

Modern Poetry: Transition and Trauma

Thomas Hardy, Edward Thomas and Wilfred Owen

In this chapter we explore the poetry of Thomas Hardy, Edward Thomas and Wilfred Owen, all poets who engage in dialogue with Romantic poetry, and who respond to the pressures of historical and cultural change with authenticity and individual integrity. All are elegists; all write in traditional forms, but adapt them in ways that make them responsive to the challenges of writing about social change, loss of religious faith and the horror of war. Their influence on later poets is deep and significant. Though not modernists, Hardy, Thomas and Owen are distinctively modern poets, each of whom offers to his poetic inheritors a voice indebted to, though separate from, his Victorian and Romantic predecessors. These are poets who typically use the first person lyric 'I' as a magnifying glass that brings the rays of human experience to a sharp, often troubling focus. While they value fidelity to speech and feeling, they are also poets who understand that the place in which such fidelity manifests and validates itself is the poem itself.

Thomas Hardy (1844–1928)

A poet with one foot in the Victorian era, beset by post-Darwinian anxieties, and the other in the troubled first quarter of the twentieth century, Thomas Hardy has never been easy to pigeonhole. He confounds periodicizing categories. If he is an eminent if maverick Victorian, he is also a modern poet. He may be hard to associate with experimental avant-gardism, but his poetry's influence on later poets such as Auden and Larkin has been immense and germane to the present volume's emphasis on the complexities of poetic legacy in

the period. Auden writes: 'My first Master was Thomas Hardy, and I think I was very lucky in my choice'. Auden finds Hardy appealingly flaw-ridden ('a lot of his poems were plain bad'), and 'modern without being too modern'. He goes on to deploy an image that intrigues in its suggestion of an enabling double vision: 'His world and sensibility were close enough to mine – curiously enough his face bore a striking resemblance to my father's – so that, in imitating him, I was being led towards not away from myself, but they were not so close as to obliterate my identity. If I looked through his spectacles, at least I was conscious of a certain eyestrain'.¹

Auden puts in the foreground an implicitly metapoetic concern with ancestry, also shared by Hardy, who, in 'Heredity', speaks of "The years-heired feature that can ... Despise the human span / Of durance" (ll. 7, 9–10). 'Speaks': despite the new-coined oddity of 'years-heired' or the reliance on the old-fashioned 'durance', Hardy's best critics, such as the poet Tom Paulin, have always recognized his ability to accommodate in his often elaborate stanzaic and metrical forms what Robert Frost calls 'the sound of sense'.² At the same time he concedes or affirms the necessarily contrived nature of poetical form and the fact that language is a site of competing dictions.

In his autobiography, ghost-written by himself, but published under the name of his second wife, Hardy defended the 'cunning irregularity' of his style by analogy with 'the Gothic art-principle in which he had been trained' with its 'principle of spontaneity'.³ His poetry is stylistically Janus-faced: with its complexly rhyming and organized stanzas, it parades its status as something made, yet it wishes to come across, not as lifeless artifice, but as a living creation. It is, as he puts it in his autobiography, 'emotion put into measure. The emotion must come by nature, but the measure can be acquired by art'.⁴ 'Acquired' offers a clue here: Hardy is by no means averse to poems seeming to be worked at and worked for in the way in which their 'measures' work themselves out, but his labour can blossom and dance because it is in touch with the quirky, the particular, the idiosyncratic.

The monorhymed tercets of the affecting 'Childhood Among the Ferns' build to the seeming grotesque 'query' (see l. 13) of the closing lines where, mock-querulously, the poet, having recalled a childhood experience of happiness sheltering from rain among ferns, asks 'Why should I have to grow to man's estate, / And this afar-noised World perambulate?' (ll. 14–15). But the pomp of the diction mimes the strain of trying to adjust to 'man's estate' after the pleasures of 'my spray-roofed house' (l. 7). Echoing Feste at the close of *Twelfth Night* who sings with infinitely saddened equanimity of how, once he came to 'man's estate', 'the rain it raineth every day', Hardy diverges, too, from his Shakespearean source; his recollection of rain is suffused with happiness.⁵ At the same time, that rain and the consequent sunshine foreshadow the co-existence of contraries that make up adult

experience. Hardy's poems, as in this case, allow us to watch mood shelving into mood, or sometimes moods twisting round one another.

The excerpt we have included by Peter Howarth from his chapter on Hardy in his *British Poetry in the Age of Modernism* looks at the poetry's supposed 'anti-organicism' (p. 19). By this term, Howarth means that 'Hardy seems to treat poetic form as though it has no relation to its content' (p. 19), even as 'no one's form is more knotted or intricate than Hardy's' (p. 19). Howarth may cut his antitheses with a marked keenness, but his study of the poetry is fascinating on the implications of the division between the poetry's 'conspicuous artistry' and its 'constant theme of helplessness' (p. 19). He suggests that even Hardy's rhythms, often failing to fall into the pattern which an opening line appears to supply, oblige us to experience such helplessness for ourselves. More generally, he contends that 'A determinism rigid with effort is the paradox behind Hardy's worked-at style whose subject is helpless knowledge' (p. 21). In the light of his overall reading of the poetry, Howarth analyses the rhyming of 'The Convergence of the Twain', a poem that treats the materialization in human affairs of 'The Immanent Will that stirs and urges everything' (l. 18), but does so with a blind indifference to consequence. Howarth moves deftly between detail and generalization, pointing out that 'the wrenched double stress' on 'indifferent' (l. 9) is supremely aware of its own 'indifference'. In turn, Howarth claims, Hardy's 'stylistic awkwardness is ... a protest against the Will's indifference towards human affairs at the same time as it is a demonstration of it' (p. 28).

The argument resonates with, and explains, as Howarth remarks (p. 26), Hardy's own emphasis on the fact that 'Art is a disproportioning – (*i.e.* distorting, throwing out of proportion) – of realities, to show more clearly the features that matter in those realities'.⁶ Arguably, what it lacks space to consider is the suppler poet of subtle feeling who held that 'the mission of poetry is to record impressions, not convictions'.⁷ 'Impressions', with its recollection of the language of empirical epistemology, prepares us for the fact that Hardy is alive to the fact that if the self is the sum of its impressions and those impressions shift, then the self, too, undergoes change. J. Hillis Miller goes so far as to write of 'Hardy's rejection of the idea of continuous identical self'.⁸ As often, Hardy suggests the co-existence of seeming opposites: both that temporality appears to expose the relentless fact of change, even threatening the principle of selfhood, and that consciousness retains enough stability to record its own grasp of change. The pathos of the havoc wrought by time is the apparent subject of poems such as 'I Look Into My Glass'. But the true subject turns out to be less the fact that the poet's physical appearance has altered than that he still feels with undiminished intensity. The sing-song rhythms of this short lyric are alert to the troubling complexities of living in time: 'But Time, to make me grieve, / Part steals, lets part abide' (ll. 9–10).

The fact of being forced, there, to 'grieve' sounds like a gift as well as an affliction, and it is as an elegist that Hardy has attracted most attention critically, an elegist able to maintain 'absolute fidelity to the postures which the voice assumes in the most expressive intimate speech', to apply to him Edward Thomas's praise for Frost.⁹ This 'expressive intimate speech' that knows it is the product of art and thought is the perfect medium for the articulation of central tensions in Hardy's 1912–13 elegies for his dead wife Emma: poems saturated by memory and reflection on the workings and meanings of memory, poems that are torn between love and regret, affirmation and guilt. In 'At Castle Boterel', as Hardy recalls how he and Emma walked beside their pony, he writes: 'What we did as we climbed, and what we talked of / Matters not much, nor to what it led' (ll. 11–12). The fall of the words, with the dignified yet colloquial run of 'whats', the alliteration at the start of line 12, and the reserve of the final phrase, imply a mind musing, reminiscing and treasuring: 'what it led' to, one presumes from 'It filled but a minute' (l. 16), was a moment of intimacy between the couple, perhaps a kiss. Hardy's art is to evoke that moment without sentimentality, playing his consciousness over the memory, mourning the passage of time, celebrating, in however restrained and grief-tinged a way, 'A time of such quality' (l. 17), conceding that such a celebration is itself vulnerable to 'Time's unflinching rigour' (l. 26). Time may not flinch, but the poem, while facing such 'rigour' unflinchingly, cannot but communicate the impulse to flinch.

The elegies of 1912–13 are also of significance for the way in which they compose a loose sequence. Each poem has its own autonomy, yet they interact suggestively. 'The Voice', for example, converses with 'After a Journey', a poem that opens: 'Hereto I come to view a voiceless ghost; / Whither, O whither will its whim now draw me?' (ll. 1–2). The metre mirrors the poem's movement between statement and yearning as Hardy refuses to deny his 'voiceless ghost' the potential to follow its 'whims'. Though voiceless, the ghost can be spoken to – and, throughout, Hardy talks to it, pleadingly, reassuringly, questioningly. He concludes with an affecting endearment in the line, 'Soon you will have, Dear, to vanish from me' (l. 27), and, as commentators have noted, the scene blends physical evocativeness ('the seals flop lazily', l. 26) with great intimacy of address. Donald Davie hears the poem as expressing 'the reposefulness of the irremediable', writing that 'It is a great poem, and it is phantasmagoria'.¹⁰ Moreover, though the ghost is phantasmal, it is, as Paulin has noticed, associated with 'irradiated flesh'.¹¹ Hardy imagines his dead wife with her 'rose-flush coming and going' (l. 8), where 'coming and going' is at once colloquial and working at a deeper level to suggest Emma's hauntings and vanishings.

The elegies evoke specificities of feeling in a style that has its own affinity with lyric song, while staying close to the cadences of speech. In doing so, they bear out Hardy's defence of 'provincialism of feeling' as 'invaluable' because 'It is of the essence of individuality'.¹² They also show Hardy exploring the

capacity for vision which is among his major literary inheritances and legacies. Donald Davie associates the belief that Emma's ghost is real with Virgil; others trace Hardy's concern with vision back to its sources in Romantic poetry.¹³

Ralph Pite notes perceptively how the poetry's very being accommodates loss and recompense: 'Time made a mockery of their early love but despite that, the love, the past, has returned, and this makes a mockery of time'.¹⁴ These negotiations between love and pain, presence and absence, make themselves audible in the famous opening of 'The Voice', another 1912–13 elegy: 'Woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me, / Saying that now you are not as you were / When you had changed from the one who was all to me, / But as at first, when our day was fair.' (ll. 1–4). The metre, as Armstrong notes, is in triple feet with a falling cadence, and triple rhymes; it might almost have an air of rollicking song, except that Hardy adapts it to a speaking voice that converses with a ghost, or, rather, seeks to ventriloquize the ghost's voice, 'Saying that now you are not as you were / When you had changed'. The syntax turns into a corridor down which the metrical feet run with a desperate, would-be joyousness. The final stanza mimics a breakdown of the poem's metrical contract with the reader, as it returns to a state of near-abandonment of hope combined with a residual sense of a presence somehow out there in the landscape.

That the poem mimes a breakdown of this sort impresses Donald Davie in the context of Hardy's compulsive love of intricate formal modes of organization as a guarantee of 'fidelity to feeling'.¹⁵ Hardy's obstinate trust in individual feeling marks him out as the patron saint of those modern poets who believe that they must speak what they feel, not what they ought to say. But Davie asks, repeatedly if at times implicitly, whether Hardy, whom he regards as a key figure for subsequent British poetry, is responsible for, say, 'Larkin's poetry of lowered sights and patiently diminished expectations'.¹⁶ Certainly Hardy presents himself as one who 'never expected much', to quote from the title of a lyric he wrote on his 86th birthday. Yet poem after poem rehearses the interplay between hope and expectation, on the one hand, and disillusionment, on the other. Were Hardy simply the poet of 'neutral-tinted haps' ('He Never Expected Much', l. 19), were he to turn away from the wish to dramatize longing as well as disappointment, he would, indeed, be a minor poet of 'lowered sights'.

In fact, in 'The Oxen', as he thinks back regretfully to the belief held as a child that the oxen knelt reverently on Christmas Eve, he imagines that, were the belief to be voiced again by a deliberately vague 'someone' (l. 11), 'I should go with him in the gloom, / Hoping it might be so.' (ll. 15–16). The phrase 'in the gloom' unobtrusively accrues to itself metaphorical suggestions (of living in a period marked by the 'gloom' of disbelief), and yet it precedes the strongly 'hopeful' stress reversal in 'Hoping', a word whose energies, in turn, ebb out into the conditionality of 'might be so'. The poem offers with one hand what it

takes with the other. Belief may be impossible; but the instinct to hope that belief may be possible persists.

A comparable effect of delicately irresolute balance occurs in the long sentence that concludes 'The Darkling Thrush'. In this lyric Hardy echoes and discredits Romantic tropes that involve projection of feeling on to landscape. The poem's description emphasizes 'growing gloom' (l. 24). Yet the bird (a distinctly bedraggled heir of Shelley's skylark and Keats's nightingale) carries on singing, despite the apparent absence of 'cause for carolings' (l. 25). This very absence of an apparent 'cause' permits the poet to assert that he 'could think there trembled through / His happy good-night air / Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew / And I was unaware' (ll. 29–32). 'Could think', not 'did think': it is a possibility, based not on what the poet 'knew' but on his being 'unaware' of it. Yet, though he is calculatedly unspecific about the nature of 'Some blessed Hope', the thought that it just might exist is enough to prevent the poem from assuming a stance of complete pessimism.

Thom Gunn is among the critics who have singled out the excellence of 'During Wind and Rain'.¹⁷ In this poem, described by Gunn as one in which 'though the poem is far from being a direct imitation of a ballad, the Ballads have been indispensable to its writing',¹⁸ the line from Shakespeare's *Feste* alluded to above – 'For the rain it raineth every day' – takes on a darkly visionary force.¹⁹ We live, the poem suggests, 'During Wind and Rain', dwelling among disturbance and metaphorical bad weather. Yet while we dwell here, good also occurs, a goodness featured in the poem in the series of cameos that occupy the first five lines of each seven-line stanza before giving way in each case to a contrapuntal refrain stressing decay, trouble, destruction and oblivion. The poem's final line – 'Down their carved names the rain-drop ploughs' (l. 28) – uses the refrain as the medium for mutability at its cruellest. The desire to preserve memory of the dead that finds expression in the picked-out stress on 'carved' is foiled by the act of erasure summed up by 'ploughs', which, as Gunn notes, 'suggests not only the movement of a rain-drop in a furrow, but also its obliterating action'. Yet in each stanza the first and last line rhyme, as if to imply the need to hold in something like a single thought the value of (for instance) 'dearest songs' (l. 1) and the evidence of impermanence and worse supplied by the fact that 'the sick leaves reel down in throngs!' (l. 7). All is done, as Gunn observes, through implication, until we recognize what Gunn calls 'The emerged mystery' of the poem's true theme: namely, the recognition that 'life in memory' is 'coexistent with death in the present'.²⁰ One might wish to modify Gunn's account by noticing how the lines describing 'life' situate themselves in a present that can only exist through memory, but resists being reduced simply to an adjunct of memory; lines such as 'They change to a high new house' (l. 22) possess, that is, their own self-generating, near-transcendent charge.

Hardy's poetry broods on the 'long perspectives' to which Larkin tells us that we are not suited.²¹ These perspectives can appear chillingly to suggest that 'Nothing matters much' to quote the title of one poem. In that poem, in fact, the poet asserts that 'Lost to all thought is he, who said / "Nothing much matters"' (ll. 19–20), a characteristically double-edged close: it is an elegy, so though it appears to rebuke the utterer of the despairing sentiment, it also grimly acknowledges his final incapacity to think now that he is dead. Elsewhere, in 'In Time of "The Breaking of Nations"', Hardy seeks to affirm the persistence of the rural and, by implication, the everyday, including the pervasive presence of love: 'this will go onward the same', he writes, 'Though Dynasties pass' (ll. 7–8). The simple lyric metre of this three-quatrain poem contains Hardy's usual wealth of suggestions; it may be that his affirmations concede their element of wish-fulfilment through their archaic diction ('a maid and her wight', l. 9), or it may be that such diction implies the fact that what held in the past might survive in the future, too.²² What the poem does indicate is that Hardy bequeaths to later poets a mode and an idiom that move, with remarkable flexibility, between passion and irony, hope and pessimism, art and feeling.

**Extract from Peter Howarth, 'Hardy's Indifference',
in *British Poetry in the Age of Modernism*
(Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005),
pp. 147–59, 216–17.**

Hardy's Indifference

Hardy was always meticulous about observing anniversaries, and in 1916, on the tercentenary of Shakespeare's death, did not fail to write him a poem. It dwells on one of Hardy's favourite themes, the callous indifference of time and circumstance to the unique and precious, which in this case means the heedlessness of the 'borough clocks' which 'but samely tongue the hour' at Shakespeare's passing, and likewise the snobbish indifference of the Stratford burghers:

'– Ah, one of the tradesmen's sons, I now recall...
Witty, I've heard...
We did not know him... Well, good-day. Death comes to all'.
(*'To Shakespeare'*)¹

This complaint about the provincialism of seventeenth-century Stratford nevertheless has a strong flavour of twentieth-century Dorchester to it. Despite his recent freedom of the borough, Hardy had long felt that his birth into the tradesman class still counted for more than his London literary honour with

many locals, as it had with his late wife, and the poem's irony is a self-protecting one, like the entry in his notebooks which runs, '*Base-born*. Homer is said to be base-born: so is Virgil'.² But the implied parallel between his own unappreciated genius and Shakespeare's is misaligned in one important respect:

Through human orbits thy discourse to-day,
Despite thy formal pilgrimage, throbs on
In harmonies that cow Oblivion,
And, like the wind, with all-uncared effect
Maintain a sway
Not fore-desired, in tracks unchosen and unchecked.

Hardy celebrates the carefree casualness of Shakespeare's writing in a verse whose compressed hyphenations and alliterations show that nothing in his own harmonies seems 'all-uncared', 'not fore-desired', unchosen or unchecked. The idea that Shakespeare's writing is as careless of its effect as the wind owes more to Romantic conceptions of genius than to any theatrical sensitivity, but its accuracy matters less than the fact that Hardy chose here, as elsewhere, to set himself at stylistic odds with the supreme poet and the poetics associated with him. Hardy's poetry is the opposite of the organic and its corollaries of the unity of feeling and thought, manner and moment. His method instead was to work out 'verse skeletons', stanzaic patterns with an arbitrary substance that he would use later as a mould into which to pour his poetic content.³ An abbreviated note confirms that this is how he approached the topic from the start of his writing career:

Lyrical Meth[od] Find a situ[at]io[n] from exp[er]ien[ce]. Turn to Ly[ri]cs for a form of express[i]o[n] that has been used for a quite diff[er]ent situ[at]io[n]. Use it (Same sit[uat]io[n] from experience may be sung in sev[er]al forms.)⁴

The 'Studies, Specimens &c' notebook shows Hardy continually taking a word or grammatical form and practising variations upon it with no surrounding poem or context. Such a detached approach to content then makes the deliberateness of the form more evident; in the stanza above, for example, 'Oblivion' requires a thumpingly full stress on the last syllable to make the rhyme, whereas in normal speech the final stress is much more slight, so that the verse-form makes a mockery of the word's meaning. In this respect, an admission made in passing to a critic who accused Hardy of mixing incompatible genres in *The Dynasts* is telling. In arguing that artistic beauty isn't determined by that art's own 'mechanical, material or methodic necessities', but can contain elements from other arts, Hardy remarked that 'if we turn to poetry we find that rhythm and rhyme are a non-necessitous presentation of language under conditions that in strictness appertain only to music.'⁵ That a poem's rhythms and rhymes are 'non-necessitous' implies a detachable content decorated – or calumniated – in poetic form.

Such an approach to poetry is heresy for any poet after Samuel Johnson, never mind Coleridge. Hardy seems to treat poetic form as if it had no relation to its content; yet, at the same time, the notebooks reveal a man teaching himself to write with conspicuous ambition and effort, and no one's form is more knotted or intricate than Hardy's. It is this paradox of caring deeply about not caring that animates not only his poetry, but his philosophy and his unhappy marriage, and it manifests itself in a division between form and content which is not accidental, although it puts him directly at odds with the main current of Romantic aesthetics, and particularly the Symbolist strand of it which leads towards certain versions of modernism. His supporters ever after have had to struggle to reconcile Hardy's manner and matter; although they admired his poetry above that of all other living poets, even de la Mare and Thomas wondered how Hardy could get away with a form so detached and manipulative. Few saw things as honestly as D. H. Lawrence, whose study diagnosed Hardy's problem as a tragic division between Love and an implacable Law (expressed in his ruthless rhythms and rhymes), and made it a policy pledge for his own work to reconcile them.⁶ This chapter will explore why Hardy might have had cogent reasons to allow his work to remain unreconciled in itself and to organic and modernist poetics, reasons which are both philosophical justifications of a particular world-view and private symptoms deriving from the most painful parts of his life.

Justifying Hardy's anti-organicism is easier in principle than in practice, however, for the division between manner and matter in his poetry often feels less like a trailblazing rejection of aesthetic unity and more like flat self-contradiction. If his multitude of stanza-forms, coinages, neologisms, archaisms and syntax-bending hyphenations seem only to confirm the labour and design of the writing, such conspicuous artistry is quite at odds with Hardy's constant theme of helplessness, where his characters are victims of circumstance or the immortals, hopelessly in thrall to Time's passing, and always too late to mend a mistake. Such helplessness was something Hardy was keen for his readers to experience for themselves, moreover, since it is not entirely coincidental that so many of his poems begin with a line which suggests a different rhythm to the one that actually turns out to structure the poem. In 'The Voice of the Thorn', for example:

When the thorn on the down
Quivers naked and cold,
And the mid-aged and old
Pace the path there to town.
In these words dry and drear
It seems to them sighing:
'O winter is trying
To sojourners here!'

The innocent reader is tempted to scan the poem with a three-beat line, because this would give a regular balance of stressed and unstressed syllables, and allows the main verb to fall on the beat. Only reading on does it become evident that the poem has two beats per line and that 'quivers', like 'pace' two lines later, is a verb that has a stress but no underlying beat. A chastened re-reading gives the verse a rushed, uncertain feel appropriate to the subject of being only temporary sojourners here, but the poem has also deliberately set its reader off on the wrong foot. 'The Conformers', too, opens with its apparent four-beat affirmative, 'Yes; we'll wed, my little fay', but like the marriage, the beginning is the exception to the rule, for the first line of all the other stanzas ('the formal faced cohue'... 'we shall not go in stealth'... 'when down to dusk we glide') conform very strictly to three beats. 'In Childbed' starts:

In the middle of the night
 Mother's spirit came and spoke to me,
 Looking weariful and white –
 As 'twere untimely news she broke to me.

No sensitive reader would give the first line four stresses: the weight on so slight a word as 'In' might be acceptable, but surely not on 'of', as a tetrameter line would require. Only when it becomes clear that this is another false start, that the rest of the poem is a completely regular alternation of tetrameter and pentameter, does the double sense of 'untimely' become clearer. Unwelcome and ghostly, the missing stress in the first line inaudibly marks the untimeliness of a spirit's prophecy that a new child 'but shapes for tears / New thoroughfares in sad humanity'. The same trick occurs in 'Her Dilemma':

The two were silent in a sunless church,
 Whose mildewed walls, uneven paving-stones,
 And wasted carvings passed antique research;
 And nothing broke the clock's dull monotones.

Once we learn that the poem is pentameter, it gives a further ominousness to the silent, sunless beginning: in retrospect, something turns out not to have been said, as indeed it proves not to be. But the reader only learns the meaning of all these metrical exceptions after the poem has been misconstrued first. As so many of Hardy's poems want to point out, we may have good reasons for thinking as we do, but we will be wrong-footed, for 'experience *unteaches* – (what at first one thinks to be the rule in events)'.⁷ Should we ever learn where we went wrong, where we missed the point, the condition of that knowledge is that it must come too late.

But the trouble with such artful illustrations of helplessness is that they are evidently carefully planned, so that the invention and effort required to make

them work belies the meaning. The same contradiction is visible in Hardy's novel vocabulary: for example, the current *OED* cites Hardy as the first user of six words or word-senses in *Time's Laughingstocks* and *Satires of Circumstance*, four of which ('blinker', 'tristful', 'uneagerness' and 'unsight') concern blind or hopeless pain. The way that so much determined creativity had gone into illustrating life's despair must have struck Hardy's original audience with even more contradictory force than a word such as 'tristfulness' does today. Hardy's frequent use of negative prefixes and suffixes to form a nonce-word, too, makes the conscious shaping of 'unminding whither bound and why' and 'void unvisioned listlessness' in a poem such as 'The Two Rosalinds' entirely at odds with the passivity the words purport to describe, like 'untomed' in 'The Dead Man Walking' and 'self-unheed' in 'By the Barrows'. This determined helplessness is best suggested by a phrase in 'Shut Out That Moon', where a disappointed lover forswears the natural attractions of the garden:

Within the common lamp-lit room
Prison my eyes and thought;
Let dingy details crudely loom,
Mechanic speech be wrought:
Too fragrant was Life's early bloom,
Too tart the fruit it brought!

In the poem, 'mechanic speech' is indeed 'wrought', the hyphenations of 'lamp-lit', 'dew-dashed' and 'years-deep' cramming the maximum of stress-words into a given metrical space. But if 'mechanic speech' suggests an effort to reject the blandishments of the garden, it also suggests automatism, as when Wordsworth speaks of producing poetry by 'obeying blindly and mechanically' the habits of association the poet's mind has made between thoughts and feelings.⁸ A determinism rigid with effort is the paradox behind Hardy's worked-at style whose subject is helpless knowledge.⁹

Hardy's critics were not slow to seize on the mismatch, but neither were those who admired him most. Michael Millgate has remarked that Hardy tended to see all criticism as implacably, personally hostile, an attack on his style from those pre-committed to maintaining what he saw as a culpable blitheness about Providence. By and around 1916, though, Hardy had become a mentor to a younger generation of admirers such as Edward Thomas and Walter de la Mare, who found his verse inspirational, but who were nevertheless also compelled to wrestle with their mixed feelings about its style.¹⁰ Hardy's relationship with de la Mare was particularly close, having begun when Hardy wrote to thank him for a review, and to compliment him on *The Listeners*, especially 'those delightful sensations of moonlight and forests and haunted houses which I myself seem to have visited curiously enough'.¹¹ This sense of

uncanny familiarity is strengthened by a letter from Florence Hardy after de la Mare's first visit to Max Gate, which told E. M. Forster that 'we have lately made the acquaintance of Walter de la Mare in the flesh – in the spirit we seem to have known him long and well'.¹² De la Mare in return felt that 'your poems are another life to me ... the poems just know me by heart – if I may say it like that'.¹³ Evidently Hardy felt that de la Mare's work knew him intimately too, for he was particularly moved by de la Mare's 'Song of the Mad Prince', seemingly associating it with Emma's death: 'for myself it has a meaning almost too intense to speak of', he confessed, and in his last few days when 'he thought only of poetry' (as his wife described it to T. E. Lawrence), 'The Listeners' was one of the three poems he wished to hear.¹⁴ On his visits, de la Mare felt he was in the presence of a higher power, rhapsodising that 'all the magic of nature is his, as well as all the wisdom and compassion and human nature'.¹⁵ Being with Hardy, he declared, gave him the sensation of being a character in one of Hardy's novels, and when Hardy asked him how he would have put a certain line, 'it was like God asking one to name the emu'.¹⁶ Yet for all this sense of private spiritual kinship, in public de la Mare's criticisms turn on just this sense of Hardy casually playing God with his material. Despite frequent protestations of variety in his poetry, 'all here is his, and all is himself', and such complete presence is manifest in the signs of effort, 'the intensity, less of impulse than of elaboration, with which he constrains it to his will'. De la Mare continues:

The style is often crustacean ... the thought, too, may be as densely burdened in its expression as the scar of a tree by the healing saps that have enwarted its surface ... stubborn the medium may be, but with what mastery it is compelled to do this craftsman's bidding. He makes our English so much his own that a single quoted line betrays his workmanship. He forces, hammers poetry into his words; not, like most poets, charms it out of them. Let the practised poet borrow but a score of Mr. Hardy's latinities and vernaculars – and then invoke his Muse. Difficulty, seeming impossibility, is the breath of Mr Hardy's nostrils as an artist.¹⁷

Not charms, but hammers: the very opposite of de la Mare's magical verses. For his part, Thomas had been one of the first critics to declare that he thought Hardy's poetry not a wrong turn but an improvement on his novels.¹⁸ A letter from his widow to Hardy after Thomas's death confirmed his admiration: 'There is no living man whose interest he would rather have had than yours ... [and whom] above all he would have felt honoured by. For him you were the master of living poets and he your endless disciple.'¹⁹ Thomas's poetic discipleship emerges in the parallel titles and themes of 'The Thrush' with Hardy's famous darkling thrush, or the similarity of theme and metre between Thomas's 'The Penny Whistle' and Hardy's 'The Night of the Dance'. Yet his reviews show a marked antipathy to Hardy's stylistic totalitarianism, which permits no surprises.

'There is no ecstasy or glory or magic for him to lose, save what is in the things themselves', Thomas complained: 'As a rule Mr Hardy's poems are the sum of their parts, and it would be easy to show what it is that produces their strong calm effect. Seldom does anything creep in from Nature or the spirit of humanity to give his work a something not to be accounted for in what he actually says.'²⁰ Hardy has understood everything, but this means that he is also much too conscious of what he is doing. 'Other poetry allows great richness and diversity of interpretation; Mr Hardy's allows none ... we cannot think of any other poetry so tyrannous', wrote Thomas in an earlier review.²¹ Like de la Mare, too, Thomas noticed this oppressive control of his material exactly because Hardy's form fits its material so badly. 'It is possible to wonder if he is poking fun at verse by first making it so unwontedly substantial, then adding a considerable amount of rhyme, alliteration, and assonance, as frills', he commented in 1913; the result of this technique is that a certain awkwardness is almost as constant in his work as truth is'.²²

Linking 'awkwardness' to 'truth' and 'mastery' to 'difficulty' show Thomas and de la Mare struggling to find a reason for Hardy's manifest divergence of style and content, and their comments articulate a problem for Hardy readers which has persisted: how to put his poetry back together again. If Hardy meant to write as he did, then he was laying himself open to the charge of writing with stunning insensitivity towards his topic. This is obviously not true, and so one solution was to say that the disparity is unwitting, and hence testimony to Hardy's unconscious capacity to register the awkwardness of life in collision with itself, an option pursued latterly by John Bayley and Samuel Hynes, but first mooted in a backhanded review by Lytton Strachey in 1914:

And he speaks; he does not sing. Or rather, he talks – in the quiet voice of a modern man or woman, who finds it difficult, as modern men and women do, to put into words exactly what is in the mind. He is incorrect; but then how unreal and artificial a thing is correctness! He fumbles; but it is that very fumbling that brings him so near to ourselves ... And who does not feel the perplexity, the discomfort and the dim agitation in that clumsy collection of vocables – 'And adumbrates too therewith our unexpected troublous case'? What a relief such uncertainties and inexpressivenesses are after the delicate exactitudes of our more polished poets.²³

But we can infer from unpublished correspondence with Thomas that Hardy, at least, hated this idea. Two years after he wrote the comment above about awkwardness, Thomas was forced to apologise. He wanted to include some of Hardy's lyrics for his anthology *This England*, and his letter is a mixture of embarrassment, modesty and self-justification:

From something I heard last year I have thought that it might seem to you an apology rather than a request for a favour was to be expected from me; but I feel

that if at all, the apology is due to having failed, as I suppose I must have done, to show my admiration and affection for your poetry. I am referring to an article by myself in *Poetry and Drama*, which I daresay you have forgotten and I hope you have.²⁴

Hardy had in fact written to Edward Garnett about *Poetry and Drama* at the time, saying it was full of 'queer young men whose wrongnesses are interesting' but his actual reply is lost, probably on the great bonfire of letters from his literary past which Thomas made when he enlisted.²⁵ However, Thomas's next letter tells the story:

I was relieved to think that the article had not left a bad impression. I cannot think that it would seem to misrepresent deliberately ... The article in the *New Statesman* I have not seen. But the writer who reviews verse there is a clever man too often carried away by a power to score for the moment. I should not have expected him to make such a mistake in your case.²⁶

It is striking, though, just how similar Strachey's verdict is to Thomas's, for both agree that Hardy's awkwardness is what testifies to his truthfulness. The crucial difference is that Thomas's article emphasises Hardy's deliberateness, whereas Strachey's implies he does not know what he was doing. Evidently this was an idea that Hardy abhorred, and when he came to ghost-write the *Life* he lamented 'the inevitable ascription to ignorance of what was really choice after full knowledge' in his poetic form (323). This complaint is amplified in an entry for 1918: 'The reviewer so often supposes that where Art is not visible it is unknown to the poet under criticism. Why does he not think of the art of concealing art? There is a good reason why' (414). It is characteristically sly of Hardy, though, to alter the sense of the original Latin tag behind 'the art of concealing art', *ars est celare artem*. The usual meaning is that artistic skill is so unobtrusive as to make its organising principles invisible in the work. For Hardy it seems to mean that the apparent lack of art is a carefully designed effect, and a demonstration of artistic intention. A year after Strachey's review he wrote to a critic, H. C. Duffin, to comment that Duffin's book had speculated on all sorts of biographical details, but omitted the poetry, 'the only part [of his oeuvre] in which self-expression has been quite unfettered'.²⁷ Such determination to prove his poetic style deliberate is expressed at length in a famous analogy:

Years earlier he had decided that too regular a beat was bad art. He had fortified himself in his opinion by thinking of the analogy of architecture, between which art and that of poetry he had discovered, to use his own words, that there existed a close and curious parallel, each art unlike some others, having to carry a rational content inside its artistic form. He knew that in architecture cunning

irregularity is of enormous worth, and it is obvious that he carried on into his verse, perhaps unconsciously, the Gothic art-principle in which he had been trained – the principle of spontaneity, found in mouldings, tracery and suchlike – resulting in the ‘unforeseen’ (as it has been called) character of his metres and stanzas, that of stress rather than of syllable, poetic texture rather than poetic veneer; the latter kind of thing, under the name of ‘constructed ornament’, being what he, in common with every Gothic student, had been taught to avoid as the plague.²⁸

Peter Robinson has pointed out that the oxymorons here of ‘principle of spontaneity’ and ‘cunning irregularity’ imply that very little is unconscious about this process, as indeed the whole comparison of poetry with architecture implies, for an architect is nothing if not a careful planner.²⁹ The effect of Hardy’s insistence on his complete control of his material, though, is to reinforce the division with his form still further. Just as the separation above of ‘artistic form’ from ‘rational content’ in architecture would be anathema to any modernist, Bauhaus insistence that form follows function, so there is an analogous anti-organicism in Hardy’s reminiscences on the practical problems of his architectural career devoted to restoration. For the architect, the form of the building counts for everything, the actual substance nothing:

It is easy to show that the essence and soul of an architectural monument does not lie in the particular blocks of stone or timber that compose it, but in the mere forms to which those materials have been shaped. We discern in a moment that it is in the boundary of a solid – its insubstantial superficies or mould – and not in the solid itself, that its right lies to exist as art. The whole quality of Gothic or other architecture – let it be a cathedral, a spire, a window, or what not – attached to this, and not to the substantial erection which it appears exclusively to consist in. Those limestones or sandstones have passed into its form; yet it is an idea independent of them – an aesthetic phantom without solidity, which might just as suitably have chosen millions of other stones from a quarry whereon to display its beauties.³⁰

But for the architect as restorer the material of the church has existed uniquely through time, and hence cannot be simply replaced. ‘No man can make two pieces of matter exactly alike’, concedes Hardy, and moreover, exact form is unreproducible because it has ‘an indefinable quality... which never reappears in the copy’ (251). For the churchgoer, too, the building’s actual stones have associations of memory which the form’s ‘aesthetic phantom’ cannot maintain. And hence Hardy concludes dispiritedly that ‘in short, the opposing tendencies excited in an architect by the distracting situation can find no satisfactory reconciliation’. Originally he added, ‘all he can do is of the nature of compromise’, but crossed it out.

The Immanent Will

Why, then, might Hardy wish to insist so deliberately on the irreconcilable opposition between the demands of form and substance, if doing so makes him look like the epitome of bad art? One very plausible answer is to argue that the disjunction itself is part of the poem's message. 'Art', an entry in the *Life* muses, 'is a disproportioning – (i.e., distorting, throwing out of proportion) – of realities, to show more clearly the features that matter in those realities, which, if merely copied or reported inventorially, might possibly be observed, but would more probably be overlooked'.³¹ The primary reality that needed pointing out was above all for Hardy the Immanent Will, otherwise formulated as the 'Prime Mover', 'Hap', 'Necessity', the 'All-One' and various other guises, which manifested itself as the determining force behind the events of the world:

The Philosophy of *The Dynasts*, under various titles and phrases, is almost as old as civilization. Its fundamental principle, under the name of Predestination, was preached by St. Paul. 'Being predestinated' – says the author of the Epistle to the Ephesians, 'Being predestinated according to the purpose of Him who worketh all things after the counsel of His own Will'; and much more to the same effect, the only difference being that externality is assumed by the Apostle rather than immanence.³²

Hardy's theology is pointedly inaccurate, since the crucial difference between him and St Paul is not merely over the externality or immanence of God's will in human affairs, but the responsibility of God himself. For Hardy this Will is unconscious – it cannot but do what it does – and unaware of the results of its actions, which include humankind. As a result, 'humanity and other animal life (roughly, though not accurately, definable as puppetry) forms the conscious extremity of a pervading urgency, or will' (200) and hence is helplessly determined by a force to which it owes its very being but to which it is also ethically superior, an idea St Paul would not have countenanced. Hardy would not have called himself a complete determinist, but his concession to 'a modicum of free-will conjecturally possessed' in the 'Apology' to *Late Lyrics* is countered by his own explanatory metaphor:

This theory, too, seems to me to settle the question of Free-will v. Necessity. The will of a man is, according to it, neither wholly free or wholly unfree. When swayed by the Universal Will (as he mostly must be as a subservient part of it) he is not individually free; but whenever it happens that all the rest of the Great Will is in equilibrium the minute portion called one person's will is free, just as a performer's fingers will go on playing the pianoforte of themselves when he talks and thinks of something else & the head does not rule them.³³

But a distracted pianist's fingers aren't free, in the sense that a headless chicken isn't free. They will continue to play the piece they were playing beforehand, or something known by heart, or even if we grant some improvisation, finger chords and runs long practised. Without the possibility of choice, their freedom is inseparable from automatism.

It is almost irresistible to see Hardy's predetermined forms as an expression of exactly such a determining Will, which acts without regard for the conscious pain or pleasure of its subjects. No matter what shape the material would take if left to its own devices, the form will have its way, and Hardy's insistent rhythms, the very arbitrariness of his pre-planned verse skeletons, would testify to the casual, blind forces of an Immanent Will in which chance and destiny come to mean the same thing. Everything must happen because the Will makes it so, but since it has no forethought, everything happens without a reason either. Hence events are simultaneously determined and random, and, in James Richardson's acute observation, 'the very artifice of his chains of events calls attention to their arbitrariness'.³⁴ As Hardy complained: 'The emotions have no place in a world of defect, and it is a cruel injustice that they should have developed in it. If Law itself had consciousness, how the aspect of its creatures would terrify it, fill it with remorse!'³⁵

And yet the attractiveness of the parallel runs into the difficulty inherent in Hardy's insistence that predestination is immanent. If human events are really entirely predestined from within, how could we ever know it? The more Hardy knows about the cruelties of the Will, the less powerful or the less immanent its determination must be, for there must be something in his knowledge that lets him know why things might be otherwise. If his poetic form really represented total predestination, in other words, no reader would ever be able to tell, and hence Hardy had to insist that his work was in no way unconscious or unforeseen, for relinquishing active consciousness would imply the utter domination of the Will. But by the same token, such consciousness gains a sense of itself only by being thwarted, so the poem must display the coerciveness of the form manipulating its material, careless and self-consciously awkward at the same time. It is as though Hardy the poet both animates *and* endures the 'reflex', 'unconscious', 'instinctive' Immanent Will he accuses of wrecking lives, as he describes ship and iceberg in 'The Convergence of the Twain':

Alien they seemed to be:
No mortal eye could see
The intimate welding of their later history.

'Welding' suggests the recalcitrance of the separate elements: as if to point out the strain of the join, the third beat of that last line falls firmly on 'of', which, like the hull of the *Titanic* crumpled by the iceberg, cannot bear the resulting

stress-impetus. The rhyme-scheme is also carefully arranged so that despite its apparent *aaa* homogeneity, several words (such as 'history' above) are forced to rhyme on an unstressed syllable:

In a solitude of the sea
 Deep from human vanity,
 And the Pride of Life that planned her, stilly couches she.
 [...]
 Over the mirrors meant
 To glass the opulent
 The sea-worm crawls – grotesque, slimed, dumb, indifferent.

The welding of the rhymes is audible in the wrenched double stress on 'indifférent', as if two things were being forced together and made to fit – and the parallels with Hardy's strained marriage here in the word 'consummation' are ominous. But the stress illustrates the poem's paradox perfectly, that to pronounce it as the poem demands also involves a certain drawing-out of the word. Simultaneously, the form of the poem is indifferent to the normal pronunciation of 'indifferent', and yet that very indifference makes the word all too conscious of what it's doing. The very indifference of the sea worm is, for the poem, an insult to the dead lying around those mirrors whose carrion it is presumably feeding on, and also a grim rebuke to those once opulent. The Immanent Will is indifferent to human desires, and it is exactly because this is so that conscious creatures cannot but feel it cruel. 'I do not expect that much notice will be taken of these poems', Hardy gloomily noted about the publication of *Moments of Vision*, for 'they mortify the human sense of self-importance by showing, or suggesting, that human beings are of no matter or appreciable value in this nonchalant universe'.³⁶ 'Nonchalant' is no less anthropomorphic for denying it, but if this tone of mournful self-regard seems at odds with the declaration of human irrelevance, that is exactly Hardy's point. His stylistic awkwardness is therefore a protest against the Will's indifference towards human affairs at the same time as it is a demonstration of it.

Notes

1. Text of all Hardy's poems taken from the *Collected Poetic Works of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Samuel Hynes, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).
2. *The Literary Notebooks of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Lennart A. Björk, 2 vols. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1985), I, 27.
3. Thomas Hardy, *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Michael Millgate (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984), p. 324.

4. Repr. in Michael Millgate, *Thomas Hardy: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 89.
5. *Thomas Hardy's Public Voice*, ed. Michael Millgate (Oxford: Clarendon, 2001), p. 197.
6. D. H. Lawrence, *Study of Thomas Hardy and Other Essays*, ed. Bruce Steel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 91.
7. Hardy, *Life*, p. 182.
8. *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems, 1797–1800*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 745.
9. See Matthew Campbell, *Rhythm and Will in Victorian Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 212–16.
10. Millgate, *Thomas Hardy*, p. 373.
11. Letter of 1 November 1918, in *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Richard L. Purdy and Michael Millgate, 7 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978–88), V: 1914–1919 (1985), p. 284.
12. Letter of 17 June 1921, in *The Letters of Emma and Florence Hardy*, ed. Michael Millgate (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), p. 177.
13. Letter of 6 November 1918, Thomas Hardy Memorial Collection, Dorset County Museum, Dorchester (hereafter DCM).
14. Letter to de la Mare, 15 October 1919, in Hardy, *Collected Letters*. V, p. 331. Letter of 5 March 1928, in *Letters of Emma and Florence Hardy*, p. 274. Hardy, *Life*, p. 480.
15. Theresa Whistler, *The Imagination of the Heart* (London: Duckworth, 1993), pp. 312, 313.
16. Russell Brain, *Tea with Walter de la Mare* (London: Faber & Faber, 1957), p. 31.
17. Walter de la Mare, 'Mr. Hardy's Lyrics', *Times Literary Supplement*, 27 November 1919, pp. 681–2.
18. Edward Thomas, *A Literary Pilgrim in England* (London: Methuen, 1917), p. 149.
19. Letter from Helen Thomas (n.d. but internal evidence suggests 1920), DCM.
20. Edward Thomas, 'Time's Laughingstocks', *Morning Post*, 9 December 1909, p. 2.
21. Edward Thomas, 'Mr Hardy's New Poems', *Daily Chronicle*, 7 December 1909, p. 3.
22. Edward Thomas, 'Thomas Hardy of Dorchester', *Poetry and Drama*, 1 (1913), 180–4 (p. 180).
23. Lytton Strachey, 'Mr Hardy's New Poems', *New Statesman*, 19 December 1914, pp. 269–71. See also John Bayley, *An Essay on Hardy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 10; Samuel Hynes, *The Pattern of Hardy's Poetry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1961), p. 63.
24. Letter of 18 March 1915, DCM.
25. Letter of 5 October 1913, in Hardy, *Collected Letters*, IV: 1909–1914 (1984), p. 307.
26. Letter of 21 March 1915, DCM.
27. Letter of 17 April 1916, in Hardy, *Collected Letters*, V, pp. 156–7.
28. Hardy, *Life*, p. 323.
29. Peter Robinson, *In the Circumstances: About Poetry and Poets* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 60–1.
30. Hardy, *Thomas Hardy's Public Voice*, p. 250.

31. Hardy, *Life*, p. 239.
32. Hardy, *Thomas Hardy's Public Voice*, p. 199.
33. Hardy, *Life*, p. 361.
34. James Richardson, *Thomas Hardy: The Poetry of Necessity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 22.
35. Hardy, *Life*, p. 153.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 409.

Edward Thomas (1878–1917)

Edward Thomas is a poet associated by some commentators such as C. K. Stead with Georgian poetry.²³ The term was used by Edward Marsh in 1911, as is noted in *The Oxford Companion to English Poetry*, 'to proclaim his belief that "English poetry is now once again putting on new strength and beauty"'.²⁴ Yet such poetry has often been devalued as promoting a wistful pastoral retreat from the problems of modernity, and Thomas's best critics have taken their cue from F. R. Leavis who, in *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932), 'pioneeringly detached Thomas', as Edna Longley observes, 'from the Georgians to declare him "a very original poet who devoted great technical subtlety to the expression of a distinctively modern sensibility"'.²⁵

Thomas, as Longley also notes, has exercised great influence over poets such as Auden, C. Day Lewis, Alun Lewis, Larkin and, more recently, Andrew Motion, the author of a significant book-length study of the poetry from which we have selected an excerpt. In this excerpt Motion offers a subtle and sensitive reading of Thomas's poem 'Old Man', a poem about the herb nicknamed 'old man' that characteristically winds into deep and mysterious territory. It does, first, by meditating on the herb's names that 'Half decorate, half perplex, the thing it is' (l. 6), a line that takes on resonance as it brings into focus the complexity of the relationship between external reality and language, but does so with the deceptively conversational manner typical of Thomas's work. As Edna Longley remarks, the poem 'is partly a poem about poetry'.²⁶ The poem is fascinated, too, by time and memory; Thomas has his own associations with the herb, but so, too, will the child of whom he speaks in the swayingly intricate lines: 'The herb itself I like not, but for certain / I love it, as some day the child will love it / Who plucks a feather from the door-side bush / Whenever she goes in or out of the house' (ll. 9–12).

The lines typify Thomas's affinity with the Frost who defines 'A sentence' as 'a sound in itself on which other sounds called words may be strung' and who speaks of 'the living part of a poem' as 'the intonation entangled somehow in the syntax idiom and meaning of a sentence'.²⁷ Here the 'intonation' is one that is brooding, subtle, elusive, self-qualifying; 'I like not' passes without explanation into 'I love it'; we have to keep up, detecting in the qualification a near-obsessive

pull to something deep in the poet's experience, even as, in turn, the sentence moves on, occupying with supple ease two versions of time; the future ('as some day the child will love it') and the disorganized but always potentially significant present, captured in 'Whenever she goes in or out of the house'. Motion traces the poem's development. Thomas thinks of the child's response to the herb, 'perhaps / Thinking, perhaps of nothing' (ll. 14–15), where the delicate syntactical slippage suggests a possible thinking of 'nothing' that may be 'absorbed and receptive' (p. 36), in Motion's words. By contrast, when Thomas turns to himself and his own memories, and attempts to recover the past, he finds that he has 'misaid the key. I sniff the spray / And think of nothing; I see and I hear nothing' (ll. 32–3). This 'nothing', anticipating the negative transcendence glimpsed at the close of Larkin's 'High Windows', is glossed by Motion as 'a shadowy telescopic view of emptiness' (p. 36); 'telescopic' is a well-chosen word since it captures the conclusion's sense of staring into a place that is far away ('an avenue, dark, nameless, without end', l. 39), which Motion points out combines elements of 'vacant darkness' and, in its very endlessness, of 'potential for fulfilment' (p. 36). It is a poetry that draws on a post-Romantic concern to follow the twists and turns of consciousness, and it might be said to be the distant heir of Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight', another poem that moves between past and imagined future, between self and child. But it is also a poetry that thrives in a way familiar from Hardy's poetry on the expression of delicately interrelated oppositions and that requires us to notice how its operations calculatedly run at an angle from its 'overt statements' (p. 36: Motion is quoting Edna Longley).

C. Day Lewis comments pertinently, in relation to the poem's close, that 'as in so many of [Thomas's] poems, we are made gradually aware that the offered mystery – the Old Man or Lad's-love, and what its signifies, for example – is only a tributary, leading on to and swelling the mysterious river of existence itself'.²⁸ Thomas is a master of the poem that flows, tributary-like, into some larger river, and often the chief formal means by which he achieves this effect of expansion is the use of long sentences. 'Rain', a driven poem that is not only concerned with 'Remembering again that I shall die' (l. 3), but is also at least half in love with death, consists of three main sentences (the second divided from the third only by a semi-colon). The last runs from lines 8 to 18 and is a tour-de-force of stylistic control, clauses modifying clauses, passing into similes and metaphors, as the poet connects his solitary self with others (imagined as 'Myriads of broken reeds all still and stiff', l. 14) and speaks of all love dissolving 'except the love of death, / If love it be for what is perfect and / Cannot, the tempest tells me, disappoint' (ll. 16–18). The longing to dissolve identity into the solution offered by death wars with the questioning impulse latent in the conditional 'If' which begins the penultimate line, while the hope that the 'tempest' can speak truly when it tells the poet that death 'Cannot ... disappoint' is exposed as tenuous by the long pause enforced by the gap between 'Cannot' and 'disappoint'.

Thomas is a poet who continually surprises. A local manifestation of this, and one that illustrates the subtlety of his dealings with the past as incarnated in Romantic poetry, occurs in 'October', a poem interpreted by John Burrow as revealing that 'the particular strength of [Thomas's] poems testifies as much to an intelligent reading of Keats as to the acknowledged friendship and advice of Robert Frost'.²⁹ Thomas, the author of a book on Keats, published in 1916, though written in 1913, echoes the opening of the Romantic poet's *Hyperion*, with its initial evocation of windlessness, as well as Keats's fascination with the fact that 'in the very temple of Delight / Veiled Melancholy has her sovran shrine' ('Ode on Melancholy', ll. 25–6). So, at the close, he imagines that in the future he might reformulate his emotional state in the present so that 'this mood by the name of melancholy / Shall no more blackened and obscured be' (ll. 20–1). The last line's inversion has the effect of placing emphasis on the fact that the 'mood' is currently 'blackened and obscured' and that its future renaming as 'happiness' rather than 'melancholy' will possibly involve a misrepresentation. At the same time, the poem has a nuanced elusiveness: the poet is responsive to the beauty of the natural world, yet aware of himself as a discordant other: 'and now I might / As happy be as earth is beautiful / Were I some other' (ll. 12–14). If Thomas reprises Romantic themes of the relationship between mind and nature here, it is also the case that a saddened eco-poetry *avant la lettre* shapes itself into being: a poetry aware of the earth's beauty, but aware, too, that such awareness is bound up with the poet's existential unhappiness.

Thomas died in the Great War, killed by a shell-blast at the start of the battle of Arras on 9 April 1917. His writing career as a poet has about it a Keatsian brevity, since he only began writing poetry in December 1914, bringing to his art lessons learned about conversational cadences from many years of writing literary journalism. The War shadows many of his poems; overtly the off-stage subject of 'As the Team's Head-Brass', among his major achievements, it haunts in a more covert way works such as 'Lights Out', in which Thomas hesitates affectingly on the threshold of 'the unknown' (l. 22).³⁰ Not that 'As the Team's Head-Brass' is ever anything but suggestive; like Hardy's 'In Time of "The Breaking of Nations"' it sets the continuities of nature and human love against the disruptions of war. Thomas is even more reliant on implication than Hardy is. The poem opens and closes with the turn of the horses pulling a ploughshare, and the lovers going into a wood at the start and, at the end, emerging from it. In the meantime there is a discussion, at once bleakly stoical and ruefully humorous, about the war, as a result of which the ploughman tells the speaker 'One of my mates is dead. The second day / In France they killed him' (ll. 25–6). Yet the natural world, as Longley points out, is described in terms that link it with the world of war: 'Thomas', notes Longley, 'implicitly assimilates the war to natural hazards like the blizzard (the elm has "fallen" like a soldier) ... The plough ... suggests a menacing or military engine ... in words like "flashed" "scraping"

“screwed” or the phrase “Instead of treading me down”.³¹ Yet the poem carries on, despite being said to be ‘stumbling’ (l. 36) in the final line, and the poem leaves one to wonder whether its main emphasis is on ‘an essential continuity’ or whether the fact that the poet is watching the ‘clouds crumble’ (l. 35) ‘for the last time’ (l. 34) is an intimation of personal or cultural endings.³²

Continuities and endings criss-cross in Thomas’s work, as befits a poet who looks back to the Romantics and foreshadows the reliance on a conversational art of implication espoused by many later writers. In ‘The Long Small Room’ he writes quietly but with ‘disturbing resonance’ of the ‘room that showed willows in the west’ (l. 1) and was part of a ‘dark house’ (l. 11).³³ The poem finds an emblem for the poet’s life in its descriptions of the house, one in which he ‘witnessed’ what he ‘could never understand / Or alter or prevent’ (ll. 10–11). As it shelves towards ‘age’ (l. 15), the poet sets against the streaming ‘hundred last leaves’ (l. 16), yet also in conjunction with them, too, the fact of his ‘right hand’ (l. 12) writing, composing. The suggestion is that poetry cannot ‘alter or prevent’, but it can bear witness, above all, to the shifting moods and feelings of the consciousness performing the witnessing.

**Extract from Andrew Motion, *The Poetry of Edward Thomas*
(London: Hogarth, 1991), pp. 165–9, 182.**

The poem’s paradoxical foundation is established in the opening lines:

Old Man, or Lad’s-love, – in the name there’s nothing
To one that knows not Lad’s-love, or Old Man,
The hoar-green feathery herb, almost a tree,
Growing with rosemary and lavender.
Even to one that knows it well, the names
Half decorate, half perplex, the thing it is:
At least, what that is clings not to the names
In spite of time. And yet I like the names.

This hiatus between the herb’s names and ‘the thing it is’ reaffirms Thomas’s belief that language cannot adequately re-create the object that it describes. The ‘thisness’ of the herb, and the memories to which it is a means of access, hover so close to the edge of consciousness that any attempt to articulate them risks destroying their elusive nature. But this loss is offset by Thomas’s gain in realising that the plant’s principal characteristics are paradoxical. The proper names – their age and youth – initiate a series of reconciled opposites that define the one context in which harmony becomes possible. The same balance is evident in its appearance: the ‘hoar-green’ colouring blends faded antiquity with youthful health, and its being ‘almost a tree’ – with its suggestion

of transition – reconciles the states of maturity and immaturity. Like the names, these qualities ‘Half decorate, half perplex’ Thomas by enlarging the herb’s significance: as he stands watching, in middle age, he remembers his own past while looking forward to the child’s future. His hopes of recalling ‘something out of [his] youth’¹ are increased by the fact that the old man is placed between rosemary and lavender. The former’s connotations of remembrance, and the latter’s of preservation, combine to shelter the old man’s potential harmony.

In this first stanza Thomas erects a platform upon which to build the main burden of the poem. The contradictory names of the herb have become, in Marie Quinn’s words, ‘an image of the speaker’s goal, because to retrieve past time is also to conquer the discreteness of time, to live in the past and present simultaneously’.² But in addition to this, the names have established him in a catalogue of distinct age groups ranging from the old man of the title to the child on whom he now concentrates his attention. Here too a paradox is implicit. While the gradations of age emphasise the remorseless passage of time, they also suggest a regenerative, cyclical movement. Child, adult and ‘old man’ discover that their patterns of experience are repeated when they look back:

The herb itself I like not, but for certain
I love it, as some day the child will love it
Who plucks a feather from the door-side bush
Whenever she goes in or out of the house.

Thomas’s original examination of the hiatus between ‘thing’ and name is here subtly enlarged to accommodate the discrepancy between his attitude to the herb itself and the consoling memories that it inspires. Their value has so far only been conveyed by ‘hints and whispers’, and his emphatic escalation of ‘like’ to ‘love’ is made while realising that he cannot entirely repossess the harmony they embody. Only the child has a pure and simple sense of integration with her surroundings:

Often she waits there, snipping the tips and shrivelling
The shreds at last on to the path, perhaps
Thinking, perhaps of nothing, till she sniffs
Her fingers and runs off. The bush is still
But half as tall as she, though it is as old,
So well she clips it. Not a word she says. ...

So complete is her absorption and sympathy with the herb that she undertakes a literally physical process of identification with it. She shares its age, and trims it regularly as if to keep it a child like herself. And this outward harmony is

complemented by evidence of an internal, invisible sympathy. By 'perhaps / Thinking, perhaps of nothing', and by saying 'not a word', the child exemplifies the same rapt, wordless communion described by Thomas in 'Digging'. 'It is enough' for her to sniff the shreds, just as it was 'enough' for him 'To smell, to crumble the dark earth': both states make the need for verbal expression redundant, and deny the possibility that language will betray them.

Thomas's appreciation of the rarity of the child's experience is made even more evident in the following lines:

... I can only wonder how much hereafter
She will remember, with that bitter scent,
Of garden rows, and ancient damson-trees
Topping a hedge, a bent path to a door,
A low thick bush beside a door, and me
Forbidding her to pick.

The child has in fact 'run off' by now, and Thomas's memory is free to ponder her future. But he does so knowing that he cannot imitate her silent communion; although he shares her intuitive knowledge that 'the ultimate language is that of the thing',³ he is unable to use it. His 'Forbidding her to pick' is stern proof of this: it replaces 'hints and whispers' with forthright disapproval. If this is the audible sign of his isolation, its inward effects are explored in the lines which follow:

As for myself,
Where first I met the bitter scent is lost.
I, too, often shrivel the grey shreds,
Sniff them and think and sniff again and try
Once more to think what it is I am remembering,
Always in vain. I cannot like the scent,
Yet I would rather give up others more sweet,
With no meaning, than this bitter one.

Where the child was content with 'perhaps / Thinking, perhaps of nothing', Thomas wrestles with the fugitive 'meaning' of the scent. As he pulls the leaves from the herb, the repetitiveness of his actions conveys a sense of frustrated bafflement. But this does not prevent him from introducing a few more hopeful signs. The present tense of 'am remembering' suggests that the mere operation of memory produces some – albeit unspecified – results. This promise is strengthened by the admission that 'I would rather give up others more sweet, / With no meaning, than this bitter one'. The confession indicates clear knowledge of his own shortcomings, and emphasises his reluctance to settle for less elusive – and less rewarding – goals.

In the poem's final stanza, however, these potential pleasures are overshadowed:

I have mislaid the key. I sniff the spray
 And think of nothing; I see and I hear nothing;
 Yet seem, too, to be listening, lying in wait
 For what I should, yet never can, remember:
 No garden appears, no path, no hoar-green bush
 Of Lad's-love, or Old Man, no child beside,
 Neither father nor mother, nor any playmate;
 Only an avenue, dark, nameless, without end.

The original location of the herb's scent has already been described as 'lost', but its disappearance is here translated into incontrovertible, concrete terms. By saying he has 'mislaid the key', Thomas recalls the fact that the bush itself is 'door-side', and that one of the things the child might remember is 'a bent path to a door'. It is as if the bush – which was touched by the child 'Whenever she [went] in or out of the house' – actually facilitated her passage from one state (indoors/outdoors) to another (outdoors/indoors). All the apartments of experience, and all the divisions of time, were available to her, whereas for Thomas there is no free access. The past, in terms of his image, is locked to him, and so is the harmony he once enjoyed there. When he repeats the mnemonic of his former happiness by sniffing the spray, it is not the absorbed and receptive 'nothing' of the child that he sees, but merely a shadowy telescopic view of emptiness. His failure is exacerbated by the very insistence of his longing for success. Not only is he looking and listening, but even 'lying in wait' – as if to ambush 'what I should, yet never can, remember'. His anxious self-consciousness is aggravated by his knowledge of what to expect, were it possible to realise his ambition.

Because Thomas is trying to reproduce, rather than originate, a sense of integration, his closing account of natural and social isolation is a tormenting mixture of visible and invisible qualities. This is most obviously apparent in the superb closing line: customary expectations that an avenue should lead towards a specific place are rebuffed by a vacant darkness. It is, however, an avenue 'without end'. While this suggests that his search for harmony will repeatedly be compromised, it also contains at least the potential for fulfilment. As Edna Longley says, 'despite the poem's overt statements, it has itself explored and illuminated as much of the avenue as is humanly and imaginatively possible'.⁴

In the role that it assigns to children, in its restless exploration of the discrepancy between the name for a thing and its essential qualities, in its extraordinarily full and delicate response to scents, and in its discussion of memory, 'Old Man' summarises every theme and technique that Thomas used in his pursuit of wholeness. It is, as Frost said, 'the flower of the lot',⁵ and movingly defines the sense of isolation which compromised Thomas's relationship with landscape, family and friends. It also illustrates the changes that he underwent when he

abandoned prose for poetry. In the former, his feelings of 'superfluosity' provoked him into single-minded pursuit of an impossible ideal. The circumstances of his suburban childhood, and his failure to find a satisfactory rural society, encouraged him to cultivate a destructively nostalgic cast of mind. Although he battled to overcome it during his long career as 'a doomed hack', it was only in the last two years of his life that his flight from reality was checked. His discovery of a medium better suited to express the full range of his personality – including its 'modern scepticism'⁶ – did not blunt his desire for perfection, but forced him to realise that he could only possess it in full knowledge of the hardships it strove to transcend. It is this determination to reconcile the conflict between real and ideal that justifies his repeated use of paradox, animates the figure of the double, and explains the function of interlocutors in his narrative poems. He consistently ridicules his original misguided assumption that 'the thing it is' will be better revealed by 'a tale' than 'the truth / Or nothing'. And the change of heart was not simply his salvation as a man: it also produced the special excellences of his poetry. With the most delicate sensuous sympathy, it clarifies all that is 'ungraspable in the very nature of words, and memory, and consciousness'.⁷ The elusiveness is so scrupulously reflected in the disarmingly low-keyed tone of voice that it is easy to understand why he has suffered undue neglect. But his refusal to let language betray his vision, and his use of 'the minor modes' to make insights of 'major psychological subtlety',⁸ entitle him to a prominent and permanent place in the history of twentieth-century literature.

Notes

1. C. Day Lewis, 'The Poetry of Edward Thomas', *Essays by Divers Hands*, vol. XXVIII (London, 1956), p. 86.
2. Marie Quinn, 'The Personal Past in the Poetry of Thomas Hardy and Edward Thomas', *Critical Quarterly*, vol. XVI, no. 1 (Spring 1974), p. 22.
3. John F. Danby, 'Edward Thomas', *Critical Quarterly*, vol. I, no. 4 (Winter 1959), p. 315.
4. Edward Thomas, *Poems and Last Poems*, ed. Edna Longley, p. 155.
5. Robert Frost, *Selected Letters*, p. 209.
6. William Cooke, *Biography*, p. 125.
7. John F. Danby, 'Edward Thomas', *Critical Quarterly*, vol. I, no. 4, p. 313.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 313.

Wilfred Owen (1893–1918)

Killed in the Battle of the Sambre one week before the end of the First World War, Wilfred Owen left a powerful legacy to British poetry. Reckoned by John Middleton Murry to be 'the greatest poet of the war',³⁴ Owen's

'savage and sacred indignation' records the brutality of combat, including its anticipation and its aftermath.³⁵ His poetry mocks the 'old Lie: Dulce et decorum Est / Pro patria mori' ('Dulce et Decorum Est', ll. 27–8),³⁶ retaining the structures and modes of traditional lyricism only to make them sing a sickened, dissonant music that employs ear-cheating off-rhymes and a diction that mixes the visionary and the visceral. Unsurprisingly but disappointingly, W. B. Yeats rejected his poems for *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* on the disputable grounds that they 'plead the suffering' of soldiers in an anti-tragic spirit.³⁷ Owen gets his retaliation in first, brusquely rejecting the notion that his men were 'flowers, / For poets' tearful fooling' ('Insensibility', ll. 7–8). In the Preface to his projected volume of war poems found among his papers, he asserts that 'Above all I am not concerned with Poetry', but he also states that 'The Poetry is in the pity' (2. 535), a statement that would be of major significance for subsequent poets such as Stephen Spender, concerned with the ethics of a poetry of 'pity' (in Spender's case pity for the sufferings of the poor).

Owen's profession of a resolutely anti-aesthetic approach is, in fact, central to his poetry's lyric force. Siegfried Sassoon, an established poet whom Owen met while being treated for shell shock at Craiglockhart, was a vitally important figure here. Sassoon's editorial work on and promotion of Owen's poetry, along with the influence of his realistic style, helped the younger poet to develop his later characteristic style. Much of Owen's poetry was published posthumously; only five of his poems were published prior to his death. Thousands of poems were published during the First World War. But the potent blend of sympathy and evocation of horror that suffuses Owen's poetry signals an individuality that ensured his poetic survival. Owen was right – 'The Poetry is in the pity'. The quality of its evocation of pity, along with its 'Keatsian richness',³⁸ gives his work a power that derives from its warring union of the ethical and the aesthetic.

Owen's pre-war poems, such as 'To Poesy' and 'Supposed Confessions of a Secondrate Sensitive Mind in Dejection', reveal a strong debt to Romantic poetry. Keatsian and Shelleyan overtones bear witness to a young poet struggling with, as well as enabled by, the Romantic inheritance. His war poetry involved a sea-change, as the terror of war required a new form of writing. Yet Owen never departed entirely from his Romantic predecessors, often, as Jon Silkin shows throughout his essay on Owen,³⁹ echoing, parodying or alluding to their poetry. 'Strange Meeting' takes its title from Shelley's *The Revolt of Islam*, and the poem has something in common, too, with the quasi-Dantescan visionary encounter at the core of Shelley's *The Triumph of Life*.⁴⁰ In 'A Terre', marrying the realistic and the Romantic, Owen's allusion to his predecessor contains more than a mere reversal of *Adonais*:

'I shall be one with nature, herb, and stone,'
Shelley would tell me. Shelley would be stunned:
The dullest Tommy hugs that fancy now.
'Pushing up daisies' is their creed, you know.
(*'A Terre'*, ll. 44–7)

Shelley's words may seem like pantheist prettifications in the face of war's realities. But the fact that they occur to Owen as comforting, in debased form, the 'dullest Tommy' suggests the continued relevance of Shelley's poetry. The colloquial tone used by Owen reflects the grim humour and the desperation that the soldier draws on as he seeks to reconcile past and present selves:

We used to say we'd hate to live dead-old, –
Yet now ... I'd willingly be puffy, bald,
And patriotic. Buffers catch from boys
At least the jokes hurled at them.
(*'A Terre'*, ll. 12–15)

The wistful and almost incredulous tone of 'We used to say' reflects the changes forced onto the young men, who dreamed, en masse, of the glory of an early death in contrast to the withering visited on the elderly. Intensified further by 'Yet now...'; the ellipses show the painful change experienced by the soldier, now taught by suffering to value longevity; patriotism, like puffy baldness, seems a luxury experienced by those without the war's continual embittering threat. The plural 'we' indicates the comradeship experienced in desperation, as age becomes a dream to be realized outside of present circumstances. This insightful use of the Romantic poets shows the aesthetic and ethical character of Owen's testing engagement with his predecessors.

A simultaneous independence from and indebtedness to the Romantics is present in Owen's poetry on the conditions of war, raising reportage into poetic subject. In 'Exposure' Owen alludes to Keats to engage with the Romantic poet while changing the sense of his predecessor's words. 'Ode to a Nightingale' begins with the line: 'My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains'. Owen takes that line, and alters it to make it adequate to the experience undergone by the soldiers. 'Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knife us ... / Wearied we keep awake because the night is silent ...' (ll. 1–2). Altering Keats's 'my' to 'our', Owen brings out the shared nature of the experience. Whereas Keats experiences 'drowsy numbness', Owen makes us feel the 'merciless ... winds that knife us', where 'knife us' assonantly chimes or off-chimes with 'silent' and anticipates the edginess that coils inside the par rhyme lying in wait, namely 'nervous' (l. 4). This use of Keats's lines is mirrored by Owen's poetic practice. His ability to enter into other characters,

in a modern take on Keats's 'negative capability',⁴¹ is particularly present in 'Disabled' and 'Miners'. In these poems, Owen conjures up characters, experiences and emotions with a precision remarkable for its clear-sighted ability to affect without descending into mawkishness. As Edmund Blunden, a poet-critic seminal in developing Owen's reputation, writes, Owen presents himself as one of the few 'spokesmen for the ordinary fighting man'.⁴² Owen takes an ethical responsibility for reporting the truths of war; his poetry seeks to burn itself into the consciousness of the civilian.

The merit of Owen's poetry has been debated since the first publication and public appreciation of his work. Yeats's rejection, already mentioned, was based on his view not only that the theme of 'passive suffering' was unsuitable for poetry, but also that Owen's poetry lacked artistic merit. Later poets and critics, including Seamus Heaney, have praised Owen for his ability to transform 'passive suffering' into art. Heaney memorably describes Owen's work as 'a poetry where a New Testament sensibility suffers and absorbs the shock of the new century's barbarism'.⁴³ The clash of these two principles, that of the New Testament and that of barbarism, creates artistically productive and expressive qualities of conflict, pain, sympathy and rage in the poetry. The second point, regarding Owen's apparent dearth of poetic artistry, has been taken up by Donald Davie. Davie regarded Owen as an 'amateur' poet, who lacked real understanding of poetic form, genre and rhyme: 'it is ... wide of the mark ... to pretend that Owen, because he rhymed badly and knew it and took the sensible precaution of allowing himself half-rhyme, was by that token an artistic innovator who transformed and renewed the medium for himself and others'.⁴⁴ These criticisms of and praise for Owen's poetry continue to spark debate.

The excerpt below, from Jahan Ramazani's *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*, combines psychoanalysis, formalist close reading and historical contextualizing to show the extent to which Owen revolutionized the genre of the elegy. Ramazani discusses the ways in which 'Owen forged a new kind of elegy upon the anvil of modern industrialized warfare' (p. 41). His case for Owen's revisionary attitude toward the elegy opens up debate about the poetry. Ramazani shows how Owen experiments with and pushes against the genre. 'Anthem for Doomed Youth', one of Owen's most famous poems, has attracted many representative discussions. Directly confronting Jon Silkin's ambivalent appraisal of 'Anthem' (Silkin is concerned about its consolatory gestures),⁴⁵ Ramazani contextualizes the poem, and shows Owen to 'fall short' only in the light of its post-Holocaust critics (p. 42). This allows Silkin and his fellow detractors too much; the combination of elegiac tender lines with anger creates an ambivalence that electrifies the lines. Silkin, though acknowledging the profundity of Owen's interweaving of fury and pity, prefers the former, viewing it as the corrective of a dangerously 'haloesque' quality.⁴⁶ Ramazani follows this critique of Owen's compensatory movements in the

set of 'Anthem', describing them as 'weak' following the excoriating octave (p. 45). Yet he brings out how Owen creates 'a conspicuous tear in the fabric of elegy' (p. 45).

This subtlety offers a salutary corrective to other readings. Sandra M. Gilbert, for example, argues that 'when Wilfred Owen begins his famous "Anthem for Doomed Youth" with the anti-elegiac question "What passing-bells for those [*sic*] who die as cattle?" ... he is declaring the bankruptcy of both religion and genre as sources of comfort'.⁴⁷ Yet Owen's challenging intelligence refuses to rule out any possibilities; he tests formal, thematic and emotional boundaries, adapting genres and engaging in dialogues with his predecessors and his contemporaries. Gilbert's judgement, that "Testimony – the iteration and (re)iteration of the *attributes* of the event – is the only available tribute to the war's inescapable factuality",⁴⁸ diminishes the poetry's scope by reading it as, in effect, front-line journalism. By contrast, Ramazani's essay focuses on the way in which Owen revises, rather than rejects, traditional conventions of the elegy. In his account of 'Futility', Ramazani focuses on Owen's evocative poetics, and his intimate manipulations of the sonnet, through judicious comparisons with Hardy and Stevens. Bringing in Freudian theories of the death-drive, melancholia and masochism, and pursuing Owen's technical effects through detailed close reading, Ramazani brings out the psychological and political importance of the poet's aesthetic choices. By placing Owen into the larger context of the elegiac tradition, alongside Milton and Tennyson, Ramazani demonstrates Owen's aesthetic and formal ability. While Owen acts as a witness, conveying the realities of war to the reader, he also creates a poetry alive to the aesthetic possibilities of the language; as Tim Kendall argues, 'War, for Owen, is poetry's consummation: it transforms rhetoric into reality, the illusory into the aesthetic'.⁴⁹ His poetic balancing act suggests the nature of his significance to following generations; the ethical and the aesthetic, the fury and the pity, operate in tandem in his finest poetry.

Extract from Jahan Ramazani, 'Wilfred Owen', in *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 69–83, 379–80.

Much as Hardy instilled his personal and public elegies with the intensified skepticisms of modernity, Wilfred Owen forged a new kind of elegy upon the anvil of modern industrialized warfare. One of Hardy's most capable admirers, Owen considered entitling a projected collection of his war poems *English Elegies* or, in a phrase from Shelley's elegy for Keats, *With Lightning and with Music*. But critics have not pursued the implication that Owen's poems should be read generically as elegies. This reluctance is understandable, since Owen's poems challenge received notions of elegiac convention, structure, and psychology.

In poems such as “Anthem for Doomed Youth,” “Futility,” “Mental Cases,” and “Miners,” Owen exemplifies the paradox of many modern elegies: that the best are frequently the most anti-elegiac. In his draft Preface, Owen states, “these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory.”¹ Owen’s melancholic elegies, like Hardy’s, make it harder to interpret the elegy solely under the aegis of the pleasure principle, harder to maintain normative explanations of the genre as psychic remedy. Resisting the traditional drive toward solace, his elegies magnify the masochism latent in the genre. Critics have noted the “sodomasochism” of Owen’s prewar poems; this quality may suggest that we should think of Owen’s poetic sensibility not only as a by-product of the painful facts of war but as a sensibility in search of such facts. If even Owen’s apparently realistic work is symbolically implicated in the production of the horrible pain and death it laments, then another key assumption about the elegy as a genre and the war elegy as a subgenre becomes problematic: that they are irreducibly “occasional” forms of poetry. Owen’s work helps us to rethink the elegiac triad of mourning poet, mourning reader, and mourned victim, eerily suggesting that, even in war elegies, both poet and reader may partly create the victimization they mourn.

Although Owen claims to write nonconsolatory elegies, his best-known poem has been attacked precisely for being consolatory. Following Geoffrey Hill and Peter Dale, Jon Silkin accuses Owen of “consolatory mourning” in “Anthem for Doomed Youth.” According to this critique, Owen participates in the religious and nationalist ideology of compensatory exchange, urging us to accept memory as a substitute for human lives.² Certainly the elegy is more consolatory than such self-excoriating war elegies as Hill’s “Two Formal Elegies” written “*For the Jews in Europe*” – later poems that scrutinize their complicity in the repellent exchange of “song” for lost life:

Arrogant acceptance from which song derives
Is bedded with their blood, makes flourish young
Roots in ashes.³

Such fierce moral objections to the compensatory imagination belong to a post-Holocaust vision of history, heightened in Adorno’s well-known proposition that after Auschwitz it is barbaric to write poetry. “After Auschwitz,” he adds, “our feelings . . . balk at squeezing any kind of sense, however bleached, out of the victims’ fate.”⁴ Against the severe standard of a later generation, Owen’s poetry does fall short, particularly the sestet of “Anthem for Doomed Youth.” But “consolatory” and “nonconsolatory,” like “mourning” and “melancholia,” should be regarded as matters of degree and not of kind: Owen’s poetry is less melancholic, less anti-consolatory than Hill’s, but much more so than the poetry of most predecessors and contemporaries. Whereas Hill, Silkin, and other postwar writers must mourn in the shadow of

the Holocaust and must disentangle their elegiac work from the vast commercial industries of the visual media, Owen's poetry precedes this historical cataclysm and the subsequent mass-marketing of atrocity for profit – films, shows, documentaries that, from Hill's perspective, ultimately make "their long death / Documented and safe" and leave us "witness-proof." Writing long before the ascendancy of such commercial genres, Owen responds to a different set of cultural intertexts. Notoriously, Rupert Brooke in "The Soldier" finds compensation for the loss of his life in the consequent expansion of England, literalizing imperialist ideology:

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is forever England.⁵

Brooke wagers his death for England's continued life. Unlike the victims in this patriotic war elegy and many others, Owen's dead never achieve apotheosis in the ideal of the state. Casting aside such consolations, Owen's elegies reject the broad current of patriotic verse and join the countercurrent not only of war poems by Siegfried Sassoon, Ivor Gurney, and Isaac Rosenberg, but also the international melancholic mode of Hardy's *War Poems*, Stevens's "Death of a Soldier," and Yeats's "Reprisals." Together with the authors of such poems, Owen helped to make the elegy a more disconsolate and discordant genre – a genre less contaminated by its likeness to the compensatory discourse of patriotic propaganda.

To the experience of modern warfare, Owen brought a profound but skeptical understanding of the resources available to the mourning poet. In the sonnets "Anthem for Doomed Youth" and "Futility," he powerfully resists and revises the traditional tropes, conventions, and economics of elegy. "Anthem" is a collective elegy for the nameless many, "Futility" an elegy for a single man. "Anthem" is consolatory in its ending, "Futility" resolutely anti-consolatory. Silkin objects that "Anthem" ends in the mode of pastoral elegy, falsifying the deaths of the soldiers; but we can appreciate the poem's overall transformation of pastoral elegy only if we take into account its initial bleak joke on the genre.⁶ Whereas the death of an individual shepherd traditionally moves animals to mourn, many die here, and their deaths cannot be sorrowful to the animals since the dying soldiers are themselves the herd:

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
– Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;

Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, –
 The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
 And bugles calling for them from sad shires. (76)

The dead strangely resemble not only the “unhonored dead” of Gray’s collective elegy but also that poem’s “lowing herd.” Confounding the categories of pastoral elegy, the first line prepares for the bizarre metamorphosis of the genre’s central trope – the pathetic fallacy. As part of the genres compensatory economy, the pathetic fallacy traditionally functions as a point of exchange, converting human loss into nature’s gain of humanity.

Owen interrogates the trope in “Anthem,” “Futility,” and his other successful elegies, though he adopts it uncritically in a few poems, producing dismal failures like “Elegy in April and September.” Earlier elegists had consoled in part by personifying a nature that sympathetically mourns; in “Anthem” Owen personifies machines instead, and these machines cannot assuage grief since they have helped to cause it. Although some consolation might seem to lie in his projecting “anger,” “mourning,” and “wailing” onto an external world, he checks this possible solace by suggesting the absurdity of this projection: the idea that the guns, rifles, and shells might be sympathetic is deliberately forced and artificial, since they are also slaughtering the soldiers like cattle. Whereas the pathetic fallacy had assuaged grief by converting, magnifying, and elevating it, the trope now short-circuits: the object-world onto which the elegist projects his feelings turns out to be the very engine of destruction rather than an alternative though mirroring reality.

Along with the pathetic fallacy, all other devices prove impotent to mourn death on such a scale: “prayers” and “bells” would be mere “mockeries,” futile attempts to lend meaning and consolation to atrocities beyond meaning or consolation. While the poet suggests that neither he nor anyone can provide a soothing “voice of mourning,” the weapons instead are vocal: the rifles are “stuttering” as they “patter out” prayers, and the “wailing” shells are “shrill, demented choirs” – tropes that Owen will stretch even further in “The Last Laugh,” where the armaments chirp, chuckle, guffaw, hoot, and groan. This chiasitic reversal of poet and machine, voice and voicelessness, indicates the poet’s resistance to the consolatory role he must partly assume. His own “voice” seems overwhelmed by the sounds of destruction, as represented by the alliterated *l*’s and *r*’s by the dissonant echoes in phonemic sequences like “stuttering,” “rattle,” and “patter,” or “shrill,” “shells,” and “shires.” Letting these sounds jar against one another, Owen suggests his reluctance to adopt the more continuous and comforting voice of traditional elegy.

Although Owen subverts consolatory fictions in the octave, he attempts to reinstate them in the sestet, as Silkin and others have shown. In a consolatory chain of substitutions, he replaces candles with the inner light of sorrowful eyes, pall with the whiteness of grieving foreheads, flow with the tender memories of mourners, whereas gun-rattle and shell-wail had earlier been the nonconsolatory

replacements for prayers and choirs. Writing at a time when many mourners were turning away from traditional mortuary codes, the poet in the second stanza takes over the ritual role, offering in place of real “flowers” the memorial flowers of his verse, in place of social ceremonies the ceremonies of elegiac poetry. As Owen’s harshest critics imply, his compensatory economy offers a poetic equivalent to religious and nationalist systems: the dead live on neither in heaven nor in the nation but in the imaginations of the bereaved. Having grimaced earlier at the fiction of a sympathetic nature, Owen obliquely revives the trope in the final line, “And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds”: as the poem draws down its own blinds, it suggests the resemblance among the nightly descent of the sun, the nightly drawing down of blinds, and the closure of the poem itself with every reading. Nevertheless, the earlier stanza more strenuously disrupts elegiac norms than critics have recognized, making this stanza’s recuperative effort fall short of consolatory closure. The poem cannot suppress its dissonances by ending on a major chord. The compensatory claims of the sestet seem so weak after the iconoclastic octave that the division between the parts of the poem betokens an unhealable grief. Though based on the elegy’s usual split between initial despair and subsequent affirmation, the poem’s structure is more radically discontinuous, replacing the traditional “turn” with a conspicuous tear in the fabric of elegy.

In the later sonnet “Futility” Owen resumes his revisionist approach to the pathetic fallacy and compensatory economics, but now he carves out of the inherited language of elegy a poem more persistently evocative of abject loss. The stock elegiac figure of the sun – alluded to at the end of “Anthem for Doomed Youth” – is the poem’s dominant trope. Whereas “Anthem” begins with an overhaul of the pathetic fallacy and then softens the critique, “Futility” moves in the opposite figurative direction, first personifying the sun and then subverting this personification. “Futility” takes its title from the famous depiction of an indifferent nature in Tennyson’s tetrameter elegy *In Memoriam*, but Tennyson, after responding “O life as futile, then, as frail!” retracts his “song of woe,” while the woe of Owen’s song only intensifies.⁷ Elegizing one soldier rather than the anonymous multitude of “Anthem,” Owen seems to restore intimacy to the form of the sonnet, though it soon turns out that the poem’s tender tone and tropes are irrelevant to the soldier’s condition:

Move him into the sun –
 Gently its touch awoke him once,
 At home, whispering of fields half-sown.
 Always it woke him, even in France,
 Until this morning and this snow.
 If anything might rouse him now
 The kind old sun will know. (135)

The sun, a familiar image of desired renewal in elegies like “Lycidas” and *In Memoriam*, loses here its sympathetic responsiveness and its regenerative power. Although the poet personifies the sun as touching, whispering, waking, these pathetic fallacies become ever more overtly fallacious, until the gap between tenor and vehicle opens into the broad irony of the mock-assurance, “The kind old sun will know.” Unlike Donne’s playfully ironic apostrophe in “The Sun Rising,” Owens’s bitterly ironic line deflates the earlier projections of a tender power onto the sun. This sun can neither rouse the soldier nor know whether anything else might rouse him. The personifications are deliberate failures, triggering expectations of sympathy and renewal only to thwart such hopes. Other elegists writing during the same decade turn with similar harshness against the image of compensatory light, Hardy watching the “morning harden upon the wall” in “The Going,” Stevens letting the indifferent “lamp affix its beam” in “The Emperor of Ice-Cream.” For such poets, the elegiac image of a renewing light had come to seem a sentimental evasion of the reality principle.

In the three concluding questions of “Futility,” the anger at the impossibility of renewal mounts:

Think how it wakes the seeds –
 Woke once the clays of a cold star.
 Are limbs, so dear achieved, are sides
 Full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir?
 Was it for this the clay grew tall?
 – O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
 To break earth’s sleep at all?

The three questions widen in scope, asking why the sun can’t instill life in this dead body, why humans developed, and why life at all? The first question – are limbs and sides too hard to stir? – has embedded within it subsidiary questions that indicate the speaker’s growing passion and bewilderment: are his limbs so dear achieved? are his sides full-nerved? are his full-nerved sides still warm? Elegiac questions, directed at nymphs and felon winds, had long been angry, but seldom had they been so chaotic and sweeping. Nor does Owen move from accusatory questions toward a comforting resolution, as had Milton. In its use of the figure of the sun, the poem summons the traditional compensatory hopes of elegy but turns against them, transforming the sun from a parent with a gentle touch into inane rays of light. In the phrase “fatuous sunbeams” Owen plays on *ignis fatuus* (will-o-the-wisp or jack-o’-lantern), suggesting that any elegiac hope we might project onto sunlight is self-deceptive and deluded. Intermingling the scientific story of evolution with the biblical story of Adam’s genesis from clay, he turns to narratives of origination not, as earlier elegists had, to locate a primordial force that gave and thus can restore life, but to mock

such fictions of rejuvenative return to a source. Life reverts neither to the mystic One of Shelley nor to the benevolent deity of Milton and Tennyson but to the inert earth.

It was partly in response to the First World War that Freud developed his controversial theory that “all instincts tend towards the restoration of an earlier state” and that “*the aim of all life is death*.”⁸ Freud’s theory and Owen’s poetry engage in a parallel questioning of the pleasure principle as the sole law of psychological economics. Repudiating the compensatory tropes of elegy, Owen writes poems that, instead of exchanging new life for death, envision the irreversible dwindling of life into death. Among Owen’s war elegies “Futility” is hardly alone in portraying life’s cyclical reversion to matter. After another soldier’s death in “Asleep,” the poet asks

whether yet his thin and sodden head
Confuses more and more with the low mould,
His hair being one with the grey grass
Of finished fields, and wire-scraggs rusty-old. . . . (129)

Owen echoes the “Whether . . . / Or whether” passage of “Lycidas,” in which Milton reflects on the water-hurled body of the drowned man, and he alludes to the fate of Adonais, who “is made one with Nature.”⁹ But Milton rescues Lycidas from the “watery floor” to raise him high, and Shelley makes Adonais a shaping “presence” in the natural world he joins, whereas Owen imagines the soldier’s return to earth as a messy confusion without transcendence. Changing the traditional elegiac synecdoche of the immortal head into an emblem of mortality, Owen plays on the verb *confuses*, as if the mingling of brain with matter were also an intellectual muddle – a secondary meaning whose defeat wryly confirms the sheer physicality of this head. Milton’s sun, like Lycidas, “repairs his drooping head, / And tricks his beams,” but the head of Owen’s soldier droops without repair, its hair not like sunbeams or nectar-soaked locks but like dead grass and rusting wire.

In his resistant adaptation of elegiac tropes and phrases, Owen takes from *Adonais* the title of a sonnet, “The One Remains,” and he again quotes Shelley’s poem in “A Terre,” updating Shelley’s representation of a paradoxically natural immortality. Owen repeatedly echoes the most melancholic elegy in the English canon, though he would outdo his predecessor with a still darker mood.¹⁰ The self-pitying speaker of “A Terre” muses that

Dead men may envy living mites in cheese,
Or good germs even. Microbes have their joys,
And subdivide, and never come to death.
Certainly flowers have the easiest time on earth.

'I shall be one with nature, herb, and stone,'
 Shelley would tell me. Shelley would be stunned:
 The dullest Tommy hugs that fancy now.
 'Pushing up daisies' is their creed, you know. (156)

The pun on stunned – slang for “shell-shocked” – further associates Shelley with the “dullest Tommy.” Such soldiers long for the final release from pain – a return *à terre*, to the insensate state from which human clay emerged. Writing at about the same time, Freud also correlated shell shock with the drive of all life to restore a simpler, earlier state of being. He was puzzled that dreams occurring in such traumatic neuroses as shell shock “have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident,” and so, recognizing the insufficiency of the pleasure principle to explain such dreams, Freud posited the repetition compulsion and the death drive.¹¹ Owen’s officer ironically quotes the soldiers’ diminished “creed” of postmortem life, the daisy being a mundane version of elegy’s more spiritualized flowers. He distinguishes the mortality of humans from the apparent immortality of simpler organisms like microbes. For Freud too, “higher organisms” like humans instinctually desire a return to oblivion, and “germ-cells, therefore, work against the death of the living substance and succeed in winning for it what we can only regard as potential immortality, though that may mean no more than a lengthening of the road to death.”¹² More than coincidental, the resemblance between Freud’s and Owen’s work is rooted in a common if divergent historical experience of war neuroses and a shared disbelief in spiritual immortality. From the wartime essays “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death” (1915), “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes” (1915), and “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917) to subsequent works like “A Child is Being Beaten” (1919), *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1919), and “The Economic Problem of Masochism” (1924), Freud’s meditations on the death drive, melancholia, and masochism bear the imprint of the Great War.¹³

Owen wrote most of his major poetry after his evacuation from the front with shell shock. “Mental Cases” is his most powerful elegy for the shell-shocked victims of the war – the living dead or “purgatorial shadows” that inhabit a “hell” in which the Dantean poet walks (146). With “jaws,” “skulls’ teeth,” and “fretted sockets,” they seem skeletons. The hell they live in is memory. “Stroke on stroke of pain,” they compulsively review the events that destroyed them:

– These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished.
 Memory fingers in their hair of murders,
 Multitudinous murders they once witnessed.
 Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander,

Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter.
Always they must see these things and hear them,
Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles,
Carnage incomparable, and human squander
Rucked too thick for these men's extrication.

As Desmond Graham states in his excellent close reading of Owen's work, here "we are at the extremity of poetry's rhetoric."¹⁴ Owen is no "objective" reporter of war. What we call the "realism" of his war poetry is a rich intertextual effect; this stanza appropriates the topography and repetition of *Inferno*, the gore and guilt of *Macbeth*. The suffering victims become "real" precisely because of, not in spite of, the literary intertexts, for the poem's extremity and intertextuality self-consciously intimate a "real" horror in excess of the poem – in excess of its rhetorical excess. If the poem pretended to hold a mirror up to war alone, it might give the reader the pleasing illusion of having "understood" such suffering, but it also holds a mirror up to itself, echoing its own sounds and parading its allusions and figurations. Owen's intense engagement with literary tradition enables, not inhibits, his articulation of a new historical reality of untold psychic trauma. The soldiers habitually reenact painful scenes on the screen of memory, but instead of mastering by rehearsing them, the men sink ever deeper into their pain, much as the poem's language sinks ever more indulgently into its own excesses. Masochists, they reinflct the torments they endured earlier. Their world is flesh, blood, and muscle, a vast body turned inside out. Compulsively repeating its alliterations and biblical cadences, the poem's language also seems corpselike, an aural body of irrepressible materiality; turning and turning in its own resonances, it is a phonemic pattern rucked too thick with iteration, inversion, and allusion to be read transparently. Its language is an allegory of the war-inflicted pain it evokes by impeding realistic representation.

Hammering the reader with bilabial stops, the next stanza savagely parodies the elegiac apotheosis of the dead as the returning sun:

Therefore still their eyeballs shrink tormented
Back into their brains, because on their sense
Sunlight seems a blood-smear; night comes blood-black;
Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh. (146)

Its figures becoming ever more extravagant, the poem persists in blocking the pleasures of transparency. Once again Owen aggressively personifies the sun, but the sun's human properties do not prove the human power to transcend death and loss, to sink low but mount high. The opposite of Milton's "opening eyelids of the morn," this dawn opens like an incurable wound. "The complex of melancholia," we remember from Freud, "behaves like an open wound."¹⁵

Owen turns an emblem of consolatory promise into an emblem of inconsolable grief. The melancholic psychology of the poem operates at more than one level: the men ironically labeled “mental cases” perpetually grieve over “the Dead,” and the poet and reader in turn grieve over the soldiers’ mental death. Mourners mourn mourners mourning the dead and themselves.

Lest we think the only masochists in this chain of mourning are the soldiers, the poet suggests that he torments himself with the “hellish” scene he relates, and this in turn implicates the reader in Owen’s self-punishing fascination. At first the poet marks his distance from the damned, asking as Keats asks of the Grecian urn “Who are these?” But soon he confesses that to observe the damned “we” too must “have perished.” At the end of the poem he clarifies this “we,” accusing himself and the reader of being the tormentors of the living dead. The soldiers are

Snatching after us who smote them, brother,
Pawing us who dealt them war and madness.

In this elegy the poet is “purgatorial,” halfway between the hell of the waking dead and the ignorant bliss of the civilians, identifying with the pitiable victims but also with their murderers. Though often represented as an unambiguous victim, Owen is poised in his poems between mourner and mourned, voyeur and victim. He and the reader have been more destructive than the former soldiers: we “smote them” (originally “scourged them”), but a panic “Gouged” the hollows of their eyes, and the recollected dead “have ravished” their minds. Like the slaughter in “Anthem for Doomed Youth,” the “murders” and “Carnage” have no human agents at first: the men recall not murders they committed but “murders they once witnessed.” Despite the Dantean intertext, Owen attributes no guilt to the sufferers: they only look “like” the “wicked.” Suddenly the last lines of the poem assign all guilt to poet and reader – a gesture that again disrupts the assumption that reading or writing the elegy is reducible to the psychic economy of pleasure.

This surprising ending should be understood in the larger context of the political vision of Owen’s war elegies, particularly the elegies that map the complex relations among soldier, poet, and civilian reader. In “Insensibility” Owen similarly assigns blame to the civilians. Because “dullness” defends soldiers against the forced pain they must endure, they differ from civilian “dullards,” whose insensibility was chosen: “By choice they made themselves immune / To pity” (122–23). One critic faults Owen for sidestepping the fact “that he, and many of his fellow soldiers, volunteered” – a view that fails to appreciate not only Owen’s self-accusations but also the question of relative “choice.”¹⁶ Elsewhere, Owen reveals the ideological pressure that made the “choice” of combat less free than it may seem. In “S.I.W.” a boy remains trapped by his father’s dichotomous cant even after experience at the front might have nullified it. “Father would sooner him dead than in disgrace,” and so the boy,

still possessed by his father's words, still seeing soldiers who shirk combat as only "vile," yet tortured by shells and fire, shoots himself through the mouth (137). The boy's father is the ideological representative in the poem of "this world's Powers who'd run amok." He resembles the still more allegorical father of "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young," a generation of Abrahams who sacrifice a generation of Isaacs: the old man "slew his son, / And half the seed of Europe, one by one" (151). For Owen, the guilt of parent, patriarch, and state far outweighs the guilt of those whom they manipulate into combat.¹⁷

Owen states only half of his paradoxical aesthetic when he writes: "My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity" (192). "Pity" is Owen's term for emotional identification with the victims of war. But Owen's poetry suggests that "pity" cannot erase the boundary that separates victim from onlooker. Using an overwrought rhetoric in poems like "Anthem for Doomed Youth" and "Mental Cases," Owen signals through verbal excess his inevitable failure to erase the boundary. His subject is also the incomprehensibility of war; the poetry is also in the alienation. Having roused pity, Owen often forces the reader back, warning that pity cannot bridge the chasm separating spectator and victim. At the end of "Apologia Pro Poemate Meo," as at the end of "Mental Cases" and "Insensibility," he points an accusing finger at the civilian reader: "These men are worth / Your tears. You are not worth their merriment" (102). Similarly, at the end of "Dulce et Decorum Est," he confronts civilians not only with their responsibility but also with their inability to "watch" or "hear" the physical details of inglorious death (117). If they could experience such death, they would not tell the old Horatian lie, and yet they would tell a different lie if they thought they could know suffering beyond the range of their experience. In these poems Owen recasts the elegy's typical configuration of mourning audience, mourned dead person, and mourning poet. For Owen, the audience is often guilty, the dead person innocent, and the poet split between the two poles. Elegists had usually attributed guilt to someone or something beyond the poetic triangle – a "fatal and perfidious bark" sinking Lycidas, a "nameless worm" killing Adonais. The primary target of Owen's anger is the civilian audience.

But, as has already been indicated, Owen also blames himself for the deaths he laments. Earlier elegists had punished themselves. Having called down the curse of Cain on the murderer of Adonais, Shelley reveals a brand on his brow that may also be Cain's (stanza 34). But Owen's blame-taking, even more than such self-accusations, is sometimes disarmingly direct. In "Strange Meeting" the poet accuses himself of murdering his double, who says, "I am the enemy you killed, my friend" (126). This "conscientious objector with a very seared conscience" writes poems of melancholic or so-called "pathological" mourning, exemplifying what Freud calls the splitting of the ego, the narcissistic identification with a double, and "self-reproaches to the effect that the mourner himself is to blame for the loss of the loved object, i.e. that he has willed it."¹⁸ We have

already seen that Owen tends to divide himself between the positions of guilty audience and innocent victim. Much as in “Mental Cases” the poet is halfway between deranged soldier and guilty onlooker, so too in “Dulce et Decorum Est,” he is one with both the victims and the voyeurs. Although he affirms at the end of the poem the authenticity of his inaccessible war experience, he earlier plays the role of the guilt-ridden, passive spectator. Helmeting himself at the cry of “Gas! Gas!” he watches as someone yells and flounders:

Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning. (117)

Owen uses the underwater imagery in part to emphasize the ontological divide that inevitably separates this observer, like any survivor, from the dying. Such a survivor may extend his pity across the spectatorial gap, but the pity would be a defensive reaction to the more fundamental guilt. “Pity,” according to Freud, is really a *“reaction-formation”* against the sadistic drive.¹⁹ In his sole aggressive act, the dying victim figures the poet’s self-accusation: he “plunges” at the poet in dreams, much as the insane were “Snatching after us” at the end of “Mental Cases.” The speaker’s latent thought seems to be, “I lived, he died; therefore I caused his death.” But as Desmond Graham observes, Owen “makes from what is a poem of guilt, a poem of protest.”²⁰ He appropriates the anger initially directed against himself and turns it outward, transforming masochistic self-reproach into a sadistic attack on the civilian reader. The alienated reader, guiltily and helplessly looking on at incomprehensible suffering, mirrors the poet, voyeuristically peering through the gas at his convulsed double. As in “Mental Cases,” the poet inhabits a terrible no-man’s-land between victim and reader.

More than any other of Owen’s poems, the elegy “Miners” is wracked by the instability of this intermediary position, possibly because Owen attempts to write not about the war he knew at close range but about dead miners, making him all the more conscious of the inevitable gap between spectator and sufferer. In the course of the elegy, the poet modulates from an observer at his hearth to one of the dead men in the ground. As observer, he listens to the coals, first thinking they “recall” the vanished primeval world to which they once belonged (112–13). He projects his exercise of poetic memory onto the coals, as if they were the mourners of their pastoral origins. But he discovers he has misinterpreted their sounds: “the coals were murmuring” not of themselves but of the men and boys killed in the mine, “Writhing for air,” like the gassed man’s eyes that were “writhing” accusingly in “Dulce et Decorum Est.” Seeing bones in his cinder-shard, the poet becomes a miner himself – he digs deep to uncover

what “few remember” – just as the miners come to resemble “all that worked dark pits / Of war.” As in other poems, Owen first depicts the plight of the victims and then attributes responsibility to the benighted civilians:

Comforted years will sit soft-chaired,
In rooms of amber;
The years will stretch their hands, well-cheered
By our life's ember. ...

The sudden metamorphosis of the singular pronoun “I,” representing a person sitting by the hearth, into the plural pronominal adjective “our,” representing the many lost in the ground, suggests that the poet has changed positions through identification with the dead, moving to the other side of the hearth. But the darker reason for this shift becomes clear as the elegy comes to its close:

The centuries will burn rich loads
With which we groaned,
Whose warmth shall lull their dreaming lids,
While songs are crooned;
But they will not dream of us poor lads.
Left in the ground.

Among the songs crooned beside the hearth is this very song about the miners. Owen glances nervously at his complicity in the exploitation of the miners by bourgeois consumers, though he also distinguishes his memorial act from their amnesia. His own song, like the other songs and like the comfortable civilian world, is born of death; its elegiac fuel is loss. To suppress this latent recognition, Owen crosses over to the position of the dead, leaving behind the cozy room in which he began the poem. As poet, Owen is implicated in the space of middle-class leisure, and he is at an inevitable remove from the deaths he mourns. As victim, he is one of the exploited and oppressed, but to maintain this stance, he must evade his own indirect confession that he uses the dead for poetic gain.

Notes

1. Wilfred Owen, *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*, ed. Jon Stallworthy (New York: Norton, 1986), 192. All references to Owen's poetry are given parenthetically in the text.
2. Jon Silkin, *Out of Battle: The Poetry of the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 210–11.
3. Geoffrey Hill, *Collected Poems* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 30.

4. Adorno, "After Auschwitz" (1949), *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum-Seabury, 1973), 361.
5. Rupert Brooke, "The Soldier," *The Poems of Rupert Brooke*, ed. Timothy Rogers (London: Black Swan Books, 1987), 133.
6. Silkin, *Out of Battle*, 211.
7. Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, 56.25, 57.1.
8. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Standard Edition*, 18: 37–38.
9. Shelley, *Adonais*, 42.370. Sven Bäckman discusses the Miltonic allusion; see *Tradition Transformed: Studies in the Poetry of Wilfred Owen* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1979), 40–42.
10. Sacks argues that *Adonais* is melancholic (*English Elegy*, 155–59).
11. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 18: 13.
12. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 18: 40.
13. Even though Freud argues against viewing war neuroses as different in kind from the traumatic neuroses of peacetime, the evolution of his metapsychology reveals the unique historical impact that the First World War had on his theories; see Introduction to *Psycho-Analysis and the War Neuroses, Standard Edition*, 17: 207–10.
14. Desmond Graham. *The Truth of War: Owen, Blunden, Rosenberg* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1984), 46. For another discussion of Owen's language and war, see Tadeusz Slawek, "Dark Pits of War': Wilfred Owen's Poetry and the Hermeneutics of War," *boundary 2* 14 (1985/86): 322–28.
15. Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 14: 253.
16. Adrian Caesar, "The 'Human Problem' in Wilfred Owen's Poetry," *Critical Quarterly* 29 (1987): 79.
17. Nor does this disproportion of civilian guilt mean that Owen sees the combatants as utterly guiltless. Although they override their remorse in "Apologia Pro Poemate Meo," they would not need the "power" to overcome sorrow and to blind themselves to their moral burden if they were wholly guiltless: "power was on us as we slashed bones bare / Not to feel sickness or remorse of murder" (101).
18. Owen, *Wilfred Owen: Collected Letters*, ed. Harold Owen and John Bell (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 461; Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 14: 251.
19. Freud, "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes." *Standard Edition*, 14: 129.
20. Graham, *Truth of War*, 60.

Chapter Notes

1. W. H. Auden, 'Making, Knowing and Judging', in *The Dyer's Hand* (London: Faber, 1963), p. 38.
2. Tom Paulin, *Thomas Hardy: The Poetry of Perception* (London: Macmillan, 1975); *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, ed. Lawrence Thompson (New York: Holt, 1964), p. 79.
3. Quoted in *Thomas Hardy: Selected Poems*, ed. Tim Armstrong (London: Longman, 1993), p. 353. This edition is used for quotations from Hardy's poetry.
4. Quoted in Armstrong, p. 353.

5. Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, 5. 1. 380, 383, in *The Norton Shakespeare: Based on the Oxford Edition*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: Norton, 1997).
6. Quoted in Armstrong, p. 352.
7. Quoted in Armstrong, p. 357.
8. J. Hillis Miller, *The Linguistic Moment: From Wordsworth to Stevens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 278–9.
9. Quoted in Edward Thomas, *Poems and Last Poems*, ed. Edna Longley (London: MacDonald and Evans, 1973), p. 396.
10. Donald Davie, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (1972; London: Routledge, 1979), p. 58.
11. See Armstrong's note, p. 169.
12. Quoted in Armstrong, p. 349.
13. See Donald Davie, 'Hardy's Virgilian Purples', in his *The Poet in the Imaginary Museum: Essays of Two Decades*, ed. Barry Alpert (Manchester: Carcanet, 1977), Tom Paulin, *The Poetry of Perception*, and Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).
14. Ralph Pite, 'Hardy and Mew', in *The Cambridge History of English Poetry*, ed. Michael O'Neill (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 757.
15. Donald Davie, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry*, p. 26.
16. Davie, p. 71.
17. See Thom Gunn, 'Hardy and the Ballads', *Agenda* 10 (1972): 19–46; rpt in and quoted from Thom Gunn, *The Occasions of Poetry: Essays in Criticism and Autobiography*, ed. with intro. Clive Wilmer (London: Faber, 1982), pp. 77–105.
18. *The Occasions of Poetry*, p. 91.
19. For the allusion, see Armstrong, p. 228; Armstrong also notes possible echoes of Vaughan, Barrett Browning, and Wordsworth.
20. *The Occasions of Poetry*, pp. 90, 91.
21. In Philip Larkin, 'Reference Back' (l. 17), quoted from Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems*, ed. with intro. Anthony Thwaite (London: Marvell Press and Faber, 1988).
22. See the reading in Dennis Taylor, *Hardy's Poetry, 1860–1928* (London: Macmillan); see also Donald Davie's somewhat tart comment that 'The maid's and her wight's indifference to history is a fact; it is not necessarily reassuring', *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry*, p. 19.
23. C. K. Stead, *The New Poetic: Yeats to Eliot* (London: Hutchinson, 1964), p. 101.
24. *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry in English*, ed. Ian Hamilton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 183.
25. Edward Thomas, *Poems and Last Poems (Arranged in Chronological Order of Composition)*, ed. Edna Longley (London: MacDonald and Evans, 1973), p. 12. See Appendix B of this edition, 'Edward Thomas and the Georgians' (pp. 404–17) for a full discussion of this issue.
26. *Poems and Last Poems*, ed. Longley, 155.
27. Quoted in *Poems and Last Poems*, ed. Longley, p. 400.
28. C. Day Lewis, 'The Poetry of Edward Thomas', in *Essays by Divers Hands*, 23, ed. Angela Thirkell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956); quoted from *Poems and Last Poems*, ed. Longley, p. 155.

29. John Burrow, 'Keats and Edward Thomas', *Essays in Criticism* 7 (1957: 404–15; quoted in *Poems and Last Poems*, ed. Longley, p. 299.
30. William Cooke comments that "The pity of war" entered Thomas's poetry before Owen had even enlisted; in *Edward Thomas: A Critical Biography* (London: Faber, 1970); quoted in *Poems and Last Poems* ed. Longley, p. 393.
31. *Poems and Last Poems*, ed. Longley, p. 352.
32. *Poems and Last Poems*, ed. Longley, p. 353.
33. *Poems and Last Poems*, ed. Longley, p. 376.
34. John Middleton Murry, 'The Poet of the War', *Nation and Athenaeum* (19 February 1921), quoted from *Poetry of the First World War: A Casebook*, ed. Dominic Hibberd (London: Macmillan, 1981), p. 60.
35. C. Day Lewis, *A Hope for Poetry*, rpt. with postscript (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1936), p. 17.
36. *Wilfred Owen: The Complete Poems and Fragments*, ed. Jon Stallworthy, 2 vols. (London: Chatto & Windus, the Hogarth Press and Oxford University Press, 1983), vol. 1, p. 140. All references to Owen's poetry will be from this edition unless specified otherwise.
37. W. B. Yeats, 'Introduction', *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892–1935* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), p. xxxiv.
38. Siegfried Sassoon, *Siegfried's Journey, 1916–1920* (London: Faber, 1945), p. 62.
39. Jon Silkin, 'Wilfred Owen', *Out of Battle: Poetry of the Great War* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 197–248.
40. See Stallworthy, p. 149.
41. John Keats, Letter to George and Tom Keats, 21, 27 (?) December 1817, *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder E. Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), vol. 1, p. 193.
42. Edmund Blunden, 'The Real War', *Athenaeum* (10 December 1920), quoted from Hibberd, p. 54.
43. Seamus Heaney, "'Crediting Poetry": The Nobel Lecture 1995', *Opened Ground: Poems 1966–1996* (London: Faber, 1998), p. 450.
44. Donald Davie, 'In the Pity', *New Statesman* (28 August 1964), quoted from Hibberd, pp. 110, 111–12.
45. Silkin, p. 210.
46. Silkin, p. 233.
47. Sandra M. Gilbert, "'Rats' Alley": The Great War, Modernism, and the (Anti) Pastoral Elegy', *New Literary History* 30.1 (1999): 188.
48. Gilbert, p. 188.
49. Tim Kendall, *Modern English War Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 64.