

## “Strange Meeting” Again\*

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Kenneth Muir’s essay “Connotations of ‘Strange Meeting’” is a thoughtful and interesting contribution to a discussion that has been going on, in various forms and fora, for the three-quarters of a century since the poem was first published in 1919, the year after Wilfred Owen’s death. In the past, “Strange Meeting” has attracted more discussion than any other of Owen’s poems (and it remains the only one to have had an entire book written about it).<sup>1</sup> It is still, arguably, Owen’s best-known poem, and from the first it has played a central part in the making and development of Owen’s reputation. Prompted by Professor Muir’s essay, and to mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of this haunting poem’s first appearance, I want to sketch here the history of “Strange Meeting” since its publication, and the way the poem has functioned as a focus of debate about Owen and the interpretation of his work. This will bring me back, in a roundabout way, to Professor Muir and some of the points in his essay.

A notable absentee from the discussion, unfortunately, is Owen himself. He wrote “Strange Meeting” in the first half of 1918, in that extraordinarily creative last year of his life, but there is no mention of the poem in any of his surviving letters. A mere handful of his poems appeared in print in his lifetime, but he had plans for a collection to be called *Disabled and Other Poems*, and “Strange Meeting” is listed towards the end of two drafts for a table of contents which he drew up in the summer of 1918.<sup>2</sup> One of these lists the “motive” of each of the poems he planned to include: the “motive” given for “Strange

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\*Reference: Kenneth Muir, “Connotations of ‘Strange Meeting,’” *Connotations* 3.1 (1993): 26-36.

Meeting" is "Foolishness of War." This tiny hint that he thought of "Strange Meeting" as a satire is the author's only surviving comment on the poem.

The 1919 number (or "cycle") of *Wheels* was dedicated to the memory of Wilfred Owen and was the first forum in which a number of his poems appeared in print. *Wheels* was an annual miscellany of contemporary poetry edited by Edith Sitwell with the assistance of her brother Osbert, who had become friends with Owen in 1918. They printed seven of Owen's poems, with "Strange Meeting" in the leading position, given a prominence that may have reflected Osbert Sitwell's very high opinion of the poem—in 1950 he was to declare it "as great a poem as exists in our tongue."<sup>3</sup> The foregrounding of "Strange Meeting" was meant to draw attention to it, and indeed J. Middleton Murry singled it out in a review article in the *Athenaeum* on "The Condition of English Poetry" (5 December 1919). Murry was reviewing the 1919 *Wheels* alongside the 1918-19 anthology of *Georgian Poetry*, and much of his article is devoted to showing that the Georgians, with their "false simplicity" and weak emotional content, are a spent force. Murry has fun likening the Georgians—with their "indefinable odour of complacent sanctity"—to the jaded Coalition Government, with the *Wheels* poets as the Radical opposition. "Strange Meeting," then, enters the critical debate as a contrasting and salutary example of what is essentially modern in English poetry. This recruitment of Owen's work to a post-Georgian modernism—Owen and T. S. Eliot are the only contemporaries Murry speaks of here with admiration—did not really catch on, except in the limited and inexact sense in which the war poems of Owen and Sassoon are routinely said to have displaced the sensibility embodied in Rupert Brooke. Middleton Murry meanwhile was also at pains to point out (here inaugurating a still flourishing industry) how "Strange Meeting" drew on a deep well of poetic tradition, and especially on Keats' *Hyperion*.

When Murry came to review (in the *Nation and Athenaeum*, 19 February 1921) the wider selection of poems in Siegfried Sassoon's edition of Owen's *Poems* (1920) he again singled out "Strange Meeting," hailing it as a work in which "a true poetic style" had been achieved.

"Throughout the poems in this book we can watch Owen working towards this perfection of his own utterance, and at the same time working away from realistic description of the horrors of war towards an imaginative projection of emotion." It is interesting to see Murry privileging "Strange Meeting," without evidence, as Owen's last word. Here already is the outline of what was to establish itself for a long time as the orthodox reading both of the place of "Strange Meeting" in the evolution of Owen's work, and of the place of Owen himself in the history of English poetry of the Great War. Beneath Murry's claim that the sombre calm of this poem was the crowning effort of Owen's career, a "complete, achieved, unfaltering" masterpiece, lay a feeling that in this case maturity was the passage beyond superficial realism to what Murry called "imaginative sublimation." The emphasis he gave to "Strange Meeting" enabled Murry to go on to declare, rather extraordinarily, of the *Poems* (1920) as a whole: "In these poems there is no more rebellion, but only pity and regret, and the peace of acquiescence." T. E. Hulme's definition of Romanticism as spilt religion holds more true for romantic criticism than for romantic poetry, and here we can watch "Strange Meeting" being transformed into a religious poem—or more accurately, itself becoming a religious text. Seeming, as the poem's dramatic apparatus does, to be an utterance *d'outré tombe*, this of all his poems became at the same time inseparable from the desperate poignancy of Owen's life and death, an inseparability sealed by Siegfried Sassoon's suggestion, in his introduction to *Poems*, that in "Strange Meeting" Owen had written his own epitaph. (Indeed it is sometimes written about almost as if, by confusion with the words of the "enemy" who is its main character, it were a post-mortem utterance of Owen's.)

Sassoon followed the Sitwells in placing "Strange Meeting" first (of twenty-three poems) in his selection, and he followed it with what he entitled "Another Version," the fragment beginning "Earth's wheels run oiled with blood." The fragment—with its biblical furniture of wells, pitchers and chariot wheels—was given favourable notice by the *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer, Basil de Selincourt, who found welcome indications of "a constructive message" in its "tone of veritable 'prophesy,'" and exempted it from his general judgement that Owen's moral revolt was largely misplaced.<sup>4</sup>

Then when much blood hath clogged the chariot wheels,  
 We will go up and wash them from deep wells.  
 What though we sink from men as pitchers falling,  
 Many shall raise us up to be their filling,  
*Even from wells we sunk too deep for war*  
*And filled with brows that bled where no wounds were.*

De Selincourt approvingly italicized the last two lines of his quotation, though he did not pause to say what he thought they meant. It is of some interest that he chose to praise this version—with its future tenses suggesting that some sort of post-war redemption is a possibility or likelihood—rather than the later version incorporated into “Strange Meeting,” with its disconsolate past-conditional (“I would have poured my spirit without stint . . .”), telling a story which can never now happen.

The next edition was Edmund Blunden’s *The Poems of Wilfred Owen* (1931), which more than doubled the number of poems Sassoon had included, and gave the war poems in, as far as Blunden could judge, their chronological order. He starts with “From my Diary, July 1914” (which was believed to be a 1914 poem, but is now dated to late 1917),<sup>5</sup> and his list ends with the sequence “Spring Offensive,” “The Sentry,” “Smile, Smile, Smile,” “The End,” “Strange Meeting.” Like Sassoon (but unlike Murry), Blunden considered “Strange Meeting” unfinished; but it seems to have been poetic instinct more than editorial reason that led him to place it as the culmination of Owen’s work. “This unfinished poem, the most remote and intimate, tranquil and dynamic, of all Owen’s imaginative statements of war experience, is without a date in the only MS seen by the present editor; it probably belongs to the last months of the prophetic soldier’s life.”<sup>6</sup> The poem demanded a special place in the foreground, and again this seemed to have to do with its prophetic content, and with its status as somehow Owen’s last testament. Blunden’s edition itself re-asserted that life and poems interpreted each other, by appending in his “Memoir” the first biographical study of Owen, a tradition continued in Cecil Day Lewis’ 1963 edition, which reprints the Blunden memoir, and by Dominic Hibberd’s edition of *War Poems and Others* (1973), which intersperses poems with extracts from Owen’s letters.

Blunden had first commended "Strange Meeting" as a prophetic poem when he reviewed Sassoon's edition in the *Athenaeum*, 10 December 1920. Now in 1931 he felt there was a need to insist that it had its roots firmly planted in realism: it was "peculiarly a poem of the Western Front," he said, "a dream only a stage further on than the actuality of the tunnelled dug-outs."<sup>7</sup> Realism in this context, largely because of the reputation of Sassoon, had a political connotation of protest, whereas what Murry had called "imaginative sublimation" was an aesthetic, even spiritual mode. The debate about the nature of Owen's achievement—how much of a realist was he?—continued, on the grounds of this poem, trailing its difficult questions about the political meaning of a poet's "acquiescence" or "protest," questions which were themselves bound up with the nation's and Europe's struggles to understand the Great War.

Blunden's edition was the vehicle for the spread of Owen's popularity in the thirties, notably with the young left-wing poets associated with Auden. In 1936, the year Yeats notoriously excluded Owen from his *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, Michael Roberts chose seven Owen poems (including "Strange Meeting") for *The Faber Book of Modern Verse*, and shrewdly discussed Owen's half-rhymes in his introduction. Yeats' anthology is perhaps too eccentric to be described as reactionary, Roberts' too canny to be called radical, but Owen in the latter was certainly in more up-to-date-looking company. Yeats was unrepentant:

"When I excluded Wilfred Owen, whom I consider unworthy of the poets' corner of a country newspaper, I did not know I was excluding a reverend sandwich-board Man of the revolution & that some body has put his worst and most famous poem ["Strange Meeting"?) in a glass-case in the British Museum—however if I had known it I would have excluded him just the same."<sup>8</sup>

Yeats' attack is intemperate and unpleasant—he says Owen is "all blood, dirt & sucked sugar stick"—but it is not absurd. One of his objections is to Owen's use of clichéd poetic diction—he points the finger at "bards," "maids," and (from "Strange Meeting") "titanic wars." How modern, after all, was a poem that could speak of wars as titanic? Yeats' real antipathy was undoubtedly temperamental and political—a mixture

of envy of Owen's subject, and impatience at his failure to relish action as (say) Gogarty had done in the Troubles in 1921—and can be measured by the distance between "Strange Meeting" and "An Irish Airman Foresees his Death," where an undoubtedly modern idiom carries an ethic of the secular middle ages. The spirit of the prophetic section of "Strange Meeting" is of—perhaps ahead of—its time, but its idiom is high-style Victorian Evangelical.

"Strange Meeting" seemed to speak even more profoundly to the experience of a second world war which (as Kenneth Muir points out) it could even be said to have prophesied. Its quasi-religious status reached a kind of climax in 1961 when Benjamin Britten used a number of Owen's poems intertextualized with the Latin mass in his *War Requiem*. The piece culminates ambiguously, with the officially reassuring "In paradisum" accompanied by a haunting repetition by tenor and baritone of the mournful invitation to sleep which comes at the end of "Strange Meeting." To Britten, pacifist and sometime conscientious objector, the poem of pity and hopelessness seemed an appropriate last word in this requiem for the dead of another war. Owen's "masterpiece" (as Sassoon had again declared it in 1945)<sup>9</sup> had become the generic war poem, an anthem for all doomed youth, now fully canonized—or at least institutionalized—as part of a cathedral service.

Cecil Day Lewis, in his 1963 edition that was to take Owen into the Vietnam War period, moved "Strange Meeting" back from the last place which Blunden had given it, to the first place it had occupied in Sassoon's edition. Day Lewis speaks of the "visionary heights" of "Strange Meeting," as opposed to the "brutal, close-up realism" of much of Owen's other work, and explains in his preface how, abandoning attempts at an uncertain chronological order, he has decided to group it together with other poems that treat the subject of war "in a more general, distanced way," separating these from poems of direct experience and descriptions of action.<sup>10</sup> Day Lewis' edition had benefited greatly from the pioneering scholarly work of D. S. R. Welland's *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study* (1960). For Welland, "Strange Meeting" is still the great Owen poem, which includes in the words of the "enemy" "lines that are in effect Owen's own elegy," as well as "a wise comment on history since 1918."<sup>11</sup> Two points in Welland's

sensitive and influential discussion of this poem can be isolated here. In the first place, Welland was the first to suggest that the "enemy" in the poem was a species of romantic *Doppelgänger* or alter ego. "The enemy Owen [*sic*] has killed is, he suggests, his poetic self."<sup>12</sup> And secondly, his work on the manuscripts gave Welland an insight into the poem's weaknesses as well as its strengths. Everyone congratulated Owen on his use of consonantal rhyme and cited "Strange Meeting" as the supreme example of the technique. Welland agreed, but he also noted how a half-rhyme as exact as Owen's was bound to be prone to monotony, and showed how the various drafts of "Strange Meeting" suggested, "by the dogged retention of certain pairs of words, that even in that great poem the exigencies of the medium are at times near to determining the sense."<sup>13</sup>

Welland's study had four principal effects on the poem's reputation. He was the first to identify Shelley (in *The Revolt of Islam*) as a major source, and the first to wonder about the origins of Owen's pararhyme (two questions that still exercise Kenneth Muir in his *Connotations* essay). His finding of a romantic theme of the double was widely accepted, encouraging a psychological or psychodramatic reading of the poem. And he drew attention to (and offered some explanation for) local problems of coherence in the poem.

When the poetry of the First World War reached new heights of popularity in the era and aftermath of the Vietnam War, Owen was that poetry's best-known exponent, and "Strange Meeting" his most famous and most anthologized poem. But a certain revaluation was taking place. In 1965 Bernard Bergonzi admitted that the opening was magnificently dramatic, but found some of the later passages needlessly obscure. It was "a slightly overrated poem, which has many splendid lines but is not entirely thought through."<sup>14</sup> An academic generation trained by Leavis and the New Critics was perhaps less readily impressed by the vatic afflatus of "Strange Meeting," and at the same time less forgiving of its unfinished texture. Curiously enough, "Strange Meeting" was chosen by Helen Gardner for her *New Oxford Book of English Verse* (1972) but not by Philip Larkin—though he included seven other Owen poems—for his *Oxford Book of Twentieth Century Verse* (1973).

That same year saw the first Owen volume—Hibberd's edition of *War Poems and Others*—that did not accord "Strange Meeting" the pride of either first or last place in the book. It is no longer assumed to be Owen's last poem: that distinction now belongs, in Hibberd and in Jon Stallworthy's definitive *Wilfred Owen: The Complete Poems and Fragments* (1983), to "Spring Offensive"; and along with this better-informed estimate of the poem's chronological place there is a definite sense that the poem is being somehow demoted. "For a long time the general enthusiasm for the poem seemed to prevent its readers from admitting its undeniable obscurity," says Hibberd.<sup>15</sup> Developing Welland's idea, Hibberd thinks that "Strange Meeting" should be read as Owen's comment on his decision to return to France, since its first speaker kills a poet who is both his equivalent on the other side and himself. Jon Stallworthy's biography, *Wilfred Owen* (1975) has little to add. He adduces Shelley, Sassoon and Barbusse as sources, and then quotes only the first ten lines (though he reproduces "Disabled" and "Spring Offensive," poems of comparable length, in their entirety).

And although the seventies saw the most assiduous round-up of the poem's sources, in S. B. Das' *Wilfred Owen's "Strange Meeting"* (1977) and especially in Sven Bäckman's *Tradition Transformed: Studies in the Poetry of Wilfred Owen* (1979), the most influential study of the decade, Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), contrived not to mention "Strange Meeting" at all. Owen's contemporary reputation was being formed here. Isaac Rosenberg is increasingly admired, especially since Ian Parsons' edition of 1979. Ivor Gurney is starting to get some of the attention he deserves. Owen, however, remains probably the best-loved of the English war poets, but his reputation no longer rests, so unequivocally as Middleton Murry thought it must, on "Strange Meeting."

Jon Silkin, indeed, felt that the prestige of "Strange Meeting" might have been positively pernicious. In a lengthy and rather repetitious argument, pursued through the introduction to his *Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* (1979), he challenges (in the name of Rosenberg, largely) Owen's predominance, and he does this principally through an attack on "Strange Meeting." Once again, the poem becomes the chosen ground



for a critical—or critical-political—debate. Silkin dislikes exactly the quality in Owen that earlier writers, and especially Blunden, had singled out for praise. Blunden admired Owen as a spokesman of the ordinary fighting man. But for Silkin, "Ever so slightly, Owen's language suffers from the settled quality of the 'spokesman.'"<sup>16</sup> Somehow a representative status gets conferred on the people in Owen's poems. They are too easily generalizable, as Rosenberg's are not. This is exemplified for Silkin by Owen's decision to amend "I was a German conscript, and your friend" to what was to become the most famous line in "Strange Meeting," "I am the enemy you killed, my friend." Silkin prefers the particularity of the earlier version, regretting that Owen went for an effect of poetic profundity rather than specificity. Further, most Owen poems are *recollected* experience (with the Wordsworthian "calm" which is what Murry most admired in Owen) whereas Rosenberg's were relived in the present. "Strange Meeting" was in fact too concerned with being a traditional kind of English poem—too vague, too quiet, and (especially if you accepted Welland's and Hibberd's "non-value-making psychological exegesis")<sup>17</sup> too private—too closed, in fact, and not imbued with an active desire for change. Silkin seems unsure whether his complaint is about Owen or about the way he is read. But as usual, beneath the debate on "Strange Meeting" lay an ideological argument, and the elegiac reading of deterministic acquiescence in the poem, which pleased Middleton Murry, seems to Silkin an affront, and a betrayal of Owen's anti-war principles and protest.

Once bitten by Silkin, Dominic Hibberd in his *Owen the Poet* (1986) judiciously gives equal weight to both the intense personal drama and the wide-ranging political statement of "Strange Meeting" in what is probably the fullest and best-informed discussion to date. He is now more sceptical about the idea that the "enemy" is Owen's double, but he does not share Silkin's preference for the earlier, more specific version.

The event in Owen's poem cannot be reduced to a meeting between a man and his double—he had no intention of presenting war as a merely internal, psychological conflict—but neither is it concerned with the immediate divisions suggested by 'German' and 'conscript' or 'British' and 'volunteer.' The poem is larger and stranger than that.<sup>18</sup>

He notes that the manuscript drafts show signs that Owen intended to continue the poem—"Let us sleep now" is scribbled in as an afterthought, and in any case it is a sleep that can be neither welcome nor peaceful. Hibberd also finds a mysteriously sexual element in this encounter between two men who meet, discover each other and sleep. It seems likely that Owen criticism is going to show an increasing interest in questions of the poems' sexuality. Meanwhile, though Hibberd's approach is more expository than evaluative, his account of "Strange Meeting" is overshadowed by the longer discussion of "Spring Offensive" that forms the climax of his book. I might add here that my own *Wilfred Owen's Voices* (1993) is more interested in "Spring Offensive" than in "Strange Meeting," and (I see from the index) gives more space to "Disabled" than to either.

Kenneth Muir's essay, then, joins a discussion that has been going on for seventy-five years, about a poem which has repeatedly acted as the focus of Owen's reputation. Professor Muir addresses three questions in particular, all canvassed in the foregoing debate—the issue of sources, the finished or unfinished nature of the work, and the origins of pararhyme, and I will end by considering these very briefly.

Muir suggests that Owen may have found precedents for spectral self-meetings in incidents from Shelley's life. This is persuasive, for Owen drew as much from the lives as from the work of his favourite poets.<sup>19</sup> Still, Muir's suggestion does assume that the enemy is the poet's double (the poem itself doesn't seem to make that assumption), and does lead us away from the *dramatic* centre of the encounter between the man and another, like himself, whom he has just bayoneted to death.

Most commentators would agree that Owen probably did not regard the poem as complete, and Professor Muir usefully adduces Keats' *Hyperion*, a poem whose status as a fragment Keats deliberately stressed by ending it in the middle of a sentence. It seems quite possible that Owen's "Let us sleep now . . ." carries a similar intention. But the question of whether a poem is finished does not only have to do with where and how it stops. Finish is also a matter of texture. Like most of Owen's poems, "Strange Meeting" was not prepared for publication. I think we have to admit that as it stands it contains some of the weakest—as well as some of the strongest—writing in late Owen.

Now men will go content with what we spoiled,  
 Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.  
 They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress.  
 None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.  
 Courage was mine, and I had mystery,  
 Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery:  
 To miss the march of this retreating world  
 Into vain citadels that are not walled.  
 Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels,  
 I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,  
 Even with truths that lie too deep for taint.

A number of factors—the prophetic solemnity of these lines, reinforced by their biblical connotations, their enclosure between the poem's powerful Dantesque beginning and the shock and pathos of the recognition that follows them, as well as the way they have repeatedly been construed as Owen's own posthumous message to futurity—have generally inhibited the observation that they do not make sense. Why (apart from the prosodically obvious reason) a tigress? If "they" are like a tigress, why are they marching in ranks? How does mastery help someone to miss a march? How can a citadel not have walls? If the entire world is retreating, what is it retreating from? What is achieved by washing blood off chariot-wheels, with poetry or with anything else? Owen was a patient reviser ("Miners" seems to have been an exception to this rule); there is every possibility he would in time have made these ideas blend and fuse, as they do not in the version he left behind. As it is, this part of the poem is not so much obscure as incoherent.

And the main reason for that incoherence appears to be the exigencies of par rhyme itself. Professor Muir claims "a native source" for par rhyme in Marlowe (32), specifically in several moments in *The Jew of Malta* (2.3.171-86). But he must know better than to suppose that he has definitively "put the record straight" (as he optimistically says), especially in the absence of any external evidence that Owen knew the play. Marlowe must join the long identity parade of the putative parents of Owen's par rhyme, rounded up by Welland, Bäckman and others, but it seems unlikely that we will ever now reach a conviction on this matter. Meanwhile in hunting for the source of Owen's par rhyme (and assuming that there must be one) it is possible that we have not paid

enough attention to its effects. Its effects on the unfinished "Strange Meeting" seem to me to have been, on the whole, baleful. The incoherences of the middle section, glanced at above, seem to be largely due to the demands of the rhyme, and the way the substance of the lines had to accommodate itself to a topography imposed by the presence of the rhyme pairs. Pararhyme helped Owen achieve some of his most powerful moments—early in "Strange Meeting," for example, or in the wonderful "Exposure" and "Futility"—but it could cripple a poem as well as make it fly. In the poems we do know that Owen worked on in France in the last months of his life—"The Sentry," "Smile, Smile, Smile" and "Spring Offensive"—he had stopped using it.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Sasi Bhusan Das, *Wilfred Owen's "Strange Meeting": A Critical Study* (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1977).

<sup>2</sup>Wilfred Owen, *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, ed. Jon Stallworthy, 2 vols. (London: Chatto & Windus, The Hogarth Press, and OUP, 1983) 538-40.

<sup>3</sup>Osbert Sitwell, *Noble Essences or Courteous Revelations* (London: Macmillan, 1950) 92.

<sup>4</sup>*Times Literary Supplement* 7 January 1921: 6.

<sup>5</sup>See Jon Stallworthy's note on the composition of this poem, in *The Complete Poems and Fragments* 120-21.

<sup>6</sup>*The Poems of Wilfred Owen*, ed. Edmund Blunden, with a memoir (London: Chatto & Windus, 1931) 125.

<sup>7</sup>Blunden 128.

<sup>8</sup>*Letters on Poetry from W. B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley* (London: OUP, 1940) 124.

<sup>9</sup>Siegfried Sassoon, *Siegfried's Journey 1916-1920* (London: Faber, 1945) 59.

<sup>10</sup>*The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*, ed. C. Day Lewis, with an introduction and notes (London: Chatto & Windus, 1963) 27.

<sup>11</sup>D. S. R. Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1960; repr. with a postscript, 1978) 101.

<sup>12</sup>Welland 101.

<sup>13</sup>Welland 118.

<sup>14</sup>Bernard Bergonzi, *Heroes' Twilight* (London: Constable, 1965) 133.

<sup>15</sup>*Wilfred Owen: War Poems and Others*, ed. Dominic Hibberd, with an introduction and notes (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973) 45.

<sup>16</sup>*The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, ed. Jon Silkin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979) 31.

<sup>17</sup>Silkin 62-63.

<sup>18</sup>Dominic Hibberd, *Owen the Poet* (London: Macmillan, 1986) 177.

<sup>19</sup>Sassoon himself is the most obvious example. See also my discussion of the importance to Owen of the story of Keats' death, in Douglas Kerr, *Wilfred Owen's Voices: Language and Community* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993) 247-50.