

Nature in Wilfred Owen's Poetry

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Wilfred Owen (1893-1918) is an outstanding English poet of the First World War. But , it is misleading to assume that he was a war poet only . He had written poetry and practiced his craft before the outbreak of war . The war did not make him , he made war a poetic subject . His early poetry is romantic rather than intellectual(1). John Keats(1795-1821) was his prototype who exerted a more profound influence on Owen than other romantics(2). His early poems record a Keatsian quest for beauty as to pass time and to face human suffering. Keats taught him the richness of diction ,the importance of sound in poetry and the task of searching for beauty and truth(3). Edmund Blunden(1900-1974) finds in Owen's early poetry a sensuousness of a young poet who was exploring the romantic tradition and developing an idiom which was admired by the Georgian contemporaries (4). Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967) finds Owen's early poetry over luscious and had an embarrassing sweetness in sentiment though it showed skill in combination of rich melodious words(5) .

At the beginning of war Owen was still in the mood of his pre-war poetry and the romantic idiom is so clear in his poetry . It was Keats who was behind the development of his impersonality in the greatest war poems . But , it is Sassoon's influence , encouragement and guidance that helped Owen to produce poems far superior to any he had written previously . Sassoon did not only help him to purge his style from its early excessive luxuriance , he introduced him to other poets and novelists as Robert Graves , Arnold Bennett , H.G.Wells , and Osbert Sitwell (6) . Owen's painstaking efforts were to exclude romantic gradiloquence and sentiment from his verse . After meeting Sassoon , he had confidence in his mature artistic powers and became far different from the Georgians as he wrote to his mother on 31 December 1917: `` I go out of this year a Poet , . . . , as which I did not enter it . I am held peer by the Georgians ; I am a poet's poet `` (7) . Sassoon stimulated him to write with compassionate and challenging realism . He advised him to be more direct and more simple in his writing so he began to risk using colloquialisms (8) .

Owen was the most outstanding anti-war poet who exposed his anger and protest against the war . He is a modern poet and his modernity lies in the straightforward and matter of fact way . His early poetry was as the thoughtless pursuit of beauty . The emotions of love , joy , compassion . . . etc. strengthen his poetry . His fervent love of nature appeared clearly in his poetry . Nature in early poetry represents beauty and an endless joy even the dark was related to loneliness . Yet , the darkness , dawn , night , icy wind , frozen . . . etc. were related to war and destruction in his war poetry . War teaches Owen

compassion and destroys his contact with beauty . It gave him an ugly vision of nature and the ability to tell the truth about the suffering of soldiers . He portrays war in intensely personal vision and a mixture of the romantic idiom and modern colloquialism.

Many of Owen's poems showed his fervent love of nature . Nature in his early poetry is influenced by the romantic and victorian writers . They were behind his aestheticising attitude and cult of beauty . His aestheticism was not the product of an inner conviction but was emotional and derivative . He shared with romantic poets the need to create a finer world both in poetry and through poetry . His early poems had a Keatsian vein and the impact of Keats appeared clearly . The darkness in his early poetry refers to loneliness which is the sphere of the romantic poet as in 'On My Songs' (1913) which was influenced by the American poet James Russell Lavell's (1819-1891) sonnet 'To the Spirit of Keats' in it the genius of Keats is seen as comforting the struggling and aspiring poet. A dreadful and appalling darkness occurs in the early,

Low croonings of motherless child, in gloom
Singing his frightened self to sleep , are these.
One night , if thou shouldst lie in this Sick Room ,
Dreading the Dark thou darest not illumine ,
Listen ; my voice may haply thee ease.(ll.10-14) (9)

The 'gloom' , 'night' and 'dark' showed an early use of the idea of darkness . Darkness seemed to be part of the horror of hell and suffering for him yet , it was the proper environment of the lone poet . Thus , it may be as Stallworthy stated that Owen's recurring theme of loneliness , a part from its relation to romantic poetry , stemmed from his real isolation "I am a lone among the Unseen Voices"(10) , as he wrote in 1911. The poem shows his tendency to identify with romantic poets 'unseen Poets' (l.1) , especially those who died young . The poem is derivative and conventionally melancholic yet , it has strong feeling struggling to be heard . Another dreadful and appalling darkness represented by the 'night' and 'stillness' occurred early in 'The Unreturning' (1913\1917) ,

Suddenly night crushed out the day and hurled
Her remnants over cloud-peaks , thunder-walled .
Then fell a stillness such as harks appalled
When far-gone dead return upon the world . (ll.1-4)

On the other hand darkness in Owen's war poetry became the dark environment of war on which , as he thought , was his duty to shed light on . '1914' (1914) is the first poem on the outbreak of war which had prophetic power . The winter and the great darkness became an image of war , he saw war as a terrible international disaster (11) ,
War broke.And now the winter of the world

With perishing a great darkness closes in
 The cyclone of the pressure on Berlin
 Is over all the width of Europe whirled. (ll. 1-4)

These lines have the Hardy-esque imagery which may reflect a recent reading of *The Dynasts*. Although the poem was about war, Owen did not consider war as a complete human impact because of the generalization of treatment and the absence of any compelling emotion (12). The dark image of war in 'Exposure' (1917) which is the first of his great poems on the suffering of soldiers in the war, it depicts the misery and boredom of the infantrymen and the numbing wretchedness of a winter night in trenches. It was inspired by Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' (ll.1-2: 'My hearts aches, and a drowsy numbness pains / My senses) in which a mysterious union between nature and the poet is celebrated. But the romantic optimistic view of nature is rejected by Owen because of his war experience. The poem reflects his impression of the landscape of war and the nearest to modernism in its bleak imagery. It has the romantic richness from the poet's emotional response and his sensuous perception:

Our brain ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knives us . . .
 Wearied we keep a wake because the night is silent . . .
 Low, drooping flares confuse our memory of the salient . . .
 Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous,
 But nothing happens. (ll.1-5)

The poet describes the front line at night. Nature's icy wind and snow, and the sights and sounds of war which fill its air are harbingers of death.

These images of dark can be linked with other images that constructed round the cycle of day and night. 'Song of Songs' (1917) the most notable aspect is its ecstatic incantatory form. It reflects synaesthetic images and excessively sweet cadences from Christina Rossetti's (1830-1894) 'The Echo'. The different utterances of the beloved appropriate to the time of day are depicted in terms of music of transcendent kind 'the sense that no song say' (l.9). Each stanza deal with a part of the day that given an ecstatic invocatory quality by the anaphora 'sing me'. The poem constructed round the cycle of night and day.

Sing me at morn but only with your laugh; (l.1)
 Sing me but only with your speech all day (l.4)
 Sing me at eve but only you sigh! (l.7)
 Sing me at midnight with your murmurous heart! (l.10)

Likewise Owen closes 'From My Diary, July 1914' (1914) with nocturnal eroticism. The sensuousness of Owen's description of the last lines are

reminiscent of Keats's 'Ode to Psyche' and 'Ode on Melancholy':

Stirs

Of leaflets in the gloom ; soft petal-showers ;

Stars

Expanding with the starr'd nocturnal flowers . (ll.15-16)

'Song of Songs' also closes with nocturnal eroticism:

Sing me at midnight with your murmurous heart !

Let youth's immortal-moaning chord be heard

Throbbing through you , and sobbing unsubdued . (ll.10-12)

Owen used nature in his war poems to show the people at home the horror and suffering of the soldiers in the battlefield . Many of his war poems refer to the destructive power of dawn and deadliness of night like the hostile dawn of 'Mental Cases' (1915) , which brings death to the soldiers :

Sunlight seems a blood-smear ; night comes blood-back ;

Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds a fresh . (ll.23-24)

'Exposure' (1917) is set at dawn which is as much as an enemy and killer as the German push their army and attack again . It is as if the war and nature represented by the heavy rain at dawn were joined in one hostile force :

The poignant misery of dawn begins to grow . . .

We only know war lasts , rains soaks , and clouds sag stormy

Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army

Attack once more in ranks on shivering rank of gray , (ll.11-14)

And the dawn in 'The Unreturning' (1913\1917) is also connected with death

The peered the indefinite unshapen dawn

With vacant gloaming , sad as half-lit minds ,

The weak-limned hour when sick men's sighs are drained (ll.9-11)

The destructive power of dawn is also seen in 'The Show' (1917) where the remains of the German crept during night and disappeared with dawn .

From gloom's last dregs these long-strung creatures crept

And vanished out of dawn hidden holes . (ll.12-13)

The young soldier of `S.I.W.` (1918) Self-Inflicted-Wound commits suicide at dawn . Owen compares death with sunset , the fall of night and dawn .

He'd seen men shoot their hands , on night patrol ,
 Their people never knew , yet there were vile .

.....

.....

One dawn , our wire patrol
 Carried him . This time , Death had not missed .
 We could do nothing , but wipe his bleeding cough . (ll.20-26)

The cool of dawn and the dark of night are universally associated with death
 when the human metabolism is running at its lowest .
 Yet the sun itself is beneficent , the warm sun of the day is obviously a life-giver ,
 kind and like a friend . In `Happiness` (1917) in which Owen expresses his deep
 reaction towards war . The warm sun in this poem cleanses human sins from
 the experience of war in which the youthful innocence is lost .

Her hands` pardoning ? The sun may cleanse ,
 And time , and starlight , life will sing sweet songs ,
 And gods will show us pleasures more than men`s . (ll.6-8)

In `Futality` (1918) the sun is as the source of warmth and life , vitality and
 awakened consciousness . The principle of vitality of the soldiers`s dead body is
 destroyed by the negative principle of war that robs life (13) . The sun is unable
 to waken the dead soldier , though it awakens the seeds in the ground :

Move him into the sun . . .
 Gently its touch awoke him once ,
 At home , whispering of fields unsown .
 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 . (ll.1-7)

It is the life-giver and as a substitute for the creative force . The sun is also like a
 friend as in `Spring Offensive` (1918) , the sun is the creative principle from
 which the soldiers have cut themselves off .

The sun , like a friend with whom their love is done .
 O large shone that smile against the sun , . . .
 Mightier than his whose bounty these have spurned . (ll.24-26)

Sun`s

The cool of dawn and the dark of night which connected to death are opposite to the warm sun of the day which is clearly a life-giver . These two views shows Owen`s ambivalent view of nature .

Nature is a source of aesthetic joys as in `From My Dairy , July 1914` (1914) it is most notably in its ecstatic incantatory form . It is a pleasing description of summer scene , nature is so happy and celebrating with summer season . This poem reflects Owen`s memories and preoccupations of that summer . It is difficult not to share in Owen`s exuberant enjoyment of his memories of that summer .

Leaves

Murmuring by myriads in the shimmering trees .

Lives

Wakening with wonder in the Pyrenees .

Birds

Cheerily chirping in the early day .

Brads

Singing of summer , scything thro` the hay .

Bees

Shaking the heavy dewes from bloom and frond . (ll.1-5)

The effect of this poem is one of the pleasing modulated variety which ``reflects the variety of the sensuous experiences involved without disturbing the tonal unity of the poem`` (14) .

Nature is the cycle of life as in the sestet of `1914` (1914) , this cycle begins with spring the season of blooming then summer , autumn and ends with the wild winter only to return again to spring season .

For after spring had bloomed in early Greece ,
And summer blazed her glory out with home ,
An Autumn softly fell , a harvest home ,
A slow grand age , and rich with all increase
But now , for us , wild winter , and the need
Of sowings for new spring , and blood for seed . (ll.9-14)

Yet, nature can be ravaged and degraded by war as in `The Show'(1917). Nature here is desolated, ravaged and degraded by war. Owen saw the landscape of war in terms of apocalyptic vision (15) that he saw below him a landscape like an evil dream a scene of sadness, desolation and horror. The romantic tradition of the poet`s isolation is displayed in a splendid detachment .Owen from above in the company of Death saw the desolated landscape of war which is like the face of a dead man whose bread is made of the barbed- wire

defences, the pockmarks and scabs are shell- holes and on whom gray and brown caterpillars are crawling:

My soul looked down from a vague height with Death,
 As unremembering how I rose or why ,
 And saw a sad land ,weak with sweats of dearth,
 Gray,cratered like the moon with hollow woe,
 And fitted with great pocks and scabs of plagues.
 Across its beard ,that horror of harsh wire ,
 There moved thin caterpillars ,slowly uncoiled .(ll.1-7)

In addition to this horrific and disgusting vision is the foul smell of the wounded and infested landscape ,

And smell came up from those foul openings
 (As out of mouth,or deep wounds deepening.) (ll.14-15)

In `Spring Offensive` (1918) nature wreaks vengeance because it was ravaged and degraded by war .In this poem the whole landscape that was warm and lovely `Hour after hour they ponder the warm field...` (l.13) turned into an inferno when the soldiers attack ,at their offence against nature.`the whole sky burned `(l.29) emphasizes the soldiers vulnerability in the landscape ,it is the whole of nature, or the nature`s hostile side symbolized by the sky that bursts into fury of attack against the soldiers.

And instantly the whole sky burned
 With fury against them; and soft sudden cups
 Opened in thousands for their blood ; and the green slopes
 Chasmed and steepened sheer to infinite space.(ll.29-32)

Evidently , Owen`s concept of nature is ontological in scope in that it undergoes a change from Romantic nature to Archetypal nature .The early poetry of the pre-war period cultivates a sensuous delight in nature, the concrete nature of natural and human landscape. In the war poems the focus narrows on nature. Nature becomes exclusively human and its poetic invocation is philosophical. A shift in the mood of his nature is being affected from the optimistic to the pessimistic due to the horrors of war that were to have a lasting impact on his poetical imagination. Within this last and more mature phase, we find a movement towards the archetypal in the representation of nature in Owen's poetry. This is a natural consequence of his philosophical involvement with war and his vain attempt to humanize it.

Notes

- (1) Edmund Blunden , *War Poets 1914-1918* (London : Chatto&Windus , 1964) , p.34.
- (2) Jon Stallworthy , *Poets of the First World War* (Oxford : University of Oxford Press , 1974) , p.13.
- (3) John Press , *A Map of Modern English Verse* (Oxford : University of Oxford Press,1979) , p.137.
- (4) Blunden as quoted in D.S.R.Welland , *Wilfred Owen : A Critical Study* (London : Chatto&Windus, 1960) , p.90.
- (5) Siegfried Sassoon , *Siegfried's Journey : 1916-1920* (London : Faber & Faber , 1945) , p.59.
- (6) Stallworthy , p.15.
- (7) Harold Owen & John Bell (eds.) , *Wilfred Owen : Collected Letters* (London : Oxford University Press , 1967) , p.520.
- (8) John H. Johnston , *English Poetry of the First World War* (Princeton : University of Princeton Press , 1964) , p.162.
- (9) Wilfred Owen , *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, vol.1, edited by Jon Stallworthy (London : Chatto & Windus , 1983) , p.57. All quotations and references to his poems are cited from this edition referred to by the line number in the text .
- (10) Wilfred Owen , *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, vol.2, edited by Jon Stallworthy (London : Chatto & Windus , 1983) , p.388.
- (11) Vivian de sola Pinto , *Crisis in Modern Poetry* (Oxford : University of Oxford Press , 1961) , p.146.
- (12) Johnston , p.167.
- (13) Ibid., p.187.
- (14) Ibid. , p.170.
- (15) Pinto , p.148.

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