

“Strange Meeting” Yet Again*

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Jon Silkin, whose work as poet, editor and critic I have long admired and to whose journal, *Stand*, I have subscribed since its inception, deserves our gratitude for calling our attention to other poets of the First World War. My other respondent, Douglas Kerr, is the author of one of the most illuminating books on Owen (*Wilfred Owen's Voices*, 1993). As it was published after I had written my article, I have read it only recently.

I am sorry Silkin thinks I was irritated with him. I may mention that at the beginning of the Owen centenary, I arranged an exhibition in which other poets from Brooke to Rosenberg were well represented. One of my two lectures in connection with the exhibition was devoted to poets other than Owen, starting with Masfield's "August 1914," and referring to his play, *Philip the King*, on the defeat of the Spanish Armada, written as Aeschylus' *The Persians* had been, from the standpoint of the defeated. The other lecture was concerned entirely with Owen whose formative years were spent in Birkenhead. I had been a governor of his old school and I had campaigned for a suitable memorial to him in the shape of a collection of the work of his fellow-poets.

In my article I was not suggesting that Owen was a greater poet than Rosenberg, but I dislike arranging poets in a pecking order. Is Byron greater than Blake, Wordsworth greater than Keats, Eliot greater than Yeats? The questions are absurd. I once attended a public discussion in an American university in which my two opponents agreed that Eliot

*Reference: Douglas Kerr, "‘Strange Meeting’ Again," *Connotations* 3.2 (1993/94): 173-85; Jon Silkin, "‘Strange Meeting,’ a Fragment? A Reply to Muir's ‘Owen,'" *Connotations* 3.2 (1993/94): 186-92.

was greater than Yeats, Auden greater than Eliot, and Larkin greater than Auden. Larkin was placed in this elevated position because he was absolutely sincere and wrote without hiding behind a mask. I need hardly say that I was outvoted.

Clearly, I disagree with Geoffrey Hill and Jon Silkin about "Anthem for doomed Youth." The contrast between the octave and the sestet, one forbidding mourning and the other allowing a silent mourning in the eyes of boys and the pallor of girls, and in the dusk that is Nature's equivalent of drawing down blinds on the death of an inmate (as when my father died in 1914) seems to me not a contradiction, but a natural ambivalence. Kerr makes a similar point when he says in *Wilfred Owen's Voices* that "the poem reaches into silence on the eloquent sign of a family in mourning, the home with drawn blinds, beautifully naturalized as a figure for dusk," (83) "a beautiful refreshment of the theme of mourning nature" (288).

I find it hard to understand Silkin's other disagreement with me. I thought I had made it clear that Owen's motive for returning to France in 1918 was not for patriotic reasons. If Silkin refers to what I actually wrote (28), he will see that I gave three motives: 1. to show his solidarity with the soldiers; 2. to prove that he could be a good officer, in spite of his shell-shock; 3. he thought it to be his duty as a poet, to validate his war poems. He proved himself as an officer by his bravery in action, by his winning the Military Cross and by the comments of his men in the letters he had to censor. Nor does his possible echo of King Henry's Agincourt speech imply that he was reverting to patriotism. He was expressing solidarity with his fellow-soldiers, his band of friends. In such an allusion he had overcome his snobbish feeling that the new officers of 1918 were not really gentlemen.

Of course I agree with Silkin that a mere list of events after Owen's death—Guernica, the Gulag, the Holocaust—only hints at the horrors they symbolise. When I went to Germany and Czechoslovakia after the war I was moved and embarrassed by the gratitude of the refugees we had welcomed into our home, and of the various "friendship" groups with whom we had been associated during the war. But this could do little to alleviate our communal guilt for the horrors we had failed to avert.

Douglas Kerr, in his valuable account of the after-life of "Strange Meeting," makes many points with which I agree. It is true that some of Owen's best poems eschew parahrime, as I have often pointed out in my readings, but I doubt whether the difficulty of the device spoils the lines Kerr quotes from the poem, and I do not think they are as confused as he believes. We should never forget that the poem was unfinished and unpolished.

Although I was aware that many of my readers would reject the Marlowian source for parahrime, there is no other suggested source that uses the identical words as *The Jew of Malta* does.

Kerr approves of my reference to *doppelgangers* in the last weeks of Shelley's life (182), but he and Silkin both reject that the two soldiers in the poem are *alter egos*, since Owen never claimed that they were. Here again Kerr is economical with facts. Both men are young poets. The German's account of himself and his ambitions might well be a fragment of Owen's autobiography. He quotes from Owen's fragmentary *preface* (misprinted *poem* in my article) "the pity of war." He speaks of the duty of the poet to warn, as Owen in his preface had said "all a poet can do today is to warn." I still adhere to the view called by Silkin "re-cycled Welland," that the spokesman in "Strange Meeting" encounters himself. Re-cycling is an honourable activity for critics and poets.

Kerr seems to deny that the lines he deplures are Owen's message to futurity. But he can hardly deny that the nations trekked from progress in the years following Owen's death.

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