

***‘Among the Unseen Voices’: The Influence of Shelley and Keats on the Poetry of Wilfred Owen***

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**Abstract**

This thesis explores the influence of Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats on the poetry of Wilfred Owen. Scholars who have noted the influence of Shelley and Keats on Owen’s poetry routinely argue that Owen becomes disenchanted with Romanticism following his front-line experience during the First World War. However, Owen’s poetry reveals an unwavering debt to the work of Shelley and Keats throughout his poetic career. Examining Owen’s early poetry and his war elegies, this thesis charts his poetic maturation through the approach of new formalism, revealing the intricacies in his developing poetic technique and providing a detailed analysis of his use of allusion.

The first chapter compares Keats and Owen’s response to poetic influence through readings of Keats’s *The Fall of Hyperion* and Owen’s ‘To Poesy’. The second chapter reveals how Keats and Owen use the sonnet form as a site of poetic experimentation through an analysis of poems that include Keats’s ‘If by dull rhymes our English must be chained’ and Owen’s ‘Futility’. The third chapter explores how Shelley and Owen depict sympathy and empathy in Shelley’s *The Triumph of Life*, and Owen’s ‘The Show’ and ‘Strange Meeting’. Chapter four discusses how Shelley and Owen manipulate the aesthetic conventions of the elegy through readings of Shelley’s *Adonais* and Owen’s ‘I saw his round mouth’s crimson’, ‘Greater Love’, and ‘Mental Cases’. The final chapter shows how Owen blends the influence of Shelley and Keats in his approach to the pastoral genre.

Owen makes explicit the influence of Shelley and Keats through a generous use of allusion throughout his oeuvre. Owen relishes the challenges of his poetic inheritance, figuring it as an experience that involves struggle and exhilaration in equal measure, and he balances his duty as a Romantic heir with his drive to assert his own unique poetic voice.

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**Table of Contents**

Page

Introduction: ‘The shadows of melodious utterance’ …………………………………………………………………………………..1-24

Chapter One: ‘Thou art no Poet’: Keats, Owen, and Poetic Influence ...............................................................................................................................25-62

Chapter Two: ‘The intensity of working out conceits’: Keats, Owen, and Poetic Apprenticeship to the Sonnet ……………………………………………….……………………………...….63-101

Chapter Three: ‘The eternal reciprocity of tears’: Shelley, Owen, and the Poetics of Sympathy ………………………………………………………………………...………102-138

Chapter Four: ‘Its horror and its beauty are divine’: Shelley, Owen, and Envisioning the Dead ……………………………………………….………………………………139-176

Chapter Five: ‘Shelley would be stunned’: Keats, Shelley, and Owen’s Version of the Pastoral ………………………………………………………………………………177-214

Conclusion: ‘[A]lone among the Unseen Voices’ ………………………………...........................................................................215-223

Bibliography.………………………………………………………………….224-234

**Introduction: ‘The shadows of melodious utterance’**

Poetic influence plays a vital role in the poetry of Wilfred Owen. The poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats inspired and sustained Owen’s poetic vision throughout his literary career. In 1914, Owen staked his claim to be a Romantic heir in a pledge to ‘perpetuat[e] the language in which Keats and the rest of them wrote’.[[1]](#footnote-1) If Keats’s words were ‘sacred’ to the young Owen,[[2]](#footnote-2) he held an equal degree of reverence for Shelley, whom he viewed as ‘the brightest genius of his time’.[[3]](#footnote-3) Central to Owen’s poetic achievement is how he balances paying homage to his predecessors with fashioning his own identity as a poet. Critics who have noted Owen’s Romanticism routinely argue that Owen becomes disillusioned with such influences following the First World War.[[4]](#footnote-4) However, though Owen’s experience on the front line serves as the backdrop for much of his later poetry, he sustains a fascination with the works of his poetic precursors throughout his career. The first study of its kind, this thesis contends that it is the melding of Romantic influence with this militaristic context that creates Owen’s poetic voice, a voice that is at once unique and self-conscious of its artistic lineage.

Revaluing Owen’s poetry through the lens of poetic influence reveals his sophistication as both a poet and a reader of poetry. This thesis centres on the view of T. S. Eliot that ‘we shall often find not only the best, but the most individual parts of [a poet’s] work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously’.[[5]](#footnote-5) Owen hones his response to Romantic influence over the course of his poetic career, and this study will view his early works as well as his war poetry to reveal the development of his allusive technique. Owen’s generous though careful use of allusion ensures that the work of Shelley and Keats serves to enrich rather than overpower his poetry. While critics of Owen’s work such as Jon Silkin, Daniel Hipp, and Tim Kendall note Owen’s Romantic influences,[[6]](#footnote-6) most significantly that of Keats, this thesis will provide a sustained and detailed examination of Shelley and Keats’s poetry in tandem with that of Owen in order to show what Owen inherits from his Romantic predecessors and how he responds to such poetic bequests.

A key consideration of this study is how Shelley and Keats intended to be read and received by their poetic audiences. In *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley makes his hopes for his poetic legacy explicit in his view that ‘the jury which sits in judgement upon a poet, belonging as he does to all time, must be composed of his peers: it must be impanelled by Time from the selectest of the wise of many generations’.[[7]](#footnote-7) The most important audience for Shelley is that of other poets, and this resonates with Owen’s wish to be what he described as ‘a poet’s poet’.[[8]](#footnote-8) Shelley’s writing is highly alert to the audience of poets that will come to form his ‘jury’, and in *Julian and Maddalo* and ‘Ode to the West Wind’ he explores his concerns regarding his reception by such an audience. Shelley presents the Maniac in *Julian and Maddalo* as an Orphic poet whose words have been dismembered and dispersed by the wind that carries them so that their meaning becomes distorted.[[9]](#footnote-9) In his poem ‘Orpheus’, Shelley describes ‘the wandering voice of Orpheus’ lyre, / Borne by the winds’ that ‘scatter’ his notes (‘Orpheus’, 38-39, 42),[[10]](#footnote-10) and in *Julian and Maddalo* the eponymous characters listen to the Maniac via the same means, by ‘Stealing his accents from the envious wind’ (*Julian and Maddalo*, 297).[[11]](#footnote-11) In the poem’s Preface Shelley describes the Maniac’s soliloquy as a series of ‘unconnected exclamations’,[[12]](#footnote-12) using terms that recall the ‘scatter[ed]’ notes of Orpheus’ lyre. The Maniac is frustrated that his words fail to convey the full record of his emotional trauma, confessing that his speech is made up of ‘“unwilling accents”’ (*Julian and Maddalo*, 475) that fall short of transmitting his intended meaning. Yet if the Maniac is a poet who is anxious of the way in which his words are received, in ‘Ode to the West Wind’ Shelley anticipates and overcomes this difficulty. The Maniac ends his speech by explaining ‘I do but hide / Under these words like embers, every spark / Of that which has consumed me”’ (*Julian and Maddalo*, 503-505). In ‘Ode to the West Wind’ Shelley reuses and revises this image, wilfully accepting an Orphic fate for himself and figuring the ‘embers’ left by words as possessing a life-giving power rather than a destructive force. He beseeches the west wind to ‘Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth / Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!’[[13]](#footnote-13) (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 66-67). Shelley hopes that the west wind will sow his ‘dead thoughts’ like seeds to ‘quicken a new birth’ (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 63, 64), revealing his wish that his words will breed more words in the years to come. Placing his trust in ‘the wise of many generations’, in ‘Ode to the West Wind’ Shelley anticipates how the poets of the future will gather his ‘dead thoughts’ that have been ‘Scatter[ed]’ by the wind and reshape them into something ‘new’ (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 63, 66). In considering how this wish shapes Shelley’s relationship with Owen, this thesis reads Shelley as a poet whose work is enlivened by the prospect that his words may be remembered and transformed by the poets who will come after him.

Keats frequently describes reading the works of his predecessors in his writing, and through this he envisions how he is going to be read. Christopher Ricks highlights Keats’s enjoyment in ‘imagining someone imagining’,[[14]](#footnote-14) and the poet describes this fascination in a letter to his brother George: ‘it would be a great delight […] to know in what position Shakespeare sat when he began “To be or not to be”’.[[15]](#footnote-15) The day after composing this letter Keats writes to his sister, Fanny, and expresses that ‘I should like the window to open onto the Lake Geneva—and there I’d sit and read all day like the picture of somebody reading’.[[16]](#footnote-16) If Keats wishes to view Shakespeare as he composed *Hamlet*, then in the same way he asks Fanny to ‘imagine [him] imagining’. He suggests that reading is itself an art form to be admired by likening the image of him reading to a ‘picture’, and he details the composition of such a work in his *mise en scène* by ‘the window’ looking out to Lake Geneva. This interest is inherited by Owen. Upon viewing a manuscript of Keats’s fragment *The Eve of St Mark* in the British Museum, Owen observed how Keats ‘go[es] round and round his subject and not knowing where or how to begin’ having ‘struck out several lines’, and he imagines Keats ‘thinking of nothing but the matter and not of himself and his pen’.[[17]](#footnote-17) Owen draws enjoyment from ‘imagining someone imagining’ in the same way as his precursor. The letters by Keats cited above reveal the poet’s desire to make art out of the way in which poetic influence is transferred through generations, and this aim is most explicitly put to practice in his sonnet, ‘On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again’. Here, Keats views Shakespeare’s tragedy as one that he must ‘burn through’ (‘On Sitting Down to read *King Lear*’, 7),[[18]](#footnote-18) referring to his aim to read it intensely, but also to the sense that his reading is a power to be wielded. The spotlight is on Keats, not Shakespeare, as *King Lear* inspires Keats to ‘fly at [his] desire’ (‘On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear*’, 14), with Keats intending to use Shakespeare’s work as a means of launching himself towards his own poetic vision. Seeing himself emerge as a ‘Phoenix’ at the end of the poem (‘On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear*’, 14), Keats advocates the benefits of reading the work of former masters as a way of reinventing himself and becoming a better poet. If Keats is conscious of his ‘half-discovered wings’ in an early sonnet, ‘On Leaving some Friends at an Early Hour’ (‘On Leaving Some Friends’, 8),[[19]](#footnote-19) in ‘On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear*’ he anticipates fully earning his poetic ‘wings’ by reading the work of his precursors. Susan J. Wolfson notes that the inclusion of ‘Once Again’ in the poem’s title shows that Keats’s emphasis is not on reading, but ‘re-reading’.[[20]](#footnote-20) Keats prizes returning to, revising, and revaluing the works that have inspired him through sustaining a constant engagement with his poetic predecessors. Keats’s depictions of reading shape Owen’s approach to both his own work and that of Shelley and Keats. This thesis shows that Owen follows Keats’s example to consistently return to the poetry of his precursors in order to ‘fly at [his own] desires’ (‘On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear*’, 14).

This study on poetic influence is indebted to, and seeks to depart from, the ideas explored by Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence*. Bloom’s theory centres on his view that poetic influence is a ‘Battle’ that exposes ‘[poetic] father and son as mighty opposites’.[[21]](#footnote-21) His argument owes much to Walter Jackson Bate’s study, *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet*, in which Bate argues that poets struggle to assert their difference from the work of the Renaissance masters, so that they ‘stutter, stagger, pull back into paralysis and indecision before such a conflict of demand’.[[22]](#footnote-22) Similarly, for Bloom, poetic influence always engenders a sense of anxiety or melancholy in the inheriting poet, and is ‘more a blight than a blessing’.[[23]](#footnote-23) While harnessing and controlling poetic influence is a challenge for Owen, it is far from a curse, and is never figured as simply an anxiety or a burden. Like Keats, he does not fully subscribe to the ‘dark melodrama of *The Anxiety of Influence*’,[[24]](#footnote-24) to use Ricks’s terms. Owen anticipates and thrives on the difficulties inherent in his role as a poetic heir; in ‘To Poesy’ he welcomes ‘the task, / That shall, as years advance, give power and skill’ (‘To Poesy’, 40-41),[[25]](#footnote-25) affirming his understanding of the degree of commitment involved in poetic inheritance but also his eagerness to enjoy the rewards it can offer. Bloom classifies the inheriting poet’s response to poetic influence in six ‘revisionary ratios’ that are introduced as the poetic heir’s ‘mechanisms for defence’ against the parent-poet.[[26]](#footnote-26) This thesis will show how Owen’s engagement with the work of Shelley and Keats reveals variations on Bloom’s ratios that allow both Owen’s ideas and those of his precursors to thrive within the same poem. Owen’s approach to influence does not involve self-effacement, daemonisation, a purgation of influence, or suggesting that his predecessors have failed in some way, as Bloom’s limiting ratios suggest.[[27]](#footnote-27) Owen does not repudiate his poetic precursors, nor does he strive to outperform them or frame their poetry as insignificant or irrelevant. Bloom argues that ‘The strong poet fails to beget himself—he must wait for his son’, explaining that ‘beget here means usurp’.[[28]](#footnote-28) The statement reveals a key problem in Bloom’s study that this thesis seeks to overcome, as Bloom neglects to explain why poets cannot co-exist in one literary lineage. This thesis frames Owen’s relationship with Keats and Shelley as positive and fruitful rather than the ‘Battle’ described by Bloom. While acknowledging the difficulties faced by the poetic inheritor, it offers an alternative, more nuanced view of influence that celebrates the affinities and differences between the poetry of Owen, Shelley and Keats, without figuring the poets as ‘mighty opposites’.

Bloom argues that ‘Every major aesthetic consciousness seems peculiarly more gifted at denying obligation as the hungry generations go on treading one another down’,[[29]](#footnote-29) yet the this view falls flat in its generalising overtone. Owen positions his ‘obligation’ to his poetic predecessors at the fore of his poetry, so that his approach to influence takes on a more overt and positive stance that resembles the attitude of Keats described by Ricks in *Allusion to the Poets*. For Ricks, ‘literary allusion is a way of dealing with the predicaments and responsibilities of “the poet as heir”’,[[30]](#footnote-30) and this stance offers a more optimistic alternative to Bloom’s six revisionary ratios. While Ricks claims that he avoids ‘engaging in current literary theory’,[[31]](#footnote-31) he nevertheless does the opposite, so that the theories offered by him and Bloom act as antipodes between which this thesis finds a balance. Ricks’s chapter on Keats serves as his most positive example of poetic inheritance in which Ricks observes ‘How unmisgivingly [Keats] speaks of influence, especially when happily under it’.[[32]](#footnote-32) Ricks notes that ‘Shakespeare has soaked Keats’s heart through’,[[33]](#footnote-33) unconsciously drawing upon an image employed by Owen when he reads W. M. Rossetti’s biography of Keats: ‘Rossetti guided my groping hand right into the wound, and I touched, for one moment the incandescent Heart of Keats’.[[34]](#footnote-34) This connection suggests that Owen not only functions as an inheritor of Keats’s poetry in this thesis, but also of Keats’s approach to influence. What Ricks’s study does not account for is Keats’s struggle to fulfil the responsibilities of the poetic heir, and it is this more complex experience of influence that this thesis will explore. While Ricks views Keats as enjoying the inspiration given to him by Shakespeare, Ricks does not fully consider Keats’s view on Milton: ‘I have but lately stood on my guard against Milton. Life to him would be death to me’.[[35]](#footnote-35) This thesis overcomes this significant elision by blending the approaches of Bloom and Ricks. Particularly in its discussion of Keats’s Miltonic influences in the first chapter, it offers a more detailed and complex view of the approach to influence taken by the poetic heir as one that vacillates between enthrallment and struggle.

Finding a middle ground between Bloom and Ricks’s theories of influence is no new feat. Eliot’s essay, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, written in 1919, serves to anticipate and mediate the extremities of Bloom and Ricks’s views in a manner that inspires the approach taken in this study. Eliot asserts that ‘[Tradition] cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour’.[[36]](#footnote-36) He anticipates the Bloomian emphasis on challenge and the ‘great difficulties’ of harnessing poetic influence,[[37]](#footnote-37) while at the same time criticising the ‘tendency’ to ‘dwell with satisfaction upon the poet’s difference from his predecessors’.[[38]](#footnote-38) Where Bloom argues that poetic influence can produce poetry ‘more original, though not necessarily better’ than that of past masters, [[39]](#footnote-39) Eliot celebrates the moments where precursors ‘assert their immortality most vigorously’ in the work of the inheriting poet as often facilitating ‘the best’ and ‘the most individual parts’ of the inheriting poet’s work.[[40]](#footnote-40) Eliot shares Ricks’s optimism but does not blind himself to the struggle endured by the poetic heir. Eliot claims that ‘the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past. And the poet who is aware of this will be aware of great difficulties and responsibilities’.[[41]](#footnote-41) By providing sustained readings of the poetry of Shelley and Keats alongside an analysis of Owen’s work, this thesis shows not only how Owen’s precursors inspire Owen’s vision, but also the ways in which Owen asks his readers to read the poetry of his predecessors in a new way. Owen amplifies the moments of difficulty, horror, and destruction that pervade the poetry of Shelley and Keats, and extends the formal, generic, and ethical tensions identified by his precursors. In this thesis, Owen is as much a poet in his own right as he is a dedicated reader of Shelley and Keats, so that their relationship reveals ‘the past [as] altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past’.[[42]](#footnote-42)

Scholars frequently argue that Owen criticises his precursors and rejects his Romantic influences in his War poetry. Sandra Gilbert argues that Owen becomes an ‘anti-Keats’,[[43]](#footnote-43) Jon Stallworthy claims that Owen ‘ironic[ally] echo[es]’ Keats,[[44]](#footnote-44) and Kendall writes that Owen views Shelley’s poetry as ‘obsolete and irrelevant to the war-dead’.[[45]](#footnote-45) However, Owen’s language reveals a continued debt to his Romantic roots; instead of turning away from or ‘parody[ing]’ the style of his predecessors,[[46]](#footnote-46) as John Purkis argues, he channels the rich descriptions associated with Romantic poetry in his accounts of the sensual and psychological bombardment of the battlefield. Though Owen’s early poetry tends more towards appropriation and imitation of Shelley and Keats’s work, this thesis will show that over the course of his career Owen not only learns to understand the nuances within Shelley and Keats’s writing but also how to respond to them while making his own unique contribution to poetry. Contrary to these critics’ beliefs, Owen becomes more Romantic as he continues to write. He reveals himself as a more astute reader of Shelley and Keats in his maturity and also learns how to control such influences in order to let his individual style and experiences shine through. To support his sense that the mature Owen rejects his Romantic forebears, Kendall claims that ‘All the numerous references to Keats and Shelley in the letters date from before active service in January 1917, and the few mentions thereafter convey little enthusiasm’.[[47]](#footnote-47) Kendall’s comment overlooks and underestimates Owen’s engagement with Romanticism following his enlistment in the army. In a letter to Siegfried Sassoon dated November 1917, Owen writes ‘I’m also getting Colvin’s new *Life of Keats*, no price advertised, but damn it, I’m going to enjoy my Leave!’[[48]](#footnote-48) Not only was Owen still reading Keats at this time, but this letter makes it clear that Owen was also still ‘enjoy[ing]’ the writing of his predecessor, rather than showing ‘little enthusiasm’ for Romanticism as Kendall claims. This letter was written in the same month Owen drafted some of his best-known poems at Craiglockhart hospital, notably, ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’, ‘Apologia Pro Poemate Meo’, ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’, ‘Insensibility’, and an early version of ‘Strange Meeting’,[[49]](#footnote-49) the title of which is taken from Shelley’s *The Revolt of Islam*.[[50]](#footnote-50) Sassoon notes the direct influence of Keats on Owen’s writing during this time. He describes Owen’s poetry as ‘a revelation’ while at the same time observing how Owen makes his poetic influences clear.[[51]](#footnote-51) Sassoon writes ‘I now realized that his verse, with its sumptuous epithets and large-scale imagery, its noble naturalness and depth of meaning, had impressive affinities with Keats’.[[52]](#footnote-52) Sassoon views Owen writing innovative poetry because of, not despite, his poetic influences, so that Owen’s Romanticism and his poetic experimentation are not mutually exclusive. Owen’s letters and Sassoon’s observation show not only that Owen responds to the poetry of Shelley and Keats in his war poetry, but also that Sassoon saw in Owen a potential Romantic heir.

While Kendall is correct that the ‘numerous references’ to Keats and Shelley dwindle in Owen’s letters,[[53]](#footnote-53) at this stage Owen engages more with the work of his predecessors through his poetry than in general epistolary conversation. His war elegies are littered with allusions to Shelley and Keats. In Stallworthy’s edition of Owen’s complete poems, Stallworthy notes thirty-five direct allusions to Romantic poetry after January 1917,[[54]](#footnote-54) thirty of which are to works by Keats and Shelley. This does not include more subtle references to their ideologies, nor does it consider the fragments written by Owen. In July 1918 Owen also considered entitling his first collection of poetry *With Lightning and With Music*,[[55]](#footnote-55) a line taken from Shelley’s *Adonais* (*Adonais*, 12. 104).[[56]](#footnote-56) Craig Raine argues that ‘Owen’s tiny corpus is perhaps the most overrated poetry in the twentieth century’, suggesting that ‘Owen’s main defect is ultimately educational: he has read, quite uncritically, too much bad Keats and worse Shelley’.[[57]](#footnote-57) Raine’s view does a huge injustice to Owen, Shelley, and Keats. Either Raine misidentifies the sources of Owen’s allusions, or he views Keats’s odes and Shelley’s *Adonais* and *The Triumph of Life*, among other poems, as ‘bad’ poetry. This view is testament to how Owen and his poetic influences have been misinterpreted, misunderstood, and undervalued. If many critics deride Owen’s Romantic influences, Michael O’Neill perceptively notes that while ‘The blissful dawn of revolutionary Romantic optimism has proved hard to sustain’, ‘Romanticism’s accompanying apocalyptic intimations have proved highly influential’.[[58]](#footnote-58) O’Neill observes that, for Owen, ‘It is more the case that a Keatsian intensity unravels itself and turns out to have terrifying applicability to life in the trenches’.[[59]](#footnote-59) Owen’s war poetry does not subscribe to any kind of blind faith in his predecessors. To be a poetic heir does not mean that the poet has to inherit everything. Owen eschews the ‘revolutionary Romantic optimism’ of Shelley and Keats while harnessing their rich language and their self-conscious approach to poetry, and extending their visions of horror, suffering, and apocalypse. Owen accepts as much of his precursors’ poetry as he rejects, so that he earns his status as Romantic heir without simply ‘imitat[ing]’ his precursors.[[60]](#footnote-60)

Jon Silkin, D. S. R. Welland, and Sven Bäckman argue that in ‘A Terre’ Owen rejects his Romantic influences.[[61]](#footnote-61) Bäckman states that the poem ‘should be read as a critical commentary’ of the philosophy that Shelley presents in *Adonais*, in which Owen ‘repudiate[s], criticize[s], and transform[s]’ the consolatory strategies of his predecessor.[[62]](#footnote-62) While Owen does engage in a critique of Shelley, his allusion to *Adonais* proves more complex than a straightforward act of ‘repudiat[ion]’. The central tension of ‘A Terre’ stems from Shelley’s belief in *Adonais* that the dead can be ‘made one with Nature’ (*Adonais*, 42. 370). Stanza forty-two of *Adonais* provides Owen with the thrust of his critique:

He is made one with Nature: there is heard

His voice in all her music, from the moan

Of thunder, to the song of night’s sweet bird;

He is a presence to be felt and known

In darkness and in light, from herb and stone,

(*Adonais*, 42. 370-374)

Responding to Shelley’s representation of nature, Owen positions Shelley’s speaker in a dialectical tension with the speaker of ‘A Terre’:

“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’, 44-47)[[63]](#footnote-63)

For Owen, Shelley’s poetry cannot offer any straightforward solution to the problems caused by the War. However, through this recognition Owen flags a concern that was equally Shelley’s; Richard Cronin argues that ‘The notion that the individual’s life after death consists in being subsumed in an impersonal life-force, no matter how excitingly described, is shown to be unsatisfactory’ for Shelley in *Adonais*.[[64]](#footnote-64) Owen’s critique of Shelley shows him disengaging from his predecessor in the same way that Shelley rejects his own idea. In *Adonais*, Shelley relocates the elegised figure from the earth to the Heavens, as ‘The soul of Adonais, like a star, / Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are’ (*Adonais*, 55. 494-495). Yet this is not a viable option for Owen, for whom ‘heaven’ is ‘but […] the highway for a shell’ (‘Apologia pro Poemate Meo’, 32).[[65]](#footnote-65) For Shelley, the earth is not enough to console him. For the ‘dullest Tommy’, the earth is all a soldier has, and this realisation forces them to reclaim the consolatory strategy that Shelley chose to reject.

Though Welland and Silkin argue that the echo of *Adonais* in ‘A Terre’ does not ‘constitute a bridge between this century and the last, but a break’,[[66]](#footnote-66) the speaker’s concession that ‘Shelley would be stunned’ (‘A Terre’, 45) is less a Bloomian antithesis than it is a sombre invocation of his precursor.[[67]](#footnote-67) The caesura in the line ‘Shelley would tell me. Shelley would be stunned;’ (‘A Terre’, 45) shows Owen’s acknowledgement of a ‘break’, yet the repetition of ‘Shelley would’ on either side of the medial pause suggests less a discontinuity than a hesitance to depart from his predecessor, as if Owen is concerning himself with what ‘Shelley would’ do before forming his own plan of action. Shelley knows that his attempt to console himself with the notion that Adonais lives through nature is facile, and Owen faces the same impasse in ‘A Terre’. Owen’s speaker tells his auditor ‘Don’t take my soul’s poor comfort for your jest’ (‘A Terre’, 58), and the line reveals that the speaker has become seduced by the ‘fancy’ rejected by Shelley because he can offer no better solution (‘A Terre’, 46). If Owen criticises Shelley in ‘A Terre’, the comment is also self-critical, as Owen inherits Shelley’s struggle to secure a source of genuine consolation. Eliot explains that ‘[The poet] must be quite aware of the obvious fact that art never improves, but that the material of art is never quite the same’.[[68]](#footnote-68) Owen responds to his predecessors while remaining aware that ‘the material of art’ has radically changed in light of the War. Owen is not saying that ‘Shelley would be stunned’ that the consolation depicted in stanza forty-two of *Adonais* is now viewed as a ‘fancy’; Shelley would not be stunned, for he had rejected this idea himself in his elegy. Rather, Owen suggests that ‘Shelley would be stunned’ at the War and at the extent to which ‘the material of art’ has changed, as Owen wonders how his predecessor would respond to the atrocities that he and his fellow soldiers have endured.

Owen became increasingly aware of the difficulties faced by a poet writing in the midst of conflict. Harold Owen recalls his brother’s frustration after his first experience at the Front when Owen asked ‘how will Shelley show me how to hate or any poet teach me the trajectory of a bullet?’[[69]](#footnote-69) A similar view is expressed by Owen in a comment on Tennyson: ‘But as for misery, was he ever frozen alive, with dead men for comforters[?]’[[70]](#footnote-70) Gilbert argues that in the context of the former statement, Owen ‘rage[s] against a literary tradition in which he found no precedent for the horrors of industrialized warfare’.[[71]](#footnote-71) But, in the light of Gilbert’s claim, this thesis views Eliot’s sense that ‘the material of art is never quite the same’ as not only a stance that should be taken by the poet,[[72]](#footnote-72) but one that should also be adopted by readers of Owen’s poetry. Owen is not ‘rag[ing]’ against a tradition that could not have foreseen the horrors of the First World War, nor did he expect his predecessors to set a ‘precedent’ for describing a level of ‘carnage’ that is ‘incomparable’ (‘Mental Cases’, 17) to that witnessed by previous generations.[[73]](#footnote-73) Rather, the comment shows Owen developing an identity as a soldier that would come to co-exist with his role as a poet, and reveals his awareness of the challenges prompted by this dual-role. If Owen is highly conscious of his poetic debts to his predecessors, he also comes to see the limits of their influence, and recognises that the War offers an opportunity for him to create something unique from its destruction. The War expands Owen’s parameters for experience, heightening his ‘misery’, but also granting him a ‘Serenity Shelley never dreamed of’.[[74]](#footnote-74) Owen is alert to both the affinities he shares with his precursors and to his differences from them. This thesis explores the struggle Owen experienced in upholding the often conflicting impulses incurred by his dual identity as a soldier-poet, and reveals Owen negotiating how to be a poet in such horrific conditions.

Following Michael O’Neill in *The All-Sustaining Air*,[[75]](#footnote-75) Peter McDonald in *Sound Intentions*,[[76]](#footnote-76) and Peter Howarth in *British Poetry in the Age of Modernism*,[[77]](#footnote-77) this thesis takes a new formalist approach to the poetry of Owen, Shelley, and Keats. Through close reading it reveals the intricate and subtle development of Owen’s poetic style and engages in a detailed analysis of his use of allusion. ‘Reading the local particularities of events in form,’ writes Susan J. Wolfson in *Formal Charges*, ‘we discover the most complex measures of human art—the terms of its durable, social, political, and psychological interest. We also feel the charge of an historically persistent, forever various, aesthetic vitality’.[[78]](#footnote-78) The formal approach of this study does not come at the cost of the poetry’s wider context. Discussion of letters written by Owen, Shelley, and Keats, and contemporary reviews of their poetry, supports this study’s formal analysis in the manner described by Wolfson. If form is seen as a means of conveying poetic meaning, as these critics suggest, then the metapoetic quality of the work of Owen, Shelley, and Keats extends this idea so that form comes to possess a meaning of its own. Stuart Curran writes that form ‘is an ideological construct, and it may be in place, forcing choices, before a word is written—or the subject matter is even conceived’.[[79]](#footnote-79) Owen follows Shelley and Keats by showing how poetic meaning results from the decisions made during a poem’s formal composition.[[80]](#footnote-80) In ‘If by dull rhymes our English must be chained’, Keats’s frustration with the ‘dull rhymes’ that characterise received stylisations of the sonnet is overcome through his manipulation of sound patterns (‘If by dull rhymes’, 1).[[81]](#footnote-81) By experimenting with rhyme, he creates a version of the form that is more ‘interwoven and complete’ than traditional structures allow (‘If by dull rhymes’, 5) (see chapter two for further discussion). In *The Triumph of Life* Shelley’s speaker declines to become a part of the frantic mass he surveys, yet the speed generated by Shelley’s heavily enjambed *terza rima* reveals his struggle to avoid being carried off by the ‘perpetual flow’ of people and the pace set out by his form (*The Triumph of Life*, 298) (see chapter three for further discussion).[[82]](#footnote-82) Like his predecessors, Owen valorises the daring potential of form. Welland writes that Owen’s manuscripts ‘show that at times his method was to jot down marginally lists of possible pairs of words and then build the poem round them’.[[83]](#footnote-83) This thesis views Owen’s poetry as responding to the moments where Shelley and Keats explore the semantic as well as the aesthetic possibilities of poetic form.

In *The Anxiety of Influence* Bloom overlooks the potential for poetic form to enact the drama of his revisionary ratios. The formalist approach of this thesis seeks to detect the nuances within Owen’s approach to influence in a manner that overcomes the generalisations of Bloom’s theoretical views. Where Bloom gives an overview of various poets’ responses to influence organised by each ratio, the sustained discussion on Owen in this study reveals the challenges, the missteps, and the successes in Owen’s poetic development over the course of his literary career. The structure of this thesis, which discusses Owen’s early and mature poetry in chronological order, shows Owen adhering to both polarities of Eliot’s view that ‘Immature poets imitate […], and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different’.[[84]](#footnote-84) Using new formalism to reveal Owen’s explicit references as well as his subtle allusions to his predecessors’ work reveals the dexterity with which Owen hones his allusive technique and responds to, revises, or re-applies the words of Shelley and Keats to his own poetry, as Owen learns to become a poetic heir. The new formalist approach of this thesis also complements the manner in which Owen himself read poetry. Raine’s comment that Owen read Shelley and Keats’s poetry ‘quite uncritically’ is inaccurate,[[85]](#footnote-85) and this thesis will demonstrate how Owen becomes a sensitive critic of his predecessors’ work. Stallworthy explains that Owen ‘acquired the habit of “close-reading” that would stand him in good stead’ in his allusions to Shelley and Keats’s poetry.[[86]](#footnote-86) Owen underlined the half-rhymes used by Shelley in his copy of John Addington Symonds’s biography of the Romantic poet,[[87]](#footnote-87) which Owen bought in 1912, so that the formal practices of his predecessor appear to have encouraged his own experimentations with the technique. Assuming Owen’s manner of close reading the work of his precursors, this thesis takes the same approach to the poetry of Shelley and Keats as that of Owen, reading their poetry as Owen read them, and subsequently reading Owen as he intended to be read. In a letter to Sassoon written in December 1917, Owen asks his friend’s opinion on early drafts of ‘A Terre’ and ‘The Show’: ‘What do you think to my Vowel-rime stunt in this, and ‘Vision’?’,[[88]](#footnote-88) highlighting the half-rhymes that would come to characterise his poetic style. The formal features of poetry became a common feature of Owen’s conversations with Sassoon, and Sassoon recalled ‘eager discussions of contemporary poets and the technical dodges we were ourselves revising’,[[89]](#footnote-89) and noted that Owen’s interest in form set him apart from other poets, including himself, ‘For my technique was almost elementary compared with his innovating experiments’.[[90]](#footnote-90) While new formalism exposes the intricacy and subtlety of Owen’s allusions, this method of reading also foregrounds Owen’s self-consciousness regarding his own poetic technique.

My decision not to discuss the direct influence of other Romantic poets on Owen’s work is one that stems predominantly from evidence, or lack thereof, in Owen’s letters and poetry. While Owen read and enjoyed poetry by Wordsworth and Byron,[[91]](#footnote-91) there is little discussion of their works in his letters and significantly fewer direct allusions to their poetry in his writing than those to Shelley and Keats. In *Wilfred Owen: The Collected Letters*, edited by Harold Owen and John Bell, Byron is mentioned by Owen on just three occasions, the latest occurrence of which is in 1912. Stallworthy does not note any allusions to Byron’s poetry by Owen in his edition of Owen’s complete works. Wordsworth is mentioned by Owen eight times in his letters, and three direct allusions are noted by Stallworthy. The relative lack of discussion of Wordsworth and Byron in Owen’s writing show that Shelley and Keats pose a much more formidable and lasting poetic presence in Owen’s poetry and letters.

The decision not to include Wordsworth’s influence on Owen in this thesis also results from the divergence between the two poets’ treatment of consolation. In the final line of ‘Elegiac Stanzas’ Wordsworth writes ‘Not without hope […] we mourn’ (‘Elegiac Stanzas’, 60).[[92]](#footnote-92) This sentiment is revised by Owen in ‘Strange Meeting’ when Owen’s speaker attempts to comfort the mysterious stranger: ‘“Strange friend,” I said, “here is no cause to mourn.” / “None,” said that other, “save […] / The hopelessness…”’ (‘Strange Meeting’, 14-15).[[93]](#footnote-93) If Wordsworth is, even amidst his negating diction, ‘Not without hope’, then this mode of ‘mourn[ing]’ is unavailable to Owen, who weaves the loss of this Wordsworthian outlook into the tragedy of ‘Strange Meeting’. O’Neill writes that the lines in ‘Elegiac Stanzas’ reveal how ‘consolation is more credible for its near-exhausted, clung-to nature’.[[94]](#footnote-94) If consolation is both hard-earned and ‘clung-to’ by Wordsworth, then the ghost in ‘Strange Meeting’ functions as a jaded Wordsworthian-poet who must let go of such a desperately-sought comfort and accept that hope ‘must die now’ (‘Strange Meeting’, 24). Owen’s poem serves as a site where hope is not a means of enduring grief, as Wordsworth asserts, but becomes itself something that must be grieved. The tenacity with which Wordsworth ‘cl[ings]’ to consolation can also be seen in the two versions of ‘The Discharged Soldier’, which Wordsworth first drafted as a stand-alone poem before integrating it into Book Four of *The Prelude*. Here, Wordsworth encounters a weary soldier who has returned from conflict abroad. Wordsworth rouses the stranger and subsequently takes him to find food and lodgings at a nearby cottage. The first version of the poem ends with the lines ‘he thanked me. I returned / The blessing of the poor unhappy man, / And so we parted’ (‘The Discharged Soldier’, 170).[[95]](#footnote-95) The half line that ends the poem amplifies the awkwardness of Wordsworth’s departure, so that the absence of the five syllables that would complete his pentameter leaves open Wordsworth’s feeling that he could have done more to aid his companion. If Wordsworth’s dissatisfaction in how things were left with the soldier remains unresolved in the first version of the poem, he revises the ending in *The Prelude*: ‘And so we parted. Back I cast a look, / And lingered near the door a little space; / Then sought with quiet heart my distant home’ (*The Prelude* [1805], 4. 502-504).[[96]](#footnote-96) The extra two lines grant the ceremony to the parting between Wordsworth and the soldier that the first version lacks. Wordsworth completes the half-finished pentameter of ‘And so we parted’ with a reflection of his own sentiment that buffers the abruptness of the separation. David Simpson remarks that Wordsworth’s ending ‘allows [the poet] to claim a quiet heart, the reward of a charitable act now completed’.[[97]](#footnote-97) If Wordsworth finds comfort in his efforts to secure food and shelter for the soldier and assimilate him back into society, for Owen and his comrades no such charity is on offer, as Owen recounts with sorrowful reiteration that ‘Shutters and doors, all closed: on us the doors are closed’ in ‘Exposure’ (‘Exposure’, 29).[[98]](#footnote-98) If Wordsworth’s ‘quiet heart’ is a result of his ‘charitable act’ to the stranger, Owen’s soldiers are ‘helpless’ (‘Mental Cases’, 13).[[99]](#footnote-99) He emphasises that the possibility of Wordsworthian consolation, no matter how desperately it is ‘clung-to’, is not tenable in the midst of the First World War.

Owen shares Byron’s suspicion of the traditional rhetoric of war and heroism, and similarly concerns himself with the pursuit of truth undertaken by the Romantic poet. However, Byron and Owen differ significantly in their approach to such subjects. The powerful poignancy of Owen’s earnest manner distinguishes him from Byron’s masterful blend of playful and serious tones. If Owen’s draft Preface advocates that ‘true Poets […] must be truthful’,[[100]](#footnote-100) *Don Juan* reveals that Byron relishes confusion and ambiguity, with Jerome J. McGann identifying the poem as one in which the ‘truth comes in masquerade’.[[101]](#footnote-101) Byron teasingly manipulates ideas of truth and poetic meaning in canto four of *Don Juan*, where hewrites:

Some have accused me of a strange design

Against the creed and morals of the land,

And trace it in this poem every line:

I don’t pretend that I quite understand

My own meaning when I would be *very* fine;

But the fact is I have nothing plann’d,

(*Don Juan*, 4. 5. 33-40)[[102]](#footnote-102)

In these lines Byron mocks the interpretative efforts of his readers, laughing off our attempt to make sense of or impose our own ‘design’ on ‘every line’. However, his concession that ‘the fact is I have nothing plann’d’ arouses our suspicion that the comment is a double-bluff, suggesting that Byron is in full control of presenting ‘fact[s]’ that may or may not be true. While Owen experiments with form and genre, he does not play with meaning in the same manner as Byron. In canto eight of *Don Juan* Byron writes: ‘Yet I love Glory:—glory’s a great thing;— / Think what it is to be in your old age / Maintained at the expense of your good king’ (*Don Juan*, 8. 14. 105-107). The lines are delivered with a sardonic sneer; when Byron asks his readers to ‘Think’ we become complicit in his mock-reverie on the joys of glory so that we momentarily fall foul of his game playing and become one of the fools he taunts. Owen shares Byron’s distaste for traditional emblems of war but communicates it more directly in his draft Preface, stating that ‘This book is not about […] deeds, or lands, or about glory’.[[103]](#footnote-103) If the Romantic poet weaves multiple meanings into his poetry, Owen clearly spells out his intentions. When Byron continues his musings on ‘Glory’ to sarcastically state that ‘heroes are but made for bards to sing, / Which is still better’ (*Don Juan*, 8. 14. 109-110), he toys with an idea that Owen delivers with a straight face in ‘Insensibility’: ‘But they are troops who fade, not flowers, / For poets’ tearful fooling: / Men, gaps for filling’ (‘Insensibility’, 7-9).[[104]](#footnote-104) If *Don Juan* shows Byron distorting truth and casting himself as a ‘sire of the half-serious rhyme’ (*Don Juan*, 4. 6. 43), then Owen deals in serious half-rhymes that confront the reality of war head-on. Byron reveals his desire for his poetry to avoid any straightforward meaning in the lines ‘thus in verse to wage / Your wars eternally’ (*Don Juan*, 8. 14. 110-111), where ‘in verse’ subtly refers to the poet’s ‘inverse’ means of ‘wag[ing]’ his wars, as each claim in this stanza of *Don Juan* is made while implying that the opposite is true. If Byron can toy with meaning and communicate mixed messages, Owen refuses this mode of ambiguity. Where Byron’s poetry avoids any easy interpretation of the intentions and aims that inspire it, for Owen the stakes are higher in the midst of the War, and he ensures that the meaning in his poetry is clearly communicated.

This thesis is divided into five chapters. The first two chapters focus on Owen’s poetic response to Keats, and chapters three and four discuss the influence of Shelley on Owen’s poetry. Chapter five discusses Shelley, Keats, and Owen together to show how both of Owen’s predecessors inspire his approach to the pastoral genre. Each chapter devotes equal attention to the work of Shelley or Keats (and in the case of the chapter five, Shelley and Keats), and to Owen’s poetic response to their writing. Framing Owen’s poetry through a sustained discussion of his predecessor poets allows each chapter to delineate the specific elements of their poetry that Owen extends, revises, or transforms. By structuring each chapter in this way, this thesis reveals where the lines of influence end and where Owen’s innovation on Shelley and Keats’s poetic vision begins. Discussing Owen’s work in chronological order foregrounds the development of his poetic technique and shows his increasing level of control over his influences. Despite Kendall’s view that Owen ‘abjures’ the lessons learned in his early work,[[105]](#footnote-105) and the critical consensus that his poetic greatness owed to the advent of the First World War,[[106]](#footnote-106) the significance of his early poetry has been greatly overlooked. In his view that ‘[Owen’s] later elegies spring from his early preoccupations as flowers from their stem’,[[107]](#footnote-107) Stallworthy aptly affirms how an understanding of Owen’s pre-War poetry facilitates the interpretation of his later work. My analysis of Owen’s early poetry alongside an examination of his war elegies allows each chapter to reveal the poetic concerns that dominate Owen’s writing at various stages in his career.

The first chapter addresses the issue of poetic inheritance in the poetry of Keats and Owen. It compares how Keats responds to the influence of Milton in *The Fall of Hyperion* to Owen’s reception of Keats in Owen’s earliest-known poem, ‘To Poesy’. Central to the chapter’s discussion is Keats’s criteria to transcend his ‘dreamer’ status and become a fully-fledged ‘poet’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*,1. 199).[[108]](#footnote-108) In *The Fall of Hyperion* Keats responds to Milton by blending Bloomian ‘anxiety’ with the ‘pleasure’ of influence as he tasks himself with making a unique contribution to the epic genre.[[109]](#footnote-109) The transformation of Keats from ‘dreamer’ to ‘poet’ in *The Fall of Hyperion* inspires Owen’s aims in ‘To Poesy’. Instead of swerving from Keats in order to formulate an individual style, Owen’s attempt to imitate Keats’s attainment of poet-status in *The Fall of Hyperion* bespeaks his youth and poetic immaturity. However, his desire to follow in the footsteps of his predecessor prevails, as Owen’s struggle in ‘To Poesy’ shares an affinity with Keats’s experience of writing *Endymion*. If Owen falls short of achieving the majestic status of Keats in *The Fall of Hyperion*, this chapter shows how he reveals the influence of his predecessor as vital to his poetic creation, and that he takes on the duties of the poetic heir with reverence and enthusiasm.

The sonnet features frequently in the works of Keats and Owen, and their engagement with this form showcases their enthusiasm for poetic experimentation. Chapter two analyses how both poets walk the tightrope between formal tradition and innovation in their approach to the sonnet. The chapter charts their apprenticeships to the form by analysing sonnets written at an early stage in Keats and Owen’s poetic career, starting with Keats’s ‘How many bards gild the lapses of time’ and ‘To Lord Byron’, and Owen’s ‘Written in a Wood, September 1910’ and ‘Sonnet written at Teignmouth, On a Pilgrimage to Keats’s House’. This culminates in a reading of Owen’s ‘Futility’ as skilful response to Keats’s ‘If by dull rhymes our English must be chained’. If Keats’s innovation in ‘If by dull rhymes’ was motivated by his distaste for the ‘pouncing rhymes’ in traditional sonnet structures,[[110]](#footnote-110) then Owen inherits this concern, and in ‘Futility’ he distinguishes himself from the ‘“Many fervent souls [who] / Strike rhyme on rhyme”’.[[111]](#footnote-111) The chapter reveals the developing complexity of Owen’s allusive technique; not only does Owen adopt and adapt the language and ideologies of Keats in his own poetry, he extends his precursor’s experimentation on the sonnet to make his own unique contribution to the form.

If Keats’s poetry influences Owen’s approach to style and form, Shelley inspires Owen as a philosopher and elegist. Chapter three explores Owen’s response to Shelley’s poetics of sympathy. Through readings of Shelley’s *The Triumph of Life* and Owen’s ‘The Show’ and ‘Strange Meeting’ it shows how both poets scrutinise the divide between sympathy and empathy. Central to this chapter is Rousseau’s proposal that Shelley’s speaker ‘turn’ ‘from spectator’ to ‘Actor or victim in this wretchedness’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 305, 306) while gazing upon the deluded mass of people depicted in *The Triumph of Life*. Implicit in this instruction is a shift from the speaker enjoying the detached sympathy of the ‘spectator’ to experiencing empathy with the people he surveys by joining the crowd and becoming an ‘Actor’. Though the speaker ultimately refrains from entering the crowd, the boundaries that divide these roles are constantly blurred throughout the poem. Shelley’s roles of ‘spectator’, ‘Actor’, and ‘victim in [the] wretchedness’ takes on a new resonance for Owen in the context of the War. In ‘The Show’ Owen views battling soldiers from a distance in a manner that is indebted to *The Triumph of Life*. The poet struggles to sustain the detached sympathy of the ‘spectator’, and desires to empathise with the soldiers in the crowd by joining them and becoming an ‘Actor’. In ‘Strange Meeting’ Owen presents his speaker as a Shelleyan ‘Actor’ who has ‘escaped’ ‘out of battle’ (‘Strange Meeting’, 1),[[112]](#footnote-112) and the stranger as a reflective ‘spectator’. While Shelley’s ‘spectat[ing]’ speaker does not experience the sufferings of the crowd in *The Triumph of Life*, for Owen both ‘spectator[s]’ and ‘Actor[s]’ become ‘victim[s]’ of the War’s ‘wretchedness’ as Owen views sympathy and empathy as posing different risks in the midst of conflict.

Chapter four focuses on Shelley and Owen’s approach to the elegy and its aesthetic traditions. In ‘On the Medusa of Leonardo Da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery’ and *Adonais* Shelley is entranced by both the ‘horror’ and ‘beauty’ of the corpses he surveys (‘On the Medusa’, 4).[[113]](#footnote-113) Shelley draws upon Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, and anticipates the processes described by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, reconciling their theories in his desire for his poetry to ‘marr[y] exultation and horror’.[[114]](#footnote-114) Owen responds to and extends the tension between the beauty and horror explored by Shelley. In the fragment ‘I saw his round mouth’s crimson deepen as it fell’ and ‘Greater Love’, Owen uses the language of Burkean sublimity to amplify the beauty of dead and dying bodies in a manner that borders upon eroticism. If the horror of the corpses depicted in these poems is tempered by Owen’s emphasis on its ‘splendour’ (‘I saw his round mouth’s crimson’, 5),[[115]](#footnote-115) in ‘Mental Cases’ Owen amplifies the ‘hideous[ness]’ (‘Mental Cases’, 23) of dying and traumatised soldiers.[[116]](#footnote-116) By foregrounding the abject appearance of the men he surveys, Owen’s horrifying vision creates ‘a vortex of summons and repulsion’,[[117]](#footnote-117) to use Kristeva’s words, as the poet forces his readers to gaze unflinchingly at the effects of the ‘unnameable tortures’ that soldiers endured in France.[[118]](#footnote-118)

Chapter five explores Owen’s achievement as a pastoral poet. While previous chapters examine Owen’s response to the poetry of Shelley or Keats, this chapter shows how Owen harnesses and melds the influences of both poets at the same time, and reveals how they inspire his approach to genre. Owen’s ‘Exposure’ and ‘Spring Offensive’ are read as direct responses to Keats’s ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ and Shelley’s ‘Ode to the West Wind’. The chapter centres upon Shelley and Keats’s desire to transcend human suffering through a union with nature. Their hope that nature will grant the escape they seek is shot through with scepticism, as both poets foreground the destructive power of their environments to suggest that nature may be no longer able to offer humanity the renewal it seeks. Nature becomes a more overtly dangerous presence in Owen’s ‘Exposure’ and ‘Spring Offensive’. In these poems, it is less that nature is indifferent to humanity’s sufferings than that it pulls humanity into its processes with devastating effect. Bloom writes, ‘“Be me but not me” is the paradox of the precursor’s implicit charge to the ephebe’.[[119]](#footnote-119) This chapter shows how Owen rises to and fulfils this ‘charge’, as it figures the pastoral as the site where Owen claims his allegiance with and asserts his difference from Shelley and Keats. In the allusions to ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ and ‘Ode to the West Wind’ that recur throughout ‘Exposure’ and ‘Spring Offensive’, Owen proves himself to be a mature poet in full control of his influences. As Owen seizes the opportunity to depart from his precursors and showcase his own version of the pastoral, he makes it clear that the origins of his poetic visions lie in the poetry of Shelley and Keats.

This thesis serves as a vital and rigorous examination of the Romantic influences within Owen’s work. If Shelley foresaw himself being judged by a ‘jury’ ‘composed of his peers’,[[120]](#footnote-120) and Keats hoped he would be ‘among the English poets after [his] death’,[[121]](#footnote-121) then Owen inherits their wishes to be part of an immortal poetic community. In 1918 he expressed a similar aim: ‘I want no limelight, and celebrity is the last infirmity I desire. *Fame is the recognition of one’s peers*’.[[122]](#footnote-122) Owen prized the notion of being ‘a poet’s poet’,[[123]](#footnote-123) and he fulfils this ambition by asserting himself as part of a poetic lineage with Shelley and Keats. Ricks observes that ‘Paradoxically it is often by the courtesy of another […] that a poet becomes himself’.[[124]](#footnote-124) In the same way that Keats more clearly envisages the direction he wishes his poetry to take after re-reading the work of Shakespeare (‘On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear*’, 14), Owen refines his poetic vision through his sustained efforts to read and revisit the poetry of his precursors. Eliot writes that the present reveals ‘an awareness of the past in a way […] [that] the past’s awareness of itself cannot show’.[[125]](#footnote-125) Much of Owen’s poetry finds its origins in that of Shelley and Keats, but it also asks that we re-read, reconsider, and revalue Shelley and Keats’s work in light of the new meanings drawn out by Owen’s allusions. This thesis reveals Owen as a poet who is as committed to his ‘innovating experiments’ as he is to imbuing his own poetry with the ‘shadows’ of his precursors’ ‘melodious utterance’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 6),[[126]](#footnote-126) with these two elements combining to form his unique poetic voice.

**Chapter One**

**‘Thou art no Poet’: Keats, Owen, and Poetic Influence**

Keats and Owen are highly conscious of the importance of poetic influence in their work. Harold Bloom figures the process of influence in almost exclusively negative terms, referring to ‘misreadings’, ‘misprisions’,[[127]](#footnote-127) and ‘inhibitors’ to account for what he terms as ‘the anxiety of influence’.[[128]](#footnote-128) Yet for Keats and Owen the process of being inspired is both a stifling burden, as Bloom argues, and an experience of exhilarating ‘pleasure’.[[129]](#footnote-129) While Bloom marks the anxiety of influence as ‘indeliberate and unconscious’,[[130]](#footnote-130) Keats was aware of Milton’s haunting presence over his first epic, *Hyperion*.[[131]](#footnote-131) Determined to make a unique contribution to the genre, Keats revises his approach to the epic in*The Fall of Hyperion*, and transforms the epic’s traditional narrative into what Vincent Newey describes as a ‘psychomachia, or mind debate, about the function and value of poetry’.[[132]](#footnote-132) In his revised epic, Keats questions his poetic identity and challenges his artistic values while figuring himself as Milton’s poetic inheritor. Keats openly displays his struggle with poetic influence, and this self-consciousness is deeply significant for Owen in his earliest surviving work, ‘To Poesy’. The poem is an underexplored and key work in Owen’s oeuvre that reveals the young poet learning how to respond to poetic influence. As Owen Knowles observes, ‘To Poesy’ presents Owen as an ‘acolyte of literature, who […] feels himself to be set apart by the belief that “the fullest largest liveable life […] [is] that of a Poet”’.[[133]](#footnote-133) Keenly conscious of the artistic vision attained by his predecessor in *The Fall of Hyperion*, Owen employs a Keatsian strategy of self-evaluation in his poetry in order to overcome his anxieties. While Keats dramatises a ‘psychomachia’, Adrian Caesar argues that ‘To Poesy’ is ‘a youthful supplication torn between hope and fear, self-aggrandisement and self-depreciation’ in which Owen struggles to assert his entitlement to poet status.[[134]](#footnote-134) Though Owen feels himself a worthy ‘acolyte’ through his reverential treatment of Keats’s work, ‘To ‘Poesy’ amplifies the sense of his artistic inexperience rather than chronicles his poetic maturation. If Owen fails to become a fully-fledged poet in ‘To Poesy’, the poem’s significance lies in the way Owen reveals his devotion to his art, his ambitions as a poet, and the importance he gives to poetic influence.

As Keats increased in poetic maturity, Paul Wright notes how the poet’s sense of his role as a poetic descendant of Milton preoccupied him more intensely: ‘In the shadow of *Paradise Lost*, Keats, like many of his contemporaries, felt that he [could not] be a poet unless he composed a long poem’.[[135]](#footnote-135) Though Wright suggests that the epic poem is proof of a poet’s worth to their era, for Keats it is the process of writing the epic, not the epic poem itself, that sees him begin to form and validate his role as a poet. In *The Fall of Hyperion* Keats drafts, practices, and hones his artistic skill, portraying the poet-self as an apprentice rather than a master. Michael O’Neill observes that in Keats’s first attempt at the epic, *Hyperion*, ‘It is as though Keats is trying, more literally than any other Romantic, to write an epic for the present day that challenges Milton on his own ground’.[[136]](#footnote-136) If *Hyperion* forms the textual battleground on which Keats attempts to combat Milton on Milton’s terms, then Keats’s shift to *The Fall of Hyperion* marks an effort to complement and extend Milton’s vision, and translate it into the terms of Keats’s self-conscious Romanticism.

In a departure from the narrative of *Hyperion*, Keats prefaces the action of *The Fall* *of Hyperion* with a manifesto that details his artistic values and the aims of his revised epic. Stuart Sperry notes that here Keats considers ‘the major concerns haunting [his] consciousness’,[[137]](#footnote-137) as the poet meditates on how to respond to the influence of *Paradise Lost*. While Milton sought to ‘justify the ways of God to men’ (*Paradise Lost*,1. 26),[[138]](#footnote-138) Keats opens his poem with a ‘swerve’ from such epic grandeur,[[139]](#footnote-139) aiming instead to justify the ways of poets to men:

Fanatics have their dreams, wherewith they weave   
A paradise for a sect, the savage too   
From forth the loftiest fashion of his sleep   
Guesses at Heaven; pity these have not   
Traced upon vellum or wild Indian leaf   
The shadows of melodious utterance.   
But bare of laurel they live, dream, and die;   
For Poesy alone can tell her dreams,   
With the fine spell of words alone can save   
Imagination from the sable charm   
And dumb enchantment.

(*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 1-11)[[140]](#footnote-140)

If language is the ‘spell’ with which imagination can be ‘save[d]’, Keats views the poet as the rescuer who speaks such poetic charms. Instead of using the epic to depict a successive sequence of events,[[141]](#footnote-141) for Keats, the narrative of the epic has shifted to the way in which the poet must use his art to ‘[do] some good for the world’.[[142]](#footnote-142) Yet this aim is troubled by Keats’s conflicting desires to at once acknowledge his poem’s debt to Milton’s epic and set his work apart from it. The indefinite article of ‘A paradise’ cites *The Fall of Hyperion* as his unique version of visionary transcendence, and not a rehashed equivalent of *Paradise Lost*. Yet the presence of Milton’s epic is felt as a potential burden fromthe start, as the metre of ‘for a sect’ stumbles in the wake of the word ‘paradise’. The words form an anapaest in a line of iambs, so that Keats is placed on unsure metrical footing following the reminder of his predecessor’s epic. Compounding this effect, the line’s hypermeter shows the poet’s strain to contain Miltonic influence in his poetry.[[143]](#footnote-143) While Keats is conscious of the ‘stern and demanding [task]’ that lies ahead of him,[[144]](#footnote-144) he also anticipates invigorating the epic and lifting the burden of influence. The ‘shadows of melodious utterance’ ‘weave’ through the iambs of Keats’s blank verse. Seven of the ten syllables in line six are unstressed as Keats unfetters himself from the stresses that have strained his poem thus far. In conjuring the ‘shadows’ of former visions Keats is conscious of Milton’s haunting presence over his epic, yet the ease of the line’s waltzing metre seems to shake off this burden. Rather than ventriloquising his predecessor, Keats expresses his wish to continue Milton’s ‘adventurous song’ (*Paradise Lost*, 1. 13) through his own ‘utterance’. Helen Vendler sees Keats’s use of musicality as either ‘exist[ing] to warm the heart luxuriously, or to offer madness […]: it was an art solely of sensation, not of thought’.[[145]](#footnote-145) Yet Keats’s self-consciousness is filtered through the musicality of his metre, creating an art dedicated to poetic ‘sensation’ and aesthetic pleasure while being shot through with the anxiety of his preoccupying ‘thought’.[[146]](#footnote-146) In a modulation of Vendler’s insight, such stylistic fluctuations in Keats’s use of musicality demonstrate that he is both liberated and weighed down by the presence of Milton’s ‘paradise’ in his opening manifesto.

Keats’s artistic identity is in flux throughout these lines. He depicts himself as both living and dead, and oscillates between the roles of the fanatic and the poet: ‘Whether the dream now purposed to rehearse / Be Poet’s or Fanatic’s will be known / When this warm scribe my hand is in the grave’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 16-18). The living Keats and the immortalised poet are coalesced in a single line, as Keats marks his artistic success as something knowable only ‘When this warm scribe my hand is in the grave’. Yet this manipulation of temporal deixis is morbidly uncanny, as the proximal demonstrative ‘this’ shows Keats surveying his living hand in the present tense, which, upon his reader viewing the poem, will now be dead. This technique shows Keats self-referentially calling into play his first epic to begin afresh. He conditions his poetic status through ‘[dying] into life’ (*Hyperion*,3. 130),[[147]](#footnote-147) so that the potential for his artistic birth into poet-status can only occur with his physical death. Keats’s understanding of his own posterity as determining his poetic success is illuminated in these lines, and Andrew Bennett notes that ‘Keats’s deferral of reception, his sense that he will be “among the English Poets” after his death, his inscription of the body of dissolution […], the body fading, is also, necessarily, a precondition of Keatsian reception.’[[148]](#footnote-148) When Keats affirms that his identity ‘will be known’, he empowers his readership by allowing it to decide his artistic success with the passing of time. The sense that Keats’s poetic status is in flux is sustained in the transition between the opening of the poem and Keats’s dream-vision. ‘Methought I stood’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*,1. 19) marks a formal shift of the epic from the tangible to the mental arena of Keats’s ‘psychomachia’.[[149]](#footnote-149)This generic revision is reinforced through a change of voice that is enacted through the shift from the present tense to the past in ‘Methought’. Sperry’s observation that Keats ‘[sets] before the reader the major concerns haunting the dreamer’s consciousness before his dream begins’ aptly describes the function of Keats’s manifesto.[[150]](#footnote-150) Yet if the manifesto appears ‘before [the] dream begins’ in structural terms, in experiential terms the dream occurs before the manifesto is written. Keats establishes the protagonist who speaks in the main narrative as a former, ‘dreaming’versionof himself before he ‘Traced upon vellum […] / The shadows of melodious utterance’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 5-6). This affirms the narrative of *The Fall* *of Hyperion* as a vision ‘recollected in tranquillity’,[[151]](#footnote-151) rather than written while experiencing high emotion, and it is only upon the self-conscious reflection of this dream that it becomes poetry in Keats’s terms. Sperry’s categorisation is reductive in this sense, as Keats in the opening stanza is not strictly still ‘the dreamer’ Sperry identifies. Keats’s use of the word ‘rehearse’ suggests his identity as one that develops throughout his dream as he implies a mutable element not only to his poetic status within the epic, but as inherent to the epic form itself. The poem is not merely a rehearsal but is ‘purposed’ as such. *The Fall of Hyperion* is an embodiment of Keats’s developing poetics and artistic identity, and any illusion of a finalised poem would defeat the aims of his unique epic strategy.

Keats begins his narrative where his precursor left off as he describes his experience within a sumptuous reincarnation of Milton’s Eden:

Methought I stood where trees of every clime,   
Palm, myrtle, oak, and sycamore, and beech,   
With plantain, and spice-blossoms, made a screen—   
In neighbourhood of fountains, by the noise   
Soft-showering in mine ears, and, by the touch   
Of scent, not far from roses. Turning round,   
I saw an arbour with a drooping roof   
Of trellis vines, and bells, and larger blooms,   
Like floral censers, swinging light in air;

(*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 19-27)

Sperry notes that ‘the “Palm, myrtle, oak, and sycamore, and beech” recall Milton’s catalogues of trees in the Garden; while the arbour, [...] brings to mind the bower of Adam and Eve, with “flourets deck’t and fragrant smells.”’[[152]](#footnote-152) The speaker’s surroundings swell with ‘soft’ ‘noise’ and the caressing scents of ‘spice-blossoms’ and ‘roses’, and are visually framed by intricate weavings of clematis and elaborate floral structures (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 25-6, 28). Such sensual imagery reveals how Keats is entranced by a landscape that has been created by another poet’s ‘fine spell of words’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 8). Yet behind his enthusiasm, the environment admired for its beautiful abundance is oppressive and obscuring in its density. The ‘showering’ noise and the rich fragrances of flora are so heavy that Keats can feel their ‘touch’ on his skin, and the trees and ‘blossom’ surrounding him are so tightly interwoven that they obscure his view of his mythical landscape in their formation as a ‘screen’. The pressure of maintaining such a rich scene bleeds into Keats’s description and burdens his images. Even the flowers themselves are anchored down by the rich scents and sounds of the garden; the floral architecture is a ‘drooping roof’, as if its overwhelming beauty is constantly at risk of collapse, and the ‘trellis vines’ and ‘bells’ hang heavily as ‘swinging’ ‘censers’. As Keats describes ‘vines, and bells, and larger blooms’, the cumulative effect of the description creates a sense of excitement, but the weighted result of such systematic listing also suggests that Keats is burdened by such an iconic poetic landscape. Such heaviness is also enacted through the poet’s deictic gaze, as he begins the scene viewing treetops, only for the immense height of the obscuring ‘oak and sycamore’ to guide his vision downwards to his floral ‘trellis’, descending further to a ‘mound / Of moss’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 28-29), and finally settling ‘on the grass’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 32). The weight of sustaining a vision that is not his own design bears down upon Keats’s images as he remains self-conscious of his debt to Milton in his attempt to formulate new poetry.

Keats’s experience at the scene is complicated by his belatedness. He approaches a setting reminiscent of the feast laid out by Eve in *Paradise Lost* to find it deserted. Milton writes:

Hail mother of mankind, whose fruitful womb  
Shall fill the world more numerous with thy sons  
Then with these various fruits the trees of God   
Have heaped this table. Raised of grassy turf  
Their table was, and mossy seats had round,

(*Paradise Lost*,5. 388-392)

Keats recreates this scene in *The Fall of Hyperion*:

Before its wreathèd doorway, on a mound   
Of moss, was spread a feast of summer fruits,   
Which, nearer seen, seemed refuse of a meal   
By angel tasted, or our Mother Eve;

(*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 28-31)

Instead of figuring Milton as ‘the great inhibitor’,[[153]](#footnote-153) as Bloom argues, Keats’s experience of influence begins to shift from enduring a Bloomian anxiety to being ‘happily under it’,[[154]](#footnote-154) as Christopher Ricks observes. Bloom’s study of influence figures poets and their heirs as interacting within ‘a filial relationship’, with the ‘father’ of poetic influence functioning as the cause of their anxiety.[[155]](#footnote-155) Yet in order to accommodate the nurturing quality of ‘pleasure’ in his experience of inspiration,[[156]](#footnote-156) Keats maternalises the father-figure of Milton in his decision to allude to Eve’s feast as the site of his artistic maturation. As Raphael praises Eve’s ‘fruitful Womb’, the notion of birth and consumption coalesce in a nourishing image that suggests that new poetic ‘sons’ will be conceived as the fruits of *Paradise Lost.* Keats’s occupation of Milton’s scene enables his own epic to come to fruition, as the poet presents the process of influence as a positive experience. He identifies the comforting, unobtrusive qualities of Eve’s design of the repast, the flavours of which promise to bring about ‘kindliest change’, and are ‘tender’ and ‘inoffensive’ (*Paradise Lost*,5. 336, 337, 345). Yet, despite Keats’s references to *Paradise Lost*, Keats holds open the possibility that he may be somewhere other than his predecessor’s setting. His description is compromised by the word ‘Methought’ which opens his account. Keats does not fully commit to the garden being Eden, questioning its definitiveness as Eve’s feast through the verb ‘seemed’ and the uncertainty of the ‘or’ conjunction (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 30, 1. 31). As he doubts the authenticity of his setting, Keats alludes to the opening of Milton’s ‘Sonnet 19’;[[157]](#footnote-157) ‘Methought I stood’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 19) is a mutated echo of Milton’s ‘Methought I saw’.[[158]](#footnote-158) Yet for Keats, the uncertainty of ‘Methought’ is not merely a doubt in vision but a doubt in his entire philosophical, poetic, and bodily position, as ‘saw’ is amplified to ‘stood’ in his allusion. Keats’s doubt is all-encompassing, surrounding him entirely and for a sustained length of time, unlike Milton’s fleeting vision of his deceased wife in ‘Sonnet 19’. Keats’s use of allusion marks his epic as acknowledging the similarity of Milton’s work even as he distinguishes his poetry from that of his precursor. Restaging the settings of *Paradise Lost*, Keats shows himself to be a dutiful poetic descendent of Milton at the same time he readies himself for composing his own version of the epic.

Mark Edmundson observes that Keats’s occupation of well-trodden poetic ground positions him in a paradoxical situation: ‘The “empty shells” […] may signify that the tradition has room to accommodate him, or that he has placed himself in a sterile vacuity’.[[159]](#footnote-159) Yet in his departure from *Hyperion* Keats does not merely seek to establish himself within the received mode of the epic as Edmundson suggests. Rather, his allusion functions as an absorption of its traditions, but also one that enables a subsequent deviation from the Miltonic mode. Keats overcomes his anxiety by celebrating his potential to establish his own poetic space on the epic landscape, and to become an influential ‘father’ himself:[[160]](#footnote-160)

For empty shells were scattered on the grass,   
And grape-stalks but half bare, and remnants more,   
Sweet smelling, whose pure kinds I could not know.   
Still was more plenty than the fabled horn   
Thrice emptied could pour forth at banqueting   
For Proserpine returned to her own fields,   
Where the white heifers low. And appetite   
More yearning than on earth I ever felt   
Growing within, I ate deliciously;

(*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 32-40)

Keats adopts an elegiac tone as he laments the ‘pure kinds I could not know’, and views ‘empty shells’ ‘And grape-stalks but half bare’. Following in the footsteps of his epic predecessors, Keats’s reference to ‘remnants’ shows how he is forced to navigate and reinvent the epic with the tools he has left and in his own poetic context.Despite this momentary disillusion, he still sees much promise in what remains of his Miltonic scene and resolves to make the most of the remnants in his insistence that ‘Still was more plenty’. Keats reaps Milton’s poetic harvest as he capitalises on the earlier poet’s example to establish his own epic voice. The desire to absorb such influence is embedded in the Poet’s narration of his feasting: ‘And appetite / More yearning than on earth I ever felt / Growing within, I ate deliciously’. His appetite lingers on the end of the line, and the enjambed metre pre-empts the ‘yearning’ of the next by metrically lengthening the sensation. Keats’s yielding to this desire is charged with the type of awareness described by Bloom, who writes that ‘The strong poet fails to beget himself—he must wait for his Son, who will define him even as he defined his own father’.[[161]](#footnote-161) Keats delicately reaffirms and extends his understanding that his poetic status ‘will be known’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 17) only after his death by signalling that another condition of artistic elevation is the progression from being influenced to becoming the influencing figure. Keats’s syntax in his description of his actions is revealing; instead of the feast being delicious, he declares that ‘I ate deliciously’. The adverb is dependent upon the act of ‘eating’, so that Keats’s actions themselves are ‘delicious’. Ricks highlights that Keats’s contemporaries thought of him as ‘an heir who will have heirs’,[[162]](#footnote-162) and Keats adds a subtle allusion to his sense that future poets will view him as a predecessor. If his own actions are akin to the fruits of Milton’s feast, it is his hope that his work, too, will be digested by future readers and become the seeds of his descendants’ poetry.

Emily E. Speller observes that though ‘Adam, Eve, and Raphael praise God’s provision and fully partake of the repast, they do not eat to excess’ in *Paradise Lost*,[[163]](#footnote-163) for ‘with meats and drinks they had sufficed, / Not burdened nature’ (*Paradise Lost*,5.451-52). However, Keats overindulges in his feasting as his appetite outperforms his poetic capacity. Such physical yearning and consumption of influence becomes a wearying feat of alliterative endurance. Keats’s gluttony is intensified as the consonance of ‘summer fruits’ ‘seen, seemed refuse’, and viewing ‘scattered’ ‘stalks’ on ‘the grass’, alongside more ‘Sweet-smelling’ remnants (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 29, 30, 32, 33, 34) creates a sickly sibilance as he digests the richness of Milton’s poetry in preparation for his own work. Though the process is intense, Keats refuses to fret in the shadow of his predecessor’s language, and instead Milton becomes a beneficent guide. Critics of Keats’s early work highlight his tendency towards narrative and stylistic indulgence. In 1835 Leigh Hunt described Keats as ‘part[aking] plentifully of the exuberance of youth […] to a morbid excess’ in *Endymion*,[[164]](#footnote-164) and in *The Encyclopedia Britannica*,published in 1857, Alexander Smith remarks that ‘The glorious and uncultured profusion of [*Endymion*] is displeasing [in] its very flush of colour and excess of sweetness’.[[165]](#footnote-165) Keats’s narration of his feasting in *The Fall of Hyperion* marks an awareness of his juvenile weaknesses. He channels the anxiety incurred from this critical self-consciousness so that the scene becomes a narrative springboard through which he innovates his epic and showcases his poetic maturity. After such nourishment, Keats sips on ‘a cool vessel of transparent juice’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 42). The potion is no new symbol in Keats’s epic strategy. In *Hyperion*,Apollo requests Mnemosyne to ‘Pour’ ‘Knowledge enormous’ ‘into the wide hollows of my brain, / And deify me, as if some blithe wine / Or bright elixir peerless I had drunk, / And so become immortal’ (*Hyperion*,3. 117, 3. 113, 3. 117-120).[[166]](#footnote-166) Dorothy Van Ghent notes that ‘In *The Fall*, the dreamer will drink of that “bright elixir peerless” not metaphorically but actually’.[[167]](#footnote-167) Keats in *The Fall of Hyperion* enacts the invocation initially performed by Apollo in *Hyperion* as he shifts his epic subject from the gods to his own poetic consciousness. Following from Keats’s first-person narration, this critical moment marks the difference between the two epics as being centred on the entrance of Keats’s own subjectivity in *The Fall of Hyperion*. In the shift from *Hyperion* to *The Fall of Hyperion,* Keats bypasses the mediation of characters and positions himself as the epic hero, as he attempts to extend the actions of Apollo and ‘see as a God sees’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 304) by doing what the deity could not literally perform in *Hyperion*.

While Sperry notes the potion’s importance in representing ‘a power akin to that of the poetic imagination’,[[168]](#footnote-168) it is not the potion itself but the very procedure of its consumption that signals a pivotal juncture in Keats’s poetic maturation:

And, pledging all the mortals of the world,

And all the dead whose names are on our lips,

Drank. That full draught is parent of my theme.

[…]

Upon the grass I struggled hard against

The domineering potion; but in vain—

The cloudy swoon came on, and down I sunk,

(*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 44-55)

This ritual illuminates Keats’s conflicting experience of influence, where Ricks’s sense of Keats being ‘happily under it’ co-exists with Bloomian side effects of ‘struggle’, ‘melancholy’, and ‘anxiety’.[[169]](#footnote-169) Keats draws upon the etymology of the word ‘influence’ as ‘the action or fact of flowing in; […] said of the action of water or other fluids’.[[170]](#footnote-170) In consuming the liquid, Keats absorbs Milton’s poetic spirit and welcomes his poetic influence. He makes clear the importance of this symbolic moment by toasting his poetic origins: ‘all the dead whose names are on our lips, / Drank’. Keats positions himself at the head of a literary lineage and gives Milton credit for his influence. The rhetoric is not that of an epic battle and ‘challenge’, as seen in *Hyperion*,[[171]](#footnote-171) but of inclusive respect, with Keats’s allusions to Milton functioning as ‘debts of honour’.[[172]](#footnote-172) At this point, Keats also directs the toast to ‘all the mortals of the world’, and marks the action as being where he takes up the responsibility of being a poet. Having ‘pledg[ed]’ himself to the rest of humanity, he marks his full commitment. Yet his hope that the contents of Eve’s feast will bring about the ‘kindliest change’ (*Paradise Lost*,5. 336) in his poetic maturation is shattered in this act. The task becomes burdensome, with the conjunction ‘And’ repeated for a third and fourth time in the sentence (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 37, 41, 44, 45) creating a sense of weight from which he attempts to relieve himself through the short sentence ‘That full draught is parent of my theme’. The action surrounding the recognition of his lineage triggers a twofold narrative shift in the poem. The liquid causes immense physical suffering and incurs Keats’s banishment from the Edenic garden, but also highlights influence, and how Keats responds to it, as the ‘theme’ of the rest of the unfinished poem. Milton acts as both an external source of inspiration and a haunting presence within *The Fall of Hyperion* that gives narrative direction to his poetic heir. This action renders the scene, once voluptuous with sensory abundance, as suddenly deflating, as influence takes on a darker, Bloomian guise. Keats’s positioning ‘Among the fragrant husks and berries crushed’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 52) renders him a shell of his former self having crumbled under Milton’s overwhelming poetic power. The ‘cool’ clarity of the ‘transparent juice’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 42) paradoxically vexes the speaker, making him hot, dizzy, and confused. Keats struggles to assert himself over the ‘domineering potion’, and ‘down I sunk’ sees him fall to the ground as if the Miltonic garden has consumed him. Having ‘happily’ asserted his poetic commitment initially, the poet’s ‘struggle’ drains his optimism. Keats succumbs to the strength of the potion and accepts influence as an excruciating experience that is essential to developing an individual poetic voice.

As the Edenic enclosure melts to reveal the imposing setting of the temple, the shift marks a change from the beauty of Eve’s feast to the sublimity of Keats’s Romantic translation. Samuel Taylor Coleridge describes the sublime as: ‘Where the perfection of *form* is combined with pleasurableness in the sensations, excited by the matters or substances so formed, there results the beautiful […]. Where neither whole nor parts, but unity, as boundless or endless *allness*—the Sublime’.[[173]](#footnote-173) While the garden’s ‘form’ was one of aesthetic delight and ‘shapeliness’,[[174]](#footnote-174) here the speaker finds himself gazing upon a building ‘so high, it seemed that filmèd clouds / Might spread beneath, as o’er the stars of heaven’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 63-64). The scale and celestial quality of the building causes the reader to pause in ‘awe’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 81) at an ‘eternal domèd monument’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 71) that exudes mystery and infinity in both its stature and its age. The building is ‘neither whole nor parts’, as the speaker can only view it through abstractions of monuments he has seen before, ‘buttressed walls, rent towers, […]’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 66-67). Having drunk the potion, Keats’s commitment to becoming a poet has cast him outside the epic environments of old. The speaker explains that he is now positioned ‘where black gates / Were shut against the sunrise evermore’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 85-86). Banished from the garden following his indulgence of the feast, the transition from a Miltonic Eden to this sublime setting shows Keats navigating the epic in a new poetic landscape. The change in setting shows Keats’s desire to seek new artistic territory instead of feeding upon the remnants left by his predecessors.

However, Keats’s movement from the garden to a new epic space is jeopardised by uncertainty*.* He comments that ‘how long I slumbered ’tis a chance to guess’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 57), and the undetermined period of unconsciousness results in him questioning his awakening, relaying it as merely ‘a sense of life’ returning to him (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 58). While Van Ghent proposes that the vision induced by the potion is a dream-within-a-dream,[[175]](#footnote-175) it is equally possible that the potion does not send Keats into a dream-like coma, but that the garden was the unreal vision, and the potion merely brings him round to reality. Keats openly states his uncertainty that such a setting existed at all by conditioning his observations in the opening ‘Methought’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 19). Van Ghent theorises that ‘The arbour is clearly a rustic shrine […] and the mound of moss in front of it is a primitive altar’.[[176]](#footnote-176) Extending Van Ghent’s interpretation, the botanical architecture of the ‘drooping roof’, ‘trellis vines’, ‘floral censers’ and columns of ‘myrtle, oak, and sycamore’ trees (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 25, 26, 27, 20) are refigured as the ‘embossèd roof’, ‘large draperies’, ‘censer[s]’ and ‘columns north and south’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 83, 73, 79, 84). The temple to which Keats is transported is the same place as the hallucinated garden, albeit an imposing version of it. The uncanny features of the temple suggest that drinking the potion is Keats’s first step in arresting his ‘dream[ing]’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 1) and seeing his environment in its real state.

Keats’s ‘mind debate’ results from a state of split consciousness.[[177]](#footnote-177) He projects his unconscious onto the figure of Moneta who presides over the temple and ‘voices [Keats’s] misgivings’.[[178]](#footnote-178) In the climax of their exchange, the poet pleads:

‘If it please,   
Majestic shadow, tell me: sure not all   
Those melodies sung into the world’s ear   
Are useless: sure a poet is a sage,   
A humanist, physician to all men.   
That I am none I feel, as vultures feel   
They are no birds when eagles are abroad.   
What am I then? Thou spakest of my tribe:   
What tribe?’

(*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 186-194)

Keats creates a sense of breathlessness through the layering of clauses and repeated colons. The cumulative effect creates a tone of urgency that the poet deliberately draws out for over eight lines. Keats’s layering of one question on top of another only serves to postpone Moneta’s response that he is not a poet. Even the epic’s subtitle, *A Dream*, confirms his awareness of his artistic status as a ‘dreamer’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 199). Keats’s agitation is also revealed through his stammering; the words ‘feel’, ‘what’, and ‘tribe’ are all repeated within a line as the matter presses heavily upon him. He confesses, ‘I feel, as vultures feel / They are no birds when eagles are abroad’. Keats’s anxiety splinters his thought in the pause after ‘feel’ as his overwhelming confusion swells in the metrical gap mid-line. Even as Keats pauses to verbalise his emotion, he can only describe his condition through the abstraction of the simile ‘as vultures feel’ as his identity remains shadowed in figurative doubt. Moneta’s existential criticism here also allows Keats to understand the inhibiting effect of the poetic strategies he has used previously. T. S. Eliot asserts that poetic growth is dependent upon how a poet manages influence: ‘One of the surest tests is the way in which a poet borrows. Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different’.[[179]](#footnote-179) Viewing his previous actions through a critical lens, Keats understands that citing his predecessors is not enough; he must ‘swerve’ from mere ‘imitat[tion]’ and turn the epic ‘into something better, or at least something different’.[[180]](#footnote-180) In this light, the bird simile reveals not only Keats’s poetic inferiority in taking on the epic as a ‘vulture’ amongst ‘eagles’, but it reinterprets his activity at the feast before he drank the potion. Keats’s reframes this scene not as feeding from the bounty of Milton’s success, but as scavenging among the poetic remains left by his predecessor. Through Moneta, Keats becomes aware of his status as an ‘imitat[ive]’ dreamer, who merely forages through old poetic works instead of pursuing his own new ideas.

Keats’s illness is intensified when Moneta shows him the suffering of Saturn and Thea, so that the figures ‘melted from [his] sight’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 459) in a manner symptomatic of the fever described in lines 1. 53-56. Keats becomes increasingly fatigued, and his wearied state is exacerbated by the responsibility of narrating his epic:

—And she spake on,

As ye may read who can unwearied pass

Onward from the antechamber of this dream,

Where even at the open doors awhile

I must delay, and glean my memory

Of her high phrase—perhaps no further dare.

(*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 463-468)

Keats cuts off Moneta mid-line so as to steal a moment of relief from the narrative. The suffering of the epic poet is overwhelming, as Keats proposes that ‘ye may read who can unwearied pass / Onward from the antechamber of this dream’, while ‘at the open doors a while / I must delay’. In these lines Keats images the mind as a house, with levels of consciousness divided into ‘chamber[s]’. Having explored the garden, Keats ventures into the lesser-known parts of his consciousness but struggles to enter them. Using ‘the Mansion of Many Apartments’ as a metaphor for poetic maturation,[[181]](#footnote-181) in a letter to John Hamilton Reynolds in May 1818 Keats writes that humans exist initially in the ‘infant or thoughtless Chamber’, and those who desire deeper reflection enter the ‘Chamber of Maiden-Thought’. He explains that ‘[we] think of delaying there for ever in delight’, yet the room ‘becomes gradually darken’d’ by the misery and suffering of the world, and ‘on all sides of it many doors are set open—but all dark—all leading to dark passages […]. We are in a Mist’.[[182]](#footnote-182) While Keats was driven into the ‘Chamber of Maiden-Thought’ by drinking the potion, his experience of the ‘miseries’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 148) that Moneta has him endure wearies his poetic stamina so that Keats ‘delay[s] there’. His movement through the metaphorical chambers is avoided or reluctant throughout the poem; Keats decides against walking through the ‘wreathèd doorway’ in the garden in favour of eating the feast in front of it (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 28-46), and when ‘the black gates / Were shut against the sunrise’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 85-6) he penetrates deeper into his vision ‘sober-paced’, and ‘Repressing haste’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 93, 94). This anxiety culminates in his description of the veils that cover Moneta’s face: ‘I had a terror of her robes, / And chiefly of the veils’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 251-2), and he winces when she parts them (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 256). As the reader ‘pass[es] / Onward’, Keats’s voice fades in the gap that separates the cantos so that the division between the two sections of the poem signals the ‘door’ that separates his Maiden-Thought from the unchartered territory beyond. The second canto is narrated almost entirely by Moneta, who resumes her speech from where Keats stopped her previously. For nearly fifty lines Keats delays himself in the ‘Mist’ of the ‘dark’ ‘Chamber’ until he reappears ‘Relieved from the dusk’, ‘Now in clear light’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 2. 49, 50). If the doorways of the Chamber of Maiden-Thought are ‘all dark’, Keats emerges on the other side to a poetic vision of ‘lucid depth’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 2. 52), that is ‘enwreathèd’ in ‘light’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 2. 55). His hesitance to continue his journey in the first canto gives way to a renewed enthusiasm to explore the poetic territory he has now claimed for himself: ‘My quick eyes ran on / From stately nave to nave, from vault to vault’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 2. 53-54). ‘[R]an on’ blurs Keats’s vision with his physical movement, and this newfound impetus is amplified through the run-on line that propels the poetry onwards. The shift from the gloomy ‘antechamber[s]’ of the poem to this bright setting shows that Keats has ventured through the Mansion of Many Apartments, endured ‘the misery and suffering’ of the epic journey he set out to make, and has emerged on the other side. The ‘dark passages’ are now ‘diamond-pavèd lustrous long arcades’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 2. 56), so that Keats can now clearly visualise the direction he intends his poetry to take.

Keats’s progression from immature ‘dreamer’ to the elevated artistic status of the ‘poet’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 119) is a transition that Owen hopes to replicate in his early poetry. Jon Stallworthy introduces Owen’s ‘To Poesy’ as his earliest surviving work, written between 1909 and 1910 ‘after a strong diet of Keats’.[[183]](#footnote-183) Here, a sixteen year-old Owen writes with *The Fall of Hyperion* ‘ringing in his ears’ as he invokes the muse ‘Poesy’ to guide his poetic journey.[[184]](#footnote-184) While Keats performs his transformation through a dialogue with Moneta, Owen’s early lack of self-critical strategies stunts his poetic growth. Following his reading of Keats’s epic, ‘To Poesy’ narrates Owen’s awareness of, and dissatisfaction with, his status as a ‘dreamer’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 199), and dramatises his effort to understand how to become a poet on Keats’s terms. Marjorie Levinson observes that ‘Keats’s ascent of the poetic ladder has become mythical; one watches him station himself where a great precursor had rested, discover the limitations of that position, step up to the next rung, and finally kick away the ladder altogether’.[[185]](#footnote-185) In his narrative ‘swerve’ from Milton,[[186]](#footnote-186) Keats rids himself of the measuring systems that calibrate the virtues of the Miltonic epic by changing the epic subject to the evolving consciousness of the poet himself. However, Owen’s inexperience renders him unable to ‘swerve’ from Keats. Instead of using influence to create a new poetic strategy, in ‘To Poesy’, Owen’s anticipated poetic journey is one that follows too closely in Keats’s footsteps, and the poem reveals the younger poet as lacking in the self-critical faculties or skill to be an autonomous artist who ‘kick[s] away the ladder’. At this very early stage in his career Owen cites his ambition to ascend ‘the poetic ladder’ in the same manner as his predecessor, but his inexperience and misreadings of *The Fall of Hyperion* compromise such aims.

Owen opens ‘To Poesy’ by positioning himself in the existential crisis that Keats suffers preceding his exchange with Moneta:

A thousand suppliants stand around thy throne,

Stricken with love for thee, O Poesy.

I stand among them, and with them I groan,

And stretch my arms for help. Oh, pity me!

No man (save them thou gav’st the right to ascend

And sit with thee, ’nointing with unction fine,

Calling thyself their servant and their friend)

Has loved thee with a purer love than mine.

(‘To Poesy’, 1-8)[[187]](#footnote-187)

Echoing Keats, who asks, ‘Are there not thousands in the world’ who claim to be poets (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 154), Owen laments that ‘A thousand suppliants stand around [Poesy’s] throne’ vying for her attention and blessings. Both Keats and Owen share an awareness of their potential insignificance in a world littered with poets. However, Keats qualifies his liminal status between dreamer and poet by stating ‘I sure should see / Other men here: but I am here alone’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 159-60). Keats has removed himself from the masses by physically ascending the steps of the temple (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 132-3), and by deviating from traditional epic narrative and focussing upon his own consciousness. Owen, however, cannot separate himself from these other worshippers. Even in his own poetry their ‘supplications’ precede his own, casting an anxiety-inducing shadow over his venerations. The awkward trisyllable ‘suppliants’ overrides Owen’s attempts to establish his iambic pentameter frame. This sense of metrical crowding reveals his struggle to occupy the centre stage in his own poem; the first person pronoun does not appear until the third line, and he is only able to protest his difference to other worshippers in the eighth: ‘Has loved thee with a purer love than mine’. As he asserts the height of his desire, his confidence is undercut by his structure as Owen positions the love of his competitors and his predecessors above his own. Even his use of brackets in an attempt to credit the old masters only results in a clunky interruption that stalls his own assertions. As Keats takes himself away from well-trodden poetic ground and questions his poetic capabilities on a private and individual level, Owen’s concern with his competitors in this opening line seems to overshadow the degree of his feeling and compromise his authority in his own poem.

Struggling to have his poetic voice heard, Owen’s desperation for attention becomes increasingly forced and constrained in the passage quoted above. His juvenility swells in the opening lines, which open themselves to W. B. Yeats’s critique of Owen’s tendency towards weak, outmoded style: ‘He is all blood, dirt & sucked sugar stick (look at the selection in Faber’s Anthology—he calls poets “bards,” a girl a “maid” & talks about “Titanic wars”). There is every excuse for him but none for those who like him’.[[188]](#footnote-188) While Yeats encompasses Owen’s later poetry in this scathing rejection, it is an accurate appraisal of Owen’s self-characterisation in ‘To Poesy’. However, Owen’s diegetic weakness is strategic and paradoxically strengthens his ties to Keats’s writing. Owen’s double rhyme ‘love for thee, O Poesy’ (‘To Poesy’, 2) amplifies the immaturity of a sixteen-year-old declaring his love, which makes even Owen self-consciously ‘groan’ (‘To Poesy’, 3). His helplessness is such that his rhetorical address is littered with the language of illness, as the more he proclaims the strength of his love against that of others the weaker he becomes. Keats’s poetic encounters with love induce ‘agonies’ (‘And what is love? It is a doll dressed up’, 13),[[189]](#footnote-189) ‘anguish moist and fever-dew’ (‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’, 10),[[190]](#footnote-190) and cause him to ‘[faint] at the charmèd touch’ (*Endymion*, 1. 637),[[191]](#footnote-191) and Owen carefully recreates this sense of morbidity in his and his competitors’ love for Poesy. They are ‘stricken’ with admiration as Owen ‘groans’, ‘stretch[es] […] for help’, and asks for ‘pity’ all within two lines (‘To Poesy’, 2, 3, 4). Keats describes his attempt to overcome suffering in *The Fall of Hyperion*, commenting that ‘the sharp anguish of my shriek / […] I strove hard to escape’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 126-7). Yet Owen wallows in his helplessness, unaware of how to quell the sensations of pleasure and pain that course through the opening lines of ‘To Poesy’. Owen requires his own poetry to ‘[pour] out a balm’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 201) upon his sufferings, but in his dreamer status he only ‘vexes’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 202) his emotion. As he discusses the position of his predecessors who ‘sit with thee, ’nointing with unction fine’ (‘To Poesy’, 6), his poetic aim is to be soothed by the medicinal ‘unction’ of poetry. Yet the phrase is confused by the absence of a grammatical subject. It is unclear as to whether the poets anoint and venerate Poesy, or whether Poesy anoints them, rendering Owen undecided as to whether he serves poetry or if poetry serves him. Owen’s desired position is vague, as he remains unsure where to metaphorically and grammatically position himself in his own work. He accurately reads Keats in identifying a distinction between the soothing quality of the poet’s ‘fine spell of words’ and the ravings of the ‘Fanatic’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 9, 1. 1), but his awareness of his ‘dreamer’ status (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 199) only heightens his sense of inadequacy.

Owen’s language and structure suffers under the burden of his ambition as he contemplates his desire not only to attain the status of a poet, but to be ‘among the English Poets after my death’,[[192]](#footnote-192) as expressed by Keats. Owen’s youthful impatience flickers through ‘To Poesy’ as he desires such poetic and conversational status instantly:

Gorgeous memories

Of days far distant in the past can flower

Afresh beneath thy touch; […]

Where, midst the heapèd honours, thine the load

Most richly prized, of all the crowns the best!

No! not for these I long to win thee, Sweet!

No more is this my fervent, hopeless quest –

To stand among the great ones there, to meet

The bards of old and greet them as my peers.

O impious thought! O I am mad to ask

E’en that their voice may ever reach my ears.

(‘To Poesy’, 26-39)

Owen strives to ‘hear the belovèd tunes of long ago’ (‘To Poesy’, 20), and his fixation upon preceding poetry his reference to ‘Gorgeous memories / Of days far distant in the past’ causes him to stumble through his requests to Poesy. In these lines, the heaviness of repeated plosive breaks on the stress of the iambs jars against the ethereal quality of the delicate ‘flower[ing]’ of memories, and the clunky addition of ‘in the past’ is unnecessary. The lines seem more a demand for assent than an attempt to woo Poesy into agreement. Owen’s requests are undercut by his metre. He asks for ‘heapèd honours’, yet the grave accent on ‘heapèd’ creates a downward intonation. As an adjective describing a piling up is oxymoronically brought down by its sound, Owen deflates his hopes just as he builds them up.Framing his aims with negative sentiments reinforces this effect; Owen begins by stating his ‘hopeless quest’ and closes it with the melodramatic lamentation, ‘O impious thought! O I am mad to ask’. Nevertheless his requests powerfully bleed through his forced humbleness, as he casts himself as a poet-hero, whose ‘words alone can save / Imagination’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 9-10). Owen relentlessly outlines his aims in sporting terms, being fixated upon ‘rich’ ‘prize[s]’ and ‘crowns’ that he aims to ‘win’ on his ‘quest’. His assertion to Poesy that no other ‘has loved thee with a purer love than mine’ (‘To Poesy’, 8) is compromised by the plaudits he hopes to win, implying that the glory and riches of poetic status are as important to him as his love. Owen replicates Keats’s conflicting aims and anxieties in *The Fall of Hyperion* but compromises his poetic integrity in his bombastic rhetoric. Torn between ‘self-aggrandisement and self-depreciation’,[[193]](#footnote-193) the stanza is a heavy-handed attempt to balance ambition with humility.

While Keats is conscious of the degree of suffering he must endure to fulfil ‘the hard task proposed’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 120) and become a poet, Owen seeks more guidance:

Yet show thou me the task,

That shall, as years advance, give power and skill,

Firm hands; an eye which takes all beauty in,

That I may woo thee thus, if thus thy will.

Ah, gladly would I on such task begin

But that I know this learning must be bought

With gold as well as toil, and gold I lack.

What then? Dost bid me first seek out the Court […]

(‘To Poesy’, 40-47)

Owen asks Poesy to play the role of Keats’s Moneta and ‘propose’ the ‘hard task’ that will hone his ‘power and skill’. Keats works through his existential and artistic crisis through the conversational structure of his ‘mind debate’,[[194]](#footnote-194) yet Owen’s struggle is exacerbated by his unanswered invocation of Poesy. While Keats already had a vast body of work preceding his epic, in this, Owen’s earliest known poem, the younger poet has not yet developed nor earned the capability to invoke a response from a poetic muse. He asks Poesy for direction with ‘show thou me the task’, yet the consecutive positioning of pronouns is jarring as he attempts to overcome the muse’s inaccessibility by positioning himself and Poesy in an uncomfortable grammatical proximity. His isolation in comparison to Keats is shown to be self-inflicted. Keats gives Moneta space to respond to his questions with clear distinctions between speakers, such as ‘Then said the veilèd shadow’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 141), and punctuates pauses to break between voices: ‘Rejoined that voice**—**’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 162). However, Owen talks over the silences that would create space for Poesy’s response in a manner that suggests an awareness that his invocation has been unsuccessful. While Owen tentatively hopes for a response from his muse, he compensates for her silence with his own words to save his young hopes from being crushed under ‘The load of this eternal quietude’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 390). The shift from the established pentameter to a trimeter line in ‘Yet show thou me the task’ accommodates a pause for him to listen to a potential response from Poesy, only for him to talk over the space where her explanation of the task would be with further elaboration: ‘That shall […] give power and skill’. Similarly, the interjection ‘Dost bid me first…’ cuts off Poesy’s potential response to his question, ‘What then?’. Keats stoically ‘b[ears]’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 389) the silence in *The Fall* *of Hyperion* to make way for Moneta and Saturn’s voices. However, having not the same resilience and ‘power’ as his predecessor (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 143), Owen sustains his monologue throughout the pauses that would enable Poesy to speak, so that his fear that his invocations will remain unanswered becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

As Owen attempts to charge his poetic growth with increasing impetus in ‘To Poesy’, his forward movement and progression is undone by his use of rhyme. In the passage cited above he ends several lines with verbs such as ‘will’, ‘begin’, ‘bought’, and ‘lack’ (‘To Poesy’, 43, 44, 45, 46), contorting the syntax and delaying the action of each line. David Loewenstein cites such a technique in the opening of *Paradise Lost*,in which Milton withholds the verb ‘Sing’ until the sixth line (*Paradise Lost*,1. 6). Loewenstein surmises that this ‘flexible yet controlled structure enables Milton to achieve an astonishing sense of concentration, as well as lucidity, […] [highlighting] his own soaring and perilous ambition’.[[195]](#footnote-195) Owen identifies this Miltonic strategy, yet his attempts to emulate such high design fall flat in their execution. The repetition of this technique at the end of four successive lines reveals that Owen’s attempt to create anticipation and demonstrate his ‘soaring’ ‘ambition’ has been undercut by his youthful impatience. His ‘concentration’ upon each attempt to implement the technique repeatedly disintegrates, being unable to sustain such syntactical tension. While Keats’ physical ascension in *The Fall of Hyperion* leads to his understanding of what it means to be a poet, Owen tries to create motion and progression through his psychological crisis through unnatural linguistic patterns, and the awkward positioning of his verbs compromises the controlled ‘lucidity’ at which he aims. Owen’s use of rhyme exacerbates his artistic inertia instead of enabling technical improvement. Despite the shift towards a new subject in a new stanza, his first line ending ‘task’ relies upon ‘ask’ (‘To Poesy’, 40, 38) in the one preceding it. Overlapping rhyme links the stanzas,[[196]](#footnote-196) showing that Owen remains transfixed on the same theme despite the visual separation of the sections. He cannot detach himself fully from the prospect of ‘rich[es]’ (‘To Poesy’, 29) in the last stanza, and his focus upon monetary requirements is revealed here in his repeated need for ‘gold’ (‘To Poesy’, 46). The rhyme of ‘task’ with ‘ask’ locates the means of Owen achieving poetic status as something given to him by a higher order, emphasising his need for ‘gold’ twice as much as his consciousness of the ‘toil’ (‘To Poesy’, 46) necessary. Owen reads *The Fall of Hyperion* correctly to the degree that he understands that ‘learning must be bought’ (‘To Poesy’, 45), and that he must lose something in return for his intellectual and spiritual gain. Yet his misprision of Keats lies in the identification of poetic currency as money, or ‘gold’, itself. At this stage, Owen’s humanist approach to learning his craft recalls Moneta’s chastisement of what Keats later defines as ‘mock lyricists’ and ‘careless hectorers’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 207, 208): ‘They seek no wonder but the human […] / They come not here, they have no thought to come’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 163-165). At this early stage in his career, Owen feels he merely needs to ‘toil’ and buy his way into respect, but he fails to consider the vital distinction which would render him a poet: to feel ‘the miseries of the world’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 148). Through his misreading of Keats, Owen cements himself as part of ‘the dreamer tribe’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 198), as he cannot yet look or listen beyond himself to feel with human concerns.

Though Owen struggles to decipher the nature of ‘the hard task proposed’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 120) in order to become a poet, he understands that it is one of great scale and a stern undertaking. The ‘glorious fear’ (‘To Poesy’, 52) that prefaces his envisioned journey demonstrates a balance between exhilaration and caution:

my heart is stirred

With glorious fear and trembles in itself,

When I look forth upon the vasty seas

Of learning to be travelled o’er.

I fain

Would know the hills, the founts, the very trees,

Where sang the Greeks of old. I would have plain

Before my vision, heroes, poets, kings,

Hear their clear accents; then observe where trod

E’en mythic men; yea, next on Hermes’ wings

Would mount Olympus and discern each god.

(‘To Poesy’, 51-60)

Curbing his excitement, Owen’s reading of *The Fall of Hyperion* helps him to review his poetic strategy. Mark Edmundson observes that in Keats’s epic every transition or realisation initiates

[…] a version of physical ascent. When the poet finally negotiates the altar, he mounts ‘As once fair Angels on a ladder flew / From the green turf to Heaven’ (1. 135-36). Awakening from his swoon at the crossing from garden to temple the poet says, ‘I started up / As if with wings ...’ (1. 58-59).[[197]](#footnote-197)

Aware that he cannot yet fulfil Keats’s criteria to become a poet, for Owen this ascent can only be imagined through the conditional-perfect tense, ‘I would have plain / Before my vision’ (‘To Poesy’, 56). In doing so, he echoes the sense of belatedness felt by Keats when he arrives to the feast scene (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 29), lamenting the impossibility of ‘Hear[ing] the clear accents’ (‘To Poesy’, 58) of the mythical figures of the past. Owen understands that to transcend his dreamer status he must be elevated in some manner: ‘yea, next on Hermes’ wings / Would mount Olympus and discern each god’ (‘To Poesy’, 59-60). Yet where Keats mounts the step in Moneta’s temple himself and arises from his slumber using his own ‘wings’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 59), for Owen such ascent requires assistance; he needs Hermes’ wings to swiftly take him up Olympus rather than aiming to scale the mountain himself. Owen appreciates the importance of status being determined by positioning. He registers the role of ascent in poetic development in the opening of ‘To Poesy’ when he writes ‘No man (save those thou gav’st the right to ascend […])’ (‘To Poesy’, 5), and understands that he must learn to ‘see as a God sees’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 304) and ‘discern each god’ on their own level. Yet he enacts this understanding in literal terms by positioning himself on top of Olympus instead of by empathising with the sufferings of beings higher than himself as Keats had demonstrated in *The Fall of Hyperion*. Owen simultaneously reads and misreads Keats, envisaging a poetic destination but not the correct means of getting there.

While Owen repeatedly attempts and fails to align himself with the poet status attained by a mature Keats in *The Fall* *of Hyperion*, he more strikingly resembles the Keats who wrote *Endymion*. The early reception of *Endymion* offers criticism strikingly apt for Owen’s own poetic shortcomings in ‘To Poesy’. For Leigh Hunt, *Endymion* reveals Keats as ‘a young poet giving himself up to his own impressions’,[[198]](#footnote-198) and an anonymous reviewer viewed the poet as expressing ‘sentiments sometimes bordering upon childishness’.[[199]](#footnote-199) Owen is aware of his ‘youth’ (‘To Poesy’, 91) and his dreamer status in ‘To Poesy’, being on the brink of the ‘task’ (‘To Poesy’, 40) that will elevate him. His ‘groans’ and ‘stretch[es] […] for help’ (‘To Poesy’, 3, 4) in the first stanza are analogous with Keats’s ‘feverish attempt’ to write *Endymion*.[[200]](#footnote-200) Owen’s consciousness of his similarity to a less experienced Keats is recognised in a letter to his mother written in September 1911, over a year after he wrote ‘To Poesy’, as he experiences the same epiphany as his predecessor:

May I quote you a sentence of a Poet—(need I name which?) that is marvellously expressive of what I want to say: ‘The imagination of a boy is healthy, and the mature imagination of a man is healthy; but there is a space of life between in which the soul is in a ferment, the character undecided, the way of life uncertain, (yes!), and the ambition thick-sighted (yes indeed!)’[[201]](#footnote-201)

Revealing a ‘character undecided’, the young Owen strives to assume the qualities of the mature Keats in *The Fall of Hyperion*, yet it is *Endymion* that unconsciously bleeds into his poetic mode and tone. Much like Owen’s first poem, Keats’s earlier work is ‘a youthful supplication torn between hope and fear, self-aggrandisement and self-depreciation’,[[202]](#footnote-202) as Keats vacillates between asserting his soaring ambition and undercutting his own poetic strategy with self-doubt. Though ‘To Poesy’ explicitly alludes to key moments in *The Fall of Hyperion*, the poem’s structural patterns reveal a faltering self-assertion that echoes the opening arrangement of *Endymion.* Owen addresses his ambition ‘to stand among the great ones’ (‘To Poesy’, 36) only to counter such positivity at the stanza’s end by admitting that such aspiration is an ‘impious thought’ (‘To Poesy’, 38). Keats reveals a similar tension in Book One of his first extended poetic project, asserting ‘I’ll smoothly steer / My little boat […] Many and many a verse I hope to write’ (*Endymion*, 1. 46-49). He swiftly affirms his artistic skill and authority through the certainty of the future tense, as he independently drives and navigates his poetic voyage with cool control.Yet, like Owen, he undercuts his ‘adventuresome’ poetry (*Endymion*,1. 58) at the end of the verse paragraph. In the unanticipated invocation ‘quickly dress / My uncertain path with green, that I may speed / Easily onward’ (*Endymion*,1. 61-2), the repetition of elongated ‘ee’ sounds in ‘green’, ‘speed’, and ‘easily’ demonstrate Keats’s navigation as mere circling, with the poet unable to release himself and progress from such articulatory flux. Keats undoes his ‘smoo[th] steer[ing]’ championed earlier in the verse paragraph with a sudden and desperate need for direction, and like Owen he is aware that the unresponsive muse ‘know’st the unseen road’ (‘To Poesy’, 30). Being ‘mad to ask’ that they ‘may dare’ to pursue their poetic ambition (‘To Poesy’, 38; *Endymion*,1. 133), both poets expose their youthful inexperience in being equally tentative in addressing their muse. Owen inherits Keats’s masochistic procedure of building self-confidence and establishing a resolute sense of poetic direction mid-stanza before sabotaging it through a humble qualification at the stanza’s close. *Endymion* unconsciously influences Owen’s structural practice as both poets credit former masters. While Owen delays his voice in ‘To Poesy’ by positioning the supplications of others before his own in his opening stanza (‘To Poesy’, 1-8), Keats foresees this anxiety with the possibility that he will ‘stammer where old Chaucer used to sing’ (*Endymion*,1. 134). Raising this concern is self-undermining; Keats positions this vocalised anxiety as an interruption of the opening of the central narrative, in which he ardently sought to establish ‘smooth[ness]’ and control (*Endymion*,1. 46). Keats effectively incorporates an awkward stammer in structural terms as he raises his concern about the possibility of him doing so. While Keats struggles to sustain his poetic voice, Owen’s preoccupation with other poets compromises his ability to even establish his in the opening stanza of ‘To Poesy’, as both poets tentatively ‘stammer’ in the structure of their respective works. While Owen alludes to the works of a mature, experienced Keats in ‘To Poesy’, the fissures of self-doubt in the poem are more analogous with the poetry of the younger version of his predecessor in *Endymion.*

As Owen realises the immensity of the task before him, he shifts from invoking Poesy to addressing himself: ‘All this to speed my suit with Poesy / Meseems must do; and far, far more than this’ (‘To Poesy’, 61-2). Michael O’Neill and Madeleine Callaghan note of the opening stanza of Book Four of *Endymion* that, despite Keats’s ‘longing to give himself to his muse’, there remains ‘the haunting fear that *Endymion* has failed even as it is being composed’.[[203]](#footnote-203) Here, Keats ‘could not pray […]—so on / I move to the end in lowliness of heart’ (*Endymion*, 4. 28-29). In a similar realisation, Owen concedes that his invocation to his muse is a failure. Resigning himself to Poesy’s silence, he realises that the onus falls back onto himself to find a way through ‘the unseen road’ (‘To Poesy’, 30) with only his reading of *The Fall of Hyperion* to move him forwards. Owen strives to overcome the ‘failure’ Keats feared for *Endymion* as he systematically plans his poetic strategy:

In divers tongues my thoughts must flow out free;

And, in my own tongue, with no word amiss,

For all its writers must be known to me.

My hand must wield the critic’s weapons, too,

To save myself, or strike an enemy.

Oh grant that this long training ne’er undo

My simple, ardent love!

(‘To Poesy’, 63-9)

The rhetoric of battle enlists Owen to play a dual role in acts of self-preservation and artistic advancement. Just as Keats subjects himself to scrutiny through the judgement of Moneta, Owen realises that he must become both a poet and a ‘critic’ in order to hone his artistic skill. While Owen registers that there is ‘far more’ to becoming a poet than mere ‘toil’ and ‘gold’ (‘To Poesy’, 46), he does not yet recognise that such elevation requires the artist himself to suffer. Owen depicts poetry and the mind as forms of water where his ‘thoughts must flow free’, yet his defensive military rhetoric usurps the peacefulness of the voiceless ‘f’ breaks, with the harsh monosyllabic verbs ‘wield’, ‘save’, and ‘strike’ falling on each of the lines’ central stresses. If Owen fails to understand that the experience of suffering is a precondition for Keats’s poethood, it is unintentionally foreboding that he should use the military terms ‘weapons’, ‘enemy’, and ‘training’ to describe his poetic journey given the hindsight that the First World War serves as the context of the suffering that inspires his mature poetry. Owen’s metaphors in this passage may be ‘undecided’ and ‘uncertain’ in a manner that aligns himself with Keats in *Endymion*,[[204]](#footnote-204) but, rather than continuing ‘To Poesy’ with a ‘lowliness of heart’ (*Endymion*, 4. 29), Owen’s ambition and awareness of his potential emerges from this confusion unscathed.

Recalling Keats’s view of *The Fall of Hyperion* as a ‘rehears[al]’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 16), Owen views ‘To Poesy’ as a poetic testing ground and subjects much of his images to constant alteration. Aware of the incongruity between his images of fluidity and battle, and realising that the power of his war metaphors has run dry, Owen settles on the image of poetry and the mind as forms of water. Natural imagery usurps militaristic terms as a more effective means of clarifying Owen’s demands to Poesy. As he beseeches her for ‘dews / Of inspiration’ (‘To Poesy’, 69-70), Owen identifies Poesy as a pastoral muse. He is aware that she cannot directly answer his entreaties and instead aspires to listen to Poesy through an engagement with his environment. Owen’s imagery becomes more lucid and flowing in his use of natural metaphors to support his requests. In his appeal to Poesy to ‘Throw early dews / Of inspiration oft-times on my brow’ (‘To Poesy’, 69-70) he simultaneously invokes an image of the muse triggering his ‘toil’ (‘To Poesy’, 46), with beads of sweat forming on his brow, alongside the image of him as a flower upon which the morning dew rests. Here Owen recalls an idea expressed by Keats in February 1818: ‘let us not […] go hurrying about and collecting honey-bee like, buzzing here and there impatiently from a knowledge of what is to be arrived at: but let us open our leaves like a flower and be passive and receptive’.[[205]](#footnote-205) Owen becomes ‘passive’ in all activity in these lines as he opts to become receptive to the world as a means of nourishing his artistic growth. However, though he articulates such a belief, this idea is not fully developed in ‘To Poesy’. While Owen alludes to his ‘receptive[ness]’, he ignores the contribution Poesy would make herself if she were able to speak in his monologue. Having been ‘mad to ask’ (‘To Poesy’, 38) anything of Poesy and repeatedly using the conditional ‘would’ in the previous stanza (‘To Poesy’, 55, 56), Owen’s shift to the modal voice marks his assumption that if Poesy could answer she would agree to his requests. While Keats ascends the steps in *The Fall of Hyperion*,being ‘Encouraged by the sooth voice of the shade’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 132-4, 1. 155), for Owen there has been no such categorical action or conversational impetus in the poem that would elevate his poetic status, and his shift in tone here seems unprompted as a result. Again, Owen positions himself in line with the young Keats rather than the more experienced poet of *The Fall of Hyperion*. Owen has not sufficiently proved himself enough to successfully make such requests from Poesy at this stage in the poem and in his poetic career. Hunt’s critique of *Endymion* is applicable to Owen, who equally reveals himself as ‘a young poet giving himself up to his own impressions’,[[206]](#footnote-206) ignoring the wishes of the interlocutor he desires to please in favour of a reality that he has not yet earned. However, in ‘Sleep and Poetry’, written four years before *The Fall of Hyperion*, Keats invokes Poesy despite not being ‘a glorious denizen / Of thy wide heaven’ (‘Sleep and Poetry’, 54-55).[[207]](#footnote-207) If Owen overcompensates in ‘To Poesy’, he follows his predecessor’s example to ‘strive / Against all doubtings’ (‘Sleep and Poetry’, 159-160) and test the limits of his poetic reach.

The tension between Owen’s desire to become a passive and receptive entity and his inability to relinquish command of his poetic journey comes to a climax. Though Owen affects to surrender control and allow Poesy to do her bidding, in the ensuing seventeen lines he goes on to meticulously describe what he wants to ‘Let’ Poesy do:

Throw early dews

Of inspiration oft-times on my brow.

Let them fall suddenly and darkly as thou choose,

Uncertain, fitful as the thunder-drops

Which sprinkle us then cease, to splash once more

Rapidly round, still pausing for long stops,

Not knowing if to vent their heavy store

Upon the parching ground, or wait awhile

Till hasty travelling winds bring increased worth.

(‘To Poesy’, 69-77)

While the Keats of *The Fall of Hyperion* claims his source of inspiration as Milton’s ‘paradise’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 2), Owen has not yet attained such vision and must request it from the muse. He asks her to ‘throw early dews / Of inspiration’, and this request betrays his connection to a younger Keats. The lines echo imagery used by Owen’s precursor in *Endymion*:‘let a portion of ethereal dew / Fall on my head’ (*Endymion*, 1. 131-132). Looking to nature for Poesy’s response through this allusion, rather than through the stark, militaristic rhetoric employed previously (‘To Poesy’, 66-68), allows Owen’s language to become more naturally embellished with adverbs and adjectives. However, his use of the water metaphor to wash away his ‘thick-sighted’ vision for more clarity paradoxically clouds his imagery.[[208]](#footnote-208) While Owen turns to nature to listen to Poesy, his sentiments overtake her ‘trembling voice’ (‘To Poesy’, 17) as nature begins to imitate the poet rather than his muse. Owen trips over alliterative breaks, such as ‘sprinkle us then cease, to splash once’, ‘Rapidly round’, ‘still pausing for long stops’, and ‘Not knowing’, and is unable to decide whether the drops ‘splash once’, fall ‘rapidly’, or ‘paus[e]’. His linguistic excitement comes at the cost of his eloquence, leading to a ‘stammer’ (*Endymion*,1. 134) that Keats foresaw after using the same image in *Endymion*. While such experimentation with sound patterns at this early stage in Owen’s poetic career anticipates the ‘incredible sound texturing’ that characterises his later poetry,[[209]](#footnote-209) here the abundance of chiming sounds creates chaos rather than control. Owen’s use of commas amplifies this effect. The lines ‘then cease, to splash once more / Rapidly round, still pausing for long stops’, metrically imitates the intermittency of the falling water drops, and the sporadic positioning of commas allows Owen to catch his breath through his excitement. It is Owen’s presence that permeates through the activity of the water, rather than Poesy as he originally intended, with the repeated ‘Not knowing’ and ‘or’ conjunction marking natural processes as indecisive and unclear. While Owen intends to give Poesy a medium through which to voice her potential actions, it is his own ‘uncertain[ty]’ and ‘thick-sighted[ness]’, shared by Keats in *Endymion*,that leaks into his imagery.[[210]](#footnote-210)

Just as Owen acknowledges that ‘To Poesy’ was written at a time in which ‘the soul [was] in a ferment, [and] the character undecided’,[[211]](#footnote-211) in a letter to Percy Bysshe Shelley Keats views *Endymion* as written by a poet ‘whose mind was like a pack of scattered cards’.[[212]](#footnote-212) As Owen’s demands to Poesy become increasingly ambitious, the density of his imagery and its arrangement affects the logic and structure of his supplication:

But as at last the concentrated pile

Of seething vapours flings its might to earth

In spurts of fire and rain, and to the ground

Flashes its energy, yields up its very soul,

So, midst long triumph-roars of awful sound,

Flash thou thy soul to me at last, and roll

Torrential streams of thought upon my brain,

(‘To Poesy’, 78-84)

Keats’s use of paradox and oxymoron in *The Fall of Hyperion* demonstrates the resilience and control of his style as he sustains their tensions over enjambment: ‘deathwards progressing / To no death was that visage’, ‘what things the hollow brain / Behind enwombèd’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 260-1, 1. 276-7). George Yost deconstructs this structural dexterity as dependent upon a balance between the syntactical proximity and the slight disengagement of contradictory images: ‘to allow time for the impact, Keats began to interpose a verb between the two parts of the oxymoron’ while ‘At the same time the contrasting elements are near enough to each other to remain in effective contact’.[[213]](#footnote-213) Owen employs a similar tension between proximity and space in his use of oxymoron as he describes ‘the concentrated pile / Of seething vapours’. His emulation of Keatsian technique is an excited modulation of the ‘dews’ invoked several lines previously (‘To Poesy’, 69). The notion of ‘concentrated’ ‘vapours’ gestures towards the contradictory sensations of exhilaration and anxiety in taking on ‘the hard task proposed’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 120). The oxymoronic tension reveals the task as both a burden, in its form as a dense, ‘concentrated pile’, but also as an intangible ‘vapour’; it weighs down the poet even as it remains undefined and ungraspable. Owen’s replication of Keats’s method here is unsuccessful, with the complexity of the image preventing Poesy from understanding his meaning. While Keats uses this technique in *The Fall* *of Hyperion* to muse upon his aims privately, Owen’s dreamer status ‘vexes’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 202) his poetic method through this positioning, serving to cloud his requests to Poesy rather than clarify them. Owen inadvertently makes his inexperience of invoking a muse overt in his uncertainty regarding what to ask for, and in doing so he overcompensates and asks for everything he can imagine and its inverse. John Barnard notes that the use of oxymoron by the young Keats of *Endymion* ‘suffer[s] from […] obscurity and excitement’,[[214]](#footnote-214) a condition to which Owen swiftly succumbs in the passage cited above. While Keats in *The Fall* *of Hyperion* achingly draws out the tension within his developing poetic consciousness and muses fully over his conflicting vision, Owen haphazardly welds Keatsian paradoxes together, with contradictory images presented as ‘scattered cards’ rather than coherent and sustained sensations.[[215]](#footnote-215) Owen loses the spacing that made Keats’s use of oxymoron in *The Fall of Hyperion* have such a lasting effect; invoking ‘Torrential streams’, he at once demands a delicate, unobtrusive body of water to fall upon him with the invasive power of ‘torrents’. Owen maintains the *Endymion-*esque ‘character undecided’ by embedding this oxymoron within another paradox; he asks Poesy to simultaneously ‘Flash thou thy soul’ and ‘roll / Torrential streams of thought upon my brain’, desiring both fleeting vision and unrelenting inspiration. The simple longing for ‘passing pleasures’ expressed previously (‘To Poesy’, 16) is no longer enough as Owen vocalises an excess of demands. Yet he loses the proximal balance of his first oxymoron, this time by increasing the distance of the momentary ‘Flash’ and the continuous ‘roll’ by positioning them in separate clauses. Owen does not sustain the linguistic tension that Keats displayed in *The Fall of Hyperion* by placing conflicting images in ‘effective contact’; instead, he vacillates between contradictory images. His call upon Poesy to ‘Flash’ her soul is undercut as the verb is repeated in the same position as it appeared two lines previously in ‘Flashes its energy’. Sustaining the fleeting nature of a ‘Flash’ over such an elongated period is a self-defeating exercise, as the ‘contact’ between images expands and loses its value. Though Owen identifies the intricacy of his precursor’s oxymoron and tasks himself with recreating the technique, he falls short of reproducing the effect mastered by the mature Keats. The increasing disparity of Owen’s attempts at paradox and oxymoron is more in line with the ‘scattered’ ‘obscurity’ of *Endymion* than the ‘effective contact’ of such images in *The Fall of Hyperion*.[[216]](#footnote-216)While Keats entreats Moneta to ‘purge off / […] my mind’s film’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 145-6) to enable him to visualise clearly his poetic task, Owen prioritises ‘inspiration’ over poetic control and fails to successfully enlist Poesy’s help because of the incoherence of his requests.

Owen attempts to curb the cumulative effect of his demands with a heavy-handed rallentando, yet he remains the same ‘thick-sighted’ ‘boy’ identified by Keats in his self-critique of *Endymion*:[[217]](#footnote-217)

So give, yea give Thyself to me

At last.

We shall be happy, thou and I. In me

Thou’lt find a jealous guardian of thy charms,

A doting master, leaving all to be

Ever with thee, ever in thine arms.

Forget my youth, forget my ignorance,

Spurn not my lowliness, and lack of friends

Who might help on my progress and perchance

Present me fearless at the throne where bends

Full timidly my lonely being now.

(‘To Poesy’, 85-95)

Owen catches his breath in the evocation of their consummation: ‘So give, yea give Thyself to me / At last.’ Yet the force behind this instruction is also undercut by the stammering of the previous stanza as Owen echoes words from three lines before: ‘Flash thou thy soul to me at last’ (‘To Poesy’, 83). The force behind his unearned demands collapses in the fissure between ‘to me / At last’. Unable to clearly envision his task he attempts to compose himself in the tetrameter and monometer lines. Abandoning the water imagery used previously, Owen changes his strategy in his attempt to parallel the Keatsian progression from dreamer to poet by invoking the transition from boyhood to manhood that comes with marriage. Yet the double**-**pause that follows the climax of Owen’s demands spotlights the immaturity of his conduct by revealing the distinct lack of a proposal from the speaker to his muse. While Keats must confront and digest Moneta’s critique (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 191-4), Owen takes advantage of his unsuccessful invocation of Poesy and his subsequent lack of an interlocutor. This poetic infirmity allows him the illusion of generic and narrative freedom, so that his tone reveals a cavalier assumption that Poesy has agreed to his requests. Seeking to buffer the failure of his invocation, Owen’s use of assonance and repetition in ‘be / […] thee’, ‘Ever […] ever’, and ‘Forget […] forget’ creates an echo chamber that attempts to compensate for the absence of Poesy’s voice. His assertions in this passage constantly work against themselves, as his struggle to overcome his artistic uncertainty inhibits any form of poetic and narrative progression. This explodes in his unfounded insistence that the muse must ‘Forget my youth, forget my ignorance, / Spurn not my lowliness or lack of friends’. While Keats exposes his self-doubt in *The Fall of Hyperion* in order to assuage it through dialogue (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 191-4), Owen attempts to elevate himself prematurely into poetic status without convincingly dispelling his weaknesses. Though Owen adopts a command over Poesy, in his excitement he skips a step in his poetic development and showcases a rhetoric that transcends his dreamer status.

Along with the stylistic similarities to Keats’s early work, Owen’s veneration of Poesy also echoes the juvenility of Endymion himself. As Keats’s protagonist reflects upon his relationship with the Indian Maiden in Book Four (*Endymion*,4. 636-43), Sperry observes that ‘The very intensity of Endymion’s otherworldly longing has fatally overtaxed the sustaining, elemental power of those bands of natural association and human affection that prompt man’s higher intimations even while they bind him more securely to the earth’.[[218]](#footnote-218) Owen emulates Endymion’s situation in the final two stanzas of ‘To Poesy’, in which the problematic nature of pursuing a transcendental relationship compromises Owen’s assertions. In *The Fall of Hyperion* Keats separates himself from ‘mock lyricists’ and ‘large self-worshippers’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 207), yet Owen’s attempts to emulate this process have a troubling effect. Just as Endymion proclaims to the Indian Maiden ‘Let us aye love each other […] and never, never go / Among the abodes of mortals’ (*Endymion*,4. 626-8), Owen foresees his and Poesy’s detachment from the rest of the world, imagining that ‘Round us the world may drift, / Some with scoffs and frowns, with laughter some’, with the ultimate intention to ‘shun / The world’ (‘To Poesy’, 101-2, 106-7). In outlining his intention to isolate himself and his beloved Poesy Owen misreads the poetic criteria Keats asserts in *The Fall of Hyperion*, asthe last two stanzas of ‘To Poesy’ ‘drift’ further away from his predecessor’s aim to do ‘some good for the world’.[[219]](#footnote-219) While *The Fall of Hyperion* demonstrates Keats physically positioning himself away from other poets, his greater poetic aims are inherently inclusive. Keats retracts and reverses *Endymion*’s desire to escape ‘the abodes of mortals’, and instead accepts his responsibility in his ‘pledge’ to ‘all the mortals of the world’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 44). In Owen’s excitement, he overlooks the duty Keats undertakes in *The Fall of Hyperion* by withholding the benevolent presence of Poesy from the rest of the world: ‘no more would I […] [show] men / Thy power’ (‘To Poesy’, 107-9). Owen’s longing to be ‘unseen’ and ‘far from men’s gaze’ with Poesy inadvertently excludes the reader from their sequestered relationship. The reader is implicated as one numbered among the ‘men’s gaze’ and is barred from this imagined union, so that the last two stanzas seem voyeuristic as a result. Owen’s desire for isolation is to his own self-detriment,[[220]](#footnote-220) as he denies himself the ‘human affection that prompt[s] man’s higher intimations’.[[221]](#footnote-221) If the mature Keats of *The Fall of Hyperion* works with and for humanity, aiming to ‘[pour] out a balm’ to at once soothe the world’s misery and improve his poetry (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 201), Owen inadvertently fights against the world, stifling his artistic progression and exacerbating the world’s sufferings by denying it access to Poesy.

However, Owen concludes ‘To Poesy’ conscious that his aim to create his own version of *The Fall of Hyperion* has drifted off-course:

And far from men’s gaze would I feel thy kiss;

No witness save the speechless star-lamps keen

When thou stoop’st over me. No eye

But Cynthia’s look on us, when through the night

We sit alone, our faces pressing nigh,

Quietly shining in her quiet light.

(‘To Poesy’, 113-118)

Where the final lines of *The Fall of Hyperion* show Keats amidst the ‘flam[es]’, ‘fire’, and ‘flare’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 2. 58, 59, 61) of the eponymous Titan, Owen ‘Quietly shin[es]’. Keats ends his epic on a blaze of visionary glory that marks his ascension to poethood, and, though he has not come close to the same transformation, Owen’s poetic identity is revealed to him in the soft illuminations of the ‘star[s]’ and moon. Here, the younger poet consciously takes a step back from attempting to fulfil Keats’s criteria on how to become a ‘poet’, and instead enjoys the ‘paradise’ that comes from ‘dream[ing]’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 199, 1. 2, 1. 199). If Keats’s fear that ‘*Endymion* ha[d] failed even as it [was] being composed’ was met with a ‘lowliness of heart’ (*Endymion*, 4. 29),[[222]](#footnote-222) Owen confronts the same problem with a resilience and an adaptability that distinguishes him from his predecessor. If Owen has not yet developed the skill to be a Keatsian ‘poet’, he also rids himself of the pressures of such a position. The tableau that closes the poem is arranged under the comforting gaze of *Endymion*’s‘Cynthia’ (‘To Poesy’, 116), rather than the critical eye of *The Fall of Hyperion*’sMoneta, as Owen’s deft use of allusion eases the burden of influence to ensure that he remains ‘happily under it’.[[223]](#footnote-223)

*The Fall of Hyperion* and ‘To Poesy’ demonstrate how poetic influence is positioned in the foreground of Keats and Owen’s poetry, consciously celebrated or lamented by the aspiring poet. Yet the differing degree of experience possessed by each poet at the time of writing their respective works conditions their response to poetic influence. Having grappled with traditional epic structure and ‘Miltonic inversions’ in *Hyperion*,[[224]](#footnote-224) *The Fall of Hyperion* demonstrates ‘Keats’s mature conviction that the poetic imagination must be found itself on a stern acceptance of reality rather than a weak nostalgia’.[[225]](#footnote-225) *The Fall of Hyperion* transforms Keats’s reading of *Paradise Lost* and establishes his response to influence as depending equally on respect and innovation, with the poem spotlighting his unique, lyric response to Milton’s epic. Keats’s poetic voice outshines the shadow of Milton’s influence through its increasing maturity, and an awareness of his responsibility as an influencing father grants Keats greater focus and impetus to innovate the epic genre. Keats’s transition from dreamer to poet in *The Fall of Hyperion* fuels the ambitions of Owen’s ‘To Poesy’. Though Keats’s poembequeaths to Owen a distilled set of criteria to attain poetic status, Owen’s juvenile excitement and indulgence in fancied images, themselves reminiscent of the weaknesses in *Endymion*, cause his language and poetics to suffer. While in *Hyperion* Keats ‘challeng[es] Milton on his own ground’,[[226]](#footnote-226) Owen repeats his predecessor’s initial mistake to imitate the source of his influence so that ‘To Poesy’ is saturated in Keatsian ‘inversions’.[[227]](#footnote-227) Yet the poem is vital for exploring the successes and missteps in Owen’s early readings of Keats, documenting the way in which the younger poet meditates on how to become a poetic heir. If Keats viewed *Endymion* as ‘a feverish attempt, rather than a deed accomplished’,[[228]](#footnote-228) that is not to underappreciate the value of the initial ‘attempt’. Like Keats with *Endymion*, Owen’s self-critical faculties develop as a result of ‘To Poesy’s’ shortcomings,[[229]](#footnote-229) so that his later work seeks to avoid the pitfalls of misprision and depict his readings of Keats’s poetry as part of an ongoing apprenticeship. Though Owen’s attempt to continue from where Keats left off at the peak of his career is discovered to be an impossible task, ‘To Poesy’ showcases Owen’s soaring ambition and his strategy to bring his own poetry into life through a response to poetic influence.

**Chapter Two**

**‘The intensity of working out conceits’: Keats, Owen, and Poetic Apprenticeship to the Sonnet**

The sonnet is the primary site of poetic experimentation in the work of Keats and Owen. The epic genre of the *Hyperion* poemsreveals conflicting experiences of the ‘anxiety of influence’ as well its exhilarating ‘pleasure’ for Keats,[[230]](#footnote-230) yet the sonnet form offers a forgiving space in which to develop his poetic skill. If the epic was a slow-burning feat of poetic stamina,[[231]](#footnote-231) Keats relieves this extended supplication for canonical status through the more manageable commitment to a short poetic form. Each poem showcases an individual burst of inspiration, and Keats’s respectful yet innovative approach to the sonnet also chronicles his extended journey from being an apprentice to a master of the form. Like Keats, Owen’s early experiments with the sonnet show him rehearsing his poetic skill, culminating in some of his finest war elegies. While Keats uses his experience of writing in Petrarchan and Shakespearean modes to create unique sonnet structures, Owen is keen to experiment with formal tradition in his early sonnets in order to open up new generic possibilities. By working in an elegiac mode, Owen challenges what Michael D. Hurley and Michael O’Neill describe as ‘the expected consolation associated with the *volta*’.[[232]](#footnote-232) While Keats finds the sonnet a liberating space, Owen’s decision not to work wholly within any single established style of the form challenges the traditions of poetic apprenticeship, as he attempts to balance the density of a concise, closed form with the absence created by loss.

Paula R. Feldman and Daniel Robinson observe that ‘Despite the implications of Milton’s innovations on English sonnet practice, the sonnet seemed hackneyed to early eighteenth-century readers hungry for satire, reason, and clarity rather than for the eroticism, emotion, and conceit of Renaissance sonnets’.[[233]](#footnote-233) In *An Essay on Criticism* Alexander Pope reviles the sonnet, complaining ‘What woeful stuff this madrigal would be, / In some starved hackney sonneteer, or me?’ (*An Essay on Criticism*, 419-20)[[234]](#footnote-234) Yet Pope raises a problem with content rather than form, as ‘hackney’ poets are exposed as poor sonneteers who underestimate the sonnet’s intricacy. The self-consciousness of the Romantics and their heirs raises the form’s status from ‘starved’ site to one of poetic opportunity. Wordsworth’s self-reflexive sonnet ‘Nuns fret not at their Convent’s narrow room’ reveals the form’s paradoxical status as both compact and emancipating:

In truth, the prison, unto which we doom  
Ourselves, no prison is: and hence to me,  
In sundry moods, ’twas pastime to be bound  
Within the Sonnet’s scanty plot of ground:  
Pleased if some Souls (for such there needs must be)  
Who have felt the weight of too much liberty,  
Should find short solace there, as I have found.

(‘Nuns fret not at their Convent’s narrow room’, 8-14)[[235]](#footnote-235)

The shift of ‘the prison, […] no prison is’ is positioned on the hinge between the octave and the sestet.[[236]](#footnote-236) This comment on the sonnet’s liberating quality creates a smooth transition between the two sections of the Petrarchan sonnet, allowing Wordsworth to stroll effortlessly through the boundaries of the form’s ‘ground’. Wordsworth also celebrates the sonnet’s flexible function. He simultaneously cites two distinct temporal frames in the description ‘’twas pastime to be bound’, using the perfect tense to refer nostalgically to his youthful ‘pastime’ of sonnet-writing, but also self-reflexively calling into play his position in the present as an experienced poet revisiting and enhancing his take on the form. In this half line Wordsworth encapsulates the enduring quality of the sonnet as a form that frequently features throughout a poet’s career. The sonnet is used to both revise and refine mature poets’ techniques and to nurture the embryonic stages of young writers’ developing methods. O’Neill highlights the way that Keats’s experiments with the sonnet ‘form the basis of the stanza form he employs in his Odes’.[[237]](#footnote-237) For Keats, the sonnet is both an accommodating testing ground and a rigorous exercise in poetic discipline. Keats’s approach to the form stems from his response to his poetic predecessors. Christopher Ricks observes that Keats ‘declines the invitation to figure in the dark melodrama of *The Anxiety of Influence*’.[[238]](#footnote-238) Though this is not wholly true of Keats’s tortured experimentation with the epic in the *Hyperion* poems, Ricks’s observation illuminates Keats’s approach to the sonnet. His appreciation and excitement of working with what he considered to be an experimental form stems from his readings of Shakespeare. In a letter to John Hamilton Reynolds, written in November 1817, Keats comments that ‘I neer found so many beauties in the sonnets—they seem to be full of fine things said unintentionally—in the intensity of working out conceits’.[[239]](#footnote-239) If Shakespeare exorcised his poetic weaknesses and controlled his strengths through his sonnets, Keats not only learns from this imperfect image of his predecessor but also sees the ‘beauty’ in apprenticeship itself. He identifies each attempt to work with the sonnet as an opportunity to draw out his own ‘conceits’ in order to develop his poetic style and skill.

In ‘How many bards gild the lapses of time’ Keats approaches the sonnet form conscious of his position as a poetic inheritor.[[240]](#footnote-240) J. B. Broadbent claims that ‘the inheritor needs to be not only generous but responsible, given that an inheritance is held in trust’,[[241]](#footnote-241) and Keats’s early sonnets demonstrate an unrelenting dedication to this sense of poetic ‘responsibility’. Instead of granting himself independent visionary indulgence, ‘How many bards’ is an exercise in poetic discipline in which Keats carefully manages the exhilarating ‘pleasure’ generated by influence:[[242]](#footnote-242)

How many bards gild the lapses of time!

A few of them have ever been the food

Of my delighted fancy—I could brood

Over their beauties, earthly, or sublime:

And often, when I sit me down to rhyme,

These will in throngs before my mind intrude:

But no confusion, no disturbance rude

Do they occasion; ’tis a pleasing chime.

(‘How many bards’, 1-8)[[243]](#footnote-243)

Ricks’s argument that Keats is ‘unmisgiving’ under influence and ‘happily’ pays his debts to his predecessors is supported by the first quatrain of ‘How many bards’.[[244]](#footnote-244) Keats credits the ‘bards’ of old for inspiring his sonnet before asserting his own presence within it in the third line, respectfully marking his lineage through this prioritisation. His enthusiastic response to influence makes itself felt in the first line with his joyful exclamation of his predecessors’ presence: ‘How many bards gild the lapses of time!’ Yet Keats’s metre ensures that the poem balances the ‘delight’ Keats feels under influence with a sense of his control over his material. Though his enjambment risks the sense that the poetry outstrips the sonnet’s lineation, Keats endstops ten of the poem’s fourteen lines so that his punctuation mediates this metrical overflow. The enjambment in lines two and seven is controlled with the caesurae in the lines following them, and the repeated commas in line four have the same effect on line three. Keats’s attempt to balance his excitement with discipline is also revealed in his structural division, as he marks each quatrain in the octave as self-contained by punctuating the end of the sections. However, Keats also allows his quatrains to melt into one another through the use of a semi-colon, rather than a full stop, at the end of line four. The word ‘And’ that begins the fifth line supports this strategy by maintaining the continuity of the poem’s second sentence. Keats regulates his form and marks his Petrarchan boundaries while maintaining a smoothness that aims to overcome the ‘lapses’ in his poetic technique.

However, Keats’s impulse to balance his predecessors’ involvement with his own self-assertion compromises the fluency and richness of his verse. In the first quatrain, Keats demonstrates self-discipline when he describes his passive position as the influenced figure. Yet the depiction of his creative activity in the second quatrain disrupts this control. He overplays his position as poet with the unnecessary inclusion of ‘me’ in the line ‘And often, when I sit me down to rhyme’ (‘How many bards’, 5). Just as Keats asserts his command over his poetry he undercuts himself by having his metre dictate the lucidity of his syntax. His use of rhyme restores his predecessors’ regulating role over his poetry. In lines five and six, ‘mind’ chimes with ‘rhyme’ (‘How many bards’, 6, 5) through the words’ assonance, and the reader momentarily hears ‘mind’ as a premature rhyming sound as a result. Yet here it is as if the bards reassert the poem’s Petrarchan scheme and ‘intrude’ upon this potential ending by reintroducing the *b* rhyme. The reminder of his predecessors’ presence curtails Keats’s anticipation of ending the line with his own independent thought. The assonance of ‘mind’ and ‘rhyme’ resounds across the octave through the proximity of the words ‘sublime’ and ‘I’ (‘How many bards’, 4, 5). The sound of the pronoun ‘I’ that rings through these words is muted by the presence of the other poets as Keats forces himself to remember his predecessors before his enthusiasm as poetic creator takes over the rest of his sonnet. Taking advantage of the sonorous proximity permitted by his form’s *bb* rhyme, he employs the same technique to deliberately extend the ‘intru[sion]’ of his predecessors (‘How many bards’, 6), with ‘intrude’, ‘confusion’, and ‘rude’ (‘How many bards’, 6, 7) drowning out the assonance of his self-absorption. Following the reminder of the bards’ presence Keats shows his restraint as he explains ‘But no confusion, no disturbance rude / Do they occasion; ’tis a pleasing chime’ (‘How many bards’, 7-8). The repeated positioning of ‘no’ on the stress of the iamb supports this clear attempt to control his enthusiasm. In the second quatrain Keats dedicates more time to describing the bards’ ‘intrusion’ and uses negative qualifiers to describe the effect of their presence before simply stating that their influential works create ‘a pleasing chime’ (‘How many bards’, 8). Having described his experience of inspiration to Richard Woodhouse as a ‘sensation of astonishment’ and ‘magic’,[[245]](#footnote-245) Keats’s decision not to embellish the power of his predecessors’ influence seems odd.[[246]](#footnote-246) Stuart Sperry notes that ‘there is an evident struggle throughout the early verse for some means to start the creative process flowing’,[[247]](#footnote-247) and while the bards teach Keats the discipline necessary for the sonnet form they do not inspire Keats’s creativity. The entire sonnet lacks adjectival adornment with ‘delighted’, ‘rude’, and ‘pleasing’ the only descriptors in the octave (‘How many bards’, 3, 7, 8). The indulgence in ‘sensation’ typical in Keats’s poetry seems conspicuously absent as the poet avoids competing with the bards’ own poetic ‘gild[ing]’ (‘How many bards’, 1).[[248]](#footnote-248) He addresses his predecessors’ influential presence and ‘broods’ over it (‘How many bards’, 3), but does not relay what makes his ‘brood[ing]’ and ‘delight’ worthwhile (‘How many bards’, 3). Paradoxically, the process of inspiration itself seems descriptively uninspiring for Keats. Yet his understated style also reveals that his ‘creative process’ remains a case of managing his enthusiasm and planning how to respond to influence rather than showcasing a poetic vision that has not been adequately honed. While Keats describes the ‘chime’ of his predecessors’ work, the slow pace and undecorated quality of his verse aligns his sonnet more with the ‘solemn sound’ of the ‘great bell’ (‘How many bards’, 8, 12, 11) described in the sestet. He metaphorically alludes to a lineage through these sonorous images, but their tonal differences suggest that he does not feel himself a worthy inheritor of the bards’ poetic legacy at this stage in his formal apprenticeship.

The sestet of the sonnet sees Keats honour his ‘responsibility’ as a poetic heir as he commemorates the bards’ legacies in his own poetry:[[249]](#footnote-249)

So the unnumbered sounds that evening store;

The songs of birds, the whispering of the leaves,

The voice of the waters, the great bell that heaves

With solemn sound, and thousand others more,

That distance of recognizance bereaves,

Make pleasing music, and not wild uproar.

(‘How many bards’, 9-14)

The *volta* marks a shift from a psychological landscape to tracing the diffused echoes of his predecessors’ ‘chime’ (‘How many bards’, 8) within nature. Jennifer-Ann Wagner argues that Keats aims to ‘forget’ the voices of the bards, continuing that ‘if the sestet begins by muffling those voices into echoic sounds of nature, line 13 transforms them by silencing them with a kind of death’.[[250]](#footnote-250) Yet Wagner’s view that Keats ‘silenc[es]’ the bards’ lingering chime though the sounds of nature misreads Keats’s efforts throughout the sonnet to become a dutiful inheritor of his predecessors. Keats’s choice of images aids this overriding strategy. Peter McDonald observes that the ‘“bards” seem naturally allied in this context to the “birds” from which they are distinguished by only a syllable’,[[251]](#footnote-251) and instead of ‘silencing’ the voices of his predecessors, Keats resurrects them in the sounds of nature. The bards’ reincarnation as birds alludes to Keats’s formal interests; the birds’ ‘songs’ are etymologically linked with the sonnets of Keats’s predecessors’, with the word ‘sonnet’ originating from the Italian ‘sonetto’, meaning ‘little song’.[[252]](#footnote-252) A human quality runs through nature’s sounds as Wagner observes that each image performs a mode of utterance through their ‘songs’, ‘whispering[s]’, and ‘voice[s]’.[[253]](#footnote-253) These forms of speech create a *crescendo* in the sestet that culminates in the ‘heav[ing]’ of the ‘great bell’. Keats does not bury his predecessors in order to usurp their canonical positions, but immortalises each unnamed bard through nature as a Miltonic ‘genius of the shore’ (*Lycidas*, 183).[[254]](#footnote-254) Furthering Keats’s sense of ‘bereavement’, the final sound in this sequence is figured as the tolling of a funeral bell that rings with ‘solemn sound’. The weight of the spondaic stress of the ‘great bell’ bears down on the songlike iambs of the previous line and anticipates the bell’s imposing sound following the delicacy of Keats’s natural imagery. Yet this heaviness is not the ‘burden’ of influence, as Walter Jackson Bate and Harold Bloom would define it,[[255]](#footnote-255) nor is it an attempt to ‘silence’ the bards’ metaphorical voices in nature. Rather, it is suggestive of Keats’s efforts to commemorate his poetic precursors as he uses this metrical weight to add gravity to his respectful interaction with his predecessors. Keats takes advantage of the double *dd* rhyme to add to the sense of the bell’s weight as the sounds of ‘leaves’ and ‘heaves’ bear down on the sestet. The enjambment of the latter rhyme allows the bell to ‘heave’ between tercets as Keats uses the sonnet’s structural boundaries to sustain and amplify his poetic bell-ringing. This is also the only sound in the sestet that Keats chooses to decorate adjectivally, describing it as ‘great’ and ‘solemn’. Keats descriptively amplifies his human commemoration over the various natural echoes of the bards, so that the sonnet is less about gleaning the nature of his inspiration than it is about how he pays tribute to it through his poetry.

While Keats laments his temporal dislocation from the bards and his inability to hear their original ‘chime’ (‘How many bards’, 8), he finds consolation in the resonating quality of their immortal poetry. He explains in the final lines that the ‘distance of recognizance bereaves, / Make pleasing music, not wild uproar’ (‘How many bards’, 13-14), and McDonald notes that the sonorous images in the sestet have ‘the ability to “bereave” distance of any “recognizance”: that is, to sound more pleasingly for being so far away’.[[256]](#footnote-256) Keats’s mourning and consolation facilitate one another in the sestet; he laments being temporally distanced from his predecessors, but equally that distance immortalises their ‘chime’ and makes it more ‘delight[ful]’ and ‘pleasing’ when harmonised with the ‘little songs’ crafted by their inheritors (‘How many bards’, 3, 8). McDonald’s observation assumes that the final two lines function as mutually dependent on one another. However, their autonomous operation heightens Keats’s self-reflexive approach to form. The independence of the two lines is indicated by the comma separating the two statements. Keats strengthens this disjuncture by opening his final line with ‘Make’. If the verb was dependent upon the ‘distance’ introduced in the line before it would have been conjugated to ‘makes’. Keats’s decision not to do so implies that the verb is modal, and renders the final line a self-instruction to ‘Make pleasing music, not wild uproar’ as a result. Keats wills himself to continue the ‘little songs’ of his predecessors rather than creating a Bloomian discordance. Yet in the positioning of ‘wild uproar’ as its final words the line appears thematically incongruous in a sonnet designed for careful control. As Keats wishes for his music to be ‘pleasing’ he finishes his sonnet with an apparently unambitious manifesto. Yet the use of adjectives exposes Keats’s true strategy by pitting ‘pleasing’ and ‘wild’ against one another. The initial, positive statement is not strong enough to support itself against the vibrancy of ‘wild uproar’, with the descriptor and ordering of clauses revealing the poet’s lingering interest in the latter. This reveals that Keats aims to follow formal traditions and continue the ‘pleasing music’ of his predecessors. Only when he has done this can he cause ‘wild uproar’ and experiment with the sonnet. Keats closes his self-reflexive foray into the form concluding that he must learn his craft before he can innovate on its conventions.

Keats’s image of birds singing ‘little songs’ to their predecessors takes on a prophetic fulfilment when he is figured as an influential father.[[257]](#footnote-257) Owen’s ‘Written in a Wood, September 1910’ echoes Keats’s self-conscious occupation with influence and the sonnet. Here Owen combines his apprenticeship to form with a consideration of genre so that the sonnet functions as an elegy for Keats:[[258]](#footnote-258)

Full ninety autumns hath this ancient beech

Helped with its myriad leafy tongues to swell

The dirges of the deep-toned western gale,

And ninety times hath all its power of speech

Been stricken dumb, at sound of winter’s yell,

Since Adonais, no more strong and hale,

Might have rejoiced to linger here and teach

His thoughts in sonnets to the listening dell;

(‘Written in a Wood, September 1910’, 1-8)[[259]](#footnote-259)

Owen reprises the notes of ‘How many bards’ by modulating his predecessor’s use of ‘songs’, ‘whispering’, and ‘voice[s]’ (‘How many bards’, 10, 11) to his descriptions of ‘tongues’, ‘deep-toned’ ‘dirges’, ‘speech’, and ‘yell[s]’. While Keats’s setting abounds with simple ‘songs’ and ‘chime[s]’ (‘How many bards’, 8) that harmonise with one another, Owen’s layering of voices and adjectives creates a cacophony that is amplified by their close positioning in lines one to five. In Owen’s description of the ‘myriad’ of beech leaves, the presiding iambic pentameter compresses the word ‘myriad’ from three syllables to two, glossing over the sounds made by each individual ‘tongue’. The voices in the opening lines converge as the sonnet’s traditions prevent Owen from registering the individual utterances of the leaves at length. Owen assesses his metrical boundaries and experiments with what the form can accommodate, and his metre audibly ‘swell[s]’ as a result of this uncomfortable containment. The light ‘myriad’ of sounds generated by the leaves is accompanied by the wind’s sustained, ‘deep-toned’ lamentation. The opening clause continues over the first three lines and forces the reader to simulate Owen’s respiratory image, necessitating a ‘deep’ intake of breath to perform the prolonged exhalation of the wind’s sustained ‘dirge’. Nature’s sounds are performed through the lines’ phonetic patterns as Owen’s technique invites the reader to echo nature’s lament when reading the poem aloud. The compact arrangement of staccato vowel sounds in ‘Helped with its myriad leafy tongues to swell’ are set against the extended vowels of ‘deep-toned dirges’ as the reader performs each tonal line of Owen’s woodland orchestra. The layering of the sounds uttered by nature and enacted in the reader’s articulation demonstrates Owen’s understanding that successive voices amplify and intensify the utterances preceding them, as Keats shows with the sequence of beautiful ‘songs’ that ensued from his bards’ ‘chime’ (‘How many bards’, 8). Yet here Owen’s crescendo overpowers individual sounds so that the multiple voices have ‘Been stricken dumb’ by winter. The thudding of plosives of ‘Been’ and ‘dumb’ and the sharp phonation of ‘stricken’ paradoxically generates silence through the introduction of more noise. While Keats’s undecorated, controlled depictions of sounds result in an elegant harmonisation of utterances in ‘How many bards’, Owen’s descriptive indulgence prompts the voices of the woodland to compete with and overpower one another, compromising his ability to ‘hear’ the delicacy of the Keatsian ‘chime’ that originally invoked them.

Sperry notes that though Keats registers the presence of influential figures in ‘How many bards’, ‘the sonnet does not succeed in characterising the nature of the ‘chime’ or the greater ‘music’ it distils, nor is there any real effort to do so’.[[260]](#footnote-260) While Keats focuses his attention upon the process of inspiration and how he intends to respond to it,[[261]](#footnote-261) he undercuts his invocation of influential figures by not disclosing the identities of those whom he conjures. Owen approaches the sonnet with the same awareness of his poetic lineage as Keats, yet Owen uses allusion to register more clearly his debt to named predecessors and to position his sonnet generically in the tradition of elegy. Ricks explains that ‘At the root of “allusion” is the verb “to play” (from the Latin, “ludere”). A calling into play is not the same as referring to or mentioning’.[[262]](#footnote-262) While Keats’s vague assembly of ‘bards’ sees him grant himself the only identifiable poetic voice in his sonnet (‘How many bards’, 1), Owen’s use of allusion ‘call[s] into play’ a ‘myriad’ (‘Written in a Wood’, 2) of sources of influence. The poem’s opening lamentation that it has been ‘Full ninety autumns’ since Keats’s death recalls ‘To Autumn’. Owen’s complaint that he is unable to hear Keats’s ‘lyre’ at the close of the sonnet (‘Written in a Wood’, 14) retrospectively reveals a ventriloquism of his predecessor’s voice that compensates for Keats’s absence. In the description of ‘swell[ing]’ ‘dirges’ that follows his initial allusion to the ode (‘Written in a Wood’, 2, 3), Owen recalls Keats’s observations of Autumn’s bloating effect upon nature as it ‘swell[s] the gourd, and plump[s] the hazel shells’ (‘To Autumn’, 7).[[263]](#footnote-263) While the tactile nature of Keats’s description of swelling depicts the ‘ripen[ing]’ and ‘budding’ of fruit and flowers (‘To Autumn’, 6, 8), Owen employs the same adjective to mark an absence of life. The accumulation of ‘ninety autumns’ without Keats causes the wounds of nature’s loss to ‘swell’ in the enjambment between the second and third line as Keats’s death overwhelms the sonnet’s lineation. Owen evokes physical suffering in the word ‘swell’ to describe sonorous ‘dirges’. Through synaesthesia Owen ‘play[s]’ with Keats’s language and negates his predecessor’s depiction of vitality by converting it into an inflamed expression of loss.

By transposing Keats’s woodland ‘songs’ into nature’s ‘dirges’ (‘How many bards’, 10; ‘Written in a Wood’, 3) Owen heightens the elegiac tone of Keats’s sonnet. He cements the poem’s generic status by ‘calling’ Shelley ‘into play’ through his allusions to *Adonais*.[[264]](#footnote-264) In his elegy for Keats, Shelley writes that ‘the wild winds flew round, sobbing their dismay’ (*Adonais*, 14. 126).[[265]](#footnote-265) Owen echoes this in his personified description of the ‘dirges of the deep-toned western gale’ (‘Written in a Wood’, 3). Shelley’s speaker also laments that ‘Winter is come and gone, / But grief returns with the revolving year’ (*Adonais*, 18. 154-155), a sentiment Owen replicates in the idea that grief returns ‘at sound of winter’s yell’ (‘Written in a Wood’, 5). The allusion to this line is subtly continued in Owen’s three mentions of ‘ninety’ year cycles (‘Written in a Wood’, 1, 4, 12), echoing the ‘revolving’ quality of mourning that is experienced by Shelley’s speaker. While Keats consolidates and controls influence in ‘How many bards’, Owen demonstrates a desire to expand it by positioning Shelley’s work in tandem with that of Keats. Yet Owen’s turn to Shelley reveals his poetic inexperience. Owen refers to his predecessor both as ‘Keats’ and ‘Adonais’ (‘Written in a Wood’, 6, 14), conflating Keats the man with Shelley’s characterisation of the poet.[[266]](#footnote-266) Owen intentionally reveals a misreading of *Adonais* by describing him as ‘strong and hale’ (‘Written in a Wood’, 6), which grates with Shelley’s depictions of the character as a ‘withering’ ‘pale flower’, and a ‘broken lily’ (*Adonais*, 32. 286; 6. 48, 6. 54). Despite his respectful tone towards Keats, Owen’s sonnet fails to stand up effectively against Shelley’s representation of Adonais as weak and delicate. His description attempts to right the legacy and character of his idol, yet Owen’s refined image jars against Shelley’s representation of Keats as Adonais. The sonnet is too brief for Owen to assert himself against Shelley’s extended portrayal, and Owen’s attempt to secure his preferred image of Keats resembles a clumsy misreading of Shelley’s elegy. His desire to cite multiple sources of influence causes his images of Keats to collapse into one another, being unable to grapple with his predecessor’s ‘myriad’ of voices and identities (‘Written in a Wood’, 2) within the sonnet’s tight formal boundaries. Adrian Caesar views the poem as ‘clogged with lush adjectives and heavy with nineteenth-century afflatus’,[[267]](#footnote-267) and the anachronisms that dominate ‘Written in a Wood’ reveal Owen attempting to engage with former masters on their level rather than his own. Owen’s reverential aims backfire in his overuse of allusion; the competition between the utterances heard in the woodland shrouds a darker dialogue in which Keats and Shelley overtake Owen’s voice in his own sonnet, as the inheritor is ‘[out]played’ by his predecessors.[[268]](#footnote-268)

Owen’s use of allusion extends beyond stylistic and tonal references to his precursors’ work. Dominic Hibberd claims that the wood in the sonnet seems to be Hampstead, where Keats lived between March 1817 and August 1819.[[269]](#footnote-269) The allusion allows Owen to occupy two settings simultaneously in his sonnet, at once walking where Keats historically walked in Hampstead while journeying through his predecessor’s textual settings. In the same way Keats imagines himself to be in Milton’s Eden in *The Fall of Hyperion*,[[270]](#footnote-270)in the sestet Owen blurs his woodland environment with the settings described in Keats’s poetry.

Or glide in fancy through those leafy grots

And bird-pavilions hung with arras green,

To hear the sonnets of its minstrel choir.

Ah, ninety times again, when autumn rots

Shall birds and leaves be mute and all unseen,

Yet I shall see fair Keats, and hear his lyre.

(‘Written in a Wood’, 9-14)

Having stated his ‘quest’ to ‘stand among the great ones’ in ‘To Poesy’ (‘To Poesy’, 35, 36),[[271]](#footnote-271) Owen venerates the settings depicted within Keats’s oeuvre by mapping a pilgrimage through his precursor’s poetry. Having already evoked ‘To Autumn’ to facilitate his elegiac strategy, Owen’s movement through ‘bird pavilions hung with arras green’ evokes ‘the leafy grot’ of *Endymion* (*Endymion*, 2. 921), and the scene is adorned with the shady ‘screens’ of ‘drooping’ foliage observed by Keats in *The Fall of Hyperion* (*The Fall of Hyperion*,1. 21, 25).[[272]](#footnote-272) However, as Owen envisages a setting in which Keats ‘Might have rejoiced to linger […] and teach’ (‘Written in a Wood’, 7), his fancy of Keats being alive cannot be sustained, and his revival of these Keatsian settings is cut short as he resumes his commitment to elegise his precursor. Though he restages the ‘grots’ of *Endymion*,his rhyme scheme in the sestet overwrites rebirth with morbid decay in the form of ‘autumn rots’. This link undermines itself as Owen reconstructs Keats’s settings only for the brevity of the sonnet to force him to swiftly dismantle them. The sonnet stages Owen’s realisation that viewing himself as ‘stand[ing] among the great ones’ (‘To Poesy’, 36) through recreating the settings of their poetic transformations is not a sustainable strategy for him to acquire greatness himself. Owen demonstrates a conflict between occupying the poetic spaces of his predecessors and creating his own. Just as Keats transported himself away from Milton’s Eden to explore new poetic territory in *The Fall of Hyperion*,[[273]](#footnote-273) Owen must craft his own narrative space in order to attain canonical space. The compact nature of the sonnet also inhibits Owen’s acquisition of ‘the expected consolation associated with the *volta*’.[[274]](#footnote-274) The change from ‘Adonais’ to ‘Keats’ suggests a movement towards a more authentic version of his predecessor rather than the version of Keats imagined by Shelley. Yet the shift to the future tense in the final line, ‘Yet I shall see fair Keats, and hear his lyre’, promises fulfilment only to deny it as the limitations of Owen’s form prevent him from realising this hope. This sense of restricted consolation is supported through the final rhyme. The *def def* structure of his sestet dictates ‘lyre’ rhyming with ‘choir’ three lines previously, yet this decision lengthens the temporal distance between the two words. This technical resolution feels inadequate as the ‘choir’ that sings Keats’s praises, of which Owen himself is a part, is spatially and temporally detached from the original sounds of Keats’s own music. While Keats could hear the bards’ ‘chime’ throughout his sonnet, Owen’s formal traditions dictate that hearing Keats’s ‘lyre’ directly can only remain a distant possibility.

While the octave and sestet structure of the sonnet suggests a Petrarchan structure, Owen’s positioning of the *volta* defies complete adherence to this tradition. Hurley and O’Neill state that in sonnets of this style ‘The “turn” towards resolution, known as the *volta,* occurs at the point where the rhyme scheme changes’ between the two sections.[[275]](#footnote-275) While Owen’s rhyme scheme marks the Petrarchan division with the introduction of the *def def* sequence, his content does not react to this formal trope. Owen implies a ‘turn’ with the ‘Or’ conjunction (‘Written in a Wood’, 9), but instead of a ‘resolution’ he merely continues to muse on what Keats would do if he were still alive. This failed turn reveals Owen attempting to release himself from such thoughts only to be drawn back into an artificial world in which Keats still exists. The octave’s conflict bleeds into the resolution of the sestet so that his second attempt at the *volta* is set back into the middle of the sestet in line 12: ‘Ah, ninety times again when autumn rots’ (‘Written in a Wood’, 12). The divide between octave and sestet through Owen’s rhyme scheme reveals the poet observing the structural traditions of the Petrarchan sonnet but not its rhetorical development. The uneven phrasing and the delayed *volta* compromise the established structure of the Petrarchan sonnet and fail to reconcile the two sections of his poem with the consolation expected following the *volta*. Owen shifts from describing the vibrancy of the ‘arras green’ ‘leafy grots’ and the ‘sonnets’ of the birds’ ‘minstrel choir’ to viewing a deathly parallel of the scene (‘Written in a Wood’, 10, 9, 11). The ‘clogged’ description of Owen’s ‘plump’ and ‘swollen’ autumnal images preceding line twelve are bled dry in the second tercet;[[276]](#footnote-276) autumn ‘rots’ away, the birds are rendered ‘mute’, and the leaves are ‘unseen’ (‘Written in a Wood’, 12, 13). While Keats consoles himself with the sound of his predecessors’ ‘chime[s]’ being echoed through nature (‘How many bards’, 8), Owen is not satisfied with his woodland’s mediation of Keats’s ‘sonnets’ and yearns to hear his predecessor’s original music. He silences the conflicting sounds of the birds and dulls the vibrancy of his imaginary surroundings, intentionally killing off his imagery in order to listen for Keats’s ‘lyre’ (‘Written in a Wood’, 14). His efforts are unsuccessful and the turn adds no ‘resolution’; the repetition of ‘hear’ in the sestet only shows Owen straining to listen for the music of his predecessor (‘Written in a Wood’, 11, 14). Yet the absence that characterises the final three lines of the poem also reflects his predecessor’s preference for solitude. In a letter to George Keats, written in October 1818, Keats writes that ‘No sooner am I alone than shapes of epic greatness are stationed around me, and serve my Spirit the office [of] which is equivalent to a king’s body guard’.[[277]](#footnote-277) The seclusion fashioned by Owen in the closing lines of ‘Written in a Wood’ reflects Keats’s own attitude towards influence. Owen isolates himself from distraction so that the sonnet ends with the poet waiting for inspiration to come in the ‘shape’ and voice of Keats. ‘Written in a Wood’ is as much about Owen celebrating the influence Keats has already given to him as it is about anticipating the inspiration still to come.

Though Keats approaches the sonnet with care and control in ‘How many bards’, he also reveals a desire to experiment with its formal and generic tropes. ‘To Lord Byron’ venerates a poet who was Keats’s contemporary as opposed to an influential ‘bard’ of a past generation. Bate describes the way in which the ‘plaintive sonnet’ became popularised ‘indiscriminately by lesser poets’, and Keats in his naivety identified this genre of the sonnet as ‘an appropriate idiom for poetry now: for poetry, at least, that hoped to be published’.[[278]](#footnote-278) Yet Bate overlooks the generic subversion at work in ‘To Lord Byron’. While critics dismiss the sonnet as ‘a conventionally sentimental response to Byron’s popularity’ and ‘the imperfect utterance of boyish sympathy and respect’,[[279]](#footnote-279) this overlooks Keats’s early attempts to challenge influential figures and assert the superiority of his own poetic style. Such experimentation is veiled by what Bate identifies as the ‘stock props’ of the plaintive sonnet, such as the ‘plaintive lute’, ‘amber rays’, and ‘dying swan’ (‘To Lord Byron’, 4, 1, 13):[[280]](#footnote-280)

Byron! how sweetly sad thy melody!  
 Attuning still the soul to tenderness,  
 As if soft Pity, with unusual stress,  
Had touched her plaintive lute, and thou, being by,  
Hadst caught the tones, nor suffered them to die.  
 O’ershading sorrow doth not make thee less  
 Delightful: thou thy griefs dost dress  
With a bright halo, shining beamily,  
As when a cloud a golden moon doth veil,  
 Its sides are tinged with a resplendent glow,  
Through the dark robe oft amber rays prevail,  
 And like fair veins in sable marble flow;  
Still warble, dying swan! still tell the tale,  
 The enchanting tale, the tale of pleasing woe.

(‘To Lord Byron’)

Jacqueline M. Labbe observes the different stylistic effects of temporally varying sources of influence. In this poem, Keats appoints his influential figure as a poet of his own generation, and the ‘burden of the present’ alters the Bloomian model of cause and effect.[[281]](#footnote-281) Labbe observes that ‘misprision yields to appropriation’ as a result, ‘as poets cast their *contemporaries* into an imaginative realm wherein admiration, veneration, disappointment and resentment mingle’.[[282]](#footnote-282) Keats’s sonnet both venerates and challenges Byron. Yet the latter element is masked as the prevailing tone of Keats’s plaintive mode operates alongside his ‘appropriation’ of Byron’s ‘sweetness’. Keats ‘Attun[es]’ to his subject in opening of the poem, and the long vowel sounds of the first line reveal him drawing out the ‘still warble’ of Byron’s tone, with the temporal signifier also functioning adjectivally as the warble’s ‘still[ness]’ describes its unmoving presence throughout the sonnet. Keats uses the form’s structure as a frame surrounding Byron’s unbroken singing. The falling intonation of ‘Melody’ is heightened by its positioning at the end of the line, which lengthens its dying away. This works in conjunction with the ‘warble’ uttered by the ‘dying’ swan in the sonnet’s penultimate line, which marks a cyclical, prophetic moment in which Byron’s melody performs a sustained diminuendo but never fully dies away. This elongation of Byron’s singing is amplified as ‘sable’ and ‘marble’ anticipate his ‘warble’, with Keats both looking forward to the swan’s melodious coda and allowing his words to tumble into each other as he gestures to the ‘flow’ mastered by Byron. Keats’s ‘appropriation’ of Byron’s stylistic strengths is not merely venerating, but allows him to use the sonnet form as a way to extend and enhance his own developing style.

While Keats expresses his admiration for Byron’s work, his sonnet delicately combines his admiration with opposition. In a letter to his brother George written in September 1819, Keats writes ‘You speak of Lord Byron and me—There is this great difference between us. He describes what he sees—I describe what I imagine—Mine is the hardest task’.[[283]](#footnote-283) Keats writes ‘To Lord Byron’ in 1814 in response to reading *The Giaour* and the travelogue style of Cantos 1 and 2 of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*,[[284]](#footnote-284) and pits his lyric ambitions against Byron’s narrative verse. Imploring Byron to ‘tell the tale, / The enchanting tale, the tale of pleasing woe’ (‘To Lord Byron’, 13-14), the trisyllable ‘enchanting’ suspiciously overperforms his reverence with a hyperbeat that offsets the close of the sonnet. Keats emphasises his stylistic difference from Byron though the word ‘tale’, which affirms Byron’s association with a narrative mode through overbearing repetition. Keats reminds his readers that Byron merely ‘tell[s]’ the tale, while he wishes to make his readers feel. Keats gropes his way through the first few lines, sustaining his engagement with Byron by reaching out poetically and physically. ‘Tenderness’, ‘soft’, and ‘stress’ create a gentle yet faintly increasing pressure that culminates in the intrusive verbs ‘touch’ and ‘caught’ (‘To Lord Byron’, 2, 3, 4, 5). Keats attempts to grasp Byron’s style in order to celebrate it, but he does so in a manner that designs to ‘[catch] the tones’ of Pity for himself (‘To Lord Byron’, 5) and use them to enrich his own poetry.

Keats’s ‘admiration and veneration’ become tinged with ‘disappointment and resentment’ as he writes that ‘soft Pity’ ‘Had touched her plaintive lute, and thou, being by, / Hadst caught the tones’ (‘To Lord Byron’, 3, 4-5).[[285]](#footnote-285) Keats’s manner suggests that Byron incidentally catches the tones in a backhanded aside, ‘being by’, and Keats laments a lack of poetic status that would enable him to reach the muse himself. This burgeoning rivalry is exacerbated by Keats’s plaintive mode. Nicholas Roe observes that ‘the warbling of its “dying swan” is echoed in Keats’s sonnet “To Chatterton” as the voice of doomed genius’.[[286]](#footnote-286) Keats’s urge to ‘Still warble, dying swan!’ (‘To Lord Byron’, 13) rings with his lamentation of Chatterton’s early death: ‘How soon that voice […] / Melted in dying murmurs!’ (‘To Chatterton’, 5-6).[[287]](#footnote-287) Bate argues that the plaintive sonnet was not ‘an appropriate idiom for poetry’,[[288]](#footnote-288) and these closely-knit images reveal Keats’s plaintiveness coming dangerously close to elegy. While this could be due to inexperience hindering Keats’s creation of original images in each of his sonnets, it also casts Keats’s potential ‘resentment’ as an attempt to silence poetically Byron’s narrative ‘warbl[ing]’ and usurp it with his own lyricism. A morbid sense of ceremony also bolsters the poem’s ties to the elegy. In ‘To Chatterton’ Keats writes that ‘the film of death obscured [Chatterton’s] eye’ (‘To Chatterton’, 3), and if Chatterton’s eye is covered by a ‘film’, Keats replicates this in his address to Byron by ‘veiling’ and covering his subject with ‘robe[s]’ as if ‘dress[ing]’ a corpse (‘To Lord Byron’, 9, 11, 7). With a similar image employed in each poem, Keats’s disguised ‘resentment’ darkly culminates in his elegising of a living Byron in order to appropriate his rival’s position as a poetic heir.[[289]](#footnote-289)

However, Keats’s challenge to Byron is hindered by the discordance of his images. Bate notes that ‘the conventions used in the other beginning poems help to float them along, whereas [in the plaintive sonnet] they prove an insurmountable handicap’.[[290]](#footnote-290) In a letter to George Keats written in February 1819, Keats complains that ‘Lord Byron cuts a figure—but he is not figurative’.[[291]](#footnote-291) However, Keats’s misapplication of the conventional images of the plaintive sonnet reveals his inability to trace the ‘figure’ Byron ‘cuts’, and the sonnet incongruously shifts between shapes and personifications held by his contemporary. Keats writes that Byron dresses his thoughts ‘As when a cloud a golden moon doth veil’ (‘To Lord Byron’, 9), while the figure of the moon is humanised with ‘fair veins’ and the adornment of ‘veil[s]’ and ‘robe[s]’ over its corporeal shape (‘To Lord Byron’, 12, 9, 11). Yet the moon is decorated with solar properties, being ‘golden’ in colour and emanating ‘amber rays’ (‘To Lord Byron’, 9, 11). Keats attempts to map out the ‘figure’ of Byron’s thoughts, yet their shapes fluctuate in a manner in keeping with their oxymoronic effect as stimulating ‘pleasing woe’ (‘To Lord Byron’, 14). The image proves difficult for Keats to sustain and it increasingly loses its intensity as a result. The ethereal ‘veil’ becomes a heavy ‘robe’, the ‘bright halo’ dulls into ‘fair veins’, and the triumphant ‘gold’ is muted to hazy ‘amber’ (‘To Lord Byron’, 9, 11, 8, 12, 11). The image of Byron’s poetic process loses its lustre as Keats struggles to maintain his contemporary’s method in his own language. The wavering syntax of ‘when a cloud a golden moon doth veil’ amplifies the elusiveness of Byron’s poetic ‘figure’. A natural syntactic structure would be ‘when a cloud doth veil a golden moon’, yet Keats lets rhyme dictate his syntax at the expense of his clarity. The subject and object of the sentence become interchangeable so that it is unclear whether it is the cloud or the moon that does the veiling. This effect is anticipated by the simultaneous actions of Byron ‘O’ershading sorrow’ (‘To Lord Byron’, 6), and sorrow enveloping Byron with its ‘veil’ and ‘dark robe’. Keats’s inability to expose and assess Byron’s poetic method ‘handicap[s]’ his images,[[292]](#footnote-292) with every outline of his subject’s creative method confused in its sustained description. While Keats subversively challenges Byron’s poetry, his attempt to position himself alongside an established and celebrated poet reveals his lack of technical finesse. Keats mistimes his bid for an elevated poetic status; while he creates an ideological space for himself next to Byron, his inability to ‘cut’ Byron’s formal and poetic ‘figure[s]’ with his existing skill reveals his inadequacy to fill such a position at this stage in his career. However, instead of the poem being ‘the imperfect utterance of boyish sympathy and respect’, as Susan J. Wolfson argues,[[293]](#footnote-293) ‘To Lord Byron’ shows Keats vacillating between reverence and conflict, fusing Bloom’s ‘anxiety’ principle with Ricks’s view of the poetic heir as ‘truly grateful, as the allusive poet had better be’.[[294]](#footnote-294) ‘To Byron’ is not only an exercise in what the form can accommodate; it also pits simultaneous, contradictory responses to influence against one other as the young Keats debates his artistic strategy as an heir engaging with another heir.

For Keats and Owen the sonnet becomes a site that reveals ‘the intensity of working out conceits’.[[295]](#footnote-295) While Keats uses the sonnet to consolidate opposing poetic strategies in ‘To Lord Byron’, Owen’s ‘Sonnet Written at Teignmouth, on a Pilgrimage to Keats’s House’, written in April 1911, overtly manipulates the sonnet’s structure to pit contrasting approaches to the elegy against one another.[[296]](#footnote-296) Reprising and revising his strategies for commemorating Keats in ‘Written in a Wood’, the sonnet’s first two quatrains reveal a tone of personal reflection:

Three colours have I known the Deep to wear;

’Tis well today that Purple grandeurs gloom,

Veiling the Emerald sheen and Sky-blue glare.

Well, too, that lowly-brooding clouds now loom

In sable majesty around, fringed fair

With ermine-white of surf: to me they bear

Watery memorials of His mystic doom

Whose Name was writ in Water (saith his tomb).

(‘Sonnet Written at Teignmouth’, 1-8)[[297]](#footnote-297)

The lyrical quality of the first two quatrains is established in the phrases ‘have I known’ and ‘to me’, which delineate a process of deep contemplation akin to Keats’s ‘brood[ing]’ (‘How many bards’, 3). While the sonnet consists of three quatrains beginning with an *abab* pattern and ending with a couplet, Owen’s adherence to the Shakespearean mode conflicts with his lyric experimentation. His rhymes shift from the Shakespearean *abab* pattern to the *aabb* structure of the couplets in the second quatrain. Helen Vendler argues that the Petrarchan chiasmus *abba* ‘is the figure of forethought, of conscious arrangement ([in] contrast to the more “natural” *abab* linearity of the stream of consciousness)’.[[298]](#footnote-298) Yet Owen’s couplets suggest less a ‘stream of consciousness’ than a ‘spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’.[[299]](#footnote-299) Owen’s adherence to a Shakespearean rhyme sequence gives way to his interest in creating a feeling of extemporised lyric subjectivity within his sonnet. While his use of monosyllabic, masculine rhymes throughout the sonnet are somewhat uninventive, with the rhymes of ‘gloom’, ‘doom’, and ‘tomb’ predictable in his elegiac mode, Owen is less interested in conceiving inventive rhyme pairings than he is in hybridising sonnet rhyme schemes to portray his intensifying thought. While the Shakespearean sonnet traditionally shifts from *a* and *b* rhymes to *cdcd* in the second quatrain, Owen’s couplets maintain his initial rhymes in the style of the Petrarchan sonnet. The sustained tones of his line endings complement the intensity created by his couplets so that the repeated sounds in the poem coincide with Owen’s deepening thought. The contrast between the airiness of ‘fair’ and ‘bear’ and the deep tones of ‘doom’ and ‘tomb’ is felt with greater force through the double-blows of this manipulated pattern. Owen’s unorthodox introduction of couplets in the second quatrain gestures towards the conventional ending of a Shakespearean structure but in the middle of his sonnet, inducing a feeling of finality that is crudely premature to reflect Keats’s untimely death. While Keats remains loyal to his formal commitment in his early sonnets, the octave of ‘Sonnet Written at Teignmouth’ reveals that in Owen’s immediate eagerness to play with formal tradition and lyric stylisation he prioritises elegiac feeling over the conventions of the sonnet.

If Owen’s Shakespearean sonnet flirts with Petrarchan rhyme patterns, an explicit hybridisation of the two styles is signalled in the visual gap that divides the poem into an octave and sestet. The *cdcd ee* rhyme scheme of the final six lines upholds a quatrain-couplet structure, but Owen’s tone and style changes after the suggested positioning of a Petrarchan *volta*:

Eternally may sad waves wail his death,

Choke in their grief ’mongst rocks where he has lain,

Or heave in silence, yearning with hushed breath,

While mournfully trail the slow-moved mists and rain,

And softly the small drops slide from weeping trees,

Quivering in anguish to the sobbing breeze.

(‘Sonnet Written at Teignmouth’, 9-14)

Vendler observes that Keats’s apprenticeship to the Petrarchan sonnet enabled him ‘to use effectively [its] binary nature […] to press [it] as far as it can go towards a personal style, on the one hand, and to an epic reach, on the other’.[[300]](#footnote-300) Similarly, Owen hybridises his sonnet to carry out this twofold function. His experimentation with ‘a personal style’ and an ‘epic reach’ lends itself towards the clear-cut ‘binary’ enabled by Petrarchan division. Owen’s pronounced medial break also amplifies his commemorative efforts as a ‘grateful’ inheritor.[[301]](#footnote-301) While the octave’s stylisation honours the lyric mode of the elegised Keats, Owen devotes the sestet to celebrating the influences of pastoral elegists. Yet the performative effect of Owen’s anachronistic tribute to his elegiac predecessors compromises the authenticity of feeling created in the lyric octave. In the opening of the sonnet he links Keats to Lycidas, creating a curious doubling between himself and Milton. Owen stares out to sea to be reminded of his predecessor’s death in the same way that Milton fixates upon the ‘the shores, and sounding seas’ (*Lycidas*, 154) as both the cause of his grief and a companion in his mourning.[[302]](#footnote-302) Owen’s identification of Keats with Lycidas in the octave becomes increasingly substantiated, describing ‘Watery memorials’ (‘Sonnet Written at Teignmouth’, 7) akin to the ‘watery bier’ of Lycidas (*Lycidas*, 12), and lamenting Keats’s premature death just as Milton mourns Lycidas as ‘dead ere his prime’ (*Lycidas*, 8). Yet here Owen takes artistic licence in relaying the conditions of his predecessor’s death. Keats died in Rome, not ‘’mongst rocks’ at sea like Milton’s elegised subject, Edward King. Owen moulds Keats into a generic elegised figure, rather than commemorating Keats himself. Though Owen showcases his developing poetic skill by hybridising traditional sonnet structures, the allure of aesthetic grandeur sees him lose interest in maintaining the sensitivity of his lyric octave.

Owen’s allusions to Milton in the octave develop into unequivocal appropriation in the sestet. George Norlin shows that ‘the appeal to Nature to mourn […] [is] almost never absent from the pastoral dirge’.[[303]](#footnote-303) Milton instructs Nature to grieve for Lycidas with intimidating force, demanding ‘Who would not sing for Lycidas?’ (*Lycidas*, 10), and Owen similarly implores the waves to ‘Eternally […] wail his death’ and ‘Choke in their grief’ (‘Sonnet Written at Teignmouth’, 9, 10). The endstops create a measured quality in the sestet as Owen invokes waves, mist, rain, and trees to act as the procession of mourners traditional to the pastoral elegy. His appropriation of this genre not only recalls *Lycidas* but also the strategies used by Shelley in *Adonais*. The cast of mourners in Shelley’s elegymove with ‘slow pomp’ ‘Like pageantry of mist on an autumnal stream’ (*Adonais*, 13. 116, 117), and Owen responsively writes ‘mournfully trail the slow-moved mists and rain’ (‘Sonnet Written in Teignmouth’, 12). Michele T. Sharp observes that in this line of *Adonais* ‘[Shelley’s] verse drains the traditional compensatory figures of elegy of their energy’.[[304]](#footnote-304) Similarly, in Owen’s sonnet the cathartic release of ‘heav[ing] and ‘wailing’ that begins the sestet becomes ‘drain[ed]’. The mists and rain move but are static at the same time; they ‘trail’ in the present tense (‘Sonnet Written at Teignmouth’, 12), but at the end of the line their motion is described in the past tense through the verb ‘moved’ (‘Sonnet Written at Teignmouth’, 12). The cessation of their movement posits the mists and rain as weighed down by the burden of grief, but also anticipates the limitations of form with the procession coming to a halt as it meets the close of the quatrain. In the line ‘softly the small drops slide’ (‘Sonnet Written at Teignmouth’, 13), the adverb ‘softly’ is separated from its dependant verb ‘slide’ by three interposing words so that the tears wept by the personified woodland are deliberately drawn out. Owen counterpoints the violence of nature’s grief with a depiction of its solemn mourning, and the ‘Or’ that begins line eleven exposes his indecision to commit to either image. The sestet reveals the ‘intensity’ of Owen’s ‘conceits’, without the poet having fully ‘work[ed] out’ how to resolve them.[[305]](#footnote-305)

Owen’s generic experimentation in ‘Sonnet Written at Teignmouth’ prefigures his challenge to the elegy in his war poetry, in which Jahan Ramazani identifies that the ‘traditional mechanisms of the elegy no longer afford consolation or closure’.[[306]](#footnote-306) Owen’s ‘anti-conventional’ approach to genre is influenced by *Adonais*,[[307]](#footnote-307)in whichSharp notes that Shelley ‘question[s] the efficacy of mourning and of his own verse’.[[308]](#footnote-308) Shelley’s speakercalls upon Nature to ‘weep for Adonais’ (*Adonais*,3. 19) in order to amplify his individual grief into a ubiquitous requiem. Yet the comfort generated by Nature’s simultaneous mourning is only temporary, as Linda K. Hughes notes how the inevitable transition between seasons is ‘a weary and taunting renewal in the face of his loss’.[[309]](#footnote-309) Shelley’s speaker laments that ‘Evening must usher night, and night urge the morrow’ in a procedure that exacerbates his ‘woe’ (*Adonais*, 21. 188, 189). The waves thrash and ‘wail’ only to ‘choke’ on their cries (‘Sonnet Written at Teignmouth’, 9, 10), as Owen denies nature its consolation by ‘drain[ing]’ his pastoral images to the extent that they come close to perishing themselves. Owen hints at their expiration as they subsequently ‘heave in silence’, gradually recovering from this affliction with a ‘hushed breath’ (‘Sonnet Written at Teignmouth’, 11). Through this imagery Owen pits his form and genre against one another, negating the elegy’s consolatory power by recalling Keats’s celebration of the sonnet form in ‘To Charles Cowden Clarke’, in which he praises ‘the sonnet swelling loudly / Up to its climax and then dying proudly’ (‘To Charles Cowden Clarke’, 60-61).[[310]](#footnote-310) In Owen’s sonnet Nature does not push through its grief but wallows in its suffering to a degree that risks its own death. Invoking an ‘Eternal’ lament (‘Sonnet Written at Teignmouth’, 9), Owen uses the sonnet’s brevity to save himself from the pain of abandonment endured by Shelley’s speaker. Owen’s shift to the continuous present tense redresses Shelley’s grievance as Owen deserts the trees and wind in the midst of their ‘weeping’, ‘Quivering’, and ‘sobbing’ (‘Sonnet Written at Teignmouth’, 13, 14). While Shelley’s speaker is unable to control the seasons’ inevitable transitions, Owen uses form to hinder Nature’s seasonal and emotional progression. He closes his sonnet with a couplet that suggests a Shakespearean *volta*: ‘And softly the small drops slide from weeping trees, / Quivering in anguish to the sobbing breeze’ (‘Sonnet Written at Teignmouth’, 13-14). Yet the ‘consolatory’ or concluding effect of the *volta*, noted by Hurley and O’Neill, is ignored by Owen.[[311]](#footnote-311) He drains his couplet of epigrammatic resolution to inflame nature’s loss, intentionally courting formal failure to create generic failure. Hurley and O’Neill note that the reader accelerates in expectation of the Shakespearean sonnet’s ending, as the couplet ‘spur[s]’ the sonnet towards ‘witty summary and dispatch’.[[312]](#footnote-312) However, in ‘Sonnet Written at Teignmouth’ such formal energy does not rouse nature from its debilitating grief. Though the final line contains eleven syllables, Owen’s skewed ratio of four stressed syllables to seven unstressed syllables has a catalectic effect. The metre in this final line destabilises the sestet’s momentum as Owen has his sonnet unceremoniously fade away instead of ‘dying proudly’. While Keats’s early sonnets demonstrate a dutiful adherence to form and a purist approach to style, Owen’s appraisal of formal space through the hybridisation of Shakespearean and Petrarchan styles reveals a developing awareness of what can be encompassed within the sonnet’s tight frame.

Though ‘How many bards’ and ‘To Lord Byron’ observe Petrarchan conventions, Keats’s vigorous application of the sonnet’s demands led to his disenchantment with the form in the later years of his apprenticeship. In a letter to George and Georgiana Keats written in May 1819, he identifies the concerns that inspire his innovation in his sonnet ‘If by dull rhymes our English must be chained’,[[313]](#footnote-313) prefacing the poem as follows:

I have been endeavouring to discover a better sonnet stanza than we have. The legitimate does not suit the language over-well from the pouncing rhymes—the other kind appears too elegai[a]c—and the couplet at the end of it has seldom a pleasing effect—I do not pretend to have succeeded—it will explain itself— [[314]](#footnote-314)

Having dutifully adhered to the tropes of the form’s ‘pleasing music’ Keats earns the experimental privilege of compounding this with ‘wild uproar’ (‘How many bards’, 14). The resulting sonnet is what Wagner describes as a ‘dialectical confrontation of convention and innovation’ that aims to soften the form’s rigidity:[[315]](#footnote-315)

If by dull rhymes our English must be chained,

And, like Andromeda, the Sonnet sweet

Fettered, in spite of painèd loveliness,

Let us find out, if we must be constrained,

Sandals more interwoven and complete

To fit the naked foot of Poesy:

Let us inspect the lyre, and weigh the stress

Of every chord, and see what may be gained

By ear industrious, and attention meet;

Misers of sound and syllable, no less

Than Midas of his coinage, let us be

Jealous of dead leaves in the bay wreath crown;

So, if we may not let the Muse be free,

She will be bound with garlands of her own.

(‘If by dull rhymes’)[[316]](#footnote-316)

Wagner’s claim that ‘the “must” of the first line acknowledges the limitations of a specific fixed form’ seems apt.[[317]](#footnote-317) Yet by qualifying the statement with ‘If’ Keats gestures towards the potential flexibility of this position as he reweaves the ‘constrain[ing]’ effects of the sonnet. McDonald views the poem as an enterprise seeking to liberate the form from its ‘dull rhymes’,[[318]](#footnote-318) but in order to do so Keats must first construct the chains from which he longs Poesy to be freed. He ties rhymes down in the first four lines in order to loosen the chains later in the poem. ‘Fettered’ and ‘Let us’ envelop the third line as the echo of their half rhyme forges a supplementary sonorous link. Keats extends the intricacy of his rhyme chains as the rhyme ‘interw[eaves]’ itself between the shackles enacted by his line endings through its positioning at the start of lines three and four. He heightens the compound quality of his rhymes with the premature, medial positioning of ‘painèd’ echoing ‘chained’ and ‘constrained’. Yet the grave accent of ‘painèd’ offsets the adjective into a half rhyme as Keats traces an interlocking rhyming pattern without having his sounds fully ‘pounc[e]’ on one another.[[319]](#footnote-319) Keats’s manipulation of syntax sustains his strategy to reflect the density of Petrarchan and Shakespearean structures by emphasising the creation of the individual links in his poetic ‘chain’. Each clause in the first four lines is followed by a subsidiary, explanatory clause that suppresses the pace and fluidity initiated by its predecessor. Instead of a sustained description, ‘Like Andromeda’, ‘in spite of painèd loveliness’, and ‘if we must be constrained’ create a patchwork of clauses with their comma-stitched outlines disrupting the continuity of his argument. Here Keats traces individual links without breaking the chain of the sentence, and this threaded effect allows the lines to weave in and out of each other rather than simply surge forwards. By binding his sonnet’s opening in ‘painèd loveliness’ Keats bemoans his formal restrictions but syntactically shows a lingering interest in the ‘loveliness’ created by such ‘constraints’.

Heeding Wordsworth’s advice, Keats does not reproach nor ‘Scorn’ the sonnet (‘Scorn not the Sonnet’, 1) but sees its aesthetic and practical worth as both facilitated and inhibited by its traditions.[[320]](#footnote-320) Grant F. Scott views Keats as ‘struggl[ing]’ with ‘the sonnet form, pushing against its structure as [Andromeda] does against her steel bands’.[[321]](#footnote-321) However, rather than simply ‘pushing against’ the sonnet’s structural traditions, Keats embraces the rhetorical pattern associated with the form while altering the positions in which the developments of his proposal appear. The compression generated in the first three lines is augmented through the tight, Shakespearean structure of the sonnet’s ‘If’, ‘Let us’, ‘So’ argument (‘If by dull rhymes’, 1, 4, 13). Yet Keats overturns the Shakespearean sonnet’s division of three quatrain sections and a rhymed couplet through a syntactical and grammatical structure that separates the sonnet into four tercets and an unrhymed couplet ending. He laments the sonnet’s ‘constraint[s]’ (‘If by dull rhymes’, 1), but the structural positioning of the ‘Let us’ instructions marks a resounding optimism in his engagement with the form. Rather than condemning the sonnet, Keats unconventionally pulls the resolution of the *volta* upwards to the poem’s fourth line. Keats directly addresses his potential inheritors with ten of the sonnet’s fourteen lines to depict a proleptic vision that is both described and set in motion by the present-tense narration of future activity. As Keats invites his heirs to help him brighten the sonnet’s ‘dull rhymes’ (‘If by dull rhymes’, 1) he suggests that the problem is not within the sonnet form *per se*, but with received stylisations that have dulled its power and beauty.

Mahoney, O’Neill, and McDonald argue that ‘If by dull rhymes’ depicts Keats ‘unchaining’ and ‘liberat[ing]’ himself from the sonnet’s traditions,[[322]](#footnote-322) and Wolfson celebrates Keats’s dramatisation of ‘an escape-artist performance’.[[323]](#footnote-323) However, Keats does not free himself from formal limitation as fully as these critics suggest. After constructing the sonnet’s ‘chain[s]’ in the opening four lines, Keats slackens and reweaves the patterns binding the sonnet in the remainder of the verse rather than ‘escap[ing]’ or ‘unchaining’ himself from its constraints altogether. John Hollander observes how Keats ‘comes up with an original way of loosening the links of rhyming’s chains without actually […] having them slip off’,[[324]](#footnote-324) as Keats deftly balances tightening and relaxing his sonnet’s engagement with its formal tradition. Keats’s succession of images pushes this dramatisation to the fore. Formal tradition is imagined as Andromeda’s ‘chains’, which ‘loosen’ to become the leather holding a sandal in place, and finally the delicate laurels of a ‘crown’ (‘If by dull rhymes’, 1, 5, 12). The shackles of form are transformed into aesthetic ‘garlands’ as Keats reveals them adorning rather than inhibiting his poetic creation (‘If by dull rhymes’, 14). He loosens the sonnet further in his manipulation of the poem’s metre. McDonald notes the ‘fragil[ity]’ of the feminine ending of ‘Poesy’ in line six,[[325]](#footnote-325) but this metrical vulnerability is also evident in the line’s beginning. All feet opening each line until this point have been trochaic or spondaic, with the weight created by the masculine ending insisting upon each line’s ‘Fetter[ing]’ (‘If by dull rhymes’, 3). Yet the line ‘To fit the naked foot of Poesy’ opens and closes withunstressed beats (‘If by dull rhymes’, 6). Though the chains remain they are not applied with the same metrical force as Keats eases the pressure on the sonnet’s lineation. Rather than adopting the compressed rhyme schemes of Petrarchan and Shakespearean modes Keats expands the distance between rhymes to aerate his verse. The final echo of the *a* rhyme, ‘gained’ (‘If by dull rhymes’, 8), is set four lines away from its preceding rhymes so that Keats eases it away from its predecessors in order for him to ‘gain’ space in between. Consequently, the next line, ‘By ear industrious, and attention meet’ (‘If by dull rhymes’, 9), contains a hyperbeat as the protracted foot ‘industrious’ pushes the line from ten to eleven syllables and grants the metrical ‘gain’ promised in the previous line. Keats’s manipulation of metre and rhyme increases the sense of space within the sonnet’s fourteen lines so that he opens the form up to new possibilities rather than remaining confined in its ‘scanty plot of ground’ (‘Nuns fret not at their Convent’s narrow room’ 11).

Keats slackens the sonnet’s restraints further by toying with the reader’s expectations in his rhyme scheme. The first tercet ends with a *c* rhyme, but rather than allowing the next tercet to repeat the same *abc* pattern, Keats’s *d* rhyme foils such an assumption. He seems on the brink of a regular form only to swerve from it suddenly so that his overreaching rhymes create a sense of incompleteness. While Keats’s open rhyme patterns vivify his verse, such experimentation is resolutely controlled. Though the positioning of rhymes initially feels haphazard, McDonald concludes that in reality they are ‘carefully marshalled—“interwoven”—rather than being the subjects of essentially improvisatory ingenuity’.[[326]](#footnote-326) Keats calculates his line endings with scientific precision. He taxes himself with limiting combinations by using only five rhymes in the manner of a Petrarchan sonnet, and he ignores the less restrictive possibilities of the Shakespearean stanza. He shifts the weight from the *a* and *b* rhymes by having the *c* and *d* rhymes appear three times as opposed to twice, as is traditional in a Petrarchan structure. Here Keats has his rhymes take the strain of more line endings without oversaturating his verse with different rhyming sounds, as he ‘weigh[s]’ the sonnet’s ‘chords’ and evens out its ‘stress[es]’ (‘If by dull rhymes’, 8, 7). Each attempt to expand the sonnet’s structure is balanced in Keats’s measured remodelling of the form. His use of enjambment opens up his line endings, but nine lines contain one or more comma stops that knot the fluency of his verse. Keats unties the sonnet from its standard cords at the same time as he sustains his ‘duty’ to his predecessors.[[327]](#footnote-327) Avoiding what Wordsworth would deem ‘the weight of too much liberty’ (‘Nuns fret not at their Convent’s narrow room’, 13), he refashions his inherited structures while ensuring that his verse remains formally recognisable and controlled.

In ‘If by dull rhymes’ Keats not only weaves his rhymes carefully but embeds explicit self-consciousness into the poetry. Scott notes the sonnet’s protean quality as ‘[Keats] explores the form both by radically disfiguring it and by prescribing the very method he is carrying out’.[[328]](#footnote-328) Keats reveals his ‘merchants’s savvy’ in the swift succession of the verbs ‘inspect’, ‘weigh’, and ‘see’ (‘If by dull rhymes’, 7, 8).[[329]](#footnote-329) This procedural listing relays a specific methodology and asserts the possibility of a conclusive outcome in Keats’s aim to ‘see what may be gained’ (‘If by dull rhymes’, 8). Through his ‘merchant’s savvy’ and systematic method he assesses the sonnet’s durability and adaptive potential. Lamenting the constraints of the sonnet’s ‘dull rhymes’ but simultaneously enchanted by the ‘painèd loveliness’ of its ‘sweet / Fetter[s]’ (‘If by dull rhymes’, 1, 3, 2-3), his formal examination manipulates and ‘disfigures’ the sonnet’s patterns in order to subsequently ‘prescribe’ it. Imagery of binding is sustained throughout the poem with Poesy’s various incarnations as ‘English’, ‘Andromeda’, the ‘Sonnet’, and the ‘Muse’ chained up (‘If by dull rhymes’, 1, 2, 13). Keats imagines himself within this figurative web. ‘[D]isfiguring’ his rhyme scheme with the introduction of the *d* rhyme incurs his own entrapment; Keats is ‘constrained’, but he willingly applies those constraints to himself (‘If by dull rhymes’, 4). With the penultimate line in his mind, ‘if we may not let the Muse be free’ (‘If by dull rhymes’, 13), he binds himself and the muse together in a musical embrace as his ‘chord[s]’ summon further restraining ‘cord[s]’ (‘If by dull rhymes’, 8). Such proximity allows Keats to conduct an intimate examination of Poesy’s restrictions. He lifts his gaze from her ‘foot’, to her ‘lyre’, and subsequently to her ‘crown’ (‘If by dull rhymes’, 6, 7, 12), and scatters each part of her body individually across the second, third, and fourth tercets. This positioning suggests a surgical dissection of her physical and formal make up that is performed in the style of a Petrarchan blazon. As he surveys Poesy’s body he simultaneously investigates each individual metrical ‘foot’, ‘sound’, ‘syllable’, and the ‘chords’ they combine to make (‘If by dull rhymes’, 6, 10, 8). While Scott suggests that Keats’s ‘disfiguring’ and ‘prescribing’ are at odds with one another,[[330]](#footnote-330) such seemingly contradictory actions facilitate one another in Keats’s surgical method.

Keats marries his twofold activity of ‘disfiguring’ and ‘prescribing’ the sonnet with his multiple roles as captor and captive, and ‘Miser’ and surgeon (‘If by dull rhymes’, 10). This intricately spun web of activity extends beyond Keats himself as the sense of camaraderie in the repeated ‘Let us’ weaves his potential poetic successors into his analytical tapestry (‘If by dull rhymes’, 4, 7, 11). While ‘To Lord Byron’ demonstrates Keats’s individualism in his bid for a canonical position, here Keats resists challenging other heirs. Aware that a poetic inheritance comes with ‘responsibility’,[[331]](#footnote-331) as highlighted by Ricks, Keats looks to the potential extension of his own future lineage. He uses the prognosis identified in the sonnet to leave his inheritors instructions to continue his formal experimentation. As he ‘teach[es] / His thoughts in sonnets’ (‘Written in a Wood’, 7-8) and relays his formal remedy to this implied audience, Keats’s use of plural pronouns summons his potential heirs into a poetic partnership by entangling them alongside him in the sonnet’s ‘Fetter[s]’: ‘if we must be constrained’ (‘If by dull rhymes’, 3). Keats signals that the ‘complet[ion]’ of his task can only be enacted in the poetry of his heirs (‘If by dull rhymes’, 5), and shows his benevolence as a poetic father by assuring them that together they are capable of writing a sonnet ‘more interwoven’ than his own (‘If by dull rhymes’, 5). Andrew Bennett highlights Keats’s ‘anxiety of reception’ with the poet cautiously envisioning his posterity as dependent upon the response of his readers.[[332]](#footnote-332) Yet the emphasis on a collaborative strategy in the phrases ‘Let us’, ‘if we must be constrained’, and ‘if we may not let the Muse be free’ shows Keats confidently speaking to a poetic community rather than addressing the general reading public, specifically showing his legacy as being contingent upon the ambition of future sonneteers (‘If by dull rhymes’, 4, 7, 11, 13). Creating what Wagner describes as ‘the suspension of closure’ through his rhyme pattern, the eye-rhyme of ‘crown’ and ‘own’ teases at an ending (‘If by dull rhymes’, 12, 14). This *e* rhyme is unsatisfyingly slanted as Keats draws attention to a Bloomian ‘swerve’ from tradition designed to extend the sonnet’s legacy.[[333]](#footnote-333) His rhyme is not infinitely binding as he intentionally resists a sense of full ‘complet[ion]’ to ensure the ongoing beautification of the sonnet’s constraints. As if alluding to some continuing linearity of rhyme in which the sonnet goes beyond itself, Keats not only creates a lingering sense of openness but also trusts that the sonnet ‘will be bound with garlands’ woven by his poetic descendants (‘If by dull rhymes’, 14).

Keats’s desire to unfetter the sonnet from its ‘dull rhymes’ (‘If by dull rhymes’, 1) is inherited by Owen. ‘Futility’ is the culmination of Owen’s apprenticeship, with Hibberd noting that ‘the subtle blend of full rhyme, half-rhyme, and pararhyme in “Futility” is the work of a mature poet in full imaginative control of his medium’.[[334]](#footnote-334) A ‘[miser] of sound and syllable’, Owen employs rhymed pairings as frugally as his predecessor as he too tasks his readers to exercise an ‘ear industrious’ (‘If by dull rhymes’, 10, 9). He reweaves the sound patterns of the sonnet by taking his cue from Keats’s half-rhymed ending to ‘If by dull rhymes’:

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.  
  
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?

(‘Futility’)[[335]](#footnote-335)

Though Owen continues from where Keats’s half-rhyme ‘crown’ and ‘own’ (‘If by dull rhymes’, 12, 14) left off, with ‘sown’ echoing Keats’s final rhyme ‘own’, Owen’s subject dictates a resistance to the ‘complet[ion]’ that ‘If by dull rhymes’ sponsored. The *a* rhyme of ‘sun’ and ‘sown’ reveals the sonnet’s ‘half-sown’ scheme as Owen refuses to imbue the ‘cold’ ‘clay’ of ‘Futility’ with any sense of fertility. Owen both adheres to and resists Keats’s use of poetic binding mechanisms. As Owen surveys the corpse of a soldier, Santanu Das observes that ‘We experience an emotional vertigo in the act of witnessing [horror], lurching between the twin acts of reaching out and looking away: there is at once a connection and a cut in the imagining’.[[336]](#footnote-336) Owen’s half rhyme and pararhyme chains demonstrate that the War has dampened and battered the decorative ‘Fetter[s]’ (‘If by dull rhymes’, 3) that he inherited from Keats, as he too must grapple with the sonnet’s ‘dull rhymes’ (‘If by dull rhymes’, 1). In the loose rhymes of ‘sun / […] sown’, ‘once / […] France’, and ‘snow / […] now’ Owen coaxes his line endings into binding his verse only for his vowel sounds to slip through. His ‘emotional vertigo’ takes effect from the first line; the instruction ‘Move him into the sun’ fixes Owen’s gaze on the corpse, but immediately following this injunction he diverts his focus into the past. He envisages the sun’s light caressing the soldier ‘At home, whispering of fields half-sown. / Always it woke him, even in France’. The tetrameter swells into nine syllables in lines three and four as Owen metrically lingers on the tranquillity of the images. Yet the utterance of ‘France’, as the rhyme partner of the reflective ‘once’, reveals his effort to bring himself back to the present as the rhymed pair of words maps out the warring destinations of Owen’s gaze. The repetition of ‘this’ in ‘this morning, and this snow’ works in tandem with the rhyme, pulling him back into the spatial and temporal position of the opening line. Owen’s use of half rhyme and pararhyme conflicts with his predecessor’s desire to create ‘pleasing music’ and complementary ‘chime[s]’ as Owen intentionally orchestrates dissonance (‘How many bards’, 14, 8). The serrated edges of the slant rhymes warp and wrench the sonnet’s smoothness as its ‘loveliness’ is edged with a more violent ‘pain’ than that of ‘If by dull rhymes’ (‘If by dull rhymes’, 3).

If Keats’s ‘primary innovation’ in ‘If by dull rhymes’ is ‘the suspensionof closure’,[[337]](#footnote-337) Owen’s half rhymes and pararhymes in ‘Futility’ inhibit such a sense of finality altogether. Douglas Kerr argues that in the dissonance between rhyming pairs Owen enacts ‘a broken promise to return’.[[338]](#footnote-338) However, even as Owen eschews the completeness of full rhyme, he upholds his commitment to a return through consonance. The dominant use of half rhyme and pararhyme renders the second word of each rhyming pair almost unrecognisable, as each line ending in the poem re-emerges as a disfigured echo of itself to such a degree that the reader must consciously strain to recognise the poem as a sonnet. Owen compounds this effect in line ten, in which the assonance of ‘achieved’ ties itself to the *d* rhyme ‘seeds’ (‘Futility’, 10, 8) and the reader’s ear wills the sound as a premature rhyme. This is succeeded by the consonance of the pararhyme ‘sides’ that ends the line (‘Futility’, 10) as the vowel and consonant sounds of ‘seeds’ are dismembered from one another in their fragmented positioning across line ten. Owen fulfils his obligation to ‘return’ to the *d* rhyme, rather than enacting a ‘broken promise’, as Kerr defines it. Yet Owen mars this fulfilment as he finds the rhyme itself ‘broken’ on its return. If Keats’s rhymes become ‘all the more fragile for having been left on [their] own for so long’,[[339]](#footnote-339) as McDonald argues, then the vulnerability of Owen’s line endings succumb to a more dramatic ‘disfigur[ation]’ on the battlefield. D. S. R. Welland observes that half rhyme and pararhyme operate in the poem to signify ‘the unanswered questions, the ghosts that are so movingly raised but never laid’ through ‘the inconclusive, baffled note it produces’.[[340]](#footnote-340) Owen intensifies the ‘inconclusive’ effect of pararhyme by endstopping eleven of the poem’s lines. The pauses stress the pararhymes’ function as line endings, yet the incomplete sonorous links insist on a resolute openness even as the punctuation attempts to the wrench the lines shut. Michael Roberts notes that in ‘Futility’ Owen ‘deliberately chooses his vowels so that there is almost invariably a fall from a high-pitched to a low-pitched one’.[[341]](#footnote-341) With the exception of ‘once / […] France’ and ‘snow / […] now’ (‘Futility’, 2, 4, 5, 7), the defeating quality of the repeated falling cadences causes line endings to die away in a manner akin to the soldier being described. Rather than exhibiting the optimism of Keats’s collaborative strategy, the ‘Futility’ of ‘Mov[ing]’ the body in the sonnet bleeds outwards as the reader feels the same sense of defeat (‘Futility’, 1).

Owen’s manipulation of rhyme in the poem toys with the expectations of his reader. Commenting on Owen’s use of half rhyme, Welland highlights Owen’s creation of a ‘subconscious disappointment […] by refusing the rhyme [the reader’s] ear expects while at the same time reminding [the reader] that [he or she] was expecting it’.[[342]](#footnote-342) Amplifying this discomfort, Owen double bluffs the reader by impairing the consolation of the full rhyme in the *ccc* ending of the sonnet’s first section. He resists satisfying the conditioned expectation of rhyme by compounding the union of ‘snow’ and ‘know’ with the medial positioning of ‘now’ (‘Futility’, 5, 7, 6). The pararhyme interjector mars the clarity of the rhyme-pair as the dissonance between them dispels the opportunity for harmonious consolation. Even in isolation the full rhyme is comfortless. Continuing his response to *Adonais* initiatedin ‘Sonnet Written at Teignmouth’, Owen ‘drains’ elegiac conventions of their consolatory effect.[[343]](#footnote-343) The repetition of the negative ‘no’ in ‘snow’ and ‘know’ emphasises the futility of action as rhyme operates with self-critical effect. As a result his use of conventional full-rhyme refuses to condone the movement of the body into the sun as a plausible attempt to ‘rouse’ it (‘Futility’, 6). Though Keats alludes to a harmony of poetic activity in the plurality of his ‘Let us’ instructions in ‘If by dull rhymes’ (‘If by dull rhymes’, 4, 7, 11), Owen’s full-rhyme refuses to cooperate with his action in the poem, as the younger poet points to formal tradition even as he empties it of its efficacy.

While Keats systematically ‘chain[s]’ ‘If by dull rhymes’ in the first four lines and slackens such ‘Fetter[s]’ in the remainder of the sonnet (‘If by dull rhymes’, 3), Owen’s rhyme and metre war with each other throughout ‘Futility’. His rhyme amplifies the poem’s latent ‘inconclusiv[ity]’ and weakens the connections between line endings,[[344]](#footnote-344) while the metrical structure of the experimental sonnet tightens the ‘chain[s]’ (‘If by dull rhymes’, 1) forged by his predecessors in order to counteract this loosened effect. ‘Futility’ is written in tetrameter and trimeter rather than the sonnet’s traditional iambic pentameter. Owen inflicts the curtailed lifespan of the soldiers onto his poetry as he decreases the metrical capacity of his verse. While he struggles with the sonnet’s brevity in ‘Written in a Wood’, as a ‘mature poet’ he intentionally suffocates the form by constricting its ‘chain[s]’ in order to fully grasp his subject.[[345]](#footnote-345) In ‘Futility’ men and form are equally dismembered as the poem’s textual body mirrors the mangled corpses of soldiers. The structure generated by his rhyme scheme opens each section with a Shakespearean quatrain, beginning with *abab* and *cdcd* respectively (‘Futility’, 1-4, 8-11). Ruth Glancy notes that ‘Owen seems to be answering Keats’s declaration, “The poetry of earth is never dead.” The war has upset natural order, when young limbs, “full-nerved, still warm,” cannot be stirred’.[[346]](#footnote-346) If ‘“the poetry of the earth is never dead”’ in Keats’s sonnet ‘On the Grasshopper and the Cricket’ (‘On the Grasshopper and the Cricket’, 1),[[347]](#footnote-347) Owen intentionally pushes the form to the brink of ruin, imitating the War’s perversion as he ‘upset[s] [the] natural order’ of his sonnet. The impact of the War confounds an initial Shakespearean structure as the quatrains are isolated on either side of the *c* rhymes’ triple blast, the impact of which leaves a trench on the page dividing the poem’s sections. With the second section of the sonnet describing its conflict and the first describing its hopeful resolution, Owen undermines the traditional, consolatory action of the sonnet by inverting its rhetorical structure.[[348]](#footnote-348) He tries to rouse the soldier and repair the body of the sonnet through polyptoton, using the incantatory repetition of ‘awoke’, ‘woke’, ‘wakes’, and ‘woke’ (‘Futility’, 2, 4, 8, 9) to ease the soldier back into life and to thread together loosely the dismembered sections of the sonnet. While Owen’s sonnets preceding the War were formally discernible, here the form’s metre is crippled, its rhymes are impaired, and its structure is misshapen to an almost unrecognisable degree. While Keats showcases an intricate remodelling of the sonnet in ‘If by dull rhymes’, the War fractures Owen’s formal structure. Unlike Keats’s meticulous tapestry, Owen’s poem is given the impression of being patched together and made to perform with everything in the wrong place.

Ramazani argues that in ‘Elegising one soldier rather than the anonymous multitude of “Anthem [for Doomed Youth]”, Owen seems to restore intimacy to the form of the sonnet’.[[349]](#footnote-349) However, despite his efforts to bring the soldier back to life in ‘Futility’, all attempts to gain such ‘intimacy’ are constantly foiled. Owen strives for proximity to his poetic subject in a manner that recalls Keats’s efforts to entwine himself with Poesy. Though Owen has ‘inspect[ed]’ and ‘weigh[ed]’ the durability of the sonnet’s ‘chain[s]’ (‘If by dull rhymes’, 7, 1), he sorrowfully exposes its fetters as too weak to bind himself to the soldier effectively. Das notes that ‘body contact [is] established through the opening trochee “Move him”’,[[350]](#footnote-350) yet the tone of the first line suggests an instruction rather than a narration of Owen’s completed action. Though he reaches out to the soldier in the opening line, such ‘body contact’ is performed vicariously. Owen is inhibited by the trimeter as the sonnet’s chains cannot be extended to encompass the soldier himself. Echoing Keats’s list-within-a-list in ‘If by dull rhymes’ (‘If by dull rhymes’, 7-9), Owen compounds his apostrophe to the sun with embedded questions: ‘Are limbs, so dear achieved, are sides / Full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir?’ (‘Futility’, 10-11). He creates a sense of urgency in these lines through the overlapping arrangement of his questions, ‘are limbs […] are sides […]’. The syntactical suspension of ‘Are limbs […] too hard to stir?’ across four clauses has the reader surge towards the grammatical ending of his interrogation. Intensifying this effect, the interjecting clauses of adjectival epithets, ‘so dear achieved’, ‘Full-nerved, still warm’, create an accumulative rhetorical energy as Owen attempts to lunge beyond his tetrameter ‘Fetter[s]’ (‘If by dull rhymes’, 3) to grasp the soldier before he slips away. Though the observation of the body being ‘still warm’ implies that Owen has made ‘body contact’ with the soldier, the syntactical interchangeability of his compound questions equally asks ‘are sides […] still warm?’[[351]](#footnote-351) While Owen implies an ‘intimacy’ traditional to the sonnet and implicit in Keats’s formal strategy, his layered questions burden his weakened ‘Fetter[s]’ (‘If by dull rhymes’, 3) and prevents physical interaction as the soldier slips through the loosened links. Owen’s language desperately dramatises his desired activity. He watches the soldier’s humanity fade away at the same time as he attempts to ‘rouse’ him (‘Futility’, 6). While the first half of the sonnet imagines the soldier’s birth, home, and his time in France through the intimacy of the third person ‘him’ (‘Futility’, 1, 2, 4, 6), the second section describes the corpse with objective detachment. Owen re-enacts Keats’s systematic examination of Poesy’s ‘naked foot’, her ‘lyre’, and her ‘crown’ on the battlefield (‘If by dull rhymes’, 6, 7, 12). Unable to restore ‘intimacy’ to the sonnet and physically revive the soldier, his ventriloquism of Keats’s surgical tone describes an impersonal mass of ‘limbs’, ‘nerve[s]’, and ‘sides’, surveying nothing more than corporeal wreckage rather than the person he gazed upon at the sonnet’s beginning.

Keats and Owen’s apprenticeship to the sonnet reveals each poet walking the tightrope between formal tradition and innovation. Hurley and O’Neill note that ‘The sonnet form is […] explicitly figured by Keats as an opportunity to make his own unique poetical contribution’.[[352]](#footnote-352) Yet this observation overlooks the proleptic vision of Keats’s formal strategy. He deliberately delays using the sonnet as a creative ‘opportunity’ in order to learn his craft and pay his ‘debts’ to the ‘bards’ who came before him (‘How many bards’, 1).[[353]](#footnote-353) Hurley and O’Neill’s view is more applicable to Owen, who seizes the opportunity to play with received stylisations of the sonnet. Owen compounds his ambition to innovate poetic tradition further as he elides the simplicity of Keats’s formal strategy, appealing less to the sonnet’s self-reflexivity and more to its malleability as a generic vehicle. Owen’s twofold task to invigorate form and erect ‘Watery memorials of [Keats’s] mystic doom’ (‘Sonnet Written at Teignmouth’, 7) secures his position in a poetic lineage by establishing himself as both a sonneteer and an elegist. Wagner states that ‘When Keats composed his *own* sonnet on the sonnet, “If by dull rhymes” […] it was “endings”—line endings, couplets, enforced formal closure—that led Keats to his late experimentation with the sonnet’.[[354]](#footnote-354) Yet Keats’s manipulation holds open such ‘endings’ so that instead of a ‘clinching of anything’,[[355]](#footnote-355) as McDonald describes, Keats’s formal experiment provokes ‘complet[tion]’ by his heirs (‘If by dull rhymes’, 5). Bloom states that ‘Initial love for the precursor’s poetry is transformed rapidly enough into revisionary strife, without which individuation is not possible’.[[356]](#footnote-356) Yet Owen’s apprenticeship continuously responds to that of Keats, and reveals the younger poet taking up Keats’s loom in order to ‘complete’ his precursor’s poetic tapestry rather than ‘swerve’, ‘discontinue’, or create a formal ‘antithesis’ (‘If by dull rhymes, 5).[[357]](#footnote-357) Though the sonnet is described by Coleridge as as ‘a small poem, in which some lonely feeling is developed’,[[358]](#footnote-358) Keats and Owen avoid a sense of solipsism in their sonnets through the implied invocation of past and future poets. While Ricks highlights Keats’s consciousness of his ‘responsibility’ as a poetic heir,[[359]](#footnote-359) his apprenticeship also considers his ‘responsibility’ as a poetic father so that he leaves his inheritors the tools with which to continue his formal experimentation in ‘If by dull rhymes’. If Owen fails to achieve consolation and effectively mourn the soldier he surveys in ‘Futility’, the comforting powers of the poem lie instead in its preservation of a literary relationship. Just as Keats instructs himself and his descendants to ‘inspect’, ‘weigh’, and ‘see’ what the sonnet’s fetters can withstand (‘If by dull rhymes’, 7, 8), Owen’s ‘responsibility’ as Keats’s inheritor survives the duress of war. Both poets put the sonnet under strain, yet neither fully breaks the chains of formal tradition. They heed Wordsworth’s view that the form ‘unto which we doom / Ourselves, no prison is’ (‘Nuns fret not at their Convent’s narrow room’, 8-9). The technical skill acquired by Keats and Owen through their formal apprenticeships allows them to celebrate ‘painèd loveliness’ of the sonnet’s imprisoning conventions by sharing in its ‘sweet / Fetter[s]’ (‘If by dull rhymes’, 3, 2-3).

**Chapter Three**

**‘The eternal reciprocity of tears’: Shelley, Owen, and the Poetics of Sympathy**

For Shelley, the human capacity for sympathy is a trait that must be consciously honed in order for one to be ‘greatly good’.[[360]](#footnote-360) In *A Defence of Poetry* he writes that one must ‘imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own’.[[361]](#footnote-361) However, Shelley’s *The Triumph of Life* and Owen’s ‘The Show’ and ‘Strange Meeting’ reveal both poets’ roles in perceiving suffering as continuously conflicted as they both vacillate between sympathy and empathy. Herbert S. Langfeld defines empathy as ‘feeling in the object’, and a state where ‘One’s own personality is merged and fused in that of some external thing’,[[362]](#footnote-362) while sympathy is ‘feeling with; instead of being merged in the object, our feelings run, so to speak, parallel with the object’.[[363]](#footnote-363) Langfeld differentiates the two processes through the degree of involvement required, as empathy implies a dynamic, physical sharing of experience while sympathy is purely an imaginative connection. The former requires an active role in suffering, and the latter a comparatively more passive position. While Moneta in *The Fall of Hyperion* implores the poet to experience suffering in order to ‘[pour] out a balm upon the world’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 201),[[364]](#footnote-364) the speaker’s inactive role as an observer in *The Triumph of Life* limits his ability to ‘feel the giant agony’ of the mass (*The Fall of Hyperion*,1. 157). Stuart Curran notes that ‘to scan Shelley’s career is to realize that one of his major contributions, not only to English literature but to Romantic psychology, is his continuing analysis of passivity’.[[365]](#footnote-365) Though Shelley’s speaker remains a passive, sympathetic ‘spectator’ of Life’s chaos, his detachment is constantly tested as the hypnotic chariot spurs him into becoming an empathic ‘Actor’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 305, 306).[[366]](#footnote-366) While Rousseau invites the speaker to ‘turn’ ‘from spectator’ to an ‘Actor or victim’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 305, 306), Shelley challenges the mutual exclusivity of these roles by depicting moments where his speaker is subtly teased across these boundaries.

Owen’s poetics of sympathy responds to Shelley’s advice to ‘put himself in the place of another’ as ‘Insensibility’ asks ‘How should we see our task / But through his blunt and lashless eyes?’ (‘Insensibility’, 42-3).[[367]](#footnote-367) While Shelley’s sympathetic speaker ultimately refrains from joining the crowd in order to maintain his poetic self-consciousness, Owen’s empathic imagination coerces him to become a part of the suffering mass depicted in his poetry. Neil Corcoran writes that ‘[Owen’s] poetry is the scene of his anguished examination of what it is to be lieutenant, a *lieu-tenant*: one who holds, or stands in, the place of others’.[[368]](#footnote-368) Owen positions himself as an observer of the battlefield as part of his poetic ‘task’, yet the War disables Owen from replicating the control Shelley holds over his characters’ narrative positions in *The Triumph of Life*. While the potential position of Shelley’s speaker is outlined as either a ‘spectator’, ‘Actor’, or ‘victim in this wretchedness’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 305, 306), Owen’s authoritative role as ‘lieutenant’ means he occupies all three positions, being a witness, a sufferer, and also one who inflicts suffering. Rather than operating as an objective ‘camera-eye’ in his poetry as Sandra Gilbert argues,[[369]](#footnote-369) Owen’s empathy manifests itself in ‘The Show’ and ‘Strange Meeting’ through the terrifying interchangeability of the narrative positions defined in *The Triumph of Life*. While Shelley writes in ‘A Treatise on Morals’ that for a person ‘to sympathise with the sufferings of another, is to enjoy a transitory oblivion of his own’,[[370]](#footnote-370) Owen’s engagement with the suffering inflicted by War’s ‘wretchedness’ is intrinsically and circumstantially linked to his own actions, preventing him from experiencing the ‘transitory oblivion’ prized by Shelley.

As he begins to relay the ‘tenour of [his] waking dream’ in *The Triumph of Life* (*The Triumph of Life*, 42), Shelley’s speaker already seems conscious of the divisions between ‘spectator’, ‘Actor’, and ‘victim’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 42, 305, 306) later described by Rousseau. For William Hazlitt, the poem reveals Shelley’s delight in extremity: ‘Mr Shelley transposes the appellations of the commonest things, and subsists only in the violence of contrast’,[[371]](#footnote-371) and Shelley’s preference for extremity is evident in the contrasting qualities of the ‘spectator’, ‘Actor’, and ‘victim’ in *The Triumph of Life*. Shelley combats the possibility of an objective and detached reading by paradoxically using ‘violence’ to counter suffering and generate empathy, infecting the reader with the symptoms of the frantic mass so that the feelings of the crowd and the reader ‘merge’ with each other.[[372]](#footnote-372) As the ‘waking dream’ unfolds before his eyes, the role of Shelley’s speaker as a passive spectator contrasts the intense activity of the mass:

Methought I sate beside a public way

Thick strewn with summer dust, and a great stream

Of people there was hurrying to and fro

Numerous as gnats upon the evening gleam,

All hastening onward, yet none seemed to know

Whither he went, or whence he came, or why

He made one of the multitude, yet so

Was borne amid the crowd as through the sky

One of the million leaves of summer’s bier.—

Old age and youth, manhood and infancy,

Mixed in one mighty torrent did appear,

(*The Triumph of Life*,43-53)

Following the ‘slow’ ‘burn’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 13) of the introduction in the bower, the vision of this second section unfolds at breakneck speed. The ‘stream’ of individuals rapidly swells to a ‘mighty torrent’ in the space of two stanzas, and the layering of dependant clauses causes each stanza to throb under their containment, mimicking the crowd’s increasing density. Charles Mahoney distinguishes Dante’s *terza rima* from that of Shelley’s English version,comparing the ‘slow motion and stanzaic integrity’ of the Dantean tercet with Shelley’s preference for ‘fluidity, or forward momentum’.[[373]](#footnote-373) Shelley’s heavily enjambed stanzas fuel this sense of continuous movement. The sentence that introduces the mass is nine lines long, so that Shelley forces his reader to imitate the crowd’s ‘hastening onward’ in the ‘hurry’ towards the relief of the full stop. The intensity of the poetry’s movement renders the reader breathless, forcing the reader to share in the ‘vain breath’ possessed by members of the crowd (*The Triumph of Life*, 61). Shelley’s controlling perspective sees him cast his reader as a member of the crowd by triggering the reader’s empathic action. The ‘mighty torrent’ of the *terza rima* compromises the reader’s focus; the crowd’s ‘hurrying’ and ‘hastening’ is skimmed over as the pentameter forces the three syllables of each word to become two when spoken aloud. Shelley renders the speaker’s role in the madness explicit in the comment ‘And as I gazed methought’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 74). He classes thought in direct relation to the uninterrupted survey of the spectator rather than the frantic activity of a participant. The speed of Shelley’s *terza rima* compromises the capacity for the reader to stop and contemplate the scene. Instead of sustaining a gaze over the crowd and taking the time to reflect as the speaker does, the reader’s activity mirrors that of the frantic mass.

Michael O’Neill notes that in this section ‘The poetry defines purposelessness, its subject, through statements which imply questions the crowd ignores but provokes’.[[374]](#footnote-374) As ‘Actors […] in this wretchedness’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 306), the individuals in the mass do not have the self-consciousness required to know ‘Whither [they] went, or whence [they] came, or why / [they] made one of the multitude’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 48-49). Only the perceiving agent is granted the ability to engage in philosophical and existential reflection, so only the speaker can consider the action at this juncture in the poem. Yet Shelley’s roles of actor and spectator are inherently compromised here; while the spectating speaker can consider the questions, he remains unable to ‘Act’ and ask them. Shelley grants his speaker contemplative freedom in these early stages of the poem, but not the means to understand or change what he sees before him. Paul de Man argues that ‘Questions of origin [...] always lead back to a new scene of questioning which merely repeats the quest’.[[375]](#footnote-375) The speaker’s role as a spectatorhinders his own quest and locates him in a philosophical whirlwind that mirrors the movement of the crowd. The intensity of his layered thoughts in ‘Whither he went, or whence he came, or why’ offsets the iambic metre with the trochaic feet ‘whither’ and ‘whence he’, as the changes in metrical direction emulates the arbitrary nature of the crowd’s surging ‘to and fro’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 45). The rhetorical structure of the speaker’s words caves in on itself as he ‘merely repeats the quest’ through posing unanswerable questions.[[376]](#footnote-376) Ross Wilson argues that Shelley ‘is acutely attentive to the way that the verbal patterning of “The Triumph of Life” is subtly recursive, rather than merely propulsive’.[[377]](#footnote-377) The repeated ‘wh’ phonation of the speaker’s questions shows each inquiry moving the poetryonwards but only by reverting back to the dying echo of its predecessor. Rather than maintaining the initial surge of the opening stanzas of the dream-vision, this stanza feigns speed through the desperation of the speaker’s unsatisfied need for knowledge. Bernard Beatty reads such questioning as part of a ‘three term formula’ of ‘whither’, ‘whence’, and ‘why’ that occurs repeatedly throughout the poem.[[378]](#footnote-378) Though de Man argues that the speaker continuously pursues ‘a new sense of questioning’,[[379]](#footnote-379) the speaker’s questions are not ‘new’ but instead repeat an ineffective ‘formula’. Shelley stresses the speaker’s desperation to know the cause of the crowd’s suffering and have the action explained, but in doing so the speaker shares in its suffering through his philosophical circling and requires an external influence to break this cycle. Rather than his questions signalling his ‘infinite regress’,[[380]](#footnote-380) as de Man argues, the speaker’s thoughts are in a constant flux that mimics the ‘to and fro’ motions of the crowd. Trapped in the passivity of his observing role, the speaker’s ‘three term formula’ of questioning functions as both a means of seeking truth and as a means of highlighting its inaccessibility. Though the crowd and the speaker take on different roles in the poem, the ‘Actor[s]’ and ‘spectator[s]’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 306, 305) of *The Triumph of Life* seem equally doomed.

Shelley’s use of *terza rima* fuels the ‘violence of contrast’ between the interwoven narrative roles of spectator, actor, and victim.[[381]](#footnote-381) Donald Reiman observes that while ‘Dante tends to make the tercet a closed unit like a couplet of Pope, Shelley emphasizes the interweaving of rhymes to develop long periods, the meaning rushing breathlessly from tercet to tercet’.[[382]](#footnote-382) The frequent use of enjambment between stanzas blurs Shelley’s formal boundaries, increasing speed where it would naturally be controlled. The transition between the setting of the bower and the vision encapsulates this sense of fluidity:

Under the self-same bough, and heard as there

The birds, the fountains and the Ocean hold

Sweet talk in music through the enamoured air.

And then a Vision on my brain was rolled….

————

As in that trance of wondrous thought I lay

This was the tenour of my waking dream.

Methought I sate beside a public way

(*The Triumph of Life*, 37-43)

Though the intersecting line between stanzas implies a clean transition, the speaker’s consciousness bleeds from the first narrative section into the second. Shelley’s formal and rhetorical structures are syncopated against one another; instead of beginning the sentence that opens the dream-vision at the start of the stanza, ‘Methought’ is delayed until two lines after the section break. The boundaries of the stanzas are not a dividing presence between ‘closed units’; rather, they teasingly allude to an ending only to deny any sense of a pause. While the enjambment between *terza rima* stanzas propels the poem onwards, the narration consistently lags behind. This delay is repeated in the next narrative transition in which the speaker’s view shifts from the ‘Senseless’ mass to the emerging chariot (*The Triumph of Life*, 160, 86). The comparison of ‘Like the young moon […] So came a chariot’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 79-86) is sustained over seven lines. The deferral of this completed image creates a sense of syntactical suspension for over four clauses before a feeling of completion is granted to the reader. The ‘violence of contrast’ in Shelley’s formal and rhetorical modes simmers over, as the speaker is conflicted between yielding himself to the intoxicating acceleration of enjambed *terza rima* and maintaining his reflective role as a spectator and thinker.[[383]](#footnote-383) The positioning of rhymes made necessary by the *terza rima* similarly toys with the accumulation and release of tension. As the crowd are seen as ‘faint for thirst’ as a result of their ‘toil’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 66), the rhyme of ‘burst’ that signifies the overflow of nearby ‘fountains’ is shunted to the next stanza (*The Triumph of Life*, 68, 67). Shelley’s form exacerbates the suffering of the people in the crowd who are ‘faint for thirst’ by withholding the rhyme until after the stanza break, so that the reader’s yearning for the rhyme to be completed mirrors the crowd’s need for its ‘thirst’ to be quenched. While Mahoney’s observation of the ‘fluid[ity]’ of Shelley’s verse implies seamlessness in its metrical propulsion,[[384]](#footnote-384) Shelley controls this consistent movement by delaying the completion of images and rhymes.

The ‘violence of contrast’ noted by Hazlitt does not depend upon a stark distinction between the roles of ‘spectator’ and ‘Actor’ defined by Shelley (*The Triumph of Life*, 305, 306).[[385]](#footnote-385) Rather, the ‘violence’ only becomes prominent when two opposing bodies come into contact, and it is this blurring of narrative roles that creates the central tension of *The Triumph of Life*. Light acts as a cohesive power in the poem that causes the roles of spectator and actor to blur together. Its presence vacillates between revealing the vision to the speaker and obscuring it from his gaze. Zachary Leader and Michael O’Neill show that the lines ‘before me fled / The night; behind me rose the day’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 26-27) echo Goethe’s *Faust*: ‘The day ahead, behind my back the night’ (*Faust*,1. 5. 1087).[[386]](#footnote-386) While Faust looks ahead towards the future in the new day,[[387]](#footnote-387) the reversed positioning of Shelley’s speaker, who has his back to the breaking dawn, reveals his eye being mournfully drawn to what is lost rather than what is attained, with the arrival of the day coming at the cost of the night’s death. The speaker does not ‘Rejoice’ (*The Triumph of Life*,3) with the rest of nature in this event as the dawn instigates forgetfulness rather than enlightenment. Shelley’s use of light works as a negative image, being the ‘shadow’ from which the speaker’s vision ‘flees’ in a manner that parallels the activity of the crowd in lines 59-60. Shelley uses simile with paradoxical effect to describe the vision unfolding: ‘so transparent that the scene came through / As clear as when a veil of light is drawn’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 31-32). By figuring the light as a ‘veil’ Shelley hints towards a vision that will be concealed as much as it will be illuminated. A limit is imposed upon the apparition that will be revealed to the speaker, and new vision comes at the expense of former knowledge. This effect is almost instantaneous. The speaker experiences his setting as if he had only just arrived there, as he insists‘That I had felt the freshness of that dawn, / Bathed in the same cold dew my brow and hair / And sate thus upon that slope of lawn’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 34-36). The speaker’s ‘wakeful’ condition preceding the ‘strange trance’ and the arrival of the light is overpowered, as he begins to forget sensations that he experienced in the bower only moments before (*The Triumph of Life*,21-22, 29).The ‘violence of contrast’ between the roles of actor and spectator gives way to a sense that the two melt into one another as the speaker experiences the physical sensations of empathy as described by Langfeld: ‘feeling in the object. One’s own personality is merged and fused in that of some external thing’.[[388]](#footnote-388) The speaker’s amnesiac state anticipates Rousseau’s later description of the ‘oblivious spell’ (*The Triumph of Life,* 331) that he experiences in the Grove of Forgetfulness. In ‘On Life’ Shelley explains that ‘We are born, and our birth is unremembered and our infancy remembered only in fragments. We live on, and in living we lose the apprehension of life’.[[389]](#footnote-389) The speaker imitates the crowd who knows not ‘whence [it] came’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 48), ‘los[ing] the apprehension’ of his own existence prior to vision so that he becomes part of the mass without being conscious of it. The vision’s description as a ‘waking dream’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 42) reveals the speaker’s awareness of having sacrificing some of his knowledge and consciousness in order to see it. The boundaries between the roles of ‘spectator’ and ‘actor’ are obscured as the bewildering effect of the light ‘merge[s]’ the speaker’s experience with the forgetful, ‘Senseless’ condition of the crowd (*The Triumph of Life*, 160).[[390]](#footnote-390)

Shelley establishes the characters’ passive and active roles with the intention of blurring and undoing their divisions. Jerrold E. Hogle argues that Rousseau’s invitation to the speaker to turn ‘from spectator’ to ‘Actor or victim’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 305, 306) marks‘a moment of choice, hints at the better choice, and laments the effects of the wrong choice so often made throughout Western history’.[[391]](#footnote-391) Yet Hogle’s emphasis upon ‘choosing’ as a viable option in *The Triumph of Life* ignores the speaker’s role as a spectator, being a passive entity without the ability to ‘Act’ in such a manner. Though characters are momentarily coaxed from one narrative role to another, the idea of a conscious ‘choice’ between active and passive positions is a smokescreen. Instead, such shifts remain out of the characters’ control. While the speaker’s sympathy yields to an imitation of the mannerisms of the actors in the mass,the mass unconsciously parodies the process of his seeing. The individuals in the crowd ‘[Pore] on the trodden worms that crawled beneath’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 57) in the same way the speaker is a voyeur of the ‘gnats’ within the crowd (*The Triumph of Life*, 46). The spectator and actors’ mirrored movements reveal the coercive quality of Shelley’s poetry as the activity of the perceiving subject and the perceived object ‘merge’ with one another with Promethean effect: ‘Whist I behold such execrable shapes, / Methinks I grow like what I contemplate’ (*Prometheus Unbound*, 1. 449-450).[[392]](#footnote-392) Not only does the speaker’s forgetfulness align him with the oblivious actors in the mass, he is temporarily displaced from his position as a spectator when he describes ‘a cold glare, intenser than the noon / But icy cold, obscured with [ ] light / The Sun as he the stars’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 77-79). The visionary ‘light’ paradoxically ‘obscure[s]’ the scene to the degree that the pun on ‘glare’ suggests it usurping the speaker’s own powers of vision. The blinded speaker is compelled to stutter his narration as he experiences the debilitating effect of the ‘cold’ light. Its influence seems inescapable, as ‘cold’ is repeated less than a line later so that his language gestures towards the ‘vicious circling’ of the mass.[[393]](#footnote-393) With the speaker having performed the role of ‘spectator’ and imitating the ‘Actor[s]’ in the crowd, the light’s crippling effect briefly forces him into the role of ‘victim’ before he rallies and casts the ‘obscured’ ‘stars’ into the role instead (*The Triumph of Life*,305, 306, 78, 77). Though Shelley suggests a distinction between these narrative roles, he momentarily has them meld with one another so that the speaker experiences elements of all three positions in close proximity. Recognising the precariousness of his spectating position, the speaker desperately clings to the sense of difference between himself and the mass. The speaker can see ‘violet banks where sweet dreams brood’, and ‘fountains’ that would quench the ‘thirst’ of the individuals in the crowd, ‘but they / Pursued their serious folly as of old…’ (*The Triumph of Life*,72, 67, 66, 72-73). ‘[T]hey’ is sorrowfully highlighted through the stress of the masculine rhyme and its pronounced enjambment. With the distinctions between narrative roles in flux, the speaker can only differentiate himself from the mass by emphasising its grammatical otherness.

In ‘The Show’ Owen restages the speaker’s surveillance of the ‘madden[ing]’ crowd in *The Triumph of Life* (*The Triumph of Life*, 138).[[394]](#footnote-394) Owen describes a nightmare ‘Vision’ of No Man’s Land in which ‘My soul looked down’ at the ‘abode of madness’ (‘The Show’, 1).[[395]](#footnote-395) Peter Howarth notes that ‘a harmony of aesthetics and situation […] would imply a harmony of two things Owen has to keep separate; his fighting self and his writing self, his exterior participation in killing and his interior feeling of sympathy’.[[396]](#footnote-396) While Shelley’s spectator blurs the boundaries between sympathy and empathy, in ‘The Show’ Owen moves between sympathetic passivity and empathic activity, with the two emotions remaining mutually exclusive. While Shelley’s speaker struggles to maintain his position as a spectator, Owen yearns to escape from his vertiginous viewpoint. Despite the distance from physical danger that the position of spectator affords, Owen’s empathy motivates him to join the battling mass:

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,  
Grey, cratered like the moon with hollow woe,  
And pitted with great pocks and scabs of plagues.

Across its beard, that horror of harsh wire,  
There moved thin caterpillars, slowly uncoiled.  
It seemed they pushed themselves to be as plugs  
Of ditches, where they writhed and shrivelled, killed.

(‘The Show’, 1-9)

Though Owen recognises the soldiers as ‘All migrants from green fields’ (‘The Show’, 18), any nostalgia of an existence preceding the War is swiftly supressed by its ‘mire’ (‘The Show’, 18). Owen elides the description of the luxurious bower in *The Triumph of Life* (*The Triumph of Life*, 1-42) and instead begins from where the speaker’s vision began. The ‘unremembering’Owen echoes Rousseau’s lament that ‘partly I seem to know, / […] how and by what paths I have been brought / To this dread pass’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 300-302). The lumbering syllables of Owen’s ‘unremembering’ are as clumsy and directionless as the insensate mass in lines 47-49 of *The Triumph of Life*. As a soldier surveying other soldiers, Owen’s detached view compromises his ability to empathise while he occupies a sympathetic position as he yearns to physically ‘[feel] in the object’ rather than simply ‘[feel] with [it]’.[[397]](#footnote-397) Owen writes that he ‘saw a sad land, weak with sweats of dearth’, and the modulation of ‘ea’ sounds from high to low vowels subtly gesture towards the men’s repeated falls. He metrically mirrors the sensations experienced by the soldiers beneath him as the iambs of the line’s first three syllables convulse in the spondaic jilt of ‘sad land’. Relapsing into its former metre, ‘weak with sweats of dearth’ achingly throbs in a manner symptomatic of the fever being described. Patrick Deer argues that for Owen ‘the deathly gaze over the trenches is impartial’.[[398]](#footnote-398) However, though Owen is physically detached from the violence, he experiences empathy as he fights to preserve his emotional connection with the other combatants.

Deer notes that ‘The more radical writers of the First World War display a profound suspicion of claims to represent the totality of battle, or to show the spectacle of modern warfare. As their work suggests, that totalizing overview was not available’.[[399]](#footnote-399) Owen ironically reveals his mistrust of the distanced, spectating viewpoint of the poet in his very attempt to capture it. Drowsily staring down from his ‘vague’ position (‘The Show’, 1) his myopic gaze is unable to encapsulate such a vast, detailed vision. He describes how ‘Across its beard, that horror of harsh wire, / There moved thin caterpillars, slowly uncoiled’ (‘The Show’, 6-7). The caesurae-effect imparted by the repeated commas fragments his own ‘totalizing’ effort as his eyes repeatedly flit across the scene rather than being ‘fixed’ on it (‘Strange Meeting’, 7).[[400]](#footnote-400) While Owen is able to ‘pace / Behind the wagon that we flung him in’ in ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ (‘Dulce et Decorum Est’, 17-18),[[401]](#footnote-401) and ‘[send] a scout / To beg a stretcher somewhere’ in ‘The Sentry’ (‘The Sentry’, 24-25),[[402]](#footnote-402) this ability to ‘act’, however desperately, is redemptive for him. In contrast, the terrifying realisation of his own powerlessness as a soldier and a poet is central to ‘The Show’. In *A* *Defence of Poetry* Shelley argues that ‘Poetry strengthens the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb’.[[403]](#footnote-403) Owen’s military experience as an ‘Actor’ in the scene prior to the start of the poetry complicates Shelley’s observation (*The Triumph of Life*,306). Owen’s distanced position as a poet at once ‘exercise[s]’ his sympathy, having granted him the distance to see and reflect as Shelley’s speaker does (*The Triumph of Life*, 74), but the lack of physical contact compromises his empathy and prevents his compassion from working dynamically. His consciousness of his powerlessness as a spectator bleeds into his observation; as he describes the ‘hollow woe’ of the landscape (‘The Show’, 4), the vocalisation of the men’s suffering in groaning ‘o’s is perversely mimicked in Owen’s ‘hollow’ poetry. Mark Rawlinson notes that Owen is ‘sparing with the potentially grotesque effects of vowel-shifts in rhyming pairs’,[[404]](#footnote-404) yet here he harnesses the garish quality of full-rhyme, guiltily exposing himself as abstracted from and incapable of sharing in the suffering he perceives. While Keats advocates poetry’s ability to ‘[pour] out a balm upon the world’ (*The Fall of Hyperion*,1. 201), Owen’s distance renders his own words ineffectual. The self-crippling effect of his sound patterns continues in the second stanza. The internal rhyme of ‘shrivelled, killed’ suggests Owen trying to ‘plug’ and clot pastoral wounds in the words’ consecutive positioning. Yet the attempt fails as the liquidity of the ‘l’ endings leak into the next stanza in the word ‘hills’ (‘The Show’, 9, 11). The elongated vowel sounds of ‘slimy’, ‘trailed’, and ‘scraped’ in the subsequent stanza (‘The Show’, 10) painfully draw out the words in a manner replicating their meaning. The open vowels move like the slow oozing of a weeping wound, as the sonorous sutures Owen had weaved previously gradually unravel (‘The Show’, 10). Longing for a position closer to the action, Owen intentionally sabotages his ‘totalizing overview’ to expose the inefficacy of his sympathetic position.

Rawlinson notes that ‘the aerial battlescape in “The Show”, a bestial *paysage moralise,* exhibits the limits of Owen’s visual macabre’.[[405]](#footnote-405) Owen gropes around the boundaries of his vision as he reveals his scepticism regarding the possibility of adopting a ‘totalizing viewpoint’:[[406]](#footnote-406)

By them had slimy paths been trailed and scraped  
Round myriad warts that might be little hills.

From gloom’s last dregs these long-strung creatures crept,  
And vanished out of dawn down hidden holes.

(And smell came up from those foul openings  
As out of mouths, or deep wounds deepening.)

On dithering feet upgathered, more and more,  
Brown strings, towards strings of grey, with bristling spines,  
All migrants from green fields, intent on mire.

(‘The Show’, 10-18)

Owen’s dissatisfaction subtly reveals itself in the description of the creatures vanishing ‘out of dawn down hidden holes’. Despite the probing alliteration with which he attempts to unearth the creatures’ subterraneous activity, the fact that the holes remain ‘hidden’ from Owen’s sight exposes the ‘limits of [his] visual macabre’. The battered landscape of ‘The Show’ hijacks his panoramic vision; as his eye persistently wanders back towards gloomy ‘crater[s]’, ‘pit[s]’, ‘ditches’, ‘holes’, and ‘openings’ (‘The Show’, 4, 5, 9, 13, 14). While the vision horrifies Owen, he is haunted more by what cannot be perceived from his lofty position. He increasingly foregrounds the instability of his ‘totalizing’ vision as the ‘long-strung creatures’ are severed into ‘more and more’ ‘strings’ of ‘brown’ and ‘grey’. The unravelling of these strands is prefigured in the stanzaic detachment of the lines in the passage above, which mark a departure from the four and five-lined verses that began the poem. Like Shelley, Owen explicitly positions himself as a ‘spectator’ (*The Triumph of Life*,305), but the poem’s title reveals the longing for action inherent within this passive role. Owen’s vision is not about the sight itself; rather, it dramatises Owen’s observation as an act of ‘Show[ing]’. Howarth writes that in the photographic detail of his images Owen ‘thrust[s] corpses into [his readers’] face[s], to make them *see*’.[[407]](#footnote-407) While Shelley casts his readers as actors in the ‘Senseless’ mass (*The Triumph of Life*, 160), in ‘The Show’ Owen trains readers to be spectators of both the scenes he describes and of his own voyeurism. Santanu Das distinguishes Owen from other soldier-poets on account of his deeply unsettling proximity to horror, viewing him as ‘the one who draws us, Caravaggio-like, into […] processes we would otherwise flinch from’.[[408]](#footnote-408) Owen’s reading of *The Triumph of Life* inverts this intensity as the horrifying vastness of the panorama he attempts to capture in ‘The Show’ clouds the characteristic detail of his poetic vision, and holds open the possibility that he might ‘flinch’ from the scene himself. Owen’s readers witness him succumb to the very criticism he directs at them; as a spectator his composure cracks by ‘reel[ing]’ from his own vision (‘The Show’, 24). Averting his gaze from an image he uses to ‘mak[e] us *see*’, Owen guiltily narrates the physical and visual abandonment of his poetic subject as he recoils from both the image and his own inability to empathise as a spectator.

Richard H. Fogle states that ‘Poetic empathy is an imaginative process which begins with the physiological and culminates in the psychological’.[[409]](#footnote-409) The deformity of Owen’s subjects in ‘The Show’ compromises the poet’s capacity for experiencing empathy on Fogle’s terms:

Those that were grey, of more abundant spawns,  
Ramped on the rest and ate them and were eaten.

I saw their bitten backs curve, loop, and straighten,  
I watched those agonies curl, lift, and flatten.

Whereat, in terror what that sight might mean,  
I reeled and shivered earthward like a feather.

(‘The Show’, 19-24)

While neither Owen nor his readers can experience the ‘physiological’ effect of empathy in a distanced position, Owen’s language seeks to mediate this experiential barrier. The hammering polysyndeton of ‘Ramped on the rest and ate them and were eaten’ crudely hurls action on top of action, and the triple-verbed activity reverberates through the following lines: ‘curve, loop, and straighten / […] curl, lift, and flatten’. Owen has his readers experience the writhing discomfort of the soldiers through the heavy thuds of his lines’ last two feet, with the cramped shifts in the soldiers’ vivid geometric movements countered by the comparative simplicity of Owen’s reporting style. The subtle modulation of the sounds of the words heightens the unnatural movement of bodies. ‘[C]urve’ becomes ‘curl’, ‘loop’ becomes ‘lift’, and ‘straighten’ becomes ‘flatten’, as the phonetic contortion of verbs imitates the soldiers’ ‘writh[ing]’ (‘The Show’, 9). Yet Owen’s poetry denies empathy in the same instance it sparks it. While he can roughly perceive the physical outlines of his subjects’ ‘feet’ (‘The Show’, 16) and ‘bitten backs’, they swiftly lose recognisable form in their description as ‘agonies’. In these mutilating movements the soldiers are characterised by their sensations so that they each become a synecdoche of their pain. As Owen reacts ‘in terror what that sight might mean’, the unfathomable quality of the vision rings with Rousseau’s frustration in *The Triumph of Life*: ‘Why this should be my mind can compass not’ (*The Triumph of Life*,303). However, though the vision prompts Owen to consider ‘Why this should be’, he deftly avoids asking such questions through the implication that he would rather not know at all, ‘reel[ing]’ equally from the ‘sight’ and its potential ‘mean[ing]’. Owen heightens the suffering of the combatants through their physical deformity in order to provoke compassion in his readers, however Fogle notes that ‘without concrete shape or form empathy will not work’.[[410]](#footnote-410) Shelley claims that ‘the pains and pleasures of [the poet’s] species must become his own’,[[411]](#footnote-411) yet the increasingly unrecognisable quality of the soldiers’ corporeality as ‘caterpillars’, ‘creatures’, and ‘agonies’ misaligns Owen’s physical and ontological identification of a poet with his ‘species’. Owen recognises here that the dehumanising strategy he employs to manipulate his readers’ emotion collaterally damages his own capacity for empathy in Shelley’s terms. Consequently, he allows his desire to be an ‘Actor’ and a ‘spectator’ to take equal hold (*The Triumph of Life*, 306, 305), as Deer notes ‘The nightmarish prospect of these insect-like hordes far below collapses perception, and the poet’s soul tumbles down into the mud’.[[412]](#footnote-412) Because Owen can no longer identify with his subjects on a human level, he descends to become among the ‘insect[s]’ in order to more effectively fulfil his empathic vision.

While the original draft of ‘The Show’, written in November 1917, closes with Owen’s lament that ‘I saw not nearer’,[[413]](#footnote-413) in the final version of May 1918 he grants himself the proximity denied to him in the rest of the poem by descending back to the battlefield with Death (‘The Show’, 25-29). The change in the poem’s ending coincides with the sentiment of a letter written by Owen on New Year’s Eve, 1917, in which he asserts that the ‘incomprehensible look’ of soldiers in Étaples ‘will never be painted, and no actor will ever seize it. And to describe it, I think I must go back and be with them’.[[414]](#footnote-414) The ending of the final version of ‘The Show’ reads:

And Death fell with me, like a deepening moan.  
And He, picking a manner of worm, which half had hid  
Its bruises in the earth, but crawled no further,  
Showed me its feet, the feet of many men,  
And the fresh-severed head of it, my head.

(‘The Show’, 25-29)

Having been both metaphorically and literally brought back down to earth from his exalted position, Death functions as a perverted Rousseau-like guide who shows Owen the risk of being an ‘Actor […] in this wretchedness’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 306). Owen likens himself and the unit he commands as one of the ‘trodden worms that crawled beneath’ described by Shelley (*The Triumph of Life*,57). As Owen views ‘the fresh-severed head of it, my head’, Jon Stallworthy notes that ‘as the commander of a platoon in single file, [Owen] would have been literally and figuratively its “head”’.[[415]](#footnote-415) Viewing himself on the battlefield, Owen reveals guilt as intrinsic to both his poetic empathy and his responsibility as a lieutenant; rather than the transcendental quality of ‘transitory oblivion’ that Shelley argues is induced by sympathy,[[416]](#footnote-416) the suffering of other soldiers is shown here to be on Owen’s head with literal effect. At this revelation the reader is granted an opportunity to replicate Owen’s reaction in the previous stanza. Accepting his invitation to be a ‘spectator’, the reader too ‘reel[s]’ and watches ‘in terror what that sight might mean’ (‘The Show’, 24, 23) at the unexpected turn of Owen viewing his decapitated body among the ‘creatures’ inhabiting No Man’s Land. As horrifying as this unprecedented moment is, there is an uncanny sense of relief for Owen in the violence of this image. Deer explains that it is a means by which ‘the poet takes his place at the head of things, still able to speak for his men, to report back from the field of battle’.[[417]](#footnote-417) Owen recalibrates his function as a poet by engaging in a balancing-act in which he possesses the visionary and imaginative capacities of a ‘spectator’, while in these lines he regains the experiential mutuality required to empathise with his comrades as an ‘Actor’ (*The Triumph of Life*,305, 306). While Shelley’s speaker tacitly declines Rousseau’s invitation to physically ‘Act’ within the dancing mass, Owen acts differently. In his ethical obligation to the soldiers he commands, Owen reveals that action is preferable to inaction. If Shelley’s speaker retreats from the ‘public way’ to the ‘hillside’ in *The Triumph of Life* (*The Triumph of Life*, 43, 183),Owen’s experience at the Front strengthens his empathic ties to the soldiers he surveys so that he ‘must go back and be with them’. His continual resistance to yield entirely to either his ‘fighting self’ or his ‘writing self’ powers his poetry and enables his empathic vision. Unable to maintain any of the narrative roles defined by Rousseau (*The Triumph of Life*, 305-306), Owen must play all three parts in order to remain artistically and physically alive, being at once *The Triumph of Life*’s passive observer, a dancer in the mass, and the worm on which it tramples.[[418]](#footnote-418)

The arrival of Rousseau in *The Triumph of Life* amends the terms of Shelley’s compassion. Here the speaker moves from sympathising with multitudinous figures within the dancing mass to identifying with a single ‘other’:

That what I thought was an old root which grew

To strange distortion out of the hillside,

Was indeed one of that deluded crew,

And that the grass which methought hung so wide

And white, was but his thin discoloured hair,

And that the holes it vainly sought to hide

Were or had been eyes.—‘If thou canst forbear

To join the dance, which I had well forborne,’

Said the grim Feature, of my thought aware,

(*The Triumph of Life*, 182-190)

Rather than surveying a crowd of people, the increased physical proximity between the speaker and his subject allows for ‘the face to face encounter’ of the self and the other described by Emmanuel Levinas.[[419]](#footnote-419) As ‘one of that deluded crew’, Rousseau’s apparent otherness to the speaker is made explicit as the speaker casts the strange figure as an adrift member of the crowd. While the individual faces of those in the mass were indistinguishable, being ‘Mixed in one mighty torrent’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 53), the change from the speaker’s subject as being the blurry mass to the singular Rousseau sparks the potential for the speaker to sympathise more effectively in this intimate positioning, as Silvan S. Tomkins asserts that the face is the ‘primary […] organ’ of ‘both [the] transmission and [the] reception’ of affect.[[420]](#footnote-420) However, the speaker’s capacity to share in his subject’s emotion and feeling through facial affect is compromised by Rousseau’s physical appearance. De Man notes that ‘The erasure or effacement [depicted in *The Triumph of Life*] is indeed the loss of a face, in French *figure.* Rousseau no longer, or hardly (as the tracks are not all gone, but more than half-erased), has a face. […] [H]e is disfigured, *défiguré*, defaced’.[[421]](#footnote-421) Because the speaker is unable to decipher any of Rousseau’s facial features, this confrontation fails to constitute a Levinasian ‘face to face’ encounter or correspond with the terms that Tomkins argues are necessary for empathy. Though Rousseau was initially mistaken for an ‘old root’ covered with ‘grass’, the speaker’s renewed perception of Rousseau as a ‘grim Feature’ does little to humanise him. Shelley has his speaker violate the terms of his own philosophy of sympathy, as articulated in *A Defence of Poetry*, which presents sympathy as dependent upon the subject and object being of the same ‘species’.[[422]](#footnote-422) The ‘strange distortion’ of Rousseau’s facial aspects blurs them into a singular ‘Feature’, with the face of the other being almost as indistinguishable as those belonging to the figures in the mass. Though Hugh Roberts argues that ‘the apparent nightmare of life’s dance is a product of incorrect seeing, or choosing an inappropriate scale’,[[423]](#footnote-423) Shelley deliberately alters the perspective and the ‘scale’ of his speaker’s vision in his shift from viewing the mass to surveying Rousseau, but this process serves to compromise the speaker’s capacity for sympathy rather than resolve it.

Though the speaker struggles to identify with his faceless interlocutor, Rousseau more convincingly fulfils what Levinas constitutes as the self and successfully empathises with his companion as a result. Levinas argues that ‘the encounter with the other is my responsibility for him’ and that this sense of responsibility ‘is always starting out from the Face’.[[424]](#footnote-424) While de Man argues for ‘the loss of [Rousseau’s] eyes’,[[425]](#footnote-425) Rousseau’s ability to see the speaker strangely remains. The speaker states that ‘the holes [Rousseau] vainly sought to hide / Were or had been eyes’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 187-188). Though this comment seems to suggest that ‘the holes’ on Rousseau’s face ‘were [once] eyes’, it would be incongruous for the speaker to make the same point twice, that the holes ‘were [once] or had been eyes’, with both possibilities implying that Rousseau no longer has eyes. Shelley equally holds open the interpretation that ‘the holes […] Were eyes’ that maintain their functionality, and this correlates with the speaker’s observation later in the poem that Rousseau ‘cast his eye upon the car’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 544-545). As the ‘holes’ in Rousseau’s face hauntingly assess his subject before he addresses him (*The Triumph of Life*, 187), Rousseau’s compassion for the other is established upon gazing at the speaker’s face.This sense of Levinasian ‘responsibility’ is not merely ethical, but one that figures Rousseau as a poetic father. Rousseau’s position as a poet who is now ‘extinguished’ strikes the reader more as an act of altruism than inadvertent self-annihilation as Rousseau imagines his experience as part of the crowd will help his poetic descendent understand the scene before them.[[426]](#footnote-426) Rousseau’s capacity for empathy with the other is revealed as he advises his companion to ‘forbear / To join the dance, which I had well forborne’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 188-9). Rousseau delicately entwines his actions with the potential actions of the speaker through the polyptoton ‘forbear’, ‘forborne’. In ‘On Love’ Shelley argues that ‘We are born into the world, and there is something within us which from the instant that we live and move thirsts after its likeness’.[[427]](#footnote-427) Rousseau’s ‘thirst after [his] likeness’ appears to be satisfied in his encounter with the speaker, to whom he relays his strikingly similar experience of having awoken from a ‘strange trance’ in a ‘bough’ of ‘kindling green’, to have a nightmare vision ‘rolled’ upon his mind (*The Triumph of Life*, 29, 37, 310, 40). The speaker is compelled to read the narrative of his predecessor due to the similarity of their experiences. De Man observes that ‘we have to imagine the same sequence of events repeating themselves for Shelley, for Rousseau, and for whomever Rousseau chose to question in his turn as Shelley questioned him’.[[428]](#footnote-428) Rousseau’s embedded narrative creates a sense of déjà vu for the reader in its form as a ‘Strange Loop’, an uncanny, Escheresque event that Brian McHale defines as ‘[being] literally back where we started from, but at the wrong narrative level’.[[429]](#footnote-429) Shelley alludes to the existence of an endless *mise en abyme* of narratives beyond that which he narrates in *The Triumph of Life*. Rousseau recognises the speaker not only as a potential heir to his knowledge but already an inheritor of the events he has experienced, perceiving the speaker’s story as akin to his own. Consequently his realisation becomes conflicted between yearning after ‘his likeness’ and warning his inheritor to ‘forebear’ his actions in order to complete his poetic mission for truth. Just as Wilson describes the ‘verbal patterning’ as ‘subtly recursive’ in *The Triumph of Life*,[[430]](#footnote-430)the poem’s narrative mirrors the regressive quality of its languageas the poem increasingly reveals events to have already happened. The forward propulsion of the narrative is feigned, but, rather than being inert, the narrative of *The* *Triumph of Life* moves inwards rather than forwards, as the speaker must explore and identify with a palimpsest of other narratives in order to find meaning in his own.

Though the speaker’s capacity for empathy is compromised by Rousseau’s facelessness, he is aware of Rousseau’s artistic and ethical ‘responsibility’ towards him,[[431]](#footnote-431) and through this, the potential for sympathetic connection, as he acknowledges his guide being ‘of my thought aware’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 190). The pair’s mirrored sentiments are revealed not only in the similarities between their narratives but also in Rousseau’s empathic responses to his interlocutor:

‘Whence camest thou and whither goest thou?

How did thy course begin,’ I said, ‘and why?

‘Mine eyes are sick of this perpetual flow

Of people, and my heart of one sad thought.—

Speak.’—‘Whence I am, partly I seem to know,

‘And how and by what paths I have been brought

To this dread pass, methinks even thou mayst guess;

Why this should be my mind can compass not,

‘Whither the conqueror hurries me still less.

But follow thou, and from spectator turn

Actor or victim in this wretchedness,

‘And what thou wouldst be taught I then may learn

From thee.—Now listen… In the April prime,

When all the forest-tops began to burn

‘With kindling green, touched by the azure clime

Of the young year, I found myself asleep

Under a mountain which from unknown time

(*The Triumph of Life*, 296-312)

De Man notes that throughout *The Triumph of Life* ‘The answer to the question is another question, asking what and why one asked, and thus receding ever further from the original enquiry’.[[432]](#footnote-432) However, rather than ‘receding ever further’ from the initial question, the rhetorical patterns of the exchanges between the speaker and Rousseau seem akin to concentric circles of enquiry as opposed to a linear regression from original thought. Each question deepens and penetrates its predecessor, subtly refining and clarifying thought by entangling it with the next question. O’Neill cites Chekhov’s belief that ‘the artist’s primary duty’ is not to find an explanation, but to ‘formulate the questions correctly’.[[433]](#footnote-433) The sound patterns in this stanza interlock question with question, with the harmonisation of sonorous links creating an increasingly tightening rhetorical chain. The repeated prefixes and suffixes of ‘wh’ and ‘est’ in ‘whither camest thou and whither goest thou?’ operate alongside the repetition of ‘thou’ to reveal a subtle rephrasing and alteration not only of the question, but also of the way in which it is asked. The double-blow of the vowel sound of ‘thou’ and ‘How’ and the internal rhyme of ‘thy’ and ‘why’ amplify the compound structure of Shelley’s sonorous patterns. The self-echoing nature of language in this exchange has the effect of the ‘sweet / Fetter[s]’ described by Keats in ‘If by dull rhymes our English must be chained’ (‘If by dull rhymes’, 2-3).[[434]](#footnote-434) The speaker’s tightening chains of enquiry replicate the crowd’s ‘agonizing pleasure’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 143) as while the structure of quadruple-barrelled questions may exacerbate the absence of an explanation, the reproductive and playful effect it has on language unveils a degree of ‘pleasure’ in the chaos. Rousseau’s speech consciously responds to the rhetoric of his interlocutor, as he mirrors the speaker’s command for him to ‘Speak’ by instructing his companion to ‘listen’. His responses echo the speaker’s language back to him in his repetition of ‘Whence’, ‘how’, ‘why’, and ‘Whither’. This systematic structure serves to clarify the clouded, compound layering of questions with which the speaker interrogates Rousseau. Each of Rousseau’s empathic statements unites him with the speaker in their shared quest, but Rousseau’s continued interaction with his new companion seems precariously poised between an embrace and a suffocation as he increasingly binds the speaker to his own tragic ‘likeness’.[[435]](#footnote-435)

The contrast between the speaker’s and Rousseau’s modes of watching the mass of people recalls Victor Fournel’s differentiation between the self-conscious *flâneur* and the ‘gawping’ *badaud*: when viewing a crowd, ‘The simple *flâneur* is always in full possession of his individuality. By contrast, the individuality of the *badaud* disappears, absorbed by the outside world, which ravishes him’.[[436]](#footnote-436) Fournel’s theory sheds light on the contrasting roles of the speaker and Rousseau in *The Triumph of Life*, so that the speaker can be viewed as the autonomous *flâneur* and Rousseau as the *badaud*. The speaker is aware that if he enters the mass he will be, in Fournel’s terms, ‘no longer a man, [… but] the public, […] the crowd’.[[437]](#footnote-437) That Rousseau has already fallen victim to this fate is noted both by himself and the speaker, with Rousseau introduced as ‘what was once Rousseau’, being now ‘one of that deluded crew’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 204,183). The conflict between the control possessed by the *flâneur* and the instability of the *badaud* is revealed in the passage cited previously (*The Triumph of Life*, 296-312). Here the speaker ‘forebears’ being pulled towards the crowd by lifting himself from his own narrative level to that of the reader. As he laments ‘Mine eyes are sick of this perpetual flow / Of people’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 298-299), the speaker transcends his immediate narrative sphere and the poetry shifts into a metapoetic observation through Shelley’s use of enjambment, as the pause of the line break hints that the subject of the sentence is both the mass of people and the relentless speed of Shelley’s *terza rima*. The speaker acts as a spectator not only to the crowd but also to the poetry he exists within, empathically channelling the responses of a reader of *The Triumph of Life* in order to distance himself from the pull of the crowd. Prior to this it has been over thirty lines since the *terza rima* was endstopped before the speaker double-stops its ‘perpetual flow’: ‘one sad thought. / Speak.’ (*The Triumph of Life*,299-300). The speaker’s attempt to quell his motion-sickness and regain self-control offsets the start of Rousseau’s speech. The speaker’s instruction ‘Speak.’ overflows into his companion’s response by usurping the first syllable of Rousseau’s pentameter. Rousseau’s response could equally be the thoughts of the speaker due to the similarities of their experience, yet the positioning of ‘Speak.’ reveals the speaker’s effort to maintain his autonomy by using its jolting effect to emphasise a point of dialogical reference. The speaker highlights the empathic connection between himself and Rousseau, yet in punctuating the transition between their voices he prevents a cloudy ‘merging’ of sentiment and maintains possession of his ‘individuality’.[[438]](#footnote-438)

Timothy Webb and Alan M. Weinberg argue for the ‘attract[ive]’ quality of *The Triumph of Life*’s ‘open-endedness, […] and its enigmatic reluctance to yield easy answers’.[[439]](#footnote-439) The withholding of narrative completion outlined by Webb and Weinberg is evident in Shelley’s manipulation of the poem’s metre and rhyme scheme. *The Triumph of Life* functions as a process of poetic plate-spinning where Shelley does not let his characters have it all; as soon as Rousseau begins to offer the speaker some ‘answers’ and explain the presence of the crowd and the car (*The Triumph of Life*, 180-281), another aspect of the poetry is compromised. In the passage cited previously (*The Triumph of Life*, 296-312) the speaker’s attempt to uncover Rousseau’s origins are thwarted by Rousseau’s struggle to remember. The task to discover the meaning of the vision is not as straightforward as the speaker hopes, and this difficulty impairs the smooth ‘flow’ of the poetry’s line endings through the half-rhymes of ‘thought’, ‘brought’, and ‘not’, as well as ‘thou’, ‘flow’, and ‘know’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 298, 299, 301, 303, 296, 298, 300). D. S. R. Welland notes that ‘the inconclusive, baffled note’ of half-rhyme in Owen’s poetry gestures towards ‘unanswered questions’,[[440]](#footnote-440) and Owen’s use of this technique shows a connection with this passage in *The Triumph of Life*.[[441]](#footnote-441) Failing to answer the speaker’s questions, Rousseau admits ‘how and by what paths I have been brought / To this dread pass […] / […] my mind can compass not’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 301-303), so that when Rousseau’s narrative lacks logical development it is mirrored in the incoherence of Shelley’s rhyme chains. Both characters are equally confused by the events leading up to the vision, and Rousseau reveals his empathic connection with the speaker by maintaining the speaker’s half rhymes in his response. The speaker sets them in motion with the pairing of ‘thou’ and ‘flow’, and Rousseau continues in this style with ‘brought’ and ‘not’. Rather than emulating the solidity of Dantean tercets, which ‘swing into […] place’,[[442]](#footnote-442) Shelley daringly exposes the cracks in his building blocks without having rhyme fully collapse. Compromise is central to the balance between disorder and control that underpins *The Triumph of Life*, with the reader having already witnessed the arrival of the day at the cost of the mesmeric night (*The Triumph of Life*, 26-27), and the speaker’s vision being granted only after sacrificing his prior knowledge (*The Triumph of Life*, 33-42). The stability and clarity of one aspect of the poem always comesat the cost of something else, with chaos constantly displaced rather than eradicated.

Roberts notes that Rousseau’s instruction to the speaker to turn ‘from spectator’ to ‘Actor or victim in this wretchedness’ ‘stands rather oddly in the poem’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 305, 306):[[443]](#footnote-443)

The narrator does not act upon it, and Rousseau does not seem to expect him to. It stands as a contingent point of bifurcation, a road not taken that invites us to inquire what it might mean if the narrator did ‘turn actor or victim’ in the dance of which they remain decidedly abstracted narrators.[[444]](#footnote-444)

That Rousseau advertises the dance as ‘wretchedness’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 306) suggests at best a half-hearted entreaty if he were being literal in this offer. If the speaker were to become an ‘Actor’, he would not be able to reflect upon his condition or explain his discoveries to Rousseau. Wilson asserts that ‘The emphasis for [Shelley] […] is on our simple incapacity for both thinking about and living life at the same time’.[[445]](#footnote-445) However, if compromise is central to *The Triumph of Life*, then Rousseau’s offer works advantageously on the same level. Though Rousseau does not expect the speaker to take his advice literally, Roberts overlooks the compassionate, imaginative connection Rousseau has revealed in his interaction with the speaker. Rousseau imagines this connection as enabling a sharing of experience and, if not a total explanation, a greater understanding of the spectacle before them. Rousseau tugs at the speaker’s empathy; instead of offering a unified experience of ‘thinking about and living life’, he offers a loophole through the subtle syncopation of these activities, proposing that he bestows his experience of ‘living life’ to the speaker who ‘think[s] about life’. It is for this reason that the advice ‘stands rather oddly in the poem’; rather than retracting his instruction to ‘forbear’ entering the mass (*The Triumph of Life*, 188), Rousseau is asking the speaker to endure his experience as an ‘Actor’ in the mass vicariously. Rousseau instructs the speaker to ‘follow’ him, and from this action ‘I then may learn / From thee’ (*The Triumph of Life*,305, 307-308). Operating on two temporal levels in these lines, Rousseau asks the speaker to follow in the footsteps of his past self, and from this the present Rousseau will ‘follow’ the speaker in whatever knowledge he discovers. It is a spiralling downwards into deeper realms of knowledge that Rousseau proposes, rather than the circling that de Man suggests in his view that Rousseau and the speaker continuously ‘[repeat] the quest’.[[446]](#footnote-446) Knowledge and experience is transmitted from poetic father to his heir, before inverting the line of inheritance in Rousseau’s promise to ‘learn’. Roberts argues that ‘[Rousseau and the speaker] both search obsessively for guarantees of identity in the face of flux’,[[447]](#footnote-447) but it is precisely this sense of ‘flux’ and experiential interchangeability upon which Rousseau relies to kindle the ‘spark’ in his inheritor (*The Triumph of Life*,207). The safe way to ‘Act’ and to learn is through the compromise made possible by sustained empathy. Though the experience that the speaker feels is not his own, he remains able to gain knowledge of the scene while maintaining his self-consciousness as a poet.

If Shelley foregrounds ‘the simple incapacity for thinking about life and living life at the same time’ in *The Triumph of Life*,[[448]](#footnote-448) Owen inherits his precursor’s suspicion of simultaneous action and passivity. In ‘Strange Meeting’ he subjects his dual identity as soldier-poet to scrutiny:

It seemed that out of battle I escaped

Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped

Through granites which titanic wars had groined.

Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,

Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.

Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared

With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,

Lifting distressful hands, as if to bless.

And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,—

By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.

(‘Strange Meeting’, 1-10)[[449]](#footnote-449)

Following Owen’s desperate need to ‘go back and be with’ the soldiers he surveys in ‘The Show’,[[450]](#footnote-450) the definition of the speaker’s movement in ‘Strange Meeting’ as an ‘escape from battle’ reveals a stark alteration of his responsibility as a ‘lieutenant’.[[451]](#footnote-451) The poem’s opening line recalls a letter written by Owen to his brother Colin in May 1917, in which he describes being targeted in a ‘Tornado of Shells’: ‘When I looked back and saw the ground all crawling and wormy with wounded bodies, I felt no horror at all but only an immense exultation at having got through the Barrage’.[[452]](#footnote-452) Owen yearns for reciprocal feeling with his fellow soldiers in ‘The Show’, enacting what Adam Smith in *A Theory of Moral Sentiments* terms as ‘the healing consolation’ of ‘mutual sympathy’.[[453]](#footnote-453) Yet the opening of ‘Strange Meeting’ foregrounds the self-preserving drive of Owen’s ‘fighting self’ rather than the compassion of his ‘writing self’,[[454]](#footnote-454) with the speaker transformed into a member of the ‘Senseless’ mass (*The Triumph of Life*, 160) that also recalls the soldiers of ‘Insensibility’ for ‘Whom no compassion fleers’ (‘Insensibility’, 3). As the speaker ‘probe[s]’ the lifeless bodies that lie in the chthonic chamber the tactile terms of his description reveals his struggle to emotionally ‘[feel] in the object’ he perceives.[[455]](#footnote-455) The implied activity in his passive vision exposes his ability to function as a Shelleyan ‘spectator’ as being compromised by his ‘turn[ing] / Actor […] in this wretchedness’ (*The Triumph of Life*,305-306). The speaker surveys the scene only to be outperformed by a more powerful spectator in the next line, who ‘stared / With piteous recognition in fixed eyes’. With the stranger’s gaze uncomfortably sustained through the line’s enjambment, the speaker’s eyes are swiftly diverted as he is displaced from being the subject to the object of observation. Unable to bear the intensity of the ‘stare’, the speaker’s focus is diverted from the stranger’s ‘fixed eyes’ to his ‘hands’. His resolve to avoid eye contact is metrically weighted; though the stranger coaxes him into ‘Lifting’ his eyes, the reversed foot counters this pull through the trochee’s falling cadence. The speaker’s vision is not only outmatched but crippled, as he recalls, ‘And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,— / By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.’ With the substitution of only five words between the first line and the second, the syntactical continuity of the lines rebounds against the echoic quality of the chamber’s ‘groined’ architecture. The subtle modulation between these observations reveals the speaker’s vision as at first deceived. The poem jolts in his double take as his perception performs inadequately against the stranger’s ‘fixed stare’. While Shelley’s speaker maintains his authority over Rousseau as the ‘spectator’ of *The Triumph of Life*,Owen’s confrontation of the self with the other inverts the terms of vision in ‘Strange Meeting’. Owen figures the speaker as the wandering *badaud*,and the stranger, described as a synecdoche of his ‘vision’ (‘Strange Meeting’, 11), as possessing the self-conscious quality as a poetic *flâneur.* Auguste de Lacroix differentiates the *flâneur* and the *badaud* through the quality of their vision, explaining that ‘The *flâneur* is to the *badaud* what the gourmet is to the glutton... The *badaud* walks for the sake of walking, […] and gazes without seeing’.[[456]](#footnote-456) The stranger is the ‘gourmet’ to the speaker’s ‘glutton[y]’, as the latter’s inelegant, ‘prob[ing]’ survey seems tactless when viewed alongside the sensitivity of the stranger’s ‘piteous recognition’. The stranger reveals himself as the *flâneur*, displacing the speaker’s observations as the poem’s reflective, Shelleyan ‘spectator’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 305) so that the speaker occupies the role of the insensible *badaud* who ‘gazes without seeing’.

While critics such as Jon Silkin and Santanu Das provide thorough and valuable insights into the poem’s ‘literal situation’,[[457]](#footnote-457) for Welland, ‘the imaginative force of ‘Strange Meeting’ […] resides in the fact that it is not a friend or an enemy that the soldier meets so much as an *alter ego*’.[[458]](#footnote-458) Owen’s rhyme scheme gestures towards this fractured consciousness as the couplets, in their echoic pairing of two similar sounds, mirror the speaker’s duality. Yet the half rhymes complicate the relationship between the two sounds and the identities they represent. Rather than the stranger being simply an ‘*alter ego*’, Owen’s poem operates as a disturbing double-vision as he suspends literal and metaphorical meaning over the poem in equal measure: the stranger is as much the ‘writing self’ to the speaker’s ‘fighting self’ as he is another soldier serving his country.[[459]](#footnote-459) Though the figure remains a stranger to the speaker, the stranger ‘recogni[ses]’ himself in his companion (‘Strange Meeting’, 7):

With a thousand pains that vision’s face was grained;

Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,

And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.

“Strange friend,” I said, “here is no cause to mourn.”

“None,” said that other, “save the undone years,

The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,

Was my life also; […]

(‘Strange Meeting’, 11-17)

The speaker’s remark that ‘I knew that sullen hall,— / […] I knew we stood in Hell’ (‘Strange Meeting’, 9-10) functions equally as a logical deduction and an uncanny recollection, as he leaves open the possibility that he ‘knew’ the hall due to him having been there before. Owen describes a scene that recalls those he has previously read. The look of ‘piteous recognition’ (‘Strange Meeting’, 7) alludes to the expression of Virgil in Dante’s *Inferno* as he prepares himself to look upon the condemned souls in Hell. That Owen’s speaker interprets the stranger’s countenance as ‘grained’ with ‘a thousand fears’ alludes to Dante’s own inadequacy as an observer, as Virgil explains that ‘It is the agony […] / of those below that paints my features thus— / Not fear, as you suppose it is, but pity’ (*Inferno*, 4. 19-21).[[460]](#footnote-460) The stranger of ‘Strange Meeting’ looks upon Owen’s speaker with the same expression Virgil has for the sinners of the upper circles, so that the stranger views the speaker as being as much a dweller of ‘Hell’ as the stranger himself. Though the speaker is living while the stranger is dead, the stranger understands that his counterpart suffers an equally tragic fate.

O’Neill argues that ‘Strange Meeting’ ‘compacts and miniaturizes the Romantic dream-vision. […][I]ts manner has more in common with *The Triumph of Life* or with Keats’s *The Fall of Hyperion.* It arrests these poems at their point of highest intensity: confrontation with the “Other”’.[[461]](#footnote-461) However, O’Neill’s observation downplays the subversive shifting of these ontological roles in both *The Triumph of Life* and ‘Strange Meeting’, and Owen’s reference to the stranger as ‘that other’ is merely relational (‘Strange Meeting’, 15). Like Shelley, Owen capitalises on the reader’s assumption that the identification of these roles is dependent on a chronological arrangement that introduces the self in the poem before the other. Echoing and extending the inverted Levinasian relationship between Shelley’s speaker and Rousseau in *The Triumph of Life*,Owen more dramatically asserts the stranger as the ‘responsibl[e]’,[[462]](#footnote-462) empathic self, and the speaker the mysterious other. The stranger mirrors Rousseau’s strategy of empathically linking himself to an object through polyptoton (*The Triumph of Life*, 188-9) as he recalls, ‘I went hunting wild / After the wildest beauty in the world’ (‘Strange Meeting’, 17-18). While Rousseau recognises in his companion his own ‘likeness’ and views him as an inheritor of his narrative,[[463]](#footnote-463) the stranger similarly reveals himself to be ‘aware’ of his interlocutor’s ‘thought’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 190). He aligns his tragic quest with the speaker’s: ‘Whatever hope is yours, / Was my life also’ (‘Strange Meeting’, 16-17). In contrast with the stranger’s heightened receptiveness, the speaker’s insensibility abounds in a location defined by absence, as he states how ‘no blood reached there from the upper ground, / And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan’ (‘Strange Meeting’, 12-13). Yet Silkin argues that ‘Owen ensures that the reader, too, retains the sense of the war’s continuation, and that the two men exist in relation to it’.[[464]](#footnote-464) The sounds of battle still infiltrate the speaker’s description through the onomatopoeic ‘thump[ing]’ of ‘guns’, from which dull ‘u’ sounds ricochet. Owen also invokes the sonic bombardment of the War through the buzzy modal breaks of ‘made moan’, as the long vowel sounds imitate the ‘moan[ing]’ that the speaker insists is absent. In a letter to Siegfried Sassoon written in October 1918, Owen writes ‘The Batt. had a sheer time last week. I can find no better epithet: because I cannot say I suffered anything; having let my brain go dull […]. I shall feel again as soon as I dare, but now I must not’.[[465]](#footnote-465) The fact that Owen’s insensibility is willed in ‘letting’ himself ‘go dull’,[[466]](#footnote-466) only to restore his senses ‘as soon as [he] dare[s]’, renders ‘Strange Meeting’ a terrifyingly prophetic vision. Rather than finding himself in a scene of haunting tranquillity, the distant echoes of ‘thump[ing] guns’ and ‘moan[s]’ foil the speaker’s observation, revealing this as an active effort to block out and numb himself to perceiving incidental sound rather than experiencing genuine silence. The deception behind the speaker’s narration continues as he seemingly shows compassion towards the stranger whose face reveals ‘a thousand pains’: ‘“Strange friend,” I said, “here is no cause to mourn”’ (‘Strange Meeting’, 11, 14). Levinas explains that ‘Our relation with [the other] certainly consists in wanting to understand him’, and that ‘knowledge of the other also demands sympathy and love’.[[467]](#footnote-467) Though the speaker acts to comfort his companion, any effort to sympathise with him or ‘understand’ the reason for his suffering is feigned. Rather than ‘feeling with’ the other,[[468]](#footnote-468) the speaker asks the stranger to emulate his own, insensible disposition, with his advice to ease the stranger’s fears being simply to ‘let [his] brain go dull’. Paradoxically, the stranger is asked to ‘feel with’ the speaker by feeling nothing.[[469]](#footnote-469) The speaker’s reluctance to ‘understand’ his companion’s grief annuls the basis of his selfhood in relation to the other. As a result, it is the stranger who assumes the ‘sympath[etic]’ drive that is characteristic of the Levinasian self.

If ‘The Show’ dramatises Owen surrendering to the pull of his active ‘fighting self’ through his descent back to earth,[[470]](#footnote-470) ‘Strange Meeting’ pragmatically reflects on this decision. As the speaker survives at the cost of his poet-consciousness the poem mutates into a self-elegy. In the shift between tenses in the lines ‘Whatever hope is yours, / Was my life also’ (‘Strange Meeting’, 16-17) Owen presents a life that is ‘half erased’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 406), as the stranger makes clear that while he is dead the speaker still lives. Yet in an early draft of the poem the structuring of ‘Strange Meeting’ as a psychomachia is absent. Sven Bäckman notes that Owen simply describes the death of a poet: ‘A man is wandering about, lost, among other men, who are equally lost, and he realizes that his heart has failed and he is walking Hell’.[[471]](#footnote-471) In ‘Science has looked, and sees no life but this’, written by Owen in 1912, Owen inadvertently charts the transition between the two drafts of ‘Strange Meeting’:

Let me but sleep…

My heart stops—it is well…

O Light, which art but darkness,

O cruel world… O Men … O my own Self…

Farewell!

(‘Science has looked, and sees no life but this’, 48-52)[[472]](#footnote-472)

Here a young Owen outlines a sacrifice that he deems necessary for the poet, as he figures a union with ‘Poesy’ as possible only through death (‘Science has looked’, 13). Staging the separation of his earthly self from his immortal poet self, Owen unconsciously foreshadows the conflict between his ‘fighting self’ and his ‘writing self’ in ‘Strange Meeting’.[[473]](#footnote-473) While the Owen of ‘Science has looked’ zealously wills himself into oblivion, the mature Owen of ‘Strange Meeting’ has the stranger reflect upon such an ontological fracture as a tragic event, marred by his posthumous solipsism:

I went hunting wild

After the wildest beauty in the world,

Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,

But mocks the steady running of the hour,

And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.

For by my glee might many men have laughed,

And of my weeping something had been left,

Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,

The pity of war, the pity war distilled.

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.

(‘Strange Meeting’, 17-29)

The ghost laments that the truths he learnt as a poet ‘must die now’, with the line’s iambic stresses falling with imperative conviction on ‘must’ and ‘now’. He lays bare his struggle to relinquish his hold on the ‘truth’ that he must sacrifice in the present tense, as if he did not know he had died until he saw his other ‘Self’ (‘Science has looked’, 51). His eulogy is permeated with an uneasy doubling that heightens his empathic connection with ‘beauty’ as he himself ‘mocks the steady running of the hour’ in his description of beauty’s mourning: ‘And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here’. The regular metre of the poem is dislodged through the repetition of ‘grieves’ on either side of the medial comma. The proximity of the words disrupts the ‘steady running’ of the line’s iambs, as the first appears on its stress but the second on the unstressed beat, creating a jolt in the poem’s measure that is drawn out by the long vowel. The unnatural closeness of the words replicates the unorthodoxy of the ‘Strange Meeting’ between Owen’s multiple selves, as the metrical variation between the two words compromises a pure doubling by rendering the latter iteration a metrically distorted version of the first. Rather than a confrontation with an ‘*alter ego*’,[[474]](#footnote-474) Owen stages a more complex personification of the shifting ‘sand[s]’ of his Shelleyan consciousness (*The Triumph of Life*,405), reflecting binary visions of himself as dead and alive, passive and active, visionary and blind, and compassionate and insensible. These lines increasingly act as a distorting room of mirrors, with the sibilance of ‘swift with swiftness of the tigress’ intensifying this quality through polyptoton. The line ‘The pity of war, the pity war distilled’ mirrors this technique, with the comma functioning as a reflective surface in which the first clause is imperfectly mirrored. In staging the unprecedented confrontation of the speaker with his ‘own / Self’, Owen continually inflicts the moment of the ghost’s ‘recognition’ (‘Strange Meeting’, 7) onto the reader in the arresting blows of repetition, as the ‘Strange[ness]’ of the ‘Meeting’ is amplified in the poem’s syntactic tensions.

Owen’s manipulation of elegy is twofold in ‘Strange Meeting’; as the stranger recounts his own death it functions equally as a lament for the speaker who murdered him:

“I am the enemy you killed, my friend.

I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned

Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.

I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.

Let us sleep now…”

(‘Strange Meeting’, 40-44)

Alan Tomlinson identifies Owen’s belief that it is ‘necessary for a poet to possess, and to a very high degree, the capacity for imaginative sympathy with others. But Owen came to believe that it was necessary for a soldier, if he were to survive, to have no such capacity’.[[475]](#footnote-475) In ‘Insensibility’ Owen writes ‘Happy are those who lose imagination: / They have enough to carry with ammunition’ (‘Insensibility’, 19-20). In order to physically survive the soldier must suppress his capacity for sympathy. However, if ‘The Poetry is in the pity’,[[476]](#footnote-476) as Owen writes in his draft Preface, the speaker not only eradicates his own compassion but also his identity as a poet. Owen dramatises a literal and metaphorical killing; as the speaker kills the stranger, the ‘fighting self’ kills the ‘writing self’.[[477]](#footnote-477) While the speaker ‘Act[s]’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 306), the stranger prioritises his empathy and vision, revealing that ‘I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned / Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed’. The stranger’s pause to form a connection with another soldier proves fatal. His delayed counterattack is rendered more tragic for being posthumous, as he ‘parries’ only after he has been ‘killed’. Despite his death the stranger sustains his compassion for the speaker. The line ‘I am the enemy you killed, my friend’ reveals a poignant consideration of the writing-self’s capacity for empathy. The counter-semantic proximity of ‘enemy’ and ‘friend’ enables the line to operate on two experiential levels simultaneously. Recalling ‘Insensibility’, where the poet asks ‘How should we see our task / But through his blunt and lashless eyes?’ (‘Insensibility’, 43), the use of the word ‘enemy’ reveals the stranger viewing himself as the speaker viewed him during their fatal encounter, and ‘friend’ is how the stranger now sees the speaker regardless of this event. The comma that separates the clauses in this line marks the divide between the two experiential levels and renders the stranger’s reconciling effort a tender epithet. In ‘On Love’ Shelley argues that ‘So soon as this want or power [to sympathise] is dead, man becomes a living sepulchre of himself, and what yet survives is the mere husk of what once he was’.[[478]](#footnote-478) Recalling the *badaud* who ‘gazes without seeing’,[[479]](#footnote-479) the speaker looks ‘through’ his ‘enemy’, viewing the stranger as a ghost before he has actually killed him. Avoiding the ‘Face to Face’ encounter of the self and other in this action, the speaker elides any sense of Levinasian ‘responsibility’ for the stranger.[[480]](#footnote-480) The true ghost, then, in Shelley’s terms, is the speaker of ‘Strange Meeting’, whose lack of sympathy renders him a ‘living sepulchre of himself’.

Owen’s final stanza recalls O’Neill’s view of *The Triumph of Life* as demonstrating ‘a very Shelleyan form of economy’ and ‘a verbal tautness that is arresting in its details, fluid in its overall sweep’.[[481]](#footnote-481) These five lines serve the poem as an ‘arresting’ epitaph as the stranger’s identity is unveiled, but its ‘fluidity’ equally overflows its existing formal boundaries. Stallworthy notes that ‘The MSS suggest that WO may not have regarded the poem as complete’,[[482]](#footnote-482) which is revealed through the dialogical structure of the poem. The poem leads into the embedded narrative of the stranger, but does not lead back out to the narrative level of the speaker with which it began. The poem’s state as a fragment only amplifies its tragic meaning. It consequently ends with the speaker ‘stood / Mute—looking at the Grave in which he lies’ and equally a ‘sepulchre’ himself (*The Prelude* [1805], 5. 421-422).[[483]](#footnote-483) Though Bäckman argues that ‘the final insight into the reality of war attained by the two soldiers comes too late, which gives special poignancy to the situation created’,[[484]](#footnote-484) there is not ‘the healing consolation’ of ‘mutual sympathy’ within the two figures’ interactions that would support the reciprocity of this ‘final insight’.[[485]](#footnote-485) Recalling the moment in which Rousseau’s ‘brain became as sand’, a process that ‘erase[s]’ vision (*The Triumph of Life*, 405-406), the poem forgets itself before the speaker’s potential response, and crumbles away in the line’s medial ellipsis to prevent the consolation that would be generated from such an ‘insight’ from occurring. In December 1914, when Owen was considering enlisting in the army, he wrote to his mother, ‘Do you know what would hold me together on a battlefield?: The sense that I was perpetuating the language in which Keats and the rest of them wrote!’[[486]](#footnote-486) Yet, owing to his experiences following active duty, ‘Strange Meeting’ demonstrates Owen’s realisation that the ‘writing self’ works in opposition to the ‘fighting self’. The role of soldier-poet is one that exists in continuous conflict with itself, so that it prompts Owen’s psyche to fall apart rather than ‘hold […] together’.

For Shelley and Owen, sympathy and empathy must be delicately balanced in order to create poetry that is both authentic in its compassion and unstinting in its self-consciousness. Both poets struggle to maintain control between sympathetic and empathic drives when observing a crowd, being equally repulsed and entranced by the ‘agonizing pleasure’ it creates within their poetry (*The Triumph of Life*, 143). However, it is through the confrontation of the self with the unfamiliar other that both poets are able to demonstrate a more controlled navigation of the boundaries between active and passive modes of compassion. Madeleine Callaghan asserts that, in *The Triumph of Life*, ‘To remain aloof seems the preferable option than melting into the senseless mass’.[[487]](#footnote-487) However, both Shelley and Owen discover that remaining a passive spectator is not the easier role. While the souls within the crowd are doomed ‘By action or by suffering’ (*The Triumph of Life*,122), the ‘spectator’ is equally cursed; Shelley’s speaker’s ‘eyes are sick’ of chaos, Rousseau ‘hide[s]’ his hollowed eyes, and Owen guiltily ‘shiver[s] earthward’ to escape his own vision (*The Triumph of Life*, 298, 187; ‘The Show’, 24). O’Neill argues that ‘Owen […], by using vision as a vehicle for taking a full look at the worst, provide[s] a kind of consolation which Shelley denies the reader of *The Triumph of Life*’.[[488]](#footnote-488) Central to both poets’ quests is the balance between empathy’s double-edged qualities, between the authenticity of ‘feeling with’ another being without sacrificing one’s own identity.[[489]](#footnote-489) Rather than a ‘deni[al]’ of consolation, Rousseau advocates careful control between sympathy and empathy in order to avoid ‘join[ing] the dance’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 189) at the same time as being an ‘Actor’ within it. The poem breaks off as the speaker and Rousseau are poised on the brink of a shared mission of ‘mutual sympathy’.[[490]](#footnote-490) While O’Neill advocates Owen’s work as enabling the reader to endure ‘a full look at the worst’, the speaker’s vision in both poems averts itself from suffering as he ‘reel[s]’ away and ‘frown[s] / […] through’ the objects he perceives (‘The Show’, 24; ‘Strange Meeting’, 41-42). Instead of ‘consolation’, the speaker’s lack of compassion in ‘Strange Meeting’ admits that the acts of discovering and communicating ‘truth’ are mutually exclusive (‘Strange Meeting’, 24), with the ‘mutual sympathy’ suggested by Shelley in *The Triumph of Life* being impossible in the midst of battle. Though Shelley’s speaker withstands the pull of the crowd, a sense of belatedness tarnishes any potential for empathic control in ‘The Show’. Owen enters the Shelleyan mass because prior to the poetry he has already been there, and his ethical obligation conflicts with his poetic duty as he insists he ‘must go back and be with’ his fellow soldiers.[[491]](#footnote-491) As revealed most poignantly in ‘Strange Meeting’, Owen inherits a poetics of sympathy that is powered with literal effect by the ‘violence of contrast’ between Shelley’s roles of actor and spectator.[[492]](#footnote-492) Owen’s desire for empathic action means that his compassion is both triggered and killed off by the War, with too much pity being just as dangerous to him as too little. ‘The Show’ and ‘Strange Meeting’ amplify the tensions between sympathy and empathy in *The Triumph of Life*. In these poems Owen admits to his incapacity to write poetry that sustains Shelley’s potential for an ‘eternal reciprocity of tears’ (‘Insensibility’, 59).

**Chapter Four**

**‘Its horror and its beauty are divine’: Shelley, Owen, and Envisioning the Dead**

In *A Defence of Poetry* Shelley describes the poet’s ability to re-imagine aesthetic conventions, invoking Milton in his view that ‘All things exist as they are perceived; […] “The mind is its own place, and of itself can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven”’.[[493]](#footnote-493) If ‘Poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted’,[[494]](#footnote-494) as Shelley writes in *A Defence of Poetry*, this pronouncement whispers the possibility that poetry might also distort that which is beautiful. It is in Shelley’s approach to death that this possibility gains its most profound poetic articulation.In ‘On the Medusa of Leonardo Da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery’ Shelley is stimulated by both the beauty and the deformity of the dead gorgon depicted in the painting, and the poem’s manipulation of aesthetics anticipates a similar strategy in *Adonais*. There death exists ‘in beauty and decay’ and life ‘repels to make thee wither’ (*Adonais*, 7. 56, 53. 474), as the consolatory value of Shelley’s elegy rests upon the poet beautifying the ugliness of death and deforming the beauty of life.[[495]](#footnote-495) The two poems draw upon Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*,[[496]](#footnote-496) first published in 1757, and, in their conflicted aesthetic representations of life and death, Shelley anticipates the language and processes described by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*.[[497]](#footnote-497) The tensions between the theories detailed in Burke and Kristeva’s works reflect the conceptual shifts that power Shelley’s poetry. In *Adonais*,Shelley systematically weaves and unravels the elegy’s traditions to render his poetry, as well as the corpses it commemorates, ‘an uncreated creature’ (‘On the Medusa’, 49).[[498]](#footnote-498)

Just as Shelley distorts the aesthetic codes that distinguish life and death, Owen skates precariously along the divide between beauty and horror when staging confrontations with corpses and decaying bodies. Gesturing towards the parallels between the two poets, Peter Howarth observes Owen, not so much ‘“load[ing] every rift” of [his] subject with ore’,[[499]](#footnote-499) as Keats enjoins Shelley, but ‘loading every rift with gore’.[[500]](#footnote-500) In Owen’s ‘I saw his round mouth’s crimson deepen as it fell’,[[501]](#footnote-501) ‘Greater Love’, and ‘Mental Cases’ the transition from life to death is as ‘magnificent’ as it is ‘hideous’ (‘I saw his round mouth’s crimson’, 3; ‘Mental Cases’, 23).[[502]](#footnote-502) Shelley’s *Adonais* ends poised between ‘exultation and horror’,[[503]](#footnote-503) and Owen amplifies the generic tensions in Shelley’s poem by pushing his work of mourning far beyond the comforting powers of the genre. Peter M. Sacks describes *Adonais* as teetering on ‘the brink of its own ruin’,[[504]](#footnote-504) and the subversive strategies within Shelley’s elegy bleed into the body of his inheritor’s work. Owen seems close to attaining consolation when his writing beautifies the corpses of ‘I saw his round mouth’s crimson’ and ‘Greater Love’, only to deny himself the satisfaction of such comfort. Instead, he abjects the genre with the claim he makes in his draft Preface that ‘These elegies are […] in no sense consolatory’.[[505]](#footnote-505) When Owen mocks the traditional features of the genre in ‘Mental Cases’, the elegy becomes a Kristevan ‘vortex of summons and repulsion’,[[506]](#footnote-506) as Owen invokes its conventions only to be repelled by its potential power to assuage grief.

Shelley and Owen’s interest in physical ‘Corruption’, ‘weep[ing]’, ‘wound[s]’, ‘bleed[ing]’, and ‘slob[bbering]’ figure the body as a site of unsettling transformation through processes of discharge and decay (*Adonais*, 8. 67, 1. 1, 24. 211; ‘Mental Cases’, 22, 3). Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the grotesque shares much with Kristeva’s study on abjection, with both theories exploring the margins of the body by analysing processes of introjection and expulsion as violating corporeal boundaries. However, their discussions diverge sharply in light of Shelley and Owen’s poetry. While Bakhtin writes about such processes to discuss their social impact,[[507]](#footnote-507) Kristeva and Burke assess experiences prompted by a confrontation with ontological boundaries as being ‘conversant about the preservation of the individual’,[[508]](#footnote-508) and their approach becomes far more salient for the work of Shelley and Owen. Both poets explore such encounters as reminding the self of its living condition at the same time as they put such an ontological status at risk. Kristeva asserts that in confronting the abject ‘I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders […]. The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life’.[[509]](#footnote-509) If the corpse, for Kristeva, is ‘the utmost of abjection’, Shelley and Owen’s representations of ‘grief’ are complicated in their descriptions of dead and dying bodies. Burke states that ‘if the object [of the sublime] be so totally lost […] a passion arises […] which is called *grief*. […] It is the nature of grief to keep its object perpetually in its eye, to present it in its most pleasurable views’.[[510]](#footnote-510) Shelley and Owen each represent dead and decaying bodies as a battleground between sublimity and abjection, amplifying the latent beauty of corpses in order to experience ‘pleasur[e]’ while also being aware of the body’s ‘loathsome’ condition.[[511]](#footnote-511) Their attraction towards corpses challenges the elegy’s ability to affirm what Sacks terms a ‘saving distance between the dead and their survivors’,[[512]](#footnote-512) as Shelley and Owen restrict the genre’s consolatory powers in favour of exploring this kaleidoscopic vision of the dead.

In ‘On the Medusa’, Shelley reveals his attraction towards the gorgon’s ‘ever-shifting’ appearance (‘On the Medusa’, 37) in his view that ‘Its horror and its beauty are divine’ (‘On the Medusa’, 4). Just as the corpse for Kristeva signifies ‘a world that has erased its borders’ between life and death,[[513]](#footnote-513) Shelley anticipates and extends this view by also ‘eras[ing]’ the borders between reality and art. He subtly transcends narrative levels from the world of the Florentine Gallery into that of the painting to more closely appreciate the Medusa’s ‘horr[ifying]’ ‘beauty’:

It lieth, gazing on the midnight sky,

Upon the cloudy mountain-peak supine;

Below, far lands are seen tremblingly;

Its horror and its beauty are divine.

Upon its lips and eyelids seems to lie

Loveliness like a shadow, from which shine,

Fiery and lurid, struggling underneath,

The agonies of anguish and of death.

Yet it is less the horror than the grace

Which turns the gazer’s spirit into stone,

(‘On the Medusa’, 1-10)

Shelley describes the scene as being witnessed ‘tremblingly’, and this physical response is symptomatic of the poet enduring both terror and horror. Burke depicts the experience of the sublime as causing ‘convulsive agitations’ in the voyeur,[[514]](#footnote-514) and Kristeva argues that the abject ‘beseeches […] a convulsion’.[[515]](#footnote-515) Shelley constantly shifts his position in the poem in order to sustain this simultaneous experience of sublime terror and abject horror. Just as the abject must lie ‘close’ for it to have an effect,[[516]](#footnote-516) Burke outlines physical positioning as key in differentiating sublime terror from horror: ‘When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful’.[[517]](#footnote-517) In the poem, the passive voice of ‘far lands are seen tremblingly’ allows the speaker to posit himself as both the grammatical subject and voyeur within the world of the painting. Without an independent subject in the sentence, the intensity of Shelley’s attraction to the ‘everlasting beauty’ (‘On the Medusa’, 42) of the abject corpse usurps the autonomy of Perseus who envisions the scene. Carol Jacobs observes that as the poet seems to stand ‘above the slain Gorgon […] view[ing] the lands beyond, tremblingly […] [t]here is something precarious in his manner of seeing’.[[518]](#footnote-518) Shelley outlines the instability of the mode of vision as much as he spotlights the precarious positioning of the visionary, being at once within the scene with the Medusa at his feet and an external observer of the painting from within the gallery. The ‘precarious[ness] of Shelley’s viewing position affects the rhymes in the opening stanza. The pairing of ‘tremblingly’ and ‘lie’ falters under the gazer’s physical convulsions, with the forced rhyme functioning as a trick of the earthat ‘lie[s]’in both senses of the word. Shelley’s vision disorientates the reader, with the downward intonation of the feminine ‘tremblingly’ lending the line ending a vertiginous quality that is never satisfyingly righted due to its atonal rhyme partner. If Shelley takes on the role of the visionary in the poem’s first stanza, his reference to ‘the gazer’ at the start of the second suggests that another viewer mediates his vision of the Medusa. The poet vacillates between being within the painting and within the gallery, shifting between the distance required to experience terror and the proximity that results in horror.

When Shelley is ensnared by the ‘tempestuous loveliness of terror’ (‘On the Medusa’, 33), the phrasing bestows the Medusa’s face with a supernatural sublimity that recalls the ‘sublime passion’ of ‘raging storms’ described by Burke,[[519]](#footnote-519) but the ‘tempest’ also anticipates the emotional response to horror outlined by Kristeva as ‘a vortex of summons and repulsion’.[[520]](#footnote-520) In the line ‘It is less the horror than the grace’ (‘On the Medusa’, 9) Jacobs argues that the Shelley uses the terms ‘horror’ and ‘grace’ to describe the corpse and the painting respectively.[[521]](#footnote-521) Yet the poet troubles such a clean-cut distinction. For Burke, ‘grace’ is a quality that specifically relates to movement and ‘posture’,[[522]](#footnote-522) suggestive of the corpse lying elegantly ‘supine’ (‘On the Medusa’, 2). Shelley’s rhymes reinforce the paradoxical appearance of the Medusa, where ‘grace’ is implicit in her ‘dead face’ (‘On the Medusa’, 11). The speaker reveals ‘it is less the horror than the grace’ that entrances him (‘On the Medusa’, 9) as Shelley’s vision compounds the effects of Kristevan horror with Burkean sublime. The terror-object has been brought close enough to transgress the boundary into ‘horror’ even as its ‘grace’ remains overwhelming. The reader is at three levels of remove from the stupefying effect the Medusa has on the ‘gazer’ (‘On the Medusa’, 10), with the ‘gazer’ encased in sculpture, painting and, finally, the poem itself. Nevertheless, Shelley’s attraction towards the Medusa’s ‘everlasting beauty’ (‘On the Medusa’, 42) has him risk dancing between these layers of aesthetic protection that hold off the effects of abject horror. Shelley’s use of metaphor brings the abject closer at the same time as it ensures its distance. The corpse is described as ‘a watery rock’ (‘On the Medusa’, 18) that ‘turns the gazer’s spirit into stone’ (‘On the Medusa’, 10). Kristeva views the abject as ‘Imaginary uncanniness and real threat’ that ‘beckons to us and ends up engulfing us’,[[523]](#footnote-523) and Shelley anticipates her description of this process. If the Medusa is ‘a watery rock’, she ‘engulf[s]’ the voyeur’s ethereal spirit so that it too becomes ‘stone’. Becoming too close to the abject incurs the speaker’s ‘annhilat[ion]’,[[524]](#footnote-524) to use Kristeva’s term. However, being rendered ‘stone’ is also a metaphor for immobilisation as a result of sublime astonishment. Being ‘the effect of the sublime in the highest degree’, astonishment, for Burke, ‘is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror’.[[525]](#footnote-525) In the poem, the possibility of being ‘turn[ed]’ ‘into stone’ refers as much to the literal consequences of Shelley being within the painting as it does to his astonishment when he views the painting in the Florentine Gallery. If, as *A Defence of Poetry* claims, ‘[Poetry] strips the veil of familiarity from the world, and lays bare the naked and sleeping beauty which is the spirit of its forms’,[[526]](#footnote-526) Shelley also gestures towards lifting the veil that shields him from the Medusa’s naked horror. The ‘Fiery’, phosphorescent glare that lurks beneath the gorgon’s eyelids causes the speaker to share in ‘The agonies of anguish and of death’ in the same manner the sublime instigates ‘an apprehension of pain or death’ (‘On the Medusa’, 7, 8).[[527]](#footnote-527) However, a physical transformation into ‘stone’ is inhibited by Shelley’s use of the word ‘seems’ (‘On the Medusa’, 10, 5). Framing the observation as conjecture, Shelley at once lifts the ‘veil’ from the Medusa while shielding himself in the safety of conditional language, revelling in a proximity to a terrifying beauty while avoiding its possible danger.

Jerome J. McGann recalls the rich interpretative history of the Medusa myth, noting the division between classical writers who ‘[hold] that the horror of [the Medusa’s] looks turned the viewer into stone’, and those who believe ‘that her beauty caused the transformation’.[[528]](#footnote-528) Despite Shelley’s repulsion, he is equally transfixed by the ‘lineaments of that dead face’ and the beautiful manner in which it appears ‘graven’ (‘On the Medusa’, 11, 12):

Yet it is less the horror than the grace

Which turns the gazer’s spirit into stone,

Whereon the lineaments of that dead face

Are graven, till the characters be grown

Into itself, and thought no more can trace;

’Tis the melodious hue of beauty thrown

Athwart the darkness and the glare of pain,

Which humanize and harmonize the strain.

(‘On the Medusa’, 9-16)

For Jacobs the Medusa is ‘something of an artist in stone’.[[529]](#footnote-529) Yet here the engraved quality of her face reveals the gorgon to be a victim of her own vision. ‘[G]lar[ing]’ at her countenance through the ‘mirror’ of her escaping breath in stanza five, the artist and object of art are ‘ever-shifting’ in the poem (‘On the Medusa’, 37). William Hildebrand notes that the ‘Medusa replicates the process of self-involution in which the subject turns object: to gaze at it is somehow suddenly to be gazed at’.[[530]](#footnote-530) Shelley shifts the power of vision from ‘the gazer’ to the dead gorgon repeatedly in this passage, as the ‘gazer’s’ line of vision and the Medusa’s ‘glare’ meet one another from opposite ends of the stanza (‘On the Medusa’ 10). Shelley conjures both the infliction and reception of violence in one word, as the pun on the word ‘glare’ marries the ‘hue’ that illuminates her face and the powers of her own vision. The ‘glare of pain’ refers at once to the gorgon’s destructive gaze and her helpless expression of defeat (‘On the Medusa’, 15). In *A Defence of Poetry* Shelley notes that ‘It is difficult to define pleasure in its highest sense; the definition involving a number of apparent paradoxes’, drawing upon what he describes as the ‘shadow of the pleasure which exists in pain’.[[531]](#footnote-531) These warring impulses collide in Shelley’s perception of the Medusa’s face, with the pleasure of viewing her beauty tarnished and tantalised by the horror of her ‘glare of pain’.

A hierarchy of vision increases the distance between the reader and the abject corpse of the Medusa, as we gaze on Shelley gazing on the painting that, through the eyes of Perseus, gazes on the Medusa, who hauntingly ‘glares’ back towards the ‘gazer’ (‘On the Medusa’, 14, 10), creating a *mise en abyme* that dangerously turns in on itself. Shelley’s vision of the Medusa is filtered through multiple spectators as we strain under the poem’s cumulative conditions of being. As such, in the poem’s final stanza Shelley’s vision succumbs to the *trompe l’oeil* he set up in the first:

It is a woman’s countenance divine

With everlasting beauty breathing there

Which, from a stormy mountain’s peak, supine

Gazes into the [ ] night’s trembling air.

It is a trunkless head, and on its feature

Death has met life, but there is life in death;

The blood is frozen—but unconquered Nature

Seems struggling to the last, without a breath—

The fragment of an uncreated creature.

(‘On the Medusa’, 41-49)

Shelley’s use of rhyme reveals the poem as reflected in the Medusa’s ‘ever-shifting mirror’ (‘On the Medusa’, 37). The final stanza echoes the first with the rhyme ‘divine’ and ‘supine’ reintroduced but with the words inverted as a result of the poem’s mirrored surface. Entranced by the poem’s illusory qualities, Shelley closes the distance between himself and the Medusa. His use of the present continuous tense in describing ‘the everlasting beauty breathing there’ implies a penetration of the narrative frames that have previously divided him from the Medusa. By the end of the stanza, the gorgon lies ‘without a breath’, with the lines in between implying that Shelley is amidst the action of the scene and witnessing the precise moment of her death, rather than viewing the inert painting. The corpse of the Medusa exists, to quote Kristeva, ‘beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated’.[[532]](#footnote-532) Yet in an attempt to ‘assimilate’ the corpse into the realm of the living, to render it ‘possible’ and ‘tolerable’, Shelley submits to its overwhelming attraction and beautifies it as if it were living. Though the corpse was acknowledged as ‘dead’ in the second stanza (‘On the Medusa’, 11), here it is ‘an everlasting beauty breathing there’. The poem ends with Shelley closing the gap between himself and the abject object to the degree that he can see the ‘vapours’ of her final breath (‘On the Medusa’, 36) and behold the ‘frozen’ ‘blood’ in her veins. However, he then swiftly puts an end to the intimacy with which he views the Medusa’s dying breath, surveying ‘The fragment of an uncreated creature’ instead of tenderly viewing ‘a woman’s countenance’, with the Medusa relegated from the position of person to thing. If Perseus ‘uncreates’ the gorgon in the narrative of the painting, Shelley also ‘uncreates’ the reality of the vision and puts an end to the power of the Medusa’s ‘everlasting beauty’ by ending the poem.

Shelley jeopardises what Burke describes as ‘the preservation of the individual’ in his confrontation with the Medusa,[[533]](#footnote-533) risking his imagined death by gazing upon the gorgon and being seduced by the ‘loveliness of terror’ (‘On the Medusa’, 33). *Adonais* sustains Shelley’s fascination with precarious modes of envisioning the dead.[[534]](#footnote-534) Reprising the simultaneous experience of attraction and repulsion evoked by ‘On the Medusa’, the sublime and the abject are fused more corrosively in the body of Adonais. If Shelley gazes upon ‘death infecting life’ in ‘On the Medusa’,[[535]](#footnote-535) then life is shown to be constantly infecting death in *Adonais*:

Haste, while the vault of blue Italian day

Is yet his fitting charnel-roof! while still

He lies, as if in dewy sleep he lay;

Awake him not! surely he takes his fill

Of deep and liquid rest, forgetful of all ill.

(*Adonais*, 7. 59-63)

Burke explains that those who possess beauty ‘inspire us with sentiments of tenderness and affection towards their persons; we like to have them near us, and we enter willingly into a kind of relation with them’.[[536]](#footnote-536) Yet Shelley blends Burkean beauty with Kristevan abjection within the body of Adonais, so that such sentiments conflict with Kristeva’s view that the corpse ‘represents fundamental pollution’ that ‘must not be displayed but immediately buried’.[[537]](#footnote-537) The speaker invokes a burial without having Adonais actually ‘buried’. With ‘the vault of blue Italian day’ acting as his ‘charnel roof’, Shelley’s metaphor for funeral rites allows the body of the elegised figure to be protected through language. The assertion of the metaphor yields to simile as the corpse lies ‘as if’ it sleeps, with the speaker holding off the fact of death in a bid to keep Adonais’s beauty ‘near us’. Yet his desperate entreaty for other witnesses to ‘Awake him not!’ exists only as contingent upon the truth of the previous statement that Adonais is asleep, so that the speaker starts to believe his own powers of persuasion. Shelley’s consolatory strategy hinges on his figurative language as he views the body as both dead and alive, vacillating between believing in both states. Even as the speaker inhibits the potential of future interaction with Adonais through his instruction to ‘Awake him not’, the finality of his death is avoided as the speaker holds open the possibility that Adonais can be awakened. David Kennedy observes that Shelley performs ‘almost a welcoming of the corpse in order to make it into a consoling art object’.[[538]](#footnote-538) The speaker ensures Adonais remains in sight by insisting upon a metaphorical burial being as ‘fitting’ as a literal one. ‘[E]nter[ing] willingly into a kind of relation’ with the dead, to use Burke’s terms, the speaker enlists himself as defender of Adonais’s rest in his urgent commands to ‘Come away!’ (*Adonais*, 7. 58) and ‘Awake him not!’ in order to sustain Adonais as a ‘consoling art object’ for as long as he can. Though the body hovers between ‘beauty and decay’ (*Adonais*, 7. 56) at the start of the stanza, the speaker ‘welcom[es]’ the deceased back into the realm of the living having been seduced by the vitality of Adonais’s beauty.

Though the speaker admits to viewing a ‘leprous corpse’ (*Adonais*, 20. 172), his gaze upon its decay is only momentary. In stanza twenty he again yields to its beauty rather than its decomposition:

The leprous corpse touched by this spirit tender

Exhales itself in flowers of gentle breath;

Like incarnations of the stars, when splendour

Is changed to fragrance, they illumine death

And mock the merry worm that wakes beneath;

(*Adonais*,20. 172-176)

In the first line Shelley’s speaker shows the spirit and the body of Adonais as separate entities. Here the corpse is a physical abject presence rather than the vessel containing the enduring spirit of Adonais. Yet the speaker overlooks the reality of the body’s decomposition. Nancy Moore Goslee notes that when drafting the poem, ‘Shelley replaces the ambiguous “odour” with the apparently more positive “fragrance” and “sunless” with “merry worm”, to support the delicately ironic image of “sweet breath” exhaling from decay’.[[539]](#footnote-539) The speaker consciously avoids placing too much emphasis on the body as being dead, disobeying his own order to ‘Come away!’ as he moves towards the body in order to be ‘touched’ and ‘quenched’ (*Adonais*, 20. 180) by its beauty. The ambiguity of the image shows the speaker as at once drawn to the corpse as an object of decadent decay while attempting to shield the ‘sinister beauty’ from his sight.[[540]](#footnote-540) He skirts around the presence of the corpse after the first line of the stanza by figuring the body only in spatial relation to other objects in his discussion of the ‘flowers’ and ‘stars’ above, and the ‘worm […] beneath’ (*Adonais*,20. 173, 174, 176). While the speaker opposes a literal burial of Adonais in stanza seven, here he binds the body in the natural imagery that presses upon the corpse in all directions. The possibility of the flowers’ actual presence, as opposed to a metaphorical one, also acts as a shielding strategy. Sacks notes that ‘flowers […] serve not only as offerings or as gestures for respite but also as demarcations separating the living from the dead’.[[541]](#footnote-541) Their function here could be to dissipate the horror of viewing the corpse so that the speaker ‘draw[s]’ ‘the mortal curtain’ himself (*Adonais*,8. 72) by envisioning the flowers covering the body. The speaker’s intimate positioning with Adonais is disturbed by the flowers’ transformation into ‘stars’ so that he momentarily positions the corpse in the sky. This ‘illumine[s]’ death in a softer, less invasive light (*Adonais*,20. 175), rendering the corpse more ‘delight[ful]’ in its increased ‘distance’ from the speaker.[[542]](#footnote-542)

Kristeva writes that horror positions the spectator ‘On the edge of non-existence’, and ‘a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me’.[[543]](#footnote-543) In stanza twenty-five Shelley’s speaker avoids the risk of his own ‘annihilation’ as he experiences the horror of Adonais’s abject corpse through Urania:

In the death chamber for a moment Death,

Shamed by the presence of that living Might,

Blushed to annihilation, and the breath

Revisited those lips, and life’s pale light

Flashed through those limbs, so late her dear delight.

‘Leave me not wild and drear and comfortless,

As silent lightning leaves the starless night!

Leave me not!’ cried Urania: her distress

Roused Death: Death rose and smiled, and met her vain caress.

(*Adonais*, 25. 217-225)

As Urania ‘Revisit[s] those lips’ and gazes upon ‘those limbs’, the repetition of ‘those’ instead of ‘his’ implies that the speaker has the corpse in his sights while making his physical distance from it clear. Kristeva describes the corpse as at once ‘fascinat[ing]’ and an ‘abomination’, creating ‘a vortex of summons and repulsion’.[[544]](#footnote-544) Yet Shelley avoids fully yielding to either impulse in the poem. He views the body through the eyes of Urania so that he experiences the horrors of abjection, and its summons and repulsion, vicariously. When Adonais lies in his ‘twilight chamber’ in stanza eight (*Adonais*, 8. 65) Earl R. Wasserman views him in a liminal position: ‘twilight is the period after the sun has sunk below the horizon (and so is “dead”) but before its light has ceased to be evident on earth. Both Adonais and the sun are gone and yet remain’.[[545]](#footnote-545) In this stanza, ‘The shadow of white Death’ has moved from waiting ‘at the door’ to claiming the burial space for itself (*Adonais*, 8. 66), revealing that Adonais has graduated from his ‘twilight chamber’ into his ‘death chamber’. With Death now presiding over the space, Urania’s presence within it seems transgressive. The object and witness of abjection are reversed through Shelley’s personification of Death; rather than life being confronted with death, here Death is confronted with life. Angela Leighton observes that ‘Being made rhetorically animate, Death becomes the opposite of itself, so that its very blushing is a form of “annihilation”’.[[546]](#footnote-546) Life ‘infect[s]’ death as Urania’s presence in the ‘death chamber’ provokes Death to undergo a series of ‘summons’ and ‘repulsion[s]’ towards and against her, as Death is ‘Shamed’, ‘annihilat[ed]’, and ‘Roused’ in swift succession. Much like the splendour that is ‘annihilate[d]’ ‘like a cloud which had outwept its rain’ after viewing Adonais’s corpse (*Adonais*, 10. 90),[[547]](#footnote-547) Death’s confrontation with the ‘living Might’ renders it equally ‘at the edge of non-existence’.[[548]](#footnote-548)

Freshly vitalised in the third line of stanza twenty-five, Death flees into Adonais’s body and signs of life momentarily ‘Flash’ through him as a result (*Adonais*, 25. 221). The body is ‘luridly artificial’ as ‘life’s pale light’ (*Adonais*, 25. 220) appears more as a deathly hue in comparison to the warm ‘glow’ of Adonais’s spirit in stanza twenty (*Adonais*,20. 179).[[549]](#footnote-549) Shelley has his rhyme heighten this theatricality as the pairing of ‘breath’ and ‘death’ is reprised from stanza twenty (*Adonais*, 20. 173, 175) but the order inverted to ‘Death’ and ‘breath’ (*Adonais*, 25. 217, 219). The body of Adonais superficially shifts from living to dead in stanza twenty, but from dead to living five stanzas later. Richard Cronin describes this series of events as a ‘practical joke’, as ‘Urania imagines Adonais to be alive, reaches out to embrace him, but instead embraces Death’.[[550]](#footnote-550) However, Death’s reaction to Urania seems more of an impulsive response to the abject rather than a plan to exacerbate the muse’s grief. To use Kristeva’s terms, Urania ‘beckons’ Adonais back to her and Death yields to her ‘summons’ by ‘[meeting] her vain caress’ (*Adonais*, 25. 225).[[551]](#footnote-551) The scene becomes what Kristeva would identify as ‘on the fragile border […], where identities […] do not exist or only barely so—double, fuzzy, […] altered, abject’.[[552]](#footnote-552) Death is a personified, independent agent at the same time as it assumes Adonais’s identity through its residency within his body. Urania’s contact with her ‘dear delight’ (*Adonais*, 25. 221) confuses their two identities so that she caresses the body of Adonais unaware that Death now inhabits it. Each mention of death in the stanza is paired with another, as in the first line, ‘In the death chamber, for a moment Death’, and in the final line, ‘Roused Death: Death rose’ (*Adonais*, 25. 217, 225). The repetition reinforces the uncanny, ‘doubl[ing]’ effect of experiencing abjection and this sense is intensified in the final lines’ subtle alteration of vowel sounds in ‘Roused’ to ‘rose’. The fact that Death is ‘Roused’ ‘mocks’ the impossibility of Adonais being woken from his own ‘sleep’ (*Adonais*, 2. 17, 8. 72) as the stanza’s linguistic and figurative strategies serve as an uncomfortable reiteration of Adonais’s irreversible death.

Shelley’s inversion of the object and witness of abjection in stanza twenty-five rehearses the radical consolatory strategy in stanza thirty-nine. Cronin observes that in the earlier stanza, ‘Urania reappears in order to displace Adonais as the focus of the reader’s sympathy’.[[553]](#footnote-553) Recalling the way in which the artist and the object of art are ‘ever-shifting’ in ‘On the Medusa’ (‘On the Medusa’, 37), here Shelley dramatically destabilises the roles of the elegist and the elegised figure. With the mourner being cast as a more appropriate object of our sympathy than the deceased, Shelley sets up the process of un-elegising Adonais and lamenting those who are living:

Peace, peace! he is not dead, he doth not sleep—

He hath awakened from the dream of life—

’Tis we, who lost in stormy visions, keep

With phantoms an unprofitable strife,

And in mad trance, strike with our spirit’s knife

Invulnerable nothings.—*We* decay

Like corpses in a charnel; fear and grief

Convulse us and consume us day by day,

And cold hopes swarm like worms within our living clay.

(*Adonais*, 39. 343-351)

The shift in Shelley’s use of pronouns is striking, as Michael O’Neill observes how the poet ‘emphasize[s] “*We*” in calculated opposition to the earlier “*He*”, only to lament our decayed lot since death’s imagery applies more to us than to Adonais’.[[554]](#footnote-554) In the revelation that ‘*We* decay’, the speaker emphatically groups himself within an elegised community as if he never truly left the ‘death chamber’ in stanza twenty-five, finding ‘life’s pale light’ universally extinguished as a consequence (*Adonais*, 25. 217, 220). Shelley’s address to his readers comes at the same time as he eulogises their condition. The assonantal stabs of ‘strife’, ‘strike’, and ‘knife’ reveal Shelley using sound patterns to amplify the philosophical blows that kill off humanity. The spoken words parallel the accuracy of Shelley’s violent aim, as the labored triple stress of ‘mad trance, strike’ amplifies the deadliness of the crowd’s blows. The speaker confirms a distance that has opened up between himself and Adonais, stating ‘Thou canst not soar where he is sitting now’ (*Adonais*, 38. 337). This marks a departure that is not only spiritual but physical as the elegised figure now ‘sit[s]’ beyond the speaker’s scope of vision. With Adonais’s corpse now vanished from the poem, Shelley realises that it is the living that pose the threat of abjection: ‘*We* decay / Like corpses in a charnel’. He amplifies the repulsive qualities he now beholds in man, with figurative language exposing him to the horror of witnessing ‘Convuls[ing]’ bodies being ‘consume[d]’ amidst ‘swarm[s]’ of ‘worms’. Shelley beholds ‘the utmost of abjection’ in his confrontation with hordes of ‘corpse[s]’ as living bodies are seen as transgressing their ontological state by rotting within their ‘living clay’.[[555]](#footnote-555) The epiphany is marred by a tone of belatedness, as the speaker reveals humanity as already in the processes of physical and spiritual ‘annihilat[ion]’, having stepped beyond ‘the edge of nonexistence and hallucination’ as it yields to life’s ‘trance’.[[556]](#footnote-556) Shelley’s readers are fleshed out and embedded into the poem’s drama in the same moment they are killed off, with stanza thirty-nine being made up of ‘creature[s]’ that are perpetually being ‘uncreated’ (‘On the Medusa’, 49).

In ‘On Life’ Shelley writes that ‘[man] disclaim[s] alliance with transience and decay’, affirming that ‘there is a spirit within him at enmity with nothingness and dissolution’.[[557]](#footnote-557) Through his repulsion of the ‘corpses’ that overpower humanity’s ‘living clay’ (*Adonais*, 39. 349, 351), the speaker undergoes a severance with the death that exists within life. This action necessitates a departure from humanity itself, which is perpetually entranced by ‘Invulnerable nothings’ (*Adonais*, 39. 348). With ‘man’ having lost the very quality that defines him, Shelley’s speaker is forced to ‘disclaim alliance’ and pursue a more suitable union with Adonais. Anna Letitia Barbauld’s essay ‘On the Pleasures Derived from Objects of Terror’, which was first published in 1773, anticipates the speaker’s dilemma in stanza fifty-three. Her claim that ‘the apparent delight with which we dwell upon objects of pure terror […] is a paradox of the heart’ offers an important perspective through which to view *Adonais*.[[558]](#footnote-558) The speaker’s ‘Heart’ sustains an intense ‘Attract[ion]’ towards the abject mortal world that jeopardises this new elegiac quest, as that which ‘still is dear / Attracts to crush, repels to make thee wither’ (*Adonais*, 53. 473-474). O’Neill views the speaker in this passage as ‘a self at cross-purposes’,[[559]](#footnote-559) as Shelley charges the stanza with fear and repulsion, and terror and attraction, in equal measure:

Why linger, why turn back, why shrink, my Heart?

Thy hopes are gone before: from all things here

They have departed; thou shouldst now depart!

A light is passed from the revolving year,

And man, and woman; and what still is dear

Attracts to crush, repels to make thee wither.

The soft sky smiles,—the low wind whispers near:

’Tis Adonais calls! oh, hasten thither,

No more let Life divide what Death can join together.

(*Adonais*, 53. 469-477)

Shelley’s intended movement is mapped out by the stanza’s form. Five of the nine lines end with the suggestion of altered positioning as Shelley uses the limits of the stanza’s lineation to coax his heart forwards through the words ‘here’, ‘depart’, ‘near’, ‘thither’, and ‘together’. Yet the speaker’s spiritual and metrical ‘cross-purposes’ come to the fore in the stanza’s opening line: ‘Why linger, why turn back, why shrink, my Heart?’[[560]](#footnote-560) Though the poet wishes to depart his hesitance is manifested in the repeated commas that splinter the line. Identifying beauty with grace, Burke explains that ‘to be graceful, it is requisite that there be no appearance of difficulty; […] nor to appear divided by sharp or sudden angles’.[[561]](#footnote-561) The awkwardness of the first line of the stanza is overcome in the unwavering iambs of the alexandrine: ‘No more let Life divide what Death can join together’. In the push towards death the line lulls the speaker with the ‘ease’ and ‘delicacy’ of its graceful iambs.[[562]](#footnote-562) Extending his view that ‘Poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted’,[[563]](#footnote-563) Shelley’s use of metre both disfigures his view of life and refigures death by assimilating it more elegantly into his poetry. The speaker falls backwards towards mortality at the start of the stanza as much as he gains momentum by its end, being jostled between life’s ‘Attract[ive]’ and ‘repulsi[ve]’ qualities.[[564]](#footnote-564)

It is not until the end of stanza fifty-four that the speaker resolutely wills himself towards Adonais, declaring that ‘The fire for which all thirst, now beams on me, / Consuming the last clouds of cold mortality’ (*Adonais*, 54. 485-486). Cronin argues that ‘the elegist rejects life, and dashes towards the immortal stars’,[[565]](#footnote-565) yet this précis overlooks Shelley’s drive to reach a life beyond death. The speaker chooses life, but in its ‘immortal’ form rather than being doomed to a finite existence on earth. Shelley hints towards the condition aspired to in ‘On the Medusa’, as the gorgon’s dying face prompts the poet’s recognition of a space in which ‘Death has met life, but there is life in death’ (‘On the Medusa’, 46). He ‘rejects’ death-in-life and chooses life-in-death so that ‘On the Medusa’ lays out the two opposing ontological destinations that attract him in *Adonais*. The speaker’s duty to attend to Adonais is made explicit as Adonais summons the speaker: ‘’Tis Adonais calls! oh, hasten thither’ (*Adonais*, 53. 476). Barbauld describes the effect of sublime terror as particularly potent when ‘the agency of invisible beings is introduced’, and as a result ‘our imagination, darting forth, explores with rapture the new world which is laid open to its view’.[[566]](#footnote-566) The double-meaning of ‘rapture’ with which the witness of the sublime explores a ‘new world’ has an increased potency here, as the speaker suggests his delight by ‘the white radiance of Eternity’ (*Adonais*, 52. 463), and the impending ‘rapture’ of his soul being transported from earth to heaven (*Adonais*,52. 461). The speaker’s decision to leave the uncanny realm of the living-dead is as much an intuitive response to the abject as it is a desire to save his human spirit. Kristeva forwards the possibility that ‘I expel *myself*, […] I abject *myself* within the same motion through which “I” claim to establish *myself*. […] [I]t is thus that *they* see that “I” am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death’.[[567]](#footnote-567) If the speaker’s attraction towards the now ‘invisible’ Adonais is established by the effects of the sublime, then the speaker’s ability to set himself in motion is enabled by his response to abjection. Shelley uses the two opposing aesthetic codes to power his journey of mourning into movement, adopting an abject language in his description of humanity as ‘corpse[s]’ to propel himself towards a sublime ‘new world’.

After the speaker sacrifices his ‘mortality’ (*Adonais*, 54. 486), the poem ends with him positioned between the ‘earth’ and ‘Heaven’ (*Adonais*, 54. 491, 493):

The breath whose might I have invoked in song

Descends on me; my spirit’s bark is driven

Far from the shore, far from the trembling throng

Whose sails were never to the tempest given;

The massy earth and spherèd skies are riven!

I am borne darkly, fearfully, afar;

Whilst burning through the inmost veil of Heaven,

The soul of Adonais, like a star,

Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are.

(*Adonais*, 53. 487-495)

Though the speaker successfully hides an abject humanity from his vision, life sustains its power to ‘Attract’ the speaker (*Adonais*, 53. 474). He becomes increasingly tentative in his movements as a result. Instead of envisioning his destination he looks back to the point of his departure, emphasising his position ‘Far from’ the mortal realm through anaphora. The repetition of ‘far’ in ‘afar’ three lines later also maps the increased distance from the mortal world, as ‘far’ becomes increasingly further away from its previous iterations. Kristeva explains that the abject signals a confrontation with that which exists in the ‘in-between, the ambiguous, [and] the composite’.[[568]](#footnote-568) Occupying a space ‘in-between’ life and death, the speaker finds himself in an abject void, with neither the mortal nor the immortal world proving an appropriate destination for him. His position in an abject space is exacerbated as the gap between earthly and heavenly realms increasingly widens in the exclamation that ‘The massy earth and spherèd skies are riven!’ The violence of the image creates an aftershock in Shelley’s syntax; the land and sky are not merely separated but ripped apart and the exclamation mark dramatically divides the stanza into two sentences. Yet the exclamation marks a moment of ecstatic terror rather than horror, allowing the speaker to be ‘borne darkly, fearfully afar’ in a manner that recalls Burke’s analysis of Death in *Paradise Lost*: ‘all is dark, uncertain, confused, terrible, and sublime to the last degree’.[[569]](#footnote-569) Mark Sandy notes the final stanza’s debt to *Lycidas* as the speaker boards the same ‘fatal and perfidious bark / Built in th’ eclipse, and rigged with curses dark’ (*Lycidas*, 100-101).[[570]](#footnote-570) Casting himself as the elegised figure, Shelley’s speaker willingly claims Edward King’s fate for himself, with the ‘perfidious’ nature of his ‘spirit’s bark’ facilitating his treacherous position between life and death. Shelley is ‘far from the trembling throng’ and the ‘far lands’ ‘seen tremblingly’ in ‘On the Medusa’ (‘On the Medusa’, 3), and being situated between mortal and immortal worlds affords Shelley’s vision a new sense of clarity and scope. Though the speaker was unable to access where Adonais had ‘fled’ prior to his embarkation (*Adonais*, 38. 334), his ability to see Heaven’s ‘veil’ marks his visionary transcendence so that he can perceive the mortal realm and ‘Eternity’ in one stanzaic glance (*Adonais*,52. 463). Shelley suggests the possibility that boundaries can be eliminated from both realms of existence; if the speaker has ‘trample[d]’ life’s ‘glass’ (*Adonais*,52. 462) and ‘riven’ the earth and skies to create an abject passage to a sublime eternity, he suggests the possibility of Adonais searing open ‘the inmost veil of Heaven’ with his ‘burning’ ‘Beacon’. Shelley does not enact a rejection of the abject in the final stanza, nor does he reduce sublime terror to horror by attaining a full union with Adonais. Instead, by being neither dead nor alive, and by holding mortal and immortal realms open to himself, consolation is suggested as only possible through transcending ontological borders, and experiencing the ‘delight’ generated in an equidistance between the horror of life and the fear of death.[[571]](#footnote-571) Shelley ends his elegy captivated, though terrified, by the abject sublimity of remaining in ‘The in-between, the ambiguous, [and] the composite’.[[572]](#footnote-572)

Owen invokes Shelley when articulating his desire to transcend the horrors of battle. Recalling the moment in *Adonais* in which the speaker’s ‘spirit’s bark is driven / […] far from the trembling throng’ (*Adonais*, 55. 488-489), Owen writes of how ‘[I have] sailed my spirit surging light and clear / Past the entanglement where hopes lay strewn’ (‘Apologia pro Poemate Meo’, 11-12).[[573]](#footnote-573) However, Owen’s duties as an officer hamper his spiritual journey as the past tense of this statement implies a return to his men following the departure of his ‘spirit’,[[574]](#footnote-574) with his Shelleyan voyage only ever a fleeting experience. The brief ‘exultation’ (‘Apologia pro Poemate Meo’, 13) Owen experiences as a result of viewing faces ‘Seraphic for an hour, though they were foul’ in ‘Apologia pro Poemate Meo’ (‘Apologia pro Poemate Meo’, 16) is described in greater detail in ‘I saw his round mouth’s crimson’. If ‘[poetry] marries exultation and horror’ for Shelley,[[575]](#footnote-575) then Owen’s poem ‘veils’ the ‘foul[ness]’ of the dying face with poetry’s ‘loveliness’:[[576]](#footnote-576)

I saw his round mouth’s crimson deepen as it fell,

Like a sun, in his last deep hour;

Watched the magnificent recession of farewell,

Clouding, half gleam, half glower,

And a last splendour burn the heavens of his cheek.

And in his eyes

The cold stars lighting, very old and bleak,

In different skies.

(‘I saw his round mouth’s crimson’)

The subject of the fragment is the speaker’s confrontation with the abject. Kristeva explains that ‘what goes out of the body, out of its pores and openings, points to the infinitude of the body proper and gives rise to abjection’.[[577]](#footnote-577) With ‘crimson’ signifying a fatal haemorrhage Owen describes ‘what goes out of the body’ with Burkean ‘delight’,[[578]](#footnote-578) as the sublime and abject disconcertingly bleed into one another. Shelley’s speaker beautifies the abject corpse of Adonais in stanzas seven and twenty of his elegy, yet Owen’s poetic subject transcends mere beautification and enters the rhetoric of the sublime as he diffuses the horror of the abject through pastoral metaphors. Sustaining his debt to Shelley, the fragment recalls the following passage in ‘Lines Written among the Euganean Hills’:

Autumn’s evening meets me soon,

Leading the infantine moon,

And that one star, which to her

Almost seems to minister

Half the crimson light she brings

From the sunset’s radiant springs:

(‘Lines Written among the Euganean Hills’, 321-326)[[579]](#footnote-579)

The vision of the dying face beheld by Owen is filtered through Shelley’s description of ‘Autumn’s evening’. Both poets depict a scene of ‘crimson’ with the diminishing ‘light’ of the ‘sunset’ studded with the emerging ‘star[s]’. Rather than viewing ‘Heaven’s light forever shin[ing]’ in *Adonais* (*Adonais*,52. 461), ‘Lines Written among the Euganean Hills’ and ‘I saw his round mouth’s crimson’ depict an image of the sublime as part of a fleeting transition rather than a permanent presence, as both poems ‘[awaken] to a transitory brightness’ with a light that dwindles at the very moment of its kindling.[[580]](#footnote-580) While Shelley describes ‘Half the crimson light’, Owen’s description of the soldier’s face recounts its ‘half gleam, half glower’. ‘[G]leam’ refers to the soldier’s half-smiling expression, but also to the light of the setting ‘sun’ that Owen invokes as a metaphor for the soldier’s death. Like Shelley in ‘Lines Written among the Euganean Hills’, Owen recalls a glimmer of a distant, sublime light at the same time as it is marred by its fragility in being only a ‘half’ presence.

While Shelley balanced the opposing drives of ‘summons and repulsion’ set in motion by the abject in *Adonais* and ‘On the Medusa’,[[581]](#footnote-581) here Owen willingly yields to its ‘summons’ and closes the gap between himself and the dying body. For Kristeva the abject ‘beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside’.[[582]](#footnote-582) Yet Owen’s ‘desire’ overrides his drive for self-preservation. Instead, he ‘is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned’.[[583]](#footnote-583) Neil Corcoran observes that the poem ‘reconfigures almost allotropically a motif everywhere in [Owen’s] work, a homoerotic fantasizing about the faces and bodies of young men’.[[584]](#footnote-584) Owen’s systematic fixation on the body’s ‘mouth’, ‘cheek’, and ‘eyes’ is always accompanied by a tactile sensation suggestive of physical contact: ‘deepen’, ‘burn’, ‘cold’ (‘I saw his round mouth’s crimson’, 1, 5, 6, 7). The ethical stakes in the poem are magnified twofold for Owen; the lines reveal the suppressed attraction of a man towards a man at the same time as suggesting the attraction of a living person towards a dead person. Corcoran views the repetition of ‘deepen’ and ‘deep’ as ‘a form of pulsation’ (‘I saw his round mouth’s crimson’, 1, 2),[[585]](#footnote-585) yet such linguistic penetration also signifies a refusal to succumb to sexual desire. Kristeva asserts that ‘[the corpse] must not be displayed but immediately buried so as not to pollute the divine earth’.[[586]](#footnote-586) Recognising the corpse as ‘a fount of impurity [that] must not be touched’,[[587]](#footnote-587) Owen’s lines also evoke a form of burial in the words ‘deepen’, and ‘deep’. Even as Owen gazes on the soldier he is aware of the risk he takes, with the polyptoton signifying as much an indulgence in his subject’s beauty as it does a denial, with Owen aware that the body must soon be hidden from sight underground. The poem straddles homosexuality and a suggested necrophilia, with one mode of eroticisation hinging upon the other. Owen’s homoerotic gaze is set into play both in spite of and because of the soldier’s death. Howarth notes that in the poem ‘desire appears not as a positive counter to death, but inseparably one with it’.[[588]](#footnote-588) As if the confession of his attraction will be buried along with the body he surveys, the soldier’s death allows Owen to sustain his gaze over the male form. Rather than deciphering the rapid movements of ‘flying muscles’ in the midst of battle (‘Mental Cases’, 16), the soldier’s incapacitation allows for Owen’s sustained, detailed view of the male body’s supple flesh and subtly flushing colours. The elegy functions paradoxically as marking a moment of loss and acquisition as the poet mourns the death of the soldier in the same poetic breath he celebrates an attainment of homoerotic vision.

Tim Kendall argues that the ‘very old and bleak’ stars (‘I saw his round mouth’s crimson’, 7) embody a rejection of the Romantic elegiac tradition: ‘Owen’s stars […] are merely obsolete and irrelevant to the war-dead. Fulfilling the tradition by closing it, Owen taunts Romanticism as glorious but hopelessly ineffectual: its light is going out’.[[589]](#footnote-589) Viewing ‘I saw his round mouth’s crimson’ alongside *Adonais*, Kendall fails to account for Owen’s position in his poem. If the stars are ‘very old and bleak’ as opposed to the ‘Beacon[ing]’ stellification of Adonais (*Adonais*, 55. 495), it is because Owen has not sacrificed his ‘mortality’ in the poetry to be granted the same vision as Shelley’s speaker (*Adonais*, 54. 486). Rather, it is the dead soldier, as opposed to the poet, who has earned his place among the eternal stars. Owen instead glimpses a distant and cold world that owes more to a Romantic vision of the sublime than Kendall’s view allows. Burke writes:

Among colours, such as soft, or cheerful, (except perhaps a strong red which is cheerful) are unfit to produces grand images. An immense mountain covered with a shining green turf, is nothing is this respect, to one dark and gloomy; the cloudy sky is more grand than the blue; and night more sublime and solemn than the day.[[590]](#footnote-590)

Rather than ‘taunt[ing]’ Romanticism and extinguishing its traditions,[[591]](#footnote-591) as Kendall argues, the relationship between the poem and Burke’s words suggests that Owen creates a space within the soldier that is equally as sublime as the blinding light of Adonais’s beacon. The ‘cold stars lighting, very old and bleak’ recalls the ‘dark and gloomy’ space preferred by Burke, and the ‘Clouding’ of the face ‘is more grand’ than the ‘strong red’ that opens the poem (‘I saw his round mouth’s crimson’, 7, 4). Even the ‘cheerful’ ‘crimson’ (‘I saw his round mouth’s crimson’, 1) is purged from the soldier in a process of abjection that purifies the interior body’s sublime status. Despite Owen’s hopes for the soldier, ‘the ending is no celebration’, as Howarth argues.[[592]](#footnote-592) It is only when the transformation from living to dead ends that the soldier is accounted as ‘different’ in relation to Owen himself, with the poem becoming ‘indifferent’ to its subject upon the realisation of its death.[[593]](#footnote-593) The ‘celebration’ of ‘magnifice[nce]’ and ‘splendour’ exists instead in the ‘half[-way]’ between ontological states (‘I saw his round mouth’s crimson’, 3, 5, 4). Kristeva explains that ‘A body without soul, a non-body, disquieting matter, it is to be excluded from God’s *territory* as it is from his *speech*’.[[594]](#footnote-594) The body’s transition from alive to dead at the end of the poem foresees Kristeva’s terms, with it swiftly ‘excluded’ from Owen’s ‘*speech*’. Owen shares the same fascination in the ‘in-between’ that Shelley reveres in the final stanza of *Adonais*.[[595]](#footnote-595) Yet ‘I saw his round mouth’s crimson’ mourns the loss of this ‘uncertain, confused, terrible and sublime’ state through which Owen so fleetingly ‘sailed [his] spirit’ (‘Apologia pro Poemate Meo, 11).[[596]](#footnote-596)

If the abject horror of the soldier’s death in ‘I saw his round mouth’s crimson’ is ‘Cloud[ed]’ in the beautifying processes of his poetry (‘I saw his round mouth’s crimson’, 4), then the sublime and the abject are fused more corrosively in Owen’s ‘Greater Love’. Owen compares the conventional beauty of a civilian lover with visions of dead and mutilated soldiers, who amidst ‘the frenzy of abjection [turn] into sinister beauty’.[[597]](#footnote-597) Positing this abject beauty as ‘Greater’ than Burkean beauty, the poem epitomises Howarth’s observation that ‘Owen’s sense of distortion turns out to be within the beauty itself, rather than in opposition to it’.[[598]](#footnote-598) Recalling Shelley’s aim to ‘[make] beautiful that which is distorted’,[[599]](#footnote-599) and distort that which is beautiful in *Adonais*, Owen’s invocation of the lover’s ‘Red lips’, ‘eyes’, ‘voice’, ‘Heart’, and ‘hand’ (‘Greater Love’, 1, 5, 13, 19, 21) subversively ‘distort[s]’ the loveliness of traditional emblems of lyric poetry without fully disfiguring them.[[600]](#footnote-600) Instead he trivialises convention, undercutting it through his structure as he continuously pits it against the ‘Greater’ beauty possessed by soldiers:

Red lips are not so red

As the stained stones kissed by the English dead.

Kindness of wooed and wooer

Seems shame to their love pure.

O Love, your eyes lose lure

When I behold eyes blinded in my stead!

(‘Greater Love’, 1-6)

The description of the soldiers is performed through the stanza’s second and third *a* rhymes, so that the *b* rhymes solely represent the civilian addressee. Though Owen lingers on the appearance of his ‘Love’ through the triple *b* rhyme, this indulgence is rendered superficial as the rapid-fire of trimeter lines refuse to yield to his addressee’s ‘lure’. The return of the *a* rhyme through the pentameter that ends the stanza affirms Owen’s enduring interest in the men who sacrifice themselves in battle. While the rhymes that describe the soldiers outperform the description of the lover, they are in a more vulnerable position. The interjection of three *b* rhymes, ‘wooer’, ‘pure’, and ‘lure’, between the second and final *a* rhyme renders ‘stead’ all the more assailable for being so isolated from its predecessors. The lines are unhinged through their offset lineation, and this gestures towards the men’s precarious position on the Front; the *b* rhymes that describe the lover are more safely sheltered in comparison to the dramatic exposure of the *a* rhymes. Sven Bäckman argues that ‘Owen did his best in writing this poem to create rhyme-pairs that involve more or less harsh contrasts’,[[601]](#footnote-601) citing Owen’s pairings of ‘red’ and ‘dead’, ‘attitude’ and ‘knife-skewed’, and ‘soft’, ‘loft’, and ‘coughed’, and from one of the drafts, ‘pure’ and ‘sewer’ (‘Greater Love’, 1, 2, 7, 8, 13, 14, 18).[[602]](#footnote-602) These line endings superficially bridge the gap between the civilian lover and the soldiers with a bitterness that is amplified by Owen’s use of full rhyme. Mark Rawlinson notes Owen’s awareness of the ‘grotesque effects’ of full rhyme,[[603]](#footnote-603) yet in ‘Greater Love’ he desires precisely this garish quality to amplify his jarring images. As the initial *a* rhyme ‘red’ refers to the lips of the lover, with ‘dead’ and ‘stead’ describing the ‘English dead’, Owen has the soldiers’ beauty overwhelm and surpass that of the lover in their pentameter lines. As he pairs the two parties within one rhyme, what appears to be unification is actually the opposite. Rhyme instead ‘Attracts to crush’ (*Adonais*, 53. 474), with the ‘red’ of the lover’s lips suffocated under the metrical weight of ‘the stones kissed by the English dead’.

Just as ‘I saw his round mouth’s crimson’ sexualises the dying soldier, ‘Greater Love’ depicts an eroticised vision of the dead:

Your slender attitude

Trembles not exquisite like limbs knife-skewed,

Rolling and rolling there

Where God seems not to care;

Till the fierce love they bear

Cramps them in death’s extreme decrepitude.

(‘Greater Love’, 7-12)

Jon Silkin notes the poem’s debt to A. C. Swinburne’s ‘Before the Mirror’, in which ‘Swinburne joins death with sex to intensify his experience of the latter (and perhaps sexualize the former)’.[[604]](#footnote-604) In ‘Greater Love’, it is less that Owen ‘sexualize[s] [death]’ than figures sex an as abject process, performing what Kristeva describes as ‘the playful reckoning of sexual drive coiled up in death’.[[605]](#footnote-605) Owen re-inflicts the horror of the abject by having the beauty of the lover continuously encroached upon by the beauty of the dead and dying soldiers. Kristeva explains that ‘The corpse […] upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance’.[[606]](#footnote-606) Yet Owen’s poetry ‘assimilate[s]’ the abject in his rhetorical pattern of establishing the beauty of the lover before that of deformed or dead soldiers. Rather than sustaining the sense that a confrontation of the abject occurs as ‘fallacious chance’, the reader begins to expect and even welcome it as the rhetorical thrust of each verse. If, for Corcoran, Owen ‘refus[es] to satirize response’ in ‘I saw his round mouth’s crimson’,[[607]](#footnote-607) here the poetry is more provocative.Owen’s use of the word ‘Kindness’ (‘Greater Love’, 3) gestures towards a pun frequently used by Shakespeare, with the term referring to the ‘sexual favour’ that can result from ‘kindl[ed]’ passions.[[608]](#footnote-608) The soldiers’ ‘Trembl[ing]’ and repeated ‘Rolling’ perversely mocks the ‘Kindness of wooed and wooer’ in the first stanza (‘Greater Love’, 8, 9, 3). Owen’s eroticising gaze bleeds into the final verse: ‘Heart, you were never hot / Nor large, nor full like hearts made great with shot’ (‘Greater Love’, 19-20). Being ‘hot’, ‘large’, and ‘full’ prepares the men’s throbbing hearts for a form of climax. The line enacts a different kind of penetration that contrasts with the ‘Kindness of wooed and wooer’. In ‘Arms and the Boy’ Owen describes the sexualised appetite of ‘bullet-leads, / Which long to nuzzle in the hearts of lads’ (‘Arms and the Boy’, 5-6).[[609]](#footnote-609) For the soldiers, death is the moment in which their ‘Greater Love’ is consummated, an act of self-sacrifice for something ‘Greater’ than themselves that outperforms the ‘Kindness of wooed and wooer’.

In a letter written in February 1917, Owen notes the unbearable quality of ‘the universal pervasion of *Ugliness*’ on the Front, where ‘everything [is] unnatural, broken, blasted; the distortion of the dead, whose unburiable bodies sit outside the dugouts all day, all night, the most execrable sights on earth. In poetry we call them glorious. But to sit with them all day, all night…’[[610]](#footnote-610) The effects of abjection are amplified by that which intensifies the sublime, as Burke states that the ‘most striking effect’ of the sublime is caused by a ‘greatness of dimension, vastness of extent, or quantity’.[[611]](#footnote-611) The ‘vastness of extent, or quantity’ of the abject is implied within the ‘universal’ presence of ‘*Ugliness*’ that Owen perceives on the Front. Owen’s concern with ‘the distortion of the dead’ shows ‘Greater Love’ paralleling Shelley’s conviction that ‘Poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted’.[[612]](#footnote-612) Owen’s remark that ‘In poetry we call them glorious’ is less a criticism of poetry’s fabricating powers than it is a modification of Shelley’s view that poetry is ‘the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth’,[[613]](#footnote-613) with Owen’s writing offering us the very image of death ‘expressed in its eternal truth’. Just as Shelley creates a more ‘fitting’ tomb for Adonais through his use of figurative language (*Adonais*, 7. 59-63), Owen’s poetry is a more appropriate resting place for the soldiers than the ‘Hideous landscapes’ of France.[[614]](#footnote-614) Owen renders the tears of the lover ineffectual in the poem’s penultimate line, ‘Weep, you may weep’ (‘Greater Love’, 24), at once advocating the lover’s sympathy and chastising the self-indulgence of her mourning. Silkin notes that Owen positions the soldiers ‘beyond the reach of most human beings’ when the poet states, ‘for you may touch them not’ (‘Greater Love’, 24).[[615]](#footnote-615) While the ‘Kindness’ bonds the ‘wooed’ to the ‘wooer’ (‘Greater Love’, 3), here the consummation of the soldiers’ ‘Greater Love’ is one performed alone. The lack of human contact is both the final curse the soldiers must endure and a protective gesture by Owen. However, the final line uses the pronoun ‘you’, rather than ‘we’, and this suggests the possibility that Owen is still able to ‘touch them’. In the same way Shelley’s speaker is so inspired by the Burkean beauty of the deceased that he ‘enter[s] willingly into a kind of relation’ with Adonais in stanza seven,[[616]](#footnote-616) Owen’s final line rings with instruction. Following his predecessor’s footsteps, he too becomes the defender of the abject beauty possessed by the dead.

If ‘I saw his round mouth’s crimson’ submits the abject entirely to the sublime, and ‘Greater Love’ tempers Owen’s abject vision with Burkean beauty, then ‘Mental Cases’ completes Owen’s aesthetic spectrum by surrendering itself completely to Kristevan horror. While Shelley’s speaker summons the resolve to ‘depart’ from the mortal world in *Adonais* (*Adonais*, 53. 471), Owen is destined for an alternative course of action in ‘Mental Cases’. In a letter written in August 1918, he marks his return to France from England by quoting Siegfried Sassoon’s ‘Testament’; ‘O my heart, / Be still; You have cried your cry, you played your part’.[[617]](#footnote-617) Owen’s quotation recalls Shelley’s invocation of his ‘Heart’ in *Adonais* as the younger poet reassures himself of his decision to ‘turn back’ (*Adonais*,53. 469).[[618]](#footnote-618) In his ‘six revisionary ratios’, Harold Bloom defines *Tessera* as a version of ‘completion and antithesis’, whereby ‘A poet antithetically “completes” his precursor, by so reading the parent-poem as to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense, as though the precursor had failed to go far enough’.[[619]](#footnote-619) Yet Owen curtails his performance of *Tessera*, ‘complet[ing]’ Shelley’s generic vision without suggesting a correction of his predecessor’s poetry through ‘antithesis’. If the speaker of *Adonais* is driven beyond the human by his wish to enter into ‘the abode where the Eternal are’ (*Adonais*, 55. 495), Owen satisfies what Shelley denies himself by opting to remain in the mortal world*.* Owen’s responsibility towards his fellow soldiers subjects him to the ‘nothingness and dissolution’ from which his predecessor turns away,[[620]](#footnote-620) so that ‘Mental Cases’ shows Owen yielding to ‘annihilat[ion]’ by an abject humanity.[[621]](#footnote-621)

Who are these? Why sit they here in twilight?  
Wherefore rock they, purgatorial shadows,  
Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish,  
Baring teeth that leer like skulls’ teeth wicked?  
Stroke on stroke of pain,—but what slow panic,  
Gouged these chasms round their fretted sockets?  
Ever from their hair and through their hands’ palms  
Misery swelters. Surely we have perished  
Sleeping, and walk hell; but who these hellish?

(‘Mental Cases’, 1-9)

Owen has life encroach upon death in the chthonic setting of ‘Mental Cases’ in a manner that recalls the presence of Urania’s ‘living Might’ in ‘death[’s] chamber’ (*Adonais*, 25. 218, 217). The first speaker of the poem transgresses ontological boundaries in his supposition that ‘Surely we have perished / Sleeping, and walk hell; but who these hellish?’ Jahan Ramazani notes the sacrifice entailed in this proximity to the abject; the speaker has potentially already undergone a form of ‘annihilation’ just to be granted access to the vision, as ‘to observe the damned “we” too must “have perished”’.[[622]](#footnote-622) Yet such a transformation is a mere supposition, recalling the carefully qualified observation of Shelley’s speaker that ‘surely [Adonais] takes his fill / Of deep and liquid rest’ (*Adonais*, 7. 62-63). Owen’s use of ‘Surely’ insists upon the speaker’s conjecture at the same time as the word suggests his doubt. Instead of ‘walk[ing] hell’, the speaker is situated in the abject space Shelley set out to explore at the end of *Adonais*, as the ‘purgatorial’ and the living collide in a setting that exists between mortal and immortal realms. While Shelley’s speaker is poised before ‘Heaven’ (*Adonais*, 55. 493), Owen’s speaker is on the brink of ‘Hell’. Dominic Hibberd notes the poem’s Dantescan quality,[[623]](#footnote-623) with the second speaker escorting the first through an infernal setting with Virgilian omniscience. It is not merely the poem’s rhetoric and thematic qualities that tie Owen to Dante’s Virgil; Owen is at once a guide and one of the damned himself, just as Virgil reveals to Dante that ‘in this number I myself am one’ (*Inferno*, 4. 39).[[624]](#footnote-624) If Owen entertained the option to ‘depart’ in the same way as Shelley (*Adonais*, 53. 471) it would be to overlook his awareness of his own damnation. Just as Virgil occupies the first circle of Hell, Owen is tied experientially to his subjects in this terrifying Limbo, as Daniel Hipp notes: ‘Though never as debilitated as these men and though he had recovered from his trauma to speak as they cannot, he nevertheless once was a “mental case” himself’.[[625]](#footnote-625) The figures that the speaker confronts embody the abject space, being that which represents ‘The in-between, the ambiguous, [and] the composite’.[[626]](#footnote-626) In the same way humans are ‘phantoms’ subjected to an ongoing ‘decay’ in *Adonais* (*Adonais*, 39. 346, 348), the ‘shadows’ described by Owen’s speaker are condemned to a ‘twilight’ existence with their bodies perpetually transitioning from life into death. Rather than being occupants of Hell, the suffix in ‘hellish’ further expresses their liminality, being akin to the damned but not quite qualifying for the title. The bodily ‘Corruption’ that ‘waits’ for Adonais but remains ‘Invisible’ in Shelley’s poem (*Adonais*, 8. 67) is brought to the fore in ‘Mental Cases’, as Owen dutifully ‘completes’ his predecessor’s vision.

The appearance of the mysterious figures incites a ‘vortex of summons and repulsion’ in the inquisitor who opens the poem.[[627]](#footnote-627) He enacts a frenzied exposition of the scene in the rapid-fire of ‘Who’, ‘Why’, and ‘Where’ questions that open the first stanza (‘Mental Cases’, 1, 2). The identities of the figures are withheld by Owen until the second stanza, and Kristeva explains that ‘Being fluid, [exclamatory suspension] can easily occupy both ends of the drive scale, from acceptance to rejection. Excitement and disgust, […] the reader deciphers them very fast on these lines pitted with blank spaces’.[[628]](#footnote-628) The speaker’s ‘excitement’ manifests itself as he layers questions in a manner that prevents his interlocutor from answering. Hipp argues that ‘The speaker of the first stanza has sought to understand the ghastly images of the men, and the speaker of the second provides this understanding by establishing the causal connection between the war and its manifestation of ravishment upon their bodies’.[[629]](#footnote-629) Yet the rapidity of the speaker’s questions reveal that he elides any effort to understand, and instead he registers the disturbing features of the figures’ deformity with a perverse enjoyment. Rather than viewing them as traumatised soldiers, he displaces his own pleasure onto his subjects, misaligning their ‘relish’ with his own (‘Mental Cases’, 3). The speaker’s gaze turns from curious to invasive, as his morbid fascination with the sculptured quality of his subjects’ bone structure strips them of any latent humanity in order to prod and poke in the holes. The faces of the figures are more violently entrenched than the graven features of Shelley’s Medusa (‘On the Medusa’, 11); they possess eyes that resemble the ‘chasms’ of shell-holes (‘Mental Cases’, 6) so that their bodies become a site resembling No Man’s Land. Viewing their ‘teeth’ as belonging to ‘skulls’ (‘Mental Cases’, 4) rather than the men themselves, the speaker objectifies these figures to the degree that they seem to have been repossessed by their bodies, with their identities ‘annihilate[d]’ by the physical power of their abject state.[[630]](#footnote-630) The ‘falseness’ of the soldiers’ appearance (‘Mental Cases’, 24) recreates the moment in which Adonais is possessed by Death (*Adonais*, 25. 219-225) as the speaker views them performing as puppets that ‘the Dead have ravished’ (‘Mental Cases’, 10), unconvinced that there are men within the waste of ‘skulls’, ‘jaws’, ‘teeth’, and ‘sockets’ (‘Mental Cases’, 3, 4, 6). Paradoxically, the ‘Dead’ appear to be the only things that animate these bodies and keep them alive. Rather than ‘Flash[ing] through [the] limbs’ of Adonais (*Adonais*,25. 221), their presence within the soldiers’ bodies is relentless and must ‘Always’ be borne (‘Mental Cases’, 15). The repetition of ‘ee’ sounds in ‘Baring teeth that leer like skulls’ teeth wicked’ (‘Mental Cases’, 4) has the reader mimic the grimaces of the demented faces when reading the poem aloud, mocking their suffering with sonorous ‘relish’ (‘Mental Cases’, 3) rather than sympathetic understanding. ‘[D]isgust’ fuels the first speaker’s ‘excitement’, deliberately detaining the second speaker’s piteous response so that he can revel in the horror of his vision.

While Owen buffers the abject with Burkean images of the sublime and beautiful in ‘I saw his round mouth’s crimson’ and ‘Greater Love’, the horror in his poetry is at its most confrontational in ‘Mental Cases’. Owen draws upon Burke to mark his departure from his aesthetic theory, as Burke describes how ‘violent bodily pain’ and the psychological effects of ‘fear or terror’ of the sublime are manifested in the same ways on the face of the sufferer:[[631]](#footnote-631)

a man in great pain has his teeth set, his eye-brows are violently contracted, his forehead is wrinkled, his eyes are dragged inwards, and rolled with great vehemence, his hair stands on end, the voice is forced out in short shrieks and groans, and the whole fabric totters. Fear or terror, which is an apprehension of pain or death, exhibits exactly the same effects, approaching in violence to those just mentioned in proportion to the nearness of the cause […].[[632]](#footnote-632)

Owen restages this physical response as his speakers gaze upon figures ‘baring teeth’ with ‘fretted sockets’ and ‘eyeballs [that] shrink tormented / Back into their brains’ (‘Mental Cases’, 4, 6, 19-20). If the violence of such symptoms depends upon ‘the nearness of the cause’, then the soldiers described by Owen in ‘Mental Cases’ serve as the most extreme version of Burke’s description. Rather than the source of such a response being external to the observer, ‘the cause’ of ‘fear’ and ‘pain’ is situated within the sufferers’ psyche. This proximity renders the apprehension of death as ‘simply terrible’ rather than provoking any ‘delight’:[[633]](#footnote-633)

— 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.

(‘Mental Cases’, 10-18)

The voice introduced in the second stanza shifts the soldiers from the first speaker’s mythologising gaze into reality. Rather than being viewed as ‘wicked’ ‘purgatorial shadows’ (‘Mental Cases’, 4, 2), ‘These are men’ who should be pitied, men who ‘are worth / [Our] tears’ rather than our morbid fascination (‘Apologia pro Poemate Meo’, 35-36). If the first stanza posits the soldiers as abject, the second complicates the poem’s processes of abjection. While the soldiers are otherworldly, deathly, and repulsive when they are introduced, here the speaker insists on the reader’s belatedness by highlighting an abject confrontation that has taken place prior to the poem, that of the ‘murders’ the soldiers have committed and ‘witnessed’ (‘Mental Cases’, 12). Owen amplifies the effects of the abject in this compound presence. Intensifying horror in an ‘ever-shifting mirror’ (‘On the Medusa’, 37), we experience its effects first-hand by gazing upon the abject figures at the same time that we view their response to abjection.

It is not merely ontological borders that are transgressed in the opening stanza of the poem. Kristeva states that ‘The body’s inside […] shows up in order to compensate for the collapse of the border between inside and outside. It is as if the skin, a fragile container, no longer guarantee[s] the integrity of one’s “own and clean self”’.[[634]](#footnote-634) While the materials expelled by the body are abject themselves, having transgressed its ‘border’, some forms of excrement, such as vomit, sweat, and tears, can also be symptoms of witnessing abjection. The fixation on the ‘slob[bering]’ and ‘sweltering’ (‘Mental Cases’, 3, 8) of the mysterious figures shows the speaker’s disgust for such abject materials, but it is not until the poem’s second stanza that we understand such bodily excrement as the result of horrors ‘witnessed’ before the poem’s beginning (‘Mental Cases’, 12). Santanu Das notes that ‘It is often overlooked that […] the corpse is almost always absent in Owen’s poetry, reduced to metonymies […] and synecdoches’.[[635]](#footnote-635) Though the reader does not directly view the corpses that haunt the soldiers’ memories, the poem does not successfully hold off their effects. Rather than sealing the soldiers’ minds from the ravages of the outside world, the men’s confrontation with the abject prior to the poem compromises the skin’s function as a barrier between external in internal worlds. Though Owen positions himself as the defender of his elegised figures in ‘Greater Love’ with the command to readers that ‘you may touch them not’ (‘Greater Love’, 24), in ‘Mental Cases’ the personification of ‘Memory’ becomes the soldiers’ ‘Invulnerable’ enemy (‘Mental Cases’, 11; *Adonais*, 39. 348), breaching Owen’s instruction by reanimating the ‘Dead’ within their psyches (‘Mental Cases’, 10). As if responding to the ‘summons’ of the abject,[[636]](#footnote-636) ‘Memory fingers in their hair of murders’, undermining Owen’s authority by caressing its victims with its invasive ‘touch’ (‘Mental Cases’, 11). Slipping along the outside of their bodies and operating within the soldiers’ minds, ‘Memory’ takes advantage of the skin as a ‘fragile container’ by filtering through it in a terrifying osmosis.

If the abject ‘turns me inside out, guts sprawling’ through the body’s expulsive responses of vomit, tears, and sweat,[[637]](#footnote-637) then the horror witnessed by the soldiers in ‘Mental Cases’ also brings the outside in. In a draft of the poem, Owen laments, ‘O vomit of mud from the green / earth grown venomous / O spite of the earth that she spawns disease’.[[638]](#footnote-638) The earth abjects itself in its ‘vomit’ of mud and in turn the soldiers contract the ‘disease’ spread by their environment. The soldiers ingest their exterior surroundings as their minds feverishly unfold their trauma back onto themselves: ‘Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander, / Treading blood from lungs that have loved laughter’ (‘Mental Cases’, 13-14). The ethereal nature of the mind is rendered physical as the mind-scape becomes a more terrifying battlefield than the front line, with the soldiers ‘Wading’, ‘wander[ing]’, and ‘Treading’ through their memories. ‘Treading blood from lungs that have loved laughter’, their bodies guiltily haemorrhage and drown in the blood they have spilled, as the abjected bodily fluids of ‘murder[ed]’ soldiers return with a vengeance to ‘annihilate’ their murderers (‘Mental Cases’, 11).[[639]](#footnote-639) The men are haunted by the noise of battle, as the internal rhyme of ‘Batter’ and ‘shatter’ echoes the sound of ‘guns’ (‘Mental Cases’, 16), with the outside trapped inside as the bullets ricochet within the perimeters of the soldiers’ minds. Das notes how ‘flesh is ripped apart’ as the soldiers recall the ‘shatter of flying muscles’.[[640]](#footnote-640) Encasing the body in a glassy veneer, Owen draws attention to its ‘fragil[ity]’ as exterior ‘flesh’ is ‘shattered’ to allow the ‘blood’, ‘guts’, and bones underneath to poke through (‘Mental Cases’, 14, 4).[[641]](#footnote-641) If the corpse is ‘the most sickening of wastes’ for Kristeva,[[642]](#footnote-642) then the subjects of ‘Mental Cases’ possess the attributes of the abject corpse without actually being dead, being prematurely written off by the poem. The notion that the body’s worth lies in its ability to function is introduced with military objectivity, as muscles ‘shatter’ in a manner that reduces the body to shrapnel, a ‘waste’ that is a failed extension of the artillery they operate.

The soldiers undergo a purging of the horrors imprinted on their minds as their persistent contact with the abject anticipates Kristeva’s response that ‘I expel *myself*, I spit *myself out*, I abject *myself*’.[[643]](#footnote-643) Operating in a vicious circle, the abject itself is a site of contagion, setting in motion its ‘annihilat[ing]’ processes with anything with which it makes contact.[[644]](#footnote-644)Paul Peppis notes that ‘“Mental Cases” translates into verse form the psycho-pathological process whereby psychic trauma displaces external reality’.[[645]](#footnote-645) If the soldiers’ exterior surroundings are psychologically involuted to create a horrifying mind-scape, the earth is splattered with their ‘guts sprawling’ as the men turn themselves inside-out in a desperate attempt to scrape out their memories:[[646]](#footnote-646)

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.  
—Thus their heads wear this hilarious, hideous,  
Awful falseness of set-smiling corpses.  
—Thus their hands are plucking at each other;  
Picking at the rope-knouts of their scourging;  
Snatching after us who smote them, brother,  
Pawing us who dealt them war and madness.

(‘Mental Cases’, 19-28)

In this stanza Owen draws upon the traditions of the pastoral elegy. George Norlin notes that ‘the representation of Nature as sharing in the universal sorrow is a commonplace almost never absent from the pastoral dirge’.[[647]](#footnote-647) Recalling the moment in *Adonais* when ‘Morning sought / Her eastern watch tower […] / Wet with the tears that should adorn the ground’ (*Adonais*, 14.120-121), here ‘Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh’ in a similarly abject response. Owen exacerbates the suffering endured by nature in *Adonais*. When Shelley questions, ‘Whence are we, and why are we? of what scene / The actors or spectators?’ (*Adonais*, 21. 184-185) the self-indulgent tears of ‘Morning’ in *Adonais* aligns nature’s sympathetic response with that of a fickle ‘spectator’ who blocks out the suffering of the elegised figure by retreating to ‘Her eastern watch tower’ and wallowing in her own pain. In contrast, the ‘bleed[ing]’ ‘Dawn’ in ‘Mental Cases’ emulates the action of the soldiers themselves, assuming the position of ‘actor’ and fellow sufferer in a seemingly empathic response. However, the role of nature in ‘Mental Cases’ is not clear-cut, and instead ‘psychic trauma displaces external reality’.[[648]](#footnote-648) Rather than nature sharing in the suffering experienced by the soldiers, its performance in the stanza acts as a Shelleyan *trompe l’oeil*. Much like the Medusa gazes upon her dying body through the ‘mirror’ of her final breath (‘On the Medusa’, 37), the earth in ‘Mental Cases’ is a reflection of the soldiers’ horrifying physical condition, as the blood in their lungs spills over and stains the beauty of natural processes: ‘Sunlight seems a blood-smear; night becomes blood-black’. Nature’s suffering is a hallucination endured by the soldiers. If the soldiers perceive nature ‘sharing in [their] sorrow’, it serves only to intensify their trauma through its apparent empathic action. The soldiers are repulsed by their pastoral visions, as ‘their eyeballs shrink tormented / Back into their brains’. However, if their eyes turn inwards in a desperate act of self-preservation, their hands ‘have mutinied against [them]’ (‘A Terre’, 3).[[649]](#footnote-649) Ramazani argues that, for Owen, the elegy functions ‘not to heal but to re-open the wounds of loss’.[[650]](#footnote-650) The anaphoric lament ‘—Thus their heads’ […] / —Thus their hands’ shows the speaker’s attempts to clot the ‘bleed[ing]’ described in the previous lines with triple, monosyllabic stresses, only for the men to ‘pluck’ and ‘pick’ at their own ‘wound[s]’.

Recalling the manner in which Shelley penetrates his frames of narrative in ‘On the Medusa’ to position himself closer to the corpse, Owen thrusts his reader into the world described in ‘Mental Cases’ in order to subject us to our own ‘annihilat[ion]’.[[651]](#footnote-651) Ramazani writes ‘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 turn implicates the reader in Owen’s self-punishing fascination’.[[652]](#footnote-652) The repetition of short ‘i’ and long ‘ee’ sounds in ‘heads’, ‘wear’, ‘hilarious’, and ‘hideous’ forces the reader to emulate the figures’ ‘set-smiling’ when the poem is read aloud (‘Mental Cases’, 23, 24). Owen’s readership is as ‘implicate[d]’ in this suffering as the soldiers; we are as ‘hilarious’ and ‘hideous’ as they are and we too become figures to be mocked and examined. The power of the abject in ‘Mental Cases’ begins to transcend the boundary between art and reality, as we seem to contract the symptoms of abjection by appearing as demented as the figures upon which we gaze. As a result the poem becomes a ‘death chamber’ in which we too are cast as ‘corpses in a charnel’ (*Adonais*, 25*.* 217, 39. 349). Owen continues to describe the soldiers ‘Snatching after us who smote them, brother, / Pawing us who dealt them war and madness’ (‘Mental Cases’, 27-28). The line restages Shelley’s strategy in ‘On the Medusa’ of being at once outside the world of his narrative and bound within it. Owen’s use of ‘us’ ambiguously refers to himself and other soldiers who inflicted physical pain upon these men in combat, but he also transcends his position on the battlefield by simultaneously addressing readers who condoned the war. Howarth notes Owen’s use of multiple voices in ‘Mental Cases’, arguing that ‘Owen writes with an excess of formal patterning which only emphasises his divided allegiances, but he is equally sincere about all of them’.[[653]](#footnote-653) With ‘brother’ bitterly spat out at the end of the penultimate line, Owen resentfully cites his alignment with the reader as a spectator of the scene. If the battlefield was Hell, then the mental hospital is a deeper circle of the inferno that even Owen is not prepared for. The soldiers’ feeble ‘pawing’ generates sympathy and guilt in the reader that the poet simultaneously chastises. We are unable to reach out to the soldiers to consummate our sympathy and quell our guilt through contact with the abject. Instead, our guilt is left to fester, as we must realise that the poetry is a boundary through which we can perceive Owen’s elegised figures, but can ‘touch them not’ (‘Greater Love’, 24).

Though Burke and Kristeva explore opposite poles of aesthetic experience, both binaries encompass the same paradoxical responses of ‘fear’ and ‘repulsion’, and ‘attract[ion]’ and ‘delight’.[[654]](#footnote-654) Both Burke and Kristeva hold danger, distance, and fascination as key to their aesthetic experience, so that Burke’s words seem apt in consolidating Shelley’s and Owen’s engagement with the sublime and the abject: ‘Thus are two ideas as opposite as can be imagined reconciled in the extremes of both; and both in spite of their opposite nature brought to concur’.[[655]](#footnote-655) Shelley brings together Burke and Kristeva’s ideas in his claim that the corpse’s ‘horror and its beauty are divine’ (‘On the Medusa’, 4), and Owen is ‘lure[d]’ by both the ‘splendour’ and ‘hideous[ness]’ of dead and decaying bodies (‘Greater Love’, 5; ‘I saw his round mouth’s crimson’, 5; ‘Mental Cases’, 23). Kristeva argues that, ‘In the end, our only difference is our unwillingness to have a face-to-face confrontation with the abject. Who would want to be a prophet? […] We prefer to foresee or seduce; to plan ahead, promise a recovery, or esthetize’.[[656]](#footnote-656) Yet both Shelley and Owen become ‘prophet[s]’ anticipating Kristeva’s ‘willingness’ to explore the abject by responding to the ‘summons’ of the corpse within their poetry.[[657]](#footnote-657) Neither poet ‘foresee[s]’ or ‘promise[s] a recovery’, as it is precisely this lack of a clear and final consolation in each of their elegies that ensures the genre’s longevity. It is in their confrontation with dead and dying bodies that Shelley and Owen’s poetry becomes a site where the beautiful and the abject, and the mourner and the mourned are thrown into the ‘vortex’,[[658]](#footnote-658) with both poets diverting their elegies away from tradition and ‘distort[ing]’ the genre in the ‘ever-shifting mirror’ of their poetry (‘On the Medusa’, 37).[[659]](#footnote-659) Though Sacks and Ramazani observe Shelley and Owen respectively ‘driv[ing] […] the genre to the brink of its own ruin’ and ‘feeding off the body of its own traditions’,[[660]](#footnote-660) it is precisely when this ‘danger […] press[es] too nearly’ in their elegies that both poets find their ‘delight’.[[661]](#footnote-661) Rather than ‘elegiz[ing] […] elegy itself’,[[662]](#footnote-662) Shelley and Owen champion the vitality of a genre where all conventions continuously ‘burst / […] with change and motion’ (*Adonais*, 19.164-165).

**Chapter Five**

**‘Shelley would be stunned’: Keats, Shelley, and Owen’s Version of the Pastoral**

William Empson describes the pastoral poet as being ‘in contact with nature, [and] therefore “one with the universe”’,[[663]](#footnote-663) and in ‘Ode to the West Wind’ and ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ Shelley and Keats express a desire to ‘forget’ their human sufferings by becoming ‘a comrade of [nature’s] wanderings’ (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 21; ‘Ode to the West Wind’, 49).[[664]](#footnote-664) Yet these poems show Shelley and Keats foregrounding their struggle to establish and sustain such ‘contact’ with nature. Rather than viewing the natural world as a Wordsworthian site of ‘tranquil restoration’ (‘Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey’, 31),[[665]](#footnote-665) Shelley and Keats are inspired by nature’s destructive power that functions to ‘quicken a new birth’ (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 64). Any possible union of the self with this macabre version of the pastoral endangers the poets’ individual identity. The nightingale in Keats’s ode performs a siren song that is as ‘melodious’ as it is ‘perilous’ (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 8, 70), and Shelley’s west wind is both a ‘Destroyer and Preserver’ (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 14). In these poems Shelley and Keats are torn between the escape offered by a union with nature and the self that they would leave behind. Timothy Morton argues that for the Romantic poets ‘consistency is what nature is all about’,[[666]](#footnote-666) yet for Shelley and Keats the natural world is a ‘deceiving elf’ and a site of instability (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 74). If the pastoral tradition prompts what Terry Gifford describes as ‘a sense of idealization, nostalgia and escapism’,[[667]](#footnote-667) then Shelley and Keats caution themselves against over-idealising nature’s potential to ease their sufferings, blending suspicion and hope at the prospect of such a union.

While Shelley and Keats pursue relationships with the west wind and the nightingale respectively, for Owen, nature is a force that thrusts itself into humanity’s concerns, becoming itself a part of ‘The weariness, the fever, and the fret’ (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 23) suffered by the soldiers he surveys. Where Shelley and Keats are seduced by nature’s violent power, Owen is more vigilant, and presents his physical environment as something to be escaped from rather than escaped into. In a letter to his mother Owen describes the French countryside following the Somme Offensive as ‘pock-marked like the body of foulest disease and its odour is the breath of cancer’,[[668]](#footnote-668) as he witnesses a natural world that is as much a victim of the War as it is an agent of its violence. His generic vision is dramatically transformed from the sympathetic ‘sobbing breeze’ of his early work to the ‘merciless iced east winds’ that ‘knive’ him and his comrades on the Front (‘Sonnet Written at Teignmouth’, 14; ‘Exposure’, 1).[[669]](#footnote-669) In ‘Exposure’ and ‘Spring Offensive’ Owen incorporates the influences of Shelley and Keats to both reappraise their take on the pastoral genre and fashion a pastoral mode fit for a modern poetic landscape. In his pastoral poetry, Owen accepts as much of his Romantic inheritance as he declines. ‘Exposure’ and ‘Spring Offensive’ uncannily reanimate Shelley and Keats’s odes, with Owen being inspired by the morbidity of his predecessors’ pastoral visions while eschewing their tempered optimism. In Owen’s poems natural processes entangle themselves with the actions of the soldiers, so that his pastoral poetry provides an epilogue to that of Shelley and Keats, as if nature has already overpowered the poet’s self and Owen endures the nightmarish union with his environment that his predecessors sought to avoid. If Shelley and Keats ‘discover how nature always slips out of reach in the very act of grasping it’,[[670]](#footnote-670) then the tenacity of an environment that refuses to ‘yield’ the poet as it ‘clutch[es] and cl[ings]’ proves to be more traumatic for Owen (‘Spring Offensive’, 16, 17).[[671]](#footnote-671)

‘Ode to a Nightingale’ shows Keats placing as much caution as he does hope in nature’s powers of ‘tranquil restoration’ (‘Tintern Abbey’, 31). Defining the ‘poetical Character’, Keats writes to Richard Woodhouse that a poet ‘has no Identity—he is continually in for—and filling some other Body’.[[672]](#footnote-672) Yet ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ foregrounds the difficulty of Keats divesting himself of his ‘identity’ in order to unite with the bird, and his use of pronouns in the opening stanza reveals his reluctance to adhere to these terms. While Morton criticises Keats’s attempt to ‘slid[e] into [nature’s] slippery, objectal form’,[[673]](#footnote-673) he overlooks Keats’s awareness of the dangers of such a union. Rather than depicting nature as ‘a medium that sustains our being’,[[674]](#footnote-674) Keats presents the forest and the nightingale as deceptive beings with the power to destroy the poet:

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains

My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,

Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains

One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:

’Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,

But being too happy in thine happiness—

That thou, light-wingèd Dryad of the trees,

In some melodious plot

Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,

Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

(‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 1-10)

‘My’ begins the first two lines as Keats’s self-consciousness provides the thrust of the poem’s opening. This structural pattern of pronouns seems unfitting for an ode; Keats consciously puts himself before the object of his veneration in the ‘My’, ‘My’, and ‘I’ of the first two lines, emphasising the self that he knows he is putting at risk in his quest for a union with the bird. His disclosure that ‘’Tis not through envy of thy happy lot, / But being too happy in thine happiness’ elides the first person pronouns he emphasises in the poem’s opening. Here the subject of the stanza invisibly shifts from Keats to the bird, and by the end of the passage the first person pronouns are usurped by the ‘thy’, ‘thine’, and ‘thou’ of the nightingale. Helen Vendler notes Keats’s awareness of the nightingale’s song as ‘delusive enchantment’.[[675]](#footnote-675) Though ‘Keats had then his mortal illness upon him, and knew it’ at the time of writing the poem,[[676]](#footnote-676) it is less that Keats’s illness prompts the anaesthetising effect of the poem’s opening lines than it is the nightingale’s song. The situation of the poem *in medias res* eliminates the ceremony associated with the ode; there is no ritualised address to the ‘Nightingale’ of the title, with the bird’s presence announced almost anonymously in the ‘thy’ of line five. This suggests that Keats has encountered the nightingale prior to the beginning of the poem, and as such, that he is already under the spell of its song. The bird appears as a beckoning Siren, and when Odysseus listens to these creatures in *The Odyssey* he admits that ‘the heart inside me throbbed to listen longer’ (*The Odyssey*, 12. 209).[[677]](#footnote-677) As much as the bird leads Keats towards an as yet unknown fate, as the Sirens did Odysseus, the poet’s ‘heart aches’ to listen. Keats views the bird among ‘the trees / In some melodious plot / Of beechen green’, and the assonance of ‘beechen’ and ‘green’ ricochets from the ‘trees’ as the forest subtly reveals its duplicity, becoming an echo chamber that multiplies the voice of the bird. The harmony of vowel sounds cushions the more troubling remark upon the bird’s ‘melodious plot’, referring not only to an area of land but also to the possibility that the bird has designs on Keats. The enjambment sustains this interpretation, with the ‘plot’ only qualified as a physical space after the clarification of the following line. Yet Keats’s metre pushes aside his wariness of the bird as the suspicion is skipped over in the line’s trimeter. The final line shifts from iambs to more limber dactyls, as the waltzing rhythm of ‘Singest of summer in full-throated ease’ ‘ease[s]’ Keats deeper into the nightingale’s ‘melodious plot’.

Rather than enacting a desire to transcend the self, Keats’s pursuit of a union with the nightingale is powered by a desire to transcend suffering. In stanzas two and three he explains his wish to ‘fade [with thee] into the forest dim’ to ‘forget’ the ‘sorrow’ and ‘despairs’ endured by mankind (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 20, 21, 27, 28). Michael O’Neill observes that ‘empathy in the ode is at once burden and release, at odds with and inextricable from the longing for escape’.[[678]](#footnote-678) Keats’s desire to ‘leave the world unseen’ (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 19) is both prompted, made possible, and guiltily burdened by humanity’s suffering, as their ‘leaden’ ‘eye[s]’ blind them from Keats’s departure (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 28). ‘Away! away!’ (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 31) swiftly and brutally ensures the poet’s detachment from an oblivious mankind as Keats pursues the nightingale in stanza four:

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,

Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,

But on the viewless wings of Poesy,

Though the dull brain perplexes and retards.

Already with thee! tender is the night,

And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,

Clustered around by all her starry Fays;

But here there is no light,

Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown

Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

(‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 31-40)

Having kept his first and second person pronouns apart in the first stanza, here they appear in the same line as Keats states that ‘I will fly to thee’. He brings himself and the bird into close grammatical proximity even as he acknowledges the physical distance between them. However, the stanza’s metre contradicts the resolution with which Keats makes these movements towards the bird. O’Neill notes that ‘the poet who would be “continually [filling] in for—and filling some other Body” seems at times to flinch from the demands imposed by such absorption in otherness’.[[679]](#footnote-679) The line ‘Though the dull brain perplexes and retards’ veers from the poem’s iambic metre by opening with a pyrrhic foot followed by a spondee, as Keats follows the bird but loses his metrical footing in the process. He describes a ‘dull[ing]’ of his consciousness that is paradoxically amplified through the spondee, as his actions and metre alternately converge and diverge. The two unstressed syllables that end ‘Poesy’ shows the metre wandering perilously through the ‘winding mossy ways’ without clear direction, as Keats’s light, unstressed feet reveal tentativeness rather than confidence in his movements towards the bird. His exclamation, ‘Already with thee!’, signals a questionable imaginative union with the nightingale: the previous line warns of Keats’s confusion as the poem prompts us to question his reliability as a speaker, so that the poet leaves his reader in an equally ‘perplexed’ position. John Barnard highlights the poem’s ‘tensions between flux and stasis’,[[680]](#footnote-680) and this is enacted here through Keats’s manipulation of time. He claims his brain ‘retards’, yet he imaginatively covers the distance between himself and the bird in the gap between the words ‘retards’ and ‘Already’. Time slows and quickens within two words of the poetry as Keats’s movements remain ‘viewless’ to the reader. The bird slips away as he gazes at the ‘Queen-Moon’, and in the reverse foot of ‘Clustered’ Keats backtracks, his sense of place more ‘perplexed’ in his observation that ‘here there is no light’. While the word ‘Here’ signified the human world in the previous stanza (‘Ode to a Nightingale’ 24), Keats now resides in the territory of the nightingale. Yet ‘here there’ shows him as both ‘here’ and ‘there’, being in two referential spaces at once. Rather than having ‘no identity’,[[681]](#footnote-681) Keats’s ‘sole self’ blurs into a double vision caused by the nightingale’s melodious ‘opiate’ (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 72, 3). The linguistic glitch of ‘here there’ suggests Keats as being both within and outside the scene, unable and unwilling to move to fully merge his own identity with that of the bird.

Keats’s skyward gaze is rapidly brought down to earth in the next stanza as his planned movements are jeopardised by the will of his surroundings. Vendler observes that ‘Though Keats’s declared intent is by a “flight” to join the bird, the retirement into the forest grove is logically a horizontal motion; and the suggestions of Lethe and hemlock, make the poet’s progress one that goes downward into darkness’.[[682]](#footnote-682) The poet’s sense of being ‘sunk’ in the first stanza (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 4) foreshadows the action of the fifth stanza, as the flora of the forest mocks the ascension Keats had hoped for when it performs a macabre burial ritual:

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,

Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,

But, in embalmèd darkness, guess each sweet

Wherewith the seasonable month endows

The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild—

White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;

Fast fading violets covered up in leaves;

And mid-May’s eldest child,

The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,

The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

(‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 41-50)

In his letter to Woodhouse Keats affirms that ‘When I am in a room with People […] the identity of every one in the room begins to […] press upon me that, I am in a very little time annihilated’.[[683]](#footnote-683) Rather than ‘filling some other Body’, ‘some other Body’ begins to ‘fill’ Keats as the forest ‘press[es]’ upon him to the point of ‘annihilation’. Keats substitutes one kind of debilitation for another. His realisation that ‘I cannot see’ shows the darkness of the forest coaxing him to leave the world ‘unsee[ing]’ rather than ‘unseen’ (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 19), losing his powers of vision in a manner that recalls the ‘leaden’ ‘eye[s]’ in stanza three (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 28). The ‘dewy wine’ of the rose echoes the ‘draught of vintage’ in stanza two (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 11), as the intoxication rejected by Keats is disguised by the forest and re-emerges to tempt Keats into oblivion rather than transcendence. Keats’s senses become increasingly compromised as the woodland prepares the poet for burial. The air becomes ‘leaden’ with synaesthesia, as ‘soft incense hangs’, ‘perplexi[ing]’ (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 34) his olfactory and tactile senses. The phrase ‘But, in embalmèd darkness’ shrouds Keats in heavy plosives that emphasise the oppression of the air. The grave accent of the adjective ‘embalmèd’ extends the experience as the trisyllable smothers the line, and the downward intonation draws Keats deeper into the earth. The activity of the forest implies a subtle change in genre from pastoral ode to pastoral elegy. Peter M. Sacks notes ‘the catalogued offering of flowers’ as a key trope of the elegy,[[684]](#footnote-684) and Keats echoes Milton’s *Lycidas*, recalling the listing of ‘The white pink, and the pansy freaked with jet, / The glowing violet, / The musk-rose’ and other flowers that ‘strew the laureate hearse where Lycid lies’ (*Lycidas*, 144-146; 151).[[685]](#footnote-685) Keats identifies the ‘White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine; / Fast fading violets’ and ‘The coming musk-rose’ with which the forest perversely begins to bury Keats before he has actually died, lamenting the fact of death at the same time it performs the killing. Keats is buried with ‘fast fading violets’ which are themselves ‘covered up in leaves’, as Mark Sandy observes,[[686]](#footnote-686) so that the forest emphatically ‘press[es] upon’ the poet in a palimpsest of organic material. If the poet sought to avoid the anonymity of the expiring youth who simply ‘grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies’ (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 26), here he flirts with death, being transfixed and seduced by the ceremony granted by the ‘incense’, ‘embalm[ing]’, and floral ‘offering[s]’ provided by the forest.

While Keats initially charts the difficulties of escaping from the pains of the mortal world, the poetry now seems to chart as much an escape from nature as an escape into it. Stuart Curran notes the poet’s realisation that ‘An art of true dimensions must escape the bower, however comfortable it appears’.[[687]](#footnote-687) Aware of nature’s ‘plot’ (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 8) to consume his identity without necessarily granting him a higher state of being, Keats charts the shift from the ‘ease’ of the self-elegy back into pastoral ode (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 52):

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time

I have been half in love with easeful Death,

Called him soft names in many a musèd rhyme,

To take into the air my quiet breath;

Now more than ever seems it rich to die,

To cease upon the midnight with no pain,

While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad

In such an ecstasy!

Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—

To thy high requiem become a sod.

(‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 51-60)

Curran observes that ‘The “winding mossy ways” of the “Ode to a Nightingale” are those of a maze, all of which promise false egress and lead inexorably back to the same center’.[[688]](#footnote-688) The poem comes full circle as here Keats seriously considers the death that he sought to escape in stanza three (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 26), avowing that ‘Now more than ever seems it rich to die’. Keats frames the stanza as a direct response to the bird through the phrase ‘Darkling I listen’, so that this suicidal impulse that comes directly as a result of the nightingale’s song. Keats accepts that a union with the bird never was a viable option, and understands the deception of the song as a lure towards death rather than a means of transcendence. The realisation is reminiscent of the description of the Sirens in *The Odyssey*: ‘those creatures who will spellbind any man alive’, as ‘The high, thrilling song of the sirens will transfix him, lolling there in their meadow’ (*The Odyssey*, 12. 45, 50-51). Keats realises that the bird’s ‘melodious plot’ (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 8) is no more than a ‘high requiem’ that is as much a part of the poet’s burial ritual as the embalming flora that mourns the poet before his death has occurred. Nature’s indifference is revealed as the forced rhyme of ‘die’ and ‘ecstasy’ shows the relentlessness of the bird’s joy, a joy that endures despite the poet’s suffering. Vendler emphasises that ‘Keats abolishes the ear as well, at least in thought—“and I have ears in vain”—the bodily annihilation is complete, and Keats becomes the “sod”’.[[689]](#footnote-689) ‘[A]broad’ and ‘sod’ do not form a full rhyme, as Keats’s poetry become symptomatic of the ears that operate ‘in vain’. Harold Bloom views the poem as affirming the tragic realisation that ‘death […] is absolute and without memorial’.[[690]](#footnote-690) Nature cannot give any more meaning to death than the diseased men of the mortal world in stanza three, and cheats Keats into thinking his existence after death has any significance beyond its elaborate ceremony. The anticlimactic transformation into an anonymous ‘sod’ instead of ‘fly[ing]’ with the nightingale or entwining with the filigree of ‘eglantine’ and ‘violets’ (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 46, 47) shows the impossibility of Keats achieving a union with nature that works to his advantage.

If Keats is ‘half in love with easeful Death’ (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 52) he also remains half in love with his mortal existence, and this life drive prevails in the final stanza of the poem.[[691]](#footnote-691) That the word ‘Forlorn!’ ‘tolls’ Keats back to his ‘sole self’ in the final stanza does not occur by chance (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 71, 72). As Keats imagines the nightingale’s song ‘in faery lands forlorn’ one line previously (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 70), he reveals his return as deliberate and enacted through choice. The first iteration of ‘forlorn’ is positioned at the end of the penultimate stanza, at the cost of the more natural syntax of ‘forlorn faery lands’ (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 70). Keats chooses to let the adjective ring out in the gap between stanzas without interjecting words that might mar the two ‘tolls’ of its sound. The poet abandons his pursuit of self-effacement by ‘Fad[ing]’, ‘dissolv[ing]’, and ‘forget[ting]’ (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 21) in favour of affirming his ‘Identity’ through a heightened self-consciousness,[[692]](#footnote-692) shifting from listening to the bird to listening to his own poetry. Though the final stanza mourns the realisation that he cannot share in the nightingale’s ‘happiness’ (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 6), Keats fashions his own escape route:

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell

To toll me back from thee to my sole self!

Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well

As she is famed to do, deceiving elf.

Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades

Past the near meadows, over the still stream,

Up the hill-side; and now ’tis buried deep

In the next valley-glades:

Was it a vision, or a waking dream?

Fled is that music—Do I wake or sleep?

(‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 71-80)

O’Neill observes that ‘Although the long “Adieu’s” bid farewell in a spirit of loss, the last stanza is, affectingly, relieved (as well as bewildered) to have awoken from the spell cast by “fancy”’.[[693]](#footnote-693) The experience with the bird has become as ‘sad’ and ‘forlorn’ as the ‘sorrow’ endured by humankind (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 65, 70, 27), and Keats deliberately hampers his attempted flight through caesurae. Wolfson argues that ‘The vanishing point, “buried deep / In the next valley-glades” is near at hand, ready for revival’.[[694]](#footnote-694) Yet Keats’s poetry turns the tables on the nightingale to ensure the finality of its departure. He lists landmarks that divide him from the bird, emphatically casting it from vision, so that rather than ‘s[inking]’ (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 4) into the forest in stanza five it is the bird that is ‘buried deep’ in fragmented clauses. His view that ‘the fancy cannot cheat so well’ rests between the dashed hope that he wanted it to ‘cheat’ him more convincingly, but also that he has overcome the ‘dull’ and ‘perplexed’ status of his brain and outwitted nature’s illusion (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 34). Keats acknowledges a fatalism that the beginning of his ode kept at bay, as the previous iterations of ‘fade’ (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 20, 21, 47) in the ode foretell the poem’s conclusion. Wolfson claims that the ode ‘parallels but never coincides with the birdsong it tracks’.[[695]](#footnote-695) Yet when Keats states that ‘thy plaintive anthem fades’, apparently speaking of the nightingale’s ‘requiem’ (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 60) the line also acts as a self-address that describes the end of his own poem. There is a synergy in the two counterpointed melodies, as Keats’s song produces the nightingale’s song as much as the bird’s music inspires Keats’s music. Paradoxically both songs ‘coincide’ at the very point of their departure. Asking, ‘Do I wake or sleep?’, it is only with the bird’s ‘fad[ing]’ that Keats can depart. Deborah Forbes argues that at this point ‘we come full circle to the beginning of the poem, feeling numbness become conscious sleeping’.[[696]](#footnote-696) Yet Keats deliberately stops short of ‘com[ing] full circle’, ending the poem questioning whether he sleeps rather than consciously affirming it. The last stanza is ‘relieved’, but performs an intentional ‘bewilderment’ as it remains between consciousness and unconsciousness, suffering and insensibility, and reality and imagination. The final question functions less as a rhetorical question to the reader than a moment of self-address. Keats relinquishes the binds of the ode; with the object of his veneration now gone, he is at once the poem’s ‘sole’ orator and subject. He both speaks and listens to himself in a final act of self-affirmation, returning to his ‘Identity’ while avoiding a return to the painful reality of the poem’s opening.[[697]](#footnote-697) With the poet now free from the charms of the nightingale’s siren song that promised escape only to render him more ‘Forlorn’, it is only by ending the poem at this precise moment and in such uncertainty that Keats can transcend the sorrows contained within it.

In ‘Ode to the West Wind’, Shelley shares Keats’s hesitance to merge his identity with nature. While Keats describes his own feelings in the first stanza of ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ rather than directly commenting on the power of the bird’s song, in the first section of ‘Ode to the West Wind’ Shelley withholds himself from the eponymous zephyr so as to avoid the path of its destruction:

O, wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn’s being,

Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead

Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,

Pestilence-stricken multitudes: O, thou,

Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed

The wingèd seeds, where they lie cold and low,

Each like a corpse within its grave, until

Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow

Her clarion o’er the dreaming earth, and fill

(Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)

With living hues and odours plain and hill:

Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;

Destroyer and Preserver; hear, O, hear!

(‘Ode to the West Wind’, 1-14)

Morton views environmental poetry as ‘a way of registering the feeling of being surrounded by others, or more abstractly, by an otherness, something that is not the self’.[[698]](#footnote-698) The repeated address of ‘thou’ in lines one, two, and five emphasise the wind as something that exists external to Shelley’s ‘self’, with the first section of the ode markedly without first person pronouns in comparison to the opening of Keats’s ode: ‘My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains / My sense’ (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 1-2). Though Shelley shapes the opening lines of the poem around the wind through the repeated ‘thou’ pronouns, the west wind slips out of his poetic grasp even as he attempts to describe it. If each image begins with the wind as its subject, they each take flight and end with the activity of ‘the leaves dead’, ‘The wingèd seeds’, and ‘sweet buds’, so that the wind refuses to be the tenor of the metaphors designed to describe it. The wind operates invisibly, being that which ‘from whose unseen presence the leaves dead / Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing’. Through the passive construct of ‘the leaves dead / Are driven’, rather than ‘the wind drives the dead leaves’, the syntax elides the wind’s agency in favour of the leaves’ activity. The ‘driv[ing]’ action of the west wind again goes uncredited at the end of the line, as the verb ‘fleeing’ implies that the leaves generate their own kinetic impetus rather than being the passive recipients of the wind’s power. The wind becomes increasingly ‘unseen’ as its grammatical presence fades almost as soon as it is announced. Shelley’s addresses to the wind as the pronoun ‘Thou’ serve to remind the reader that Shelley is hymning the wind in this section rather than the leaves, forcefully marking the poem as an ode even when the subject it venerates fades from view. Shelley addresses the wind as a ‘Destroyer and Preserver’, and he structures the section to dedicate himself to both aspects of the wind’s activity. Shelley describes the wind’s power as a ‘Destroyer’ in the first three stanzas, where the proximity of the words ‘being’ and ‘dead’ in the first two lines foregrounds the ‘swift’ effect of the wind’s life-taking force (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 56). The leaves that are caught up in the wind in line three cannot but fall victim to its life-draining power, which renders them ‘Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red, / Pestilence-stricken multitudes’. Richard Cronin notes that ‘“hectic” is a disease word, [and] “pale” refers more usually to sickly faces than leaves’, so that the colours ‘might just as easily list the symptoms of various diseases’.[[699]](#footnote-699) The ‘dead’ leaves’ presence as ‘pale’ ‘ghosts’ recalls the youth that ‘grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies’ described by Keats (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 26). The feverish hues invoke a bodily suffering, as if the dead leaves are fleshed out only to be killed off again when they are ‘str[uck]’ in the next line. The iambs of the listed colours succumb to the wind’s chaotic commotion in the next, with ‘Pestilence-stricken multitudes’ disrupting the metre as the leaves are lifted by the wind into a more tumultuous existence. Natural decay bleeds into the human world when it is described in such bodily terms, and Shelley keeps a distance from the wind as he assesses the risk that he too may be rendered ‘a corpse within its grave’.

Shelley counters the west wind’s destruction with its power as a ‘Preserver’ in the second half of the section (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 14). O’Neill notes ‘Shelley’s virtuosic conversion of *terza rima* sonnets into an ode’,[[700]](#footnote-700) and by viewing the first fourteen-line section of the poem as a self-contained sonnet, the shift from the west wind in autumn to its manifestation in the spring in the section’s eighth line occurs as a Petrarchan *volta*. Shelley’s use of form adds weight to his vision of the sestet as providing a ‘resolution’ to the chaos described in the octave.[[701]](#footnote-701) The enjambment of ‘until’ amplifies the anticipation for the change offered by the *volta* (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 8), as Shelley plays on the features of the sonnet so that the spring seems like the positive development for which the reader has been waiting. However, by predicting nature’s resurrection in the future tense of ‘shall’, Shelley gambles on its capacity to ‘quicken a new birth’ (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 64). In *Queen Mab* he hails the ‘Spirit of Nature’ as a ‘Life of interminable multitudes’ (*Queen Mab*, 3. 226, 227),[[702]](#footnote-702) and these lines anticipate the way in which Shelley’s ode glosses over the wind’s ‘multitud[inous]’ nature. Though the second half of the section envisions positive change so as to temper the wind’s violence, the only aspect of the ‘Wild Spirit’ Shelley can guarantee is its current role as a ‘Destroyer’ (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 13, 14). If the *volta* offers a superficial resolution, it is so that the final line of the section can ground the wind’s power more effectively. Though Shelley withholds his selfhood from the poem in order to foreground the west wind as his subject in this section, the final words of the stanza remind the reader of his presence as the poem’s human speaker. ‘[H]ear, O, hear!’ becomes, in various forms, the refrain of the first three sections of the poem (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 14, 28, 42). Cronin observes that ‘Each of the first three stanzas is a tangle of subordinate clauses which become a sentence only in the stanza’s last word, its main clause, “hear!”’.[[703]](#footnote-703) The suspension of the main verb of each section adds to the speed at which the passages are read, so that the reader anticipates Shelley’s imperative address to the wind as each section’s grammatical ‘resolution’. The authority of the instruction is heightened by this syntactical weight so that implicit in the invocation of the wind to ‘hear’ him is his assertion of himself as an equally powerful ‘voice’ (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 41).

If Shelley supresses his selfhood in the first three sections of ‘Ode to the West Wind’, in the fourth he thrusts it centre-stage as he delivers the message he implores the wind to ‘hear!’ (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 14, 28, 42):

If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear;

If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;

A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share

The impulse of thy strength, only less free

Than thou, O, Uncontrollable! If even

I were as in my boyhood, and could be

The comrade of thy wanderings over Heaven,

As then, when to outstrip thy skiey speed

Scarce seemed a vision; I would ne’er have striven

As thus with thee in prayer in my sore need.

Oh! lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!

I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!

A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed

One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud.

(‘Ode to the West Wind’, 43-56)

These lines mark the first appearance of the pronoun ‘I’ in the poem. Shelley’s self-assertions drive the first two lines of the section, with the anaphoric repetition of ‘If I’ affirming Shelley’s place in the poem with iambic stress, challenging the repetitions of ‘Thou’ in the poem’s opening (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 1, 2, 5). Shelley’s first person pronouns appear eight times in this section, and it features a nearly equal number of ‘thou’, ‘thee’, and ‘thy’ iterations that signify the west wind, so that the section is charged by the tension between its first and second person pronouns. In August 1819, two months before he began ‘Ode to the West Wind’, Shelley writes to Leigh Hunt ‘So much for self—*self*, that burr that will stick to one’.[[704]](#footnote-704) Describing his human identity through a botanical image, once introduced, Shelley’s ‘self’ tenaciously presides over the opening clauses in the repetition of ‘If I’. Rather than echoing Keats’s desire to transcend his identity and ‘[fill] some other Body’,[[705]](#footnote-705) Shelley is aware that any attempt to shake off the ‘burr’ of ‘self’ will be unsuccessful, so that his wish to be a ‘dead leaf’ knows its own impossibility. In the same way Keats refuses to be an insentient ‘sod’ in ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 60), even if it means a union with nature, Shelley will not commit to any loss of self. Recalling Keats’s commitment to the nightingale, ‘I will fly to thee’ (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 31), Shelley’s conditional phrasing of ‘If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee’ declares his willingness to sacrifice his selfhood at the same time that he grammatically withholds the option of doing so. Sandy notes that ‘What makes this attempt even less hopeful is Shelley’s tentative repetition of “If I were”. He is forced to acknowledge again the divide between the natural and the human, between the Wind’s spirit and his own’.[[706]](#footnote-706) Though the poet flatters the wind with his commitment, he frames his poetry so as not to commit completely to an unappealing form of union with the wind, deliberately thwarting his own attempts to be a part of its kinetic process. Morton recognises Shelley as part of a ‘countertradition’ in his environmental poetry, viewing him as a poet ‘for whom nature did not stand in for an authority for which you sacrifice your autonomy and reason’.[[707]](#footnote-707) Shelley concedes that were he be swept up by the wind he would be ‘less free / Than thou’, and his syntax signals this realisation as a crucial impasse in the poem. The ‘If I’ clauses do not end with any grammatical completion, so that ‘O, Uncontrollable!’ should be where the conditions laid out in the first clauses of the sentence find their fulfilment, but instead Shelley suddenly abandons such possibilities in the spontaneous exclamation. The knowledge that he would be ‘less free / Than thou’ stops the poet in his syntactical tracks, so that he deliberately avoids the fate that these conditions combine to create. It is less that he pleads for a union with nature than he searches for a union on his terms, with the stanza driven by half-desired hopes which Shelley ensures never come to fruition.

Morton asserts that ecological writing becomes ‘shortsighted’ when it ‘insist[s] that we are “embedded” in nature’.[[708]](#footnote-708) At this point in the poem, however, Shelley realises the counter-possibility of nature becoming ‘“embedded”’ in the human. The descriptive structure of the ode, which relates the wind’s effect on ‘land, sky, and sea’ in the first three sections, culminates in the fourth.[[709]](#footnote-709) The ‘If I were’ clauses self-consciously restate the different environments explored by the poem in the systematic reference to ‘a dead leaf’, ‘a swift cloud’, and ‘A wave’ (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 43, 44, 45). Shelley’s plea to the wind to ‘lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!’ compresses the sections of the poem further in the poet’s hectic shapeshifting (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 53), so that nature increasingly converges in the image of Shelley. As if recalling the density of the wind’s ‘solid atmosphere’ that threatens to ‘burst’ (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 27, 28), he deliberately pushes the pastoral to its limits in the tension between his human self and natural objects. While the first two sentences of the section stretch over five and six lines, Shelley’s plea, ‘Oh! lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud! / I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!’ serves as the section’s frenzied cacophony by compressing four sentences into two lines (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 53-54). Empson explains that the ‘proper tone’ of pastoral poetry ‘is one of humility’,[[710]](#footnote-710) and though Timothy Webb argues that this section insists on ‘the weakness of the supplicant’,[[711]](#footnote-711) the exclamation marks hamper Shelley’s attempted flight as if he never wanted to be ‘lift[ed]’ by the wind at all. The final couplet of the section shifts the tone of this invocation from wild desperation to composed solemnity. Acting as a Shakespearean *volta*, the shift in tone is matched by a shift in speed, as Shelley resumes the enjambment of his stately lines rather than puncturing them with caesurae, carefully avoiding ‘outstrip[ping]’ his own ‘speed’ in favour of more calculated movements (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 50). Revealing that ‘A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed / One too like thee’ (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 55-56), Shelley’s dreams of flight are ‘weigh[ed]’ down as swiftly as they are dreamt up. In his assertion that he has been ‘bowed’ having been ‘like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud’, he assumes the ‘weak’ posture appropriate for a ‘supplicant’ of a pastoral ode through a reminder of his strength.

Gifford notes that ‘Retreat and return is the essential pastoral momentum’.[[712]](#footnote-712) If Shelley calls upon the wind to ‘quicken a new birth’ in the final section of the poem (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 64), such progression is enacted through a ‘Retreat and return’ as Shelley invokes the images and movements of the poem’s opening section:

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:

What if my leaves are falling like its own!

The tumult of thy mighty harmonies

Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,

Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,

My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe

Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!

And, by the incantation of this verse,

Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth

Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!

Be through my lips to unawakened earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O, wind,

If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

(‘Ode to the West Wind’, 57-70)

Having tried to elide his identity in the first section, Shelley writes himself back into the poem, rendering himself as part of the Ode’s regenerative cycle. The ‘leaves dead’ in the first stanza become Shelley’s ‘dead thoughts’, the ‘clarion’ of the wind in Spring is now ‘The trumpet of a prophecy’ performed through Shelley’s own ‘lips’, and he bids the wind to ‘Drive’ his thoughts in the same way the ‘sweet buds’ and ‘leaves’ were ‘driven’ by the wind in the first section (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 2, 10, 11, 2, 3). Instead of ‘avoiding backwards reference’,[[713]](#footnote-713) as Cronin argues, Shelley returns to the first section to re-imagine his relation to nature in an environment that previously excluded him. The subtle alterations in his proposals to the wind throughout the section facilitate this strategy. Following his plea for the wind to ‘lift me as a […] leaf’ in the previous section (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 53), Shelley shifts from pleading for an escape to asking the wind to make use of his own powers in his request to ‘Make me thy lyre’. ‘Be thou me’ alters the balance of power to place Shelley and the wind on a more equal footing, only for the terms to shift swiftly again in the poet’s demand that the wind ‘Scatter’ ‘my words’ and ‘Be through my lips’. His requests sound more like instructions that seek to bring the wind under his control rather than supplications to a saviour. Shelley repeatedly begins lines with imperatives in this final section: ‘Make’, ‘Drive’, ‘Scatter’, and ‘Be’. Where the first three sections delay their main verb ‘hear’ (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 14, 28, 42), here, there is a more resolute sense of direction so that Shelley proves his equal worth as the poem’s ‘impetuous one’. Beseeching the wind to use him as an instrument in the same way as it does the forest, Shelley envisions the wind ‘tak[ing] from both a deep, autumnal tone, / Sweet though in sadness’. But this merging does not prove to be enough for Shelley; just as the nightingale prompted a vision more ‘forlorn’ for Keats (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 70, 71), Shelley’s cooperation with the forest is tainted by ‘sadness’. The word ‘tolls’ (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 72) Shelley back from sacrificing his selfhood and blending with the sounds of the forest to asserting himself in a more direct relationship with the wind. The reverie is abruptly ceased in the caesura following his ‘sadness’. As with Keats, the term marks a renewed drive towards self-preservation. Shelley’s assertion that the wind should ‘Be thou, Spirit fierce, / My spirit’ embeds within its clauses his consideration of the wind as a highly formidable power. Shelley tackles the wind head-on as if it is a direct challenge rather than a ‘prayer in his sore need’ (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 52), revealing the speaker’s implicit awareness of the risk of containing a ‘Spirit’ so ‘fierce’ within his own being.

Though Shelley envisions the west wind empowering him in the last section, the final couplet reveals him at his most sceptical of its restorative capacity. Morton explains that ‘nature becomes, in the Romantic period and afterward, a way of healing […] modern society’,[[714]](#footnote-714) a view Shelley gestures towards by using the wind as a ‘parallel between natural regeneration and social renewal’ in his ode.[[715]](#footnote-715) Yet Shelley calls into question whether the pastoral can still offer humanity the restoration it seeks. The exclamation marks and imperatives that give the final section its assertiveness and majesty only amplify the uncertainty that closes the poem. Shelley asks, ‘O, wind, / If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?’ (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 69-70). This ending is doubly uncertain; while Shelley seems to doubt the arrival of spring by phrasing the line as a question, the opening ‘If’ avoids the assumption that even winter will come. The half rhyme of ‘wind’ and ‘behind’ that should ring in the couplet ending adds to this inconclusiveness. While the question that ends ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ allows Keats to move beyond the suffering in the poem (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 80), Shelley ends in the midst of such turmoil, questioning whether humanity can replicate nature’s change from destruction to preservation. Yet this uncertainty shows Shelley refusing to subscribe to any blind faith that a ‘new birth’ for humanity will coincide with the arrival of spring (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 64). The end of the poem is less a ‘trumpet[ing]’ of a prophecy than a whisper that cements the epistemological distance between Shelley and the wind (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 69). Rather than affirming a newfound camaraderie between the self and nature, Shelley celebrates the possibility that he might independently parallel the processes of his environment even as the ending casts him adrift from the wind’s guiding impetus. In an ode that O’Neill describes as ‘glimps[ing] the destruction of its best hopes’,[[716]](#footnote-716) Shelley insists on interrogating his own prophecy. Even if the wind will ‘Drive’ his ‘dead thoughts’ (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 63), Shelley makes no assumptions that they will ‘quicken a new birth’ for humanity. A union with nature is not an end in itself for Shelley, as he keeps in play his awareness that the onus falls back onto the self to bring about the change that the natural world inspires. Though he champions the west wind as a ‘Destroyer and Preserver’ (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 14), its ‘Destr[uction]’ is the only guarantee offered by the poem, with its ‘Preservation’ only a distant and hard-earned possibility.

In ‘Exposure’ Owen shares Shelley and Keats’s concerns with nature and the self. Yet if Keats intends to use the pastoral as a means of transcending the self, and Shelley as a means of affirming the self, Owen’s pronouns reveal his identity as having already slipped from his grasp:

Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knive us…

Wearied we keep awake because the night is silent…

Low, drooping flares confuse our memory of the salient…

Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous,

But nothing happens.

Watching, we hear the mad gusts tugging on the wire,

Like twitching agonies of men among its brambles.

Northward, incessantly, the flickering gunnery rumbles,

Far off, like a dull rumour of some other war.

What are we doing here?

(‘Exposure’, 1-10)

Owen begins the poem with Keats’s ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ ringing in his ears, as the sentiment and cadence of ‘My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains / My sense’ is echoed in ‘Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knive us’ (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 1-2).[[717]](#footnote-717) Owen deliberately uses a voice that owes so much to his predecessor even as he signals a change in direction. He shifts from the singular first person pronouns used by Shelley and Keats to the plural ‘Our’, ‘us’, and ‘we’. These words occur in swift succession in the opening two lines as Owen’s individual self is imperceptible amidst the anonymous mass. Bookending the opening line with ‘Our’ and ‘us’, it is weighted on either side by communal experience rather than the personal suffering endured by Keats. Edna Longley argues that the reader’s experience of Owen’s poetry is always limited, stating that ‘We have to be there’, a position that is impossible for the reader.[[718]](#footnote-718) Crucially in ‘Exposure’, the pronoun ‘we’ deliberately does not include the reader in its communal suffering. If the soldiers are ‘us’, the reader is ‘them’, in a subtle process of othering that marks the experiential divide between those who served in the War and those who did not. The reader can learn and understand, but can never truly share in the soldiers’ experience.

Owen not only channels ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ in the opening stanzas of ‘Exposure’. In the image of the ‘winds’ that ‘knive’ the soldiers (‘Exposure’, 1) he recalls the destructive power of Shelley’s west wind. In ‘Exposure’ Owen draws upon his experience of the Somme, and in a letter to his mother dated February 1917, he writes

my Platoon had no Dug-Outs, but had to lie in the snow under the deadly wind. […]

The marvel is that we did not all die from cold. As a matter of fact, only one of my party actually froze to death before he could be got back, but I am not able to tell how many have ended up in hospital. I had no real casualties from shelling, though for 10 minutes every hour whizz-bangs fell a few yards short of us. Showers of soil rained on us, but no fragments of shell could find us. […]

We were marooned on a frozen desert.

There is not a sign of life on the horizon and a thousand signs of death.[[719]](#footnote-719)

The soldiers of ‘Exposure’ take on the role of the leaves in ‘Ode to the West Wind’, being driven by the wind to ‘lie cold and low, / Each like a corpse within its grave’ (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 6-7), in a manner that bestows Shelley’s simile with a strikingly literal resonance. If Shelley hopes the west wind will shift from being a ‘Destroyer’ in autumn to a ‘Preserver’ in the spring (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 14), Owen describes ‘iced east winds’ that show no sign of relenting their destruction (‘Exposure’, 1). Bloom defines ‘Clinamen’ as the process in which ‘the precursor poem went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved precisely in the direction that the new poem moves’.[[720]](#footnote-720) Though this describes the relationship between ‘Ode to the West Wind’ and ‘Exposure’ ‘accurately up to a certain point’, Owen’s poem nevertheless seems to ‘swerve’ from this definition. ‘Exposure’ exists in the eternal autumn of the west wind’s destruction (‘Ode to the West Wind’ 1-8), with Owen living without any hope of the ‘Spring’ towards which Shelley’s poem tentatively aspires (Ode to the West Wind’, 70). Rather than ‘swerv[ing]’ from Shelley’s ode, Owen views it as ‘going accurately up to a certain point’, and curtails it. Shelley implores the west wind to ‘lift’ him from his misery, and in lines that gesture towards the suffering of Christ he laments ‘I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!’[[721]](#footnote-721) (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 54). Owen sustains this biblical resonance. However, rather than depicting the potential salvation offered by the west wind, Owen’s east wind is figured as God’s means of retribution. In Exodus, God smites the Egyptians by having ‘the East wind br[ing] the locusts’ (Exodus, 10. 13),[[722]](#footnote-722) and in Jonah he ‘prepared a vehement East wind’ to punish the prophet (Jonah, 4. 8). In his letter Owen describes how ‘Showers of soil rained on us’, and this upside-down world gestures towards the derangement of the east wind of ‘Exposure’. The shift from the wind being Shelley’s elusive ‘comrade’ to an elusive enemy renders the soldiers’ as unhinged as the ‘mad gusts’ that besiege them (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 49; Exposure’, 6). Owen explains that they ‘keep awake because the night is silent’ (‘Exposure’, 2), where, instead of noise, it is paradoxically the overbearing quietness of the soldiers’ environment that prevents them from sleeping: ‘Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous’ (‘Exposure’, 4). In a draft of the poem ‘whisper’ was ‘listen’,[[723]](#footnote-723) so that in the final version the sentries counteract their environment rather than assimilating themselves within it. ‘[C]urious’ and ‘nervous’ reiterate the ‘whisper’ of the sentries, as the ‘silence’ resounds in the sibilance of the rest of the line. The word ‘silence’ is itself repeated from ‘silent’ two lines previously (‘Exposure’, 2) as it troublingly ‘whisper[s]’ across the stanza. Shelley’s question, ‘If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?’ (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 70), receives an answer in Owen’s refrain that ‘nothing happens’ (‘Exposure’, 5, 15, 20, 40). Yet this is less Owen’s rebuttal of his predecessor than a response to a world that seems to have wrought ‘the destruction of [Shelley’s] best hopes’.[[724]](#footnote-724) Positioned at the end of the first, third, fourth, and final stanza, the refrain does not fit into the patterns of rhyme and metre that the rest of the poetry follows. The line’s dimeter and the dislodged positioning of its lineation ‘maroons’ the statement from the rest of the stanza.[[725]](#footnote-725) While Shelley whispers the potential failure of his prophecy in the question that ends his ode, Owen’s failed hopes are ‘expos[ed]’ on his poetry’s ‘salient’ topography (‘Exposure’, 3).

Tim Kendall argues that ‘Exposure’ ‘criticiz[es] the Romantic tradition through attacks on carefully selected targets’.[[726]](#footnote-726)However, while Owen rejects Shelley and Keats’s hope in nature to ease their suffering, he amplifies their growing mistrust of the natural world:

The poignant misery of dawn begins to grow . . .

We only know war lasts, rain soaks, and clouds sag stormy.

Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army

Attacks once more in ranks on shivering ranks of grey,

But nothing happens.

Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence.

Less deathly than the air that shudders black with snow,

With sidelong flowing flakes that flock, pause, and renew;

We watch them wandering up and down the wind’s nonchalance,

But nothing happens.

(‘Exposure’, 11-20)

While Shelley only sees the west wind functioning as a ‘Destroyer’, with its power as a ‘Preserver’ merely conjecture (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 14), Owen elides the optimism of his predecessor by resigning himself to the view that destruction and suffering endures: ‘We only know war lasts, rain soaks, and clouds sag stormy’. But if the War poses an immense danger, nature threatens twice as much. In the three clauses of the line only one relates to human conflict and the second two refer to nature’s destructive power. While Owen ‘had no real casualties from shelling’ during the experience of the Somme described in his letter,[[727]](#footnote-727) the soldiers’ exposure to the wind and cold led to death and hospitalisation. Here, bullets are ‘Less deathly than the air’, as Owen’s environment poses a more imminent threat. If ‘Shelley sees himself as the prophet of a rising wind which heralds destruction of an old world and creation of a new’,[[728]](#footnote-728) as Bloom puts it, Owen is unable to envision the ‘creation of a new’ world that comes at the expense of destruction. Shelley’s description of the west wind as a ‘congregated might / Of vapours, from whose solid atmosphere / Black rain, and fire, and hail will burst’ (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 26-28) is refigured in Owen’s blunt promise that ‘rain soaks, and clouds sag stormy’. O’Neill argues that ‘Shelley expects the wind to “Scatter” his words, both to disseminate them widely and to let them fall in an almost random way […] as though Shelley were an Orphic poet whose words were to be dismembered by a wind which destroys as well as preserves’.[[729]](#footnote-729) Owen revives the language and processes at work in Shelley’s ode as his predecessor’s ‘dead thoughts’ are ‘Scatter[ed]’ within his poetry but in the haphazard manner Shelley feared (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 66, 63), so that the hope and optimism that inspired them fails to reignite. While Shelley envisions ‘sweet buds’ that are guided by the west wind ‘like flocks to feed in air’ in the spring (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 11), Owen views ‘flowing flakes that flock, pause, and renew’. Bloom describes Shelley’s spring wind as ‘a shepherdess of renewed pastoral innocence’,[[730]](#footnote-730) guiding the buds as if herding its ‘flock’. Yet Owen subverts this pastoral trope in ‘Exposure’, as the ‘flock[ing]’ of flakes figure the east wind as a demented shepherd. The snow transforms the growth of Shelley’s buds into an ominous ‘renew[al]’, with even the ‘air’ ‘shudder[ing]’ in response to its haunting accumulation. Sandy observes that Shelley is ‘confronted in nature’s antipathy’ in the first section of ‘Ode to the West Wind’.[[731]](#footnote-731) Yet in ‘Exposure’ humanity bears the brunt of nature’s destructive processes, as the snowflakes ‘renew’ only to smother the ‘faces’ of the soldiers in the next stanza (‘Exposure’, 21). While Ronald Tetreault views Shelley as struggling ‘with the forces of an indifferent universe’,[[732]](#footnote-732) ‘the wind’s nonchalance’ in ‘Exposure’ amplifies the west wind’s ‘indifferen[ce]’ to carelessness, with the War rendering it a ‘mad gust’ (‘Exposure’, 6) that becomes even more unpredictable and ‘Uncontrollable’ than its Shelleyan precursor (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 47).

Owen envisions the English countryside and French ‘home[s]’ in order to counter-act the horror of his environment (‘Exposure’, 26). However, while Gifford defines the pastoral as a genre characterised by ‘idealization, nostalgia and escapism’,[[733]](#footnote-733) the fifth and sixth stanzas of ‘Exposure’ deliberately fail to fulfil these conventions:

Pale flakes with fingering stealth come feeling for our faces—

We cringe in holes, back on forgotten dreams, and stare, snow-dazed,

Deep into grassier ditches. So we drowse, sun-dozed,

Littered with blossoms trickling where the blackbird fusses.

—Is it that we are dying?

Slowly our ghosts drag home: glimpsing the sunk fires, glozed

With crusted dark-red jewels; crickets jingle there;

For hours the innocent mice rejoice: the house is theirs;

Shutters and doors, all closed: on us the doors are closed,—

We turn back to our dying.

(‘Exposure’, 21-30)

Similar to the way Keats sought to leave the forest in his ode rather than ‘escap[e]’ into nature, the pastoral prompts Owen to escape from his exterior surroundings. As the soldiers ‘cringe in holes, back on forgotten dreams’, Owen’s invocation of ‘forgotten dreams’ recalls the ‘dream’ of his precursor (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 79), with the soldiers’ ‘ach[ing]’ ‘brains’ and ‘drows[iness]’ reminiscent of Keats’s ‘dull brain’ and ‘drowsy numbness’ (‘Exposure’, 1, 23; ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 34, 1). Keats avoids the death of the youth who ‘grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies’, only to face an equally unappealing fate as an insentient ‘sod’ in his union with the forest (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 26, 60). In the same way, the soldiers’ imaginations coerce them from one grave into another. They transcend the shell ‘holes’ only to find themselves sinking ‘Deep into grassier ditches’ as Owen and his comrades ‘dream’ of the English countryside. Picturing himself ‘Littered with blossoms trickling where the blackbird fusses’, the reverie glitters in its high vowel sounds, and the shift from ‘snow-dazed’ to ‘sun-dozed’ pacifies nature from a bewildering enemy into a nurturing presence. Recalling Keats being led by the nightingale to be buried by the flora of the forest, Owen and his comrades are ‘Littered with blossoms’ ‘where the blackbird fusses’. His question, ‘Is it that we are dying?’ deliberately ventriloquises Keats’s ‘Do I wake or sleep?’ (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 80). While Kendall argues that ‘Exposure’ ‘attacks’ and ‘critici[ses]’ his predecessor,[[734]](#footnote-734) it is less that Owen attacks Keats than he appropriates his precursor’s vision in an environment where the stakes are higher, where ‘sleep[ing]’ equates to ‘dying’. Like the leaves of Shelley’s ‘Ode to the West Wind’ which ‘Are driven, like ghosts’ (‘Ode to the West Wind, 3), the soldiers’ ‘ghosts’ slowly ‘drag home’ in ‘Exposure’. Gifford explains that ‘the *Idylls* of Theocritus, the first pastoral text, gave us the word “idyllic” and established a sense of idealization’.[[735]](#footnote-735) If Owen momentarily escapes the War through his dreams of the English countryside, then this Theocritean ‘idyll’ is swiftly destroyed upon the soldiers’ discovery that ‘home’ is just as alienating as the battlefield. Owen writes of how ‘the innocent mice rejoice: the house is theirs’, as nature claims the domestic space for itself. Jon Silkin observes that ‘nature’s most vulnerable creatures are […] judgementally hostile to man’, with ‘joyful activity only possible in his absence’.[[736]](#footnote-736) Owen describes ‘Shutters and doors, all closed: on us the doors are closed’. Shutting out humanity, the mice and crickets displace the soldiers so that their new ‘home’ becomes the battlefield from which they sought escape. Though ‘Retreat and return is essential to the pastoral momentum’,[[737]](#footnote-737) the soldiers of ‘Exposure’ perform a mock-pastoral ‘return’, as the soldiers ‘turn back to our dying’. In a draft of the poem, Owen writes ‘Return’ instead of ‘We turn’. The shift from the imperative marks the soldiers’ resigned acceptance, as the only ‘return’ ‘essential’ to their ‘momentum’ is one that takes them back to the battlefield and the elements that bombard them.

While Shelley prophesises what will happen in the ‘Spring’ (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 9), for Owen, the season represents a future too distant to gamble on in the midst of war. Jon Stallworthy notes that Owen’s ‘imagination gropes forward numbly from the past to the future’.[[738]](#footnote-738) Though Owen’s lines recall Shelley’s question ‘can Spring be far behind?’ by being ‘afraid’ for the ‘spring’ in stanza seven (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 70; ‘Exposure’, 33), he can only guess at what will happen ‘Tonight’ (‘Exposure’, 40). The final stanza functions as a sinister take on Shelley’s ‘prophecy’ (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 69):

Tonight, this frost will fasten on this mud and us,

Shrivelling many hands, puckering foreheads crisp.

The burying-party, picks and shovels in shaking grasp,

Pause over half-known faces. All their eyes are ice,

But nothing happens.

(‘Exposure’, 31-40)

Just as Keats plans his flight to the nightingale only to find that he is ‘Already with thee!’ (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 31, 35), Owen distorts time in the final stanza of ‘Exposure’. He predicts that ‘this frost will fasten on this mud and us’, yet the stanza finishes in the present tense: ‘their eyes are ice’. Assuming he is at a safe temporal distance from the ravages of the cold, Owen is suddenly in the midst of the future he predicted for himself. He envisions soldiers burying comrades who have frozen alive, but Owen abandons the repeated plural pronoun ‘us’ that begins the stanza, and refers instead to the actions of ‘the burying-party’. In a draft of the poem Owen positioned himself among the grave diggers: ‘Before this soft mud stiffens, some of us must freeze. / […] Their feet are boots; their faces mould; their wide eyes ice’.[[739]](#footnote-739) The shift from ‘us’ to ‘their’ in the draft marks the divide of the community that the rest of the poem so desperately clings to. Yet in the final version this separation is not so clean-cut. In the transition from the first person plural ‘us’ to the third person of ‘the burying-party’ and ‘their’, we barely notice Owen’s grammatical departure. If Keats keeps his ‘sole self’ at hand so that he can return to it (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 72), Owen’s selfhood melts away completely by the end of his poem. That the frost and mud fasten on ‘us’ shows the poet numbering himself among nature’s sad victims, yet his awareness of the actions of ‘The burying-party’ transcends this death by suggesting that he is doing the digging. The relationship between pronouns and the soldiers they signify becomes arbitrary over the course of the stanza. ‘[T]heir’ in ‘All their eyes are ice’ refers to the frozen corpses being ‘Pause[d]’ over, but also to the cold manner in which the burying-party glance over ‘half-known faces’ before covering them with mud and snow. That the ice takes hold over both parties affirms nature’s triumph over both the dead and the living, with the frost and mud ‘fasten[ing]’ on human bodies so that their very ‘eyes’ take on the form of their surroundings. ‘Instead of trying to pull the world out of the mud’, writes Morton, ‘we could jump down into the mud’, as he argues for an ecological form of writing that avoids any unrealistic, utopian representation of the natural world.[[740]](#footnote-740) Owen’s poem anticipates this idea. While Keats escapes his fate of being a ‘sod’ (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 60), Owen has no hope that nature will ‘lift’ him from the ‘mud’ in which he finds himself at the end of ‘Exposure’ (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 53), and is forced to accept the fate that his predecessor rejected. The ambiguity of the final pronoun ‘their’ renders it unclear whether Owen is one of the burying-party or one of the ‘half-known faces’ being buried. Owen’s selfhood is erased in the poetry’s ambiguous pronouns as he leaves the poem ‘unseen’ (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 19). The lack of ceremony in his departure signals Owen’s belief that in War the self can only ever be ‘half-known’ among the suffering mass, with Owen among the soldiers who ‘cease feeling / Even themselves’ (‘Insensibility’, 12-13).[[741]](#footnote-741)

The shift from ‘we’ to ‘the[y]’ in ‘Exposure’ reveals Owen as a Keatsian ‘camelion Poet’ whose ‘sole self’ is forever lost (‘Exposure’, 2, 39; ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 72).[[742]](#footnote-742) As Owen’s identity bleeds into the battling mass, his pastoral poetry picks up on Keats’s words to Woodhouse with lasting effect, as Owen experiences ‘the identity of every one […] press[ing] upon [him]’ so that he is ‘in a very little time annihilated’.[[743]](#footnote-743) This ‘annihilation’ is sustained in ‘Spring Offensive’. Stallworthy notes that in the poem ‘the figure of the poet does not appear, and the greater objectivity of [Owen’s] later poems is a measure of his maturity’,[[744]](#footnote-744) even as Owen gestures towards to poetics of his predecessors. Owen’s physical distance from the men he describes in ‘Exposure’ is reflected in his grammar. While in ‘Exposure’ Owen views himself among the soldiers in the lines ‘What are we doing here?’ and ‘we lie out here’ (‘Exposure’, 10, 34), in ‘Spring Offensive’ Owen gazes on the soldiers ‘there’ (‘Spring Offensive’, 4) as he occupies a different space to sustain the strategy of self-erasure that ended the earlier poem. The title of ‘Spring Offensive’ ushers in the ‘Spring’ that Shelley awaited in ‘Ode to the West Wind’ and that Keats provocatively calls for in ‘To Autumn’: ‘Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?’[[745]](#footnote-745) (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 70; ‘To Autumn’, 23) If Shelley ends his ode in a state of ‘maximum potential’,[[746]](#footnote-746) anticipating the creation that comes after destruction, in ‘Spring Offensive’ the spring only heralds more devastation. Even if the soldiers await the battle at the beginning of the poem, the destructive effect of the ‘Spring’ has already taken hold of them:

Halted against the shade of a last hill

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

And, leaning on the nearest chest or knees

Carelessly slept.

But many there stood still

To face the stark blank sky beyond the ridge,

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

(‘Spring Offensive’, 1-6)

If Owen undergoes a process of self-erasure in ‘Exposure’, here the mass that engulfed him is also erased. As Owen views the soldiers as ‘They fed’, there are no markers of their human identity until the next line which references their ‘chest[s]’ and ‘knees’. Instead, the first two lines align the soldiers with the ‘flocks [that] feed’ in ‘Ode to the West Wind’ (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 11), as they are subsumed by their pastoral environment and lose their individual identities. Owen describes the soldiers removing their loads from their bodies in the second line of the stanza: ‘eased of pack loads, [they] were at ease’. Owen’s narration of the soldiers’ movements in the passive voice has the effect of denying the soldiers agency over their own actions. Like the west wind that moves as an ‘unseen presence’ (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 2), the soldiers fade in and out of the poem. The subsidiary clauses that describe the soldiers’ activity, ‘eased of pack loads, were at ease’, ‘leaning on’, and ‘Carelessly slept’, eliminate the need to re-state their grammatical presence as the pronoun ‘they’ fades from the opening lines. Owen explains that ‘their feet had come to the end of the world’. Though their ‘feet’ arrive at their destination, implicit in the synecdoche is that some part of their identity has been left behind. As Owen views them ‘leaning on the nearest chest or knees’, they are reduced to fragments of useful body parts that appear as if features of their environment. If Keats risks losing his human identity and becoming part of the forest in ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 20), the hill offers the soldiers the same kind of transcendence. ‘They breathe like trees unstirred’ (‘Spring Offensive’, 18) as their bodies begin to ‘fade away into’ their surroundings (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 20).

As the soldiers ‘Marvel’ at the Romantic vision of nature in which they find themselves (‘Spring Offensive’, 7), they struggle to reject the tranquillity and ‘easeful[ness]’ of their Keatsian surroundings (‘Spring Offensive’, 2; ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 52):

Marvelling they stood, and watched the long grass swirled

By the May breeze, murmurous with wasp and midge;

And though the summer oozed into their veins

Like an injected drug for their bodies’ pains,

Sharp on their souls hung the imminent ridge of grass,

Fearfully flashed the sky’s mysterious glass.

Hour after hour they ponder the warm field

And the far valley behind, where buttercups

Had blessed with gold their slow boots coming up;

When even the little brambles would not yield

But clutched and clung to them like sorrowing arms.

They breathe like trees unstirred.

(‘Spring Offensive’, 7-18)

Owen continues to pay homage to ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ in these stanzas. Recreating the suffering of Ruth described by Keats in the penultimate stanza of his ode, the soldiers ‘ponder the warm field’, ‘sick for home’, as Keats’s ‘song’ ‘f[inds] a path / Through’ their ‘sad heart[s]’ (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 65-66). The soldiers gaze upon ‘murmurous wasp[s] and midge[s]’ that recall ‘The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves’ (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 50). The numbing ‘hemlock’ and ‘dull opiate’ imagined by Keats (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 2, 3) become morphine ‘injected’ into the soldiers’ ‘veins’. Though tempted by the ‘comfort’ offered by the scene (‘Spring Offensive’, 2), staying in this idyllic space is not an option for the soldiers, who must imminently perform the ‘Offensive’ of the poem’s title. Nor is this an option for Owen; Curran’s view of Keats in his ode seems equally applicable to Owen in ‘Spring Offensive’, as he too ‘must escape the bower, however comfortable it appears’ in order to create ‘An art of true dimensions’.[[747]](#footnote-747) Rather than rejecting his predecessor, Owen makes a necessary departure from Keats, with ‘Spring Offensive’ becoming a site where Owen’s commitment to revealing the ‘truth’ of War and offering a unique contribution to poetry is brought to the fore.[[748]](#footnote-748) Silkin argues that ‘The soldiers ignore the warnings—in “the imminent ridge” and “fearfully flashed”—and in so doing reject the beneficent aspects of nature’.[[749]](#footnote-749) Yet it is less that the soldiers ‘reject the beneficent aspects of nature’ than that they view it as offering only a temporary comfort. The anaesthetising effect of summer is not the same as erasure; it offers the soldiers only a superficial transcendence that borders on wilful ignorance of the reality of War. The syntax of the final line of the stanza is oddly weighted: ‘Fearfully flashed the sky’s mysterious glass’ reads strangely when compared with the more natural phrasing of ‘the sky’s mysterious glass fearfully flashed’. The sky does not fully integrate itself with the actions of the ‘grass’ with the final line of the verse syntactically unhinged from the previous line, as if the disconnected clause is ready to crumble from the end of the stanza. The beauty of the pastoral setting is tinged with precariousness: the grass ‘h[angs]’, the sky is ‘mysterious’, and the last line loses its grammatical hold on the rest of the verse as the poetry and its images teeter dangerously on the verge on which the soldiers find themselves. As the soldiers remember ‘the warm field / And the far valley behind’, Owen fuses the gesture with metapoetic poignancy. Looking back to a place ‘where buttercups / Had blessed with gold their slow boots coming up’, Owen remembers a time in his youth when his brother walked through a field and discovered that his shoes had been covered with buttercup petals, an occasion that prompted Owen’s remark that ‘Harold’s boots are blessed with gold’.[[750]](#footnote-750) The event is also recalled by Owen in ‘A Palinode’, written in 1915, where he envisions the sun ‘blessing all the field and air with gold’ (‘A Palinode’, 19).[[751]](#footnote-751) As the soldiers look back at the valley, Owen takes the opportunity to see how far he has come as a poet, recalling childhood memories, early poetry, and his poetic predecessors in the opening stanzas of ‘Spring Offensive’. The climax of this reflection appears as the soldiers stand at ‘the end of the world’, with ‘end’ not only a temporal signifier, with the soldiers awaiting apocalypse, but also marking a boundary between poetic worlds, as they stare from a Romantic vision of the pastoral into the modern battlefield. Gazing into the ‘blank sky’, it is less that Owen views the site as barren of generic inspiration than as a blank canvas, as he acknowledges the necessity for rewriting the pastoral for his generation.

If Shelley puts hope in the wind to shift from ‘Destroyer’ to ‘Preserver’ in ‘Ode to the West Wind’ (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 14), the wind of ‘Spring Offensive’ completes this cycle. The soldiers wait until the warm ‘May breeze’ that revives them in the opening stanzas turns into the ‘cold gust’ that shepherds them into the battlefield (‘Spring Offensive’, 8, 19). Sandra Gilbert argues that Owen ‘soon metamorphosed into an […] anti-Romantic’, by ‘rag[ing] against a literary tradition in which he found no precedent for the horrors of industrialized warfare’.[[752]](#footnote-752) Yet ‘Spring Offensive’ reveals Owen working towards his own version of the pastoral rather than ‘rag[ing]’ against tradition. Instead of a Bloomian ‘usurp[ation]’ of his poetic fathers,[[753]](#footnote-753) Owen sustains the destructive capacity of the pastoral found in Shelley and Keats’s odes. His poetic strategy is suggestive less of an anxiety of influence than it is a realisation that anticipates T. S. Eliot’s ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’: ‘[The poet] must be quite aware of the obvious fact that art never improves, but that the material of art is never quite the same’.[[754]](#footnote-754) Rather than outmatching Keats and Shelley, Owen seizes the opportunity to springboard his poetry from their visions of nature’s destruction to his own version of the pastoral:

So, soon they topped the hill, and raced together

Over an open stretch of herb and heather

Exposed. And instantly the whole sky burned

With fury against them; earth set sudden cups

In thousands for their blood; and the green slope

Chasmed and deepened sheer to infinite space.

Of them who running on that last high place

Breasted the surf of bullets, or went up

On the hot blast and fury of hell’s upsurge,

Or plunged and fell away past this world’s verge,

Some say God caught them even before they fell.

(‘Spring Offensive’, 27-37)

In the description of the soldiers running ‘together’ before they ‘fell’, Owen casts a new light on his earlier poetry. In ‘To—’, written in May 1916, Owen invokes memories of Mérignac in 1914 when he tutored the three de la Touche brothers.[[755]](#footnote-755) He remembers ‘Three rompers, run[ning] together, hand in hand’.[[756]](#footnote-756) The poem ends, ‘I cannot run much farther,’ ‘and having tumbled, try / To go forever children, hand in hand. / The sea is rising… and the world is sand’ (‘To—’, 11-14). Owen revised the poem at some time between late 1917 and early 1918, and it seems it was still in his mind when writing ‘Spring Offensive’ in July 1918.[[757]](#footnote-757) As the soldiers ‘race together’ in the same childlike manner, the image is tinged with impending tragedy. In a world where ‘the material of art is never quite the same’,[[758]](#footnote-758) the ‘sea is rising’ with the ‘surf of bullets’, and the soldiers do not rise from their ‘tumbles’. The rhyme of ‘together’ and ‘heather’ in ‘Spring Offensive’ foreshadows the soldiers’ ‘f[alling]’ in the next stanza, with the downward intonation of feminine rhymes suggestive of the soldiers’ toppling beyond ‘this world’s verge’. Owen’s pastoral nostalgia imitates that of Shelley in ‘Ode to the West Wind’ where Shelley remembers being ‘in my boyhood’, ‘when to outstrip thy skiey speed / Scarce seemed a vision’ (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 50-51). Owen sustains Shelley’s nostalgic image: where Shelley attempts to ‘outstrip’ the wind, Owen must ‘out-run our breath’ in ‘To—’ (‘To—’, 10), and both images are morbidly reimagined in the soldiers’ efforts to ‘race’ ‘the surf of bullets’ and the ‘hot blast and fury of hell’s upsurge’. Paul Fussell remarks that Owen ‘indicat[es] the pastoral norm by which [the horrors of war] were to be gauged’.[[759]](#footnote-759) Yet, as the poem shifts from describing the Keatsian idyll to the battle below, Owen cannot hold his nostalgia and the War in such contrasting tension. His allusions to Romantic poetry begin to bleed into the chaos of his new generic vision so that its horror slowly takes over to become the new ‘pastoral norm’.

The landscape described in ‘Spring Offensive’ endures the destruction depicted in ‘Ode to the West Wind’. Where Shelley is enthralled by the sublime manner in which ‘the Atlantic’s level powers / Cleave themselves into chasms’ and by the way the storm gathers on ‘the dim verge / Of the horizon’ (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 37-38, 21-22), Owen watches how ‘the green slope / Chasmed and deepened sheer into infinite space’ (‘Spring Offensive’, 32) as the soldiers fall from ‘this world’s verge’ (‘Spring Offensive’, 36). Yet the difference between Shelley’s fascination and Owen’s terror in viewing these sublime scenes recalls Edmund Burke’s view that distance is key to the enjoyment of the sublime: ‘When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances […] they are, delightful’.[[760]](#footnote-760) If Shelley is enthralled by the storm as a ‘pain threatened but avoided’,[[761]](#footnote-761) Owen’s soldiers plunge into the chaos described by his precursor. As Shelley watches the ‘Loose clouds’ caught on that west wind’s ‘airy surge’ from a distance (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 16, 19), his wish to ‘lift me as a […] cloud’ (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 53), which he later retracts, sees its macabre fulfilment in the image of soldiers who ‘went up / On […] hell’s upsurge’ (‘Spring Offensive’, 35). In a letter to his mother written on 16 January 1917, Owen writes, ‘I can see no excuse for deceiving you about these last 4 days. I have suffered seventh hell. / I have not been at the front. / I have been in front of it’.[[762]](#footnote-762) Owen depicts this experience in his poetry, with ‘the dim verge’ (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 21) witnessed by Shelley being surpassed by the soldiers of ‘Spring Offensive’. They occupy a place where the sublime has been overthrown so that there exists not ‘delight’, but pure ‘terror’. While Shelley maintains a firm grip of his selfhood and subsumes nature in his command that the wind ‘Be through my lips’ (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 68), the soldiers sacrifice themselves to be consumed by their nightmarish environment. In a letter written a week before the one just quoted, Owen refers to the Front as ‘a Gehenna’,[[763]](#footnote-763) which aptly describes the topography of ‘Spring Offensive’. In the Book of Jeremiah, God punishes the Judeans in Gehenna for worshipping pagan gods, cursing ‘the high places’ where they ‘burn[ed] their sons with fire [...] which I commanded not’, and renaming the site ‘The valley of slaughter’ (Jeremiah, 19. 5, 6). Recalling this, the soldiers climb ‘that last high place’ where ‘the whole sky burned / With fury against them’ and bombarded them with the ‘hot blast and fury from hell’s upsurge’ (‘Spring Offensive’, 32, 29-30, 35). Owen writes of how the ‘earth set sudden cups / In thousands for [the soldiers’] blood’ (‘Spring Offensive’, 30-31) in a mass-Eucharist where the battling men ‘fall upon the thorns of life’ and ‘bleed’ into shell-holes (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 54). If Shelley aligns his suffering with that of Christ (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 54), then Owen’s pastoral poetry does the same in representing the offensive as a sacrifice rather than a tactical campaign, depicting the terrifying fate for which the soldiers ‘were born’ (‘Exposure’, 34).

While many soldiers were lost ‘past this world’s verge’ (‘Spring Offensive’, 36), those who survive the offensive ‘[crawl] slowly back’ towards the idyll from which they came (‘Spring Offensive’, 44). Their movement recalls their ‘slow boots coming up’ the hill in the second stanza (‘Spring Offensive’, 15) as the natural cycle of the poem seems to perversely complete itself:

But what say such as from existence’ brink

Ventured but drave too swift to sink,

The few who rushed in the body to enter hell,

And there out-fiending all its fiends and flames

With superhuman inhumanities,

Long-famous glories, immemorial shames—

And crawling slowly back, have by degrees

Regained cool peaceful air in wonder—

Why speak not they of comrades that went under?

(‘Spring Offensive’, 38-46)

If Owen’s identity slips from his grasp in ‘Exposure’, in ‘Spring Offensive’ the remaining soldiers are at risk of the same ambiguous transformation. The awkwardness of the line, ‘But what say such as from existence’ brink’ seems at pains to avoid direct reference to its grammatical subject. The absence of the pronoun that has previously represented the soldiers is exchanged for the vague signifier, ‘such’. Owen’s grammar gropes to find the soldiers before more clearly depicting them as ‘The few who rushed into the body to enter hell’, as if this third line of the stanza seeks to correct the difficulties of the first. The lack of a possessive in ‘existence’ brink’ stunts the line’s natural progression so that the poetry stumbles forward. The line cannot accommodate the extra syllable granted by ‘existence’s’ given the term’s position so close to the ‘brink’ of its ending. The trajectory of the poem’s journey from ‘the warm field’ (‘Spring Offensive’, 13) to the bowels of ‘hell’ recalls lines spoken by Satan in *Paradise Lost*: ‘Farewell, happy fields / Where joy forever dwells: hail horrors, hail / Infernal world, and thou profoundest hell’ (*Paradise Lost*, 1. 249-251),[[764]](#footnote-764) as Milton’s half-rhyme anticipates Owen’s own poetic style. If Owen’s soldiers are aligned with Christ in their self-sacrifice (Spring Offensive’, 30-31), he fuses their actions with the lyricism of Milton’s Satan, so that ‘Spring Offensive’ is ‘not about heroes’,[[765]](#footnote-765) but about acknowledging the ‘superhuman inhumanities’ that lurk beneath their ‘Long-famous glories’. Bloom describes Satan’s lines as ‘the poetry of loss’, spoken by ‘a strong poet accepting his task, [and] rallying what remains’.[[766]](#footnote-766) Owen writes ‘the poetry of loss’ as the surviving soldiers of ‘Spring Offensive’ slip through his fingers, yet through this he ‘rall[ies] what remains’ of the pastoral genre in the midst of the War. ‘[A]ccepting his task’ to carve out new generic ground, Owen creates a unique poetic opportunity from the infernal environment in which he finds himself. ‘Spring Offensive’ revives and extends Satan’s view that ‘hell’ now seems a more ‘profound’ site for poetic inspiration than ‘warm’ and ‘happy fields’ (‘Spring Offensive’, 13).

In ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ and ‘Ode to the West Wind’ Shelley and Keats challenge Morton’s view that in Romantic poetry ‘contact with nature […] will mend the bridge between subject and object’.[[767]](#footnote-767) Rather than viewing nature as a ‘healing’ presence,[[768]](#footnote-768) these poems foreground nature’s destructive power, so that Shelley questions whether ‘contact with nature’ will facilitate the renewal he seeks, and Keats ends his ode by burning the ‘bridge’ that connects him to his environment. Attracted by ‘the bird’s life-destroying rapture’,[[769]](#footnote-769) the ‘happiness’ Keats feels at the beginning of the ode is ruined by the realisation that the nightingale leads him towards ‘annihilat[ion]’ rather than transcendence.[[770]](#footnote-770) While Keats discovers nature’s deception over the course of his ode, Shelley takes on the role of the ‘deceiving elf’ himself in ‘Ode to the West Wind’ (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 74). Charles Mahoney and Michael O’Neill note that ‘In a draft of the poem [Shelley] scrawled in Greek “By virtuous power I, a mortal, vanquish thee, a mighty god”’.[[771]](#footnote-771) Less a bid to become a ‘comrade’ (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 49), Shelley covertly strives for the upper hand and pursues a union with the west wind on his own terms. Confronted with nature’s destructive energies, Keats improvises, Shelley strategises, and Owen simply endures. Influenced by the threat nature poses to the poet’s identity in ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ and ‘Ode to the West Wind’, ‘Exposure’ and ‘Spring Offensive’ extend Shelley and Keats’s generic innovations. In these poems Owen charts the aftermath of the ‘annihilat[ion]’ that his predecessors avoid, and in doing so, asserts his unique version of the pastoral. In a letter to his brother, Colin, written in May 1917, Owen writes, ‘The sensations of going over the top are about as exhilarating as those dreams of falling over a precipice’.[[772]](#footnote-772) The ‘sensation of going over the top’ that forms the action of ‘Spring Offensive’ also resonates with Owen’s intention to disengage from his predecessors in his pastoral poetry. Owen shares Keats’s approach to influence, as Christopher Ricks’s observation of the older poet seems just as apt for his inheritor: ‘For Keats, allusions are debts of honour’.[[773]](#footnote-773) Rather than performing a complete rejection of Shelley and Keats’s pastoral poetry, ‘Exposure’ and ‘Spring Offensive’ undergo a necessary departure from it, one that fuses ‘sorrow’ and ‘exhilarat[ion]’ (‘Spring Offensive’, 17). While ‘Spring Offensive’ upholds Owen’s duty to claim new territory, both literally and poetically, his pastoral poetry also maintains his responsibility to pay his respects to his precursors. Though he cannot subscribe to the optimism of Shelley and Keats’s visions, Owen’s amplification of nature’s ‘Destr[uctive]’ power makes it clear that his unique take on the pastoral genre finds its origins in the ‘Ashes and sparks’ left by his predecessors (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 14, 67).

**Conclusion: ‘[A]lone among the Unseen Voices’**

The influence of Shelley and Keats galvanises Owen’s poetry, and the success of Owen’s Romantic inheritance lies in his balance between invoking the poetry of his precursors and asserting his own poetic voice. In ‘On My Songs’ Owen sustains his distinctive poetic vision in his claim that ‘I voice mine own weird reveries’ amidst the ‘hoards of thought’ that have gone before him (‘On My Songs’, 9, 6).[[774]](#footnote-774) These lines reveal Owen’s awareness of his individuality as poet. As much as Owen is entranced by the voices of the past, which ‘[fashion] their rime / To be my own soul’s cry’ (‘On My Songs’, 3-4), he also affirms his independence from them, asserting the uniqueness of his poetry in the claim that it is his voice, not that of the ‘many and many’ poets that have gone before him (‘On My Songs’, 1), that can ‘haply lend thee ease’ (‘On My Songs’, 14). Owen is grateful for his influences, but his poetic development shows him anticipate T. S. Eliot’s view that ‘good poets’ must use such sources of inspiration to create ‘something different’.[[775]](#footnote-775) Owen is highly conscious that his poetic inheritance involves a commitment to both commemoration and innovation, to honouring the work of past masters and to pioneering his own vision.

The title of this thesis, and the conclusion, is taken from a verse letter written by Owen in 1911. The line ‘I am alone among the Unseen Voices’ encapsulates the concerns of this thesis,[[776]](#footnote-776) and anticipates the stance taken by Owen over the course of his poetic career. While Edmund Blunden comments that the line bespeaks Owen’s ‘loneliness as a young poet’,[[777]](#footnote-777) it holds more resonance in light of Owen’s response to poetic influence. The letter invokes ‘A stream of verse from aerial Shelley’s tongue’, as well as the poetry of Keats, as Owen views himself in the ‘company’ of the poets that combine to create ‘a presence to be felt and known’ (*Adonais*, 42. 373)throughout his oeuvre.[[778]](#footnote-778) If Owen is ‘alone’, he is also ‘among the Unseen Voices’, yet the line slips through the paradox that Owen seems to propose. Rather than offering a solipsistic lament, the line shows Owen viewing himself as part of a poetic community while maintaining his own identity within it as an individual poet. If Owen vows to be a Romantic heir who will ‘perpetuat[e] the language in which Keats and the rest of them wrote’,[[779]](#footnote-779) then he is also a poet who knows the worth of his unique ‘voice’ (‘On My Songs’, 9).

Being ‘alone among the Unseen Voices’,[[780]](#footnote-780) Owen positions himself as a dedicated reader of poetry as well as a poet, a dual-role that forms the focus of this thesis. Owen’s invocation of ‘Unseen Voices’ is indebted to the words of Shelley in *A Defence of Poetry*, where Shelley describes the poet as ‘a nightingale who sits in darkness […] sing[ing] to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds’, and whose ‘auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician’.[[781]](#footnote-781) Owen deliberately fashions himself as a Shelleyan poet, and his relation to the invisible ‘Voices’ described in his verse letter shows him to be both an unseeing auditor and an ‘unseen’ poet himself. Mary Newboult recalls Owen reciting his poetry in a manner that strikingly resembles that of Shelley’s ‘nightingale’, writing that ‘the beautiful cadence of [Owen’s] voice held me spellbound’.[[782]](#footnote-782) For Owen, Shelley is a poet who thrives in moments of difficulty, uncertainty, and impossibility, one that ‘rule[s] / The torturing and conflicting throngs’ within his poetry (*Prometheus Unbound*, 1. 1. 492-493).[[783]](#footnote-783) If Keats influences Owen’s poetic style and his approach to form, Shelley’s work shapes Owen’s philosophy and his ethics as a poet. Shelley’s view that poetry must‘[subdue] to union […] irreconcilable things’ is inherited by Owen.[[784]](#footnote-784) Mark Sandy describes Shelley’s ideologies as built upon ‘shifting intellectual sands’,[[785]](#footnote-785) and this observation rings true for Owen whose impulses as a soldier and a poet contradict one another, with him being responsible for killing other soldiers during the War at the same time as having compassion for their suffering. Owen fulfils the ambition of his predecessor to ‘[subdue] to union […] irreconcilable things’, and also anticipates the view of Siegfried Sassoon that ‘one cannot be a good soldier and a good poet at the same time’.[[786]](#footnote-786) Like Shelley, Owen’s poetry is built on the ‘shifting […] sands’ that form his poetic identity, and Owen amplifies and extends the strategies of his precursor by foregrounding the moral difficulties and the aesthetic tensions that result from this precarious mode of existence during the War.

Owen’s relationship with Keats is more complex than the youthful ‘hero-worship’ described by John Purkis and James Campbell.[[787]](#footnote-787) Owen revered Keats not simply for his poetic mastery, but also because the Romantic poet foregrounded the difficulty of writing poetry in a way that resonated with Owen’s own experience. In the same way that Keats delights in perceiving Shakespeare ‘working out conceits’ in the sonnets,[[788]](#footnote-788) Owen surveys Keats’s ‘corrections and crossings out’ in the manuscripts of *The Eve of St Mark* with ‘subdued ecstasy’.[[789]](#footnote-789) Both poets ‘school [their] Intelligence’ not only through the achievements of their poetic precursors but through their missteps and revisions,[[790]](#footnote-790) being fascinated by ‘the growth of [the poet’s] mind’,[[791]](#footnote-791) to use Wordsworth’s words. If Owen ‘worship[ed]’ Keats, his reverence often stemmed from being able to see in Keats his own struggle to form a poetic identity independent from that of his predecessors. When Owen assumes Shelley’s view that poetry can ‘[subdue] to union […] irreconcilable things’,[[792]](#footnote-792) it is with this idea in mind that he applies the sumptuousness of Keats’s language to the suffering he witnessed during the War. Keats’s description of the Titans in *Hyperion* bridges the transition between Keats’s Romanticism and Owen’s real-life experiences. Keats imagines the gods

Dungeoned in opaque element, to keep  
Their clenchèd teeth still clenched, and all their limbs  
Locked up like veins of metal, cramped and screwed;  
Without a motion, save of their big hearts  
Heaving in pain, and horribly convulsed  
With sanguine feverous boiling gurge of pulse.

(*Hyperion*, 2. 23-28)[[793]](#footnote-793)

This description simmers beneath the surface of ‘Mental Cases’ when Owen surveys traumatised soldiers ‘Baring teeth that leer like skulls’ teeth wicked’, and views their ‘Misery swelter[ing]’ ‘through their hands’ palms’ as they experience ‘Stroke on stroke of pain’ (‘Mental Cases’, 4, 8, 7, 5).[[794]](#footnote-794) Keats experiences a power ‘of enormous ken / To see as a God sees’ in the *Hyperion* poems (*The Fall of Hyperion*, 1. 303-304),[[795]](#footnote-795) but for Owen there are no such epic subjects anymore, asserting in his draft Preface that his poetry ‘is not about heroes’.[[796]](#footnote-796) Stating that ‘we see our task / […] through his blunt and lashless eyes’ (‘Insensibility’, 42-43),[[797]](#footnote-797) Owen encourages his readers to see as a soldier sees, but in a poetic style that makes its debts to Keats explicit so that he shows how, as Michael O’Neill expresses, ‘a Keatsian intensity unravels itself and turns out to have terrifying applicability to life in the trenches’.[[798]](#footnote-798) If Keats can turn away from the imagined suffering of the Titans in his self-instruction to ‘leave them to their woes’ (*Hyperion*, 3. 3), Owen’s ethical obligation to real victims is stronger, so that he magnifies this ‘Keatsian intensity’ by forcing his readers to look unflinchingly at the suffering endured by the soldiers. It is not simply that Owen refigures Keats’s poetry through the context of the War, but that he showcases the style of his predecessor as naturally suited to describing the pain and misery caused by the conflict.

Owen’s allusions to Shelley and Keats invite us to reconsider their poetry. Owen views his Romantic precursors as being defined by their depictions of apocalypse, destruction, and suffering. W. H. Auden writes that ‘The words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living’ (‘In Memory of W. B. Yeats’, 22-23),[[799]](#footnote-799) and this thesis has shown how Owen ‘modifie[s]’ the way Shelley and Keats are read by shifting the emphasis from ‘beauty’, ‘joy’, and ‘Hope’ to the elements of their visions that are ‘more like Despair’ (*Endymion*, 1.1; *The Mask of Anarchy*, 87, 88).[[800]](#footnote-800) The resonance of Shelley and Keats’s poetry in light of the War forms a Romantic vision that distinguishes Owen from the approach taken by William Butler Yeats, who views himself ‘a last inheritor’ of the Romantic poets in ‘Coole and Ballylee, 1931’ (‘Coole and Ballylee, 1931’, 30):[[801]](#footnote-801)

We were the last romantics—chose for theme

Traditional sanctity and loveliness;

Whatever’s written in what poets name

The book of the people; whatever most can bless

The mind of man or elevate a rhyme;

But all is changed, that high horse riderless,

Though mounted in that saddle Homer rode

Where the swan drifts upon a darkening flood.

(‘Coole and Ballylee, 1931’, 41-42)

Madeleine Callaghan comments that the past tense of ‘were’ in the opening line of the stanza ‘suggests the impossibility of asserting a present tense Romanticism’.[[802]](#footnote-802) In the image of the ‘riderless’ horse ‘mounted in that saddle Homer rode’, Yeats temptingly vacates the seat of the Romantic heir, but galloping into the ‘darkening flood’ is a foreboding prospect for those who may wish to assume his former position. Rather than ‘ch[oosing] for theme / Traditional sanctity and loveliness’, Owen’s allusions to scenes of destruction and horror in the poetry of Shelley and Keats offer an alternative view of Romanticism. The position upon ‘that high horse’ once ridden by Homer is not a Romantic stance that Owen wished to adopt given his claim that his poetry ‘is not about heroes’.[[803]](#footnote-803) Yeats’s critique of Owen’s poetry, which affirmed that ‘passive suffering is not a theme for poetry’,[[804]](#footnote-804) falls short of describing the ‘theme’ of Owen’s writing. If ‘The Poetry is in the Pity’ for Owen,[[805]](#footnote-805) then his poetry lies not in ‘passive suffering’ but in the compassion, and the action, that it sparks in readers. Such a strategy shows Owen aligning himself with Shelley by embracing the dynamic potential of poetry to ‘[strengthen] […] the organ of the moral nature of man’.[[806]](#footnote-806) Owen actively challenges, tests, and refigures the poetry of Shelley and Keats in his own writing to show that he is no ‘passive suffer[er]’ under poetic influence. In Owen’s ambition to ‘perpetuat[e] the language in which Keats and the rest of them wrote’,[[807]](#footnote-807) he offers an alternative brand of Romanticism that Yeats does not consider, and strives to ensure that there is no ‘last romantic’. Speaking of the War in February 1915, Yeats writes ‘I think it better that in times like these / A poet’s mouth be silent, for in truth / We have no gift to set a statesman right’ (‘On Being Asked for a War Poem’, 1-3).[[808]](#footnote-808) Edna Longley writes of how ‘Yeats notoriously disclaimed interest in the Great War’ and,[[809]](#footnote-809) read alongside Owen’s writing, the lines reveal that where Yeats keeps his ‘mouth […] silent’, Owen chooses to speak, allowing Owen to position himself as an alternative Romantic heir without usurping Yeats’s claim for the title.

Siegfried Sassoon, the other major influence on Owen’s poetry, recalled how he ‘stimulated [Owen] towards writing with compassionate and challenging realism’.[[810]](#footnote-810) Sassoon understood the importance of Shelley and Keats to Owen. In a letter in November 1917, Owen writes to Sassoon telling him ‘I held you as Keats + Christ + Elijah’,[[811]](#footnote-811) and expresses the effect his mentor had on his poetry:

If you consider what the above Names have severally done for me, you will know what you are doing. And you have *fixed* my Life—however short. You did not light me: I was always a mad comet; but you have fixed me. I spun round you a satellite for a month, but I shall swing out soon, a dark star in orbit where you will blaze.[[812]](#footnote-812)

In his comment that ‘you did not light me’, Owen makes it clear that he was already under the influence of other poets prior to meeting Sassoon. However, Sassoon did not replace Shelley and Keats as Owen’s source of poetic inspiration but came to exist alongside them. Owen’s image of a ‘mad comet’ being ‘fixed’ recalls a sentiment expressed by Shelley in *A Defence of Poetry*: ‘mark how beautiful an order has sprung from the dust and blood of this fierce chaos!’[[813]](#footnote-813) Shelley’s statement not only seems applicable to Owen’s poetic context in the War, but it also complements Owen’s gratitude in being ‘fixed’ by Sassoon. If Owen was a ‘mad comet’, he consolidates the diverse influences of Shelley, Keats, and Sassoon into something controlled and unique. Owen also makes his friend and mentor aware of his response to influence in his assurance that he will ‘swing out soon’. If Owen upholds the charge of the poetic heir to honour his poetic debts, then he also intends to use this influence to steer the course of his own poetry into unchartered territory beyond that explored by his precursors. Though Sandra Gilbert describes Owen as an ‘avatar’ of his poetic influences,[[814]](#footnote-814) here Owen makes it clear that his approach to influence involves being an ‘acolyte of literature’ in order to become a trailblazer himself.[[815]](#footnote-815) The literary relationship of Owen and Sassoon described in this letter epitomises Shelley’s view that poets are ‘the creators, and […] the creations, of their age’.[[816]](#footnote-816) Sassoon recalls that when writing his collection of poems, *Counter-attack*, at Craiglockhart, he soon realised that Owen ‘could give me as much as I gave him’.[[817]](#footnote-817) Viewing Sassoon’s comment alongside Owen’s letter demonstrates how Owen was as eager to respond to the poetic influence of Sassoon as he was to become a source of influence himself.

In a letter written in December 1917 Robert Graves tells Owen ‘you are a damned fine poet already & are going to be more so […]—you have found a new method and must work it yourself’.[[818]](#footnote-818) Owen’s ‘new method’ is one that blends a receptiveness to poetic influence with a commitment to innovation, so that Graves’s advice to Owen that he ‘must work it yourself’ casts Owen as a poet of unique style and ability. Graves affirms that, ‘You must help S. S. and R. N. and R. G. to revolutionize English Poetry—So outlive this War’.[[819]](#footnote-819) Entreating Owen to ‘help’ Sassoon and his fellow poets, Graves sees in Owen a poet who not only responds to poetic influence, but who has the capacity to be a source of inspiration for his contemporaries. Owen’s poetry resonated with T. S. Eliot, who invokes Owen’s claim that ‘above all, I am not concerned with Poetry’ in ‘East Coker’,[[820]](#footnote-820) writing that ‘The poetry does not matter’ (‘East Coker’, 71).[[821]](#footnote-821) ‘All a poet can do today is warn’, Owen tells his fellow poets,[[822]](#footnote-822) and Eliot takes up Owen’s advice when he states that ‘For us, there is only the trying’ (‘East Coker’, 190). In Owen’s instruction of what a poet can do ‘today’, he tentatively envisions how he and his contemporaries can lay the foundations for the ‘next’ ‘generation’ of poets.[[823]](#footnote-823) In his draft Preface Owen suggests that ‘if the spirit of [this book] survives—survives Prussia—my ambition […] will have achieved fresher fields than Flanders’.[[824]](#footnote-824) Owen outlines his ‘ambition’ as one centring upon his poetic posterity, and his method of citing his influences is inherited by his own poetic heirs. Auden writes “‘The poetry is in the pity”, Wilfred said’ (‘Here on the cropped grass’, 127),[[825]](#footnote-825) not only recollecting the words of Owen’s draft Preface and applying them ‘To my situation’ (‘Here on the cropped grass’, 126), but doing so in a manner that echoes Owen’s invocation of Shelley in ‘A Terre’: ‘“I shall be one with nature, herb, and stone,” / Shelley would tell me’ (‘A Terre’, 44-45),[[826]](#footnote-826) with the tender address to ‘Wilfred’ suggestive of Auden remembering the words of an old friend. Owen’s draft Preface shows a sustained commitment to a wish expressed in March 1915, where he describes poetry as being ‘[the] one Sphere where I may be an influence for Truth’.[[827]](#footnote-827) The achievement of Owen’s aim to be an ‘influence’ himself is expressed by Dylan Thomas, whose essay on Owen celebrates how Owen blends ‘lush ornamentation of language, [and] brilliantly […] borrowed melody’ with ‘dark, grave, assonant rhythms, [and] vocabulary purged and sinewed’.[[828]](#footnote-828) For the poets that came after him, Owen’s legacy is one defined not only by the originality of his poetic experimentation, but also the mastery with which he weaves the ‘borrowed melod[ies]’ of his precursors into his own poetry.

Though Owen was killed in action on the 4th November 1918, his legacy as a poet does much to fulfil Graves’s hope that Owen would ‘outlive this War’.[[829]](#footnote-829) Owen’s posterity is testament to the way in which he responds to the influence of Shelley and Keats with his own poetic innovation. In the same way Keats entreats John Hamilton Reynolds to ‘look over [his writing] again and examine into the motives, the seeds from which any one sentence sprung’,[[830]](#footnote-830) Owen’s generous use of allusion demands that we examine his ‘motives’ and find the ‘seeds’ planted by his predecessors from which his poetry springs. Harold Bloom argues an ‘Initial love for the precursor’s poetry is transformed rapidly enough into revisionary strife, without which individuation is not possible’.[[831]](#footnote-831) Yet Owen’s poetry continuously responds to that of Shelley and Keats while proving that ‘individuation’ is possible under poetic influence. Instead of ‘wrestling with [his] strong precursors’ in a continuous ‘Battle’,[[832]](#footnote-832) Owen is exhilarated by the challenges posed by his poetic inheritance, being ‘thankful for its thorn-paved way’ (‘Lines Written on My Nineteenth Birthday’, 50).[[833]](#footnote-833) It is Owen’s enduring fascination with the work of Shelley and Keats alongside his ability to ‘revolutionize English poetry’ that renders him both an exceptional poet in his own right and a worthy Romantic heir.[[834]](#footnote-834)

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43. Gilbert, p. 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. See Stallworthy’s editorial note to ‘Exposure’ in *Wilfred Owen: The Complete Poems and Fragments*, I, 184-187 (186, n. 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Kendall, p. 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Purkis, p. 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
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48. Letter to Siegfried Sassoon, 5 November 1917. Owen, *Collected Letters*, p. 506. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. See Stallworthy’s notes in *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, I, 100, 125, 141, 147 & 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Stallworthy notes that the title of ‘Strange Meeting’ is taken from the following lines in Shelley’s *The Revolt of Islam*:‘and all / Seemed like some brothers on a journey wide / Gone forth, whom now strange meeting did befall / In a strange land’ (*The Revolt of Islam*, 5. 110-113). Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Revolt of Islam*, in *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, I. 239-408. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
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88. Letter to Siegfried Sassoon, 6 December 1917. Owen, *Collected Letters*, p. 514. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Sassoon, p. 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Sassoon, p. 60; In October 1917 Sassoon introduced Owen to Robert Graves. Graves responded positively to a draft of Owen’s ‘Disabled’, calling it ‘a damn fine poem’ (see below for reference). In a letter following their meeting he advises Owen on how to balance formal tradition and experimentation in order to become a more accomplished technical poet: ‘So good the general sound and weight of the words that the occasional metrical outrages are most surprising. […] One can’t put too many syllables into a line & say “Oh, it’s all right. That’s my way of writing poetry”. One has to follow the rules of the metre one adopts. Make new metres by all means, but one must observe the rules where they are laid by a custom of centuries’. Robert Graves, letter to Wilfred Owen, 17 October 1917. Owen, *Collected Letters*,p. 595. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. See *Collected Letters*, p. 129 & p. 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
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106. Gilbert, p. 122; Adrian Caesar, *Taking It Like a Man: Suffering, Sexuality, and the War Poets* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), p. 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
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108. John Keats, *The Fall of Hyperion*, in *The Complete Poems*, pp. 435-449. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 7; Woodhouse cited in Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets*, p. 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Letter to George and Georgiana Keats, 3 May 1819. John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, II, 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. Owen quoting lines from *Aurora Leigh*. Letter to Mary Owen, 22 March 1917. Owen, *Collected Letters*, p. 445. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. Wilfred Owen, ‘Strange Meeting’, in *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, I, 148-149. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Percy Bysshe Shelley, ‘On the Medusa of Leonardo Da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery’, in *Percy Bysshe Shelley: Selected Poetry*, ed. by Neville Rogers (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 357-358. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, p. 698. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. Wilfred Owen, ‘I saw his round mouth’s crimson deepen as it fell’, in *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, I, 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. Wilfred Owen, ‘Mental Cases’, in *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, I, 169; [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. Letter to Nellie Bulman, 1 July 1917. Owen, *Collected Letters*, p. 473. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, p. 680. [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, I, 394. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. Letter to Susan Owen, 25 May 1918. Owen, *Collected Letters*, p. 553. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. Owen, *Collected Letters*, p. 521. [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets*, p. 160. [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. Eliot, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, p. 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. Sassoon, p. 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 2nd edn(New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. Bloom, p. 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. Richard Woodhouse cited in Christopher Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 160. [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. Bloom, p. 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. In a letter to John Hamilton ReynoldsKeats confesses that *Hyperion* compromised his poetic autonomy by possessing ‘too many Miltonic inversions’, and that he desired instead ‘to devote myself to other sensations’. Letter to John Hamilton Reynolds, 21 September 1819. John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*,ed. by Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011), II, 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. Vincent Newey, ‘*Hyperion*, *The Fall of Hyperion*, and Keats’s Epic Ambitions’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*, ed. by Susan J. Wolfson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 69-86 (p. 78). [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. Owen Knowles, ‘Introduction’, in *The Poems of Wilfred Owen* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2002), pp. 5-20 (p. 7). [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
134. Adrian Caesar, *Taking it Like a Man: Suffering, Sexuality and the War Poets* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), p. 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
135. Paul Wright, ‘Introduction’, in *The Complete Poems of John Keats*, ed. by Paul Wright (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1994), pp. iii-xxiii (p. xiii). [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. Michael O’Neill, ‘Romantic Re-appropriations of the Epic’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Epic*, ed. by Catherine Bates (London: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 193-211 (p. 207). [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
137. Stuart Sperry, ‘Keats, Milton, and *The Fall of Hyperion*’, *PMLA*, 77.1 (1962), 77-84 (p. 78). [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
138. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*,ed. by Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg (Oxford & New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
139. Bloom, p. 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. John Keats, *The Fall of Hyperion*, in *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, ed. by John Barnard, 2nd edn (London: Penguin Books, 1982), pp. 435-449. [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
141. Herbert Tucker highlights the tension in the Romantic epic to sustain a traditional epic plot within a metapoetic self-consciousness: ‘Romantic and Victorian epics […] performed in the currency of a narrative that was typically paid out in two denominations. One was the sheer telling of a plot, usually one that was sticky with the consensual cohesiveness that defines the genre. Such a plot called forth normative virtues of the protagonists, as they rose to the test of hardships that set at risk the welfare, and so highlighted the values of the society they upheld. The other denomination was the story of this telling, which subsumed the present narrative within a chain of transmission. This it did either explicitly, by various means of legendary attribution, or else by implication, through conventions that claimed for the narrative a place in the tradition of epic writing.’ Herbert Tucker, *Epic: Britain’s Heroic Muse 1790-1910* (Oxford & New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
142. Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*,I, 271. [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
143. Sperry observes that ‘*The Fall* is a poem that dramatises the poet’s hardships and responsibilities and not the luxury of song’. Sperry, ‘Keats, Milton, and *The Fall of Hyperion*’, p. 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
144. Sperry, ‘Keats, Milton, and *The Fall of Hyperion*’, p. 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
145. Helen Vendler, *The Odes of John Keats* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
146. Vendler, p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
147. John Keats, *Hyperion*, in *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, pp. 283-307. [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
148. Andrew Bennett, *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
149. Newey, p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-149)
150. Sperry, ‘Keats, Milton, and *The Fall of Hyperion*’, p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-150)
151. William Wordsworth, ‘Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*’, in *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*,ed. by Stephen Gill (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 595-616 (p. 611). [↑](#footnote-ref-151)
152. Sperry, ‘Keats, Milton, and *The Fall of Hyperion*’, p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-152)
153. Bloom, p. 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-153)
154. Ricks, p. 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-154)
155. Bloom, p. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-155)
156. Woodhouse cited in Ricks, p. 160. [↑](#footnote-ref-156)
157. Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*,II, 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
158. John Milton, ‘Sonnet 19’, in *John Milton: The Major Works*, ed. by Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg(New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-158)
159. Mark Edmundson, ‘Keats’s Moral Stance’, *Studies in Romanticism*, 26.1 (1987), 85-104 (pp. 88-89). [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
160. Bloom, p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-160)
161. Bloom, p. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
162. Ricks, p. 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
163. Emily E. Speller, ‘Knowledge is as Food: Digesting Gluttony and Temperance in *Paradise Lost*’, *Early English Studies*, 2 (2009) <http://www.uta.edu/english/ees/pdf/speller2.pdf> [accessed 17 October 2017] (p. 8). [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
164. This comment is taken from an article by Leigh Hunt, entitled ‘A commentary on two poems’, *London Journal*, 21 January 1885, cited in *John Keats: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by G. M. Matthews (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), pp. 275-284 (p. 281). [↑](#footnote-ref-164)
165. Extract from an article by Alexander Smith, *Encylopedia Britannica*, eighth edition, 1857, cited in *John Keats: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 365-367 (p. 366). [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
166. Keats, *Hyperion*, in *The Poems of John Keats*, pp. 283-307. [↑](#footnote-ref-166)
167. Dorothy Van Ghent, *Keats: The Myth of the Hero* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 220. [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
168. Sperry, ‘Keats, Milton, and *The Fall of Hyperion*’,p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-168)
169. Ricks, p. 158; Bloom, p. 77, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-169)
170. ‘Influence, *n*.’, *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/95519?rskey=kYumED&result=1#eid> [accessed 20 November 2017]. [↑](#footnote-ref-170)
171. O’Neill, ‘Romantic Re-appropriations of the Epic’, p. 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-171)
172. Ricks, p.158. [↑](#footnote-ref-172)
173. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, cited in J. A. Wittreich, *The Romantics on Milton* (London & Cleveland, OH: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1970), pp. 252-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-173)
174. Coleridge, cited in *The Romantics on Milton*, p. 252. [↑](#footnote-ref-174)
175. Van Ghent, p. 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-175)
176. Van Ghent, p. 223. [↑](#footnote-ref-176)
177. Newey, p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-177)
178. Newey, p. 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-178)
179. T. S. Eliot, ‘Philip Massinger’, in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition*, ed. by Ronald Schuchard and others, 8 vols (London and Baltimore, MD: Faber and Faber Ltd. and The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), II: *The Perfect Critic, 1919-1926*, pp. 244-259 (p. 245). [↑](#footnote-ref-179)
180. Bloom, p. 92; Eliot, p. 245. [↑](#footnote-ref-180)
181. Letter to Reynolds, 3 May 1818. Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*,I, 280-281. [↑](#footnote-ref-181)
182. Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*,II, 281. [↑](#footnote-ref-182)
183. Jon Stallworthy, *Wilfred Owen: A Biography* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-183)
184. Stallworthy, p. 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-184)
185. Marjorie Levinson, *The Romantic Fragment Poem: A Critique of a Form* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), p. 174. [↑](#footnote-ref-185)
186. Bloom, p. 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-186)
187. Wilfred Owen, ‘To Poesy’, in *Wilfred Owen: The Complete Poems and Fragments*,ed. by Jon Stallworthy, 2 vols (London: Chatto and Windus, 2011), I: *The Poems*, 3-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-187)
188. W. B. Yeats, *Letters on Poetry from W. B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley*, ed. by Dorothy Wellesley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940), p. 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-188)
189. John Keats, ‘And what is love? It is a doll dressed up’, in *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, pp. 282-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-189)
190. John Keats, ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’, in *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, pp. 334-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-190)
191. John Keats, *Endymion,* in *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, pp. 106-217. [↑](#footnote-ref-191)
192. Letter to George Keats, 14, 16, 21, 24, 31 October 1818. Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, I, 394. [↑](#footnote-ref-192)
193. Caesar, p. 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-193)
194. Newey, p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-194)
195. David Loewenstein, *Milton: Paradise Lost* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-195)
196. This technique is common in *Endymion*. Peter McDonald explains that ‘often, verse paragraphs will end on the first line of the couplet, and new paragraphs will begin with the answering rhyme’ to creating the effect of ‘“open” couplets’. Peter McDonald, *Sound Intentions: The Workings of Rhyme in Nineteenth Century Poetry* (Oxford & New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-196)
197. Edmundson, pp. 92-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-197)
198. This comment is taken from an article by Hunt that was published in *Examiner*, June 1817. *John Keats: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 55-63 (p.57). [↑](#footnote-ref-198)
199. This comment is taken from an article written by an anonymous reviewer published in *Eclectic Review*, September 1817. *John Keats: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 63-70 (p. 67). [↑](#footnote-ref-199)
200. Keats, ‘Preface to *Endymion*’, in *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, p. 505. [↑](#footnote-ref-200)
201. Letter to Susan Owen, 28 September 1911.Wilfred Owen, Wilfred Owen, *Wilfred Owen: Collected Letters*, ed. by Harold Owen and John Bell (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-201)
202. Caesar, p. 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-202)
203. Michael O’Neill and Madeleine Callaghan, *The Romantic Poetry Handbook* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), p. 273. [↑](#footnote-ref-203)
204. Owen, *Collected Letters*, p. 88; Keats, ‘Preface to *Endymion*’, in *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, p. 505. [↑](#footnote-ref-204)
205. Letter to Reynolds, 19 February 1818. Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, I, 232. [↑](#footnote-ref-205)
206. Hunt, cited in *John Keats: The Critical Heritage*, p. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-206)
207. Keats, ‘Sleep and Poetry’, in *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, pp. 82-93. [↑](#footnote-ref-207)
208. Owen, *Collected Letters*, p. 88 [↑](#footnote-ref-208)
209. Peter Howarth, *British Poetry in the Age of Modernism* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 188. [↑](#footnote-ref-209)
210. Keats, cited in Owen, *Collected Letters*, p. 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-210)
211. Owen, *Collected Letters*, p. 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-211)
212. Letter to Percy Bysshe Shelley, 16 August 1820. Keats *The Letters of John Keats*, II, 323. [↑](#footnote-ref-212)
213. George Yost, ‘Keats’s Tonal Development’, *Studies in Literature, 1500-1900*, 23.4 (1983), 567-578 (pp. 569-570). [↑](#footnote-ref-213)
214. John Barnard, *John Keats* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-214)
215. Keats *The Letters of John Keats*, II, 323. [↑](#footnote-ref-215)
216. Barnard, *John Keats*,p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-216)
217. Keats, cited in Owen, *Collected Letters*, p. 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-217)
218. Stuart Sperry, *Keats the Poet* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-218)
219. Letter to John Taylor, 24 April 1818. Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*,I, 271. [↑](#footnote-ref-219)
220. This solipsistic turn demonstrates that Owen misunderstands more than Keats in ‘To Poesy’. In the preface to *Alastor*,Percy Bysshe Shelley reveals that the desire for such extreme idealistic and poetic isolation can only be qualified with ‘an untimely grave’: ‘[They who,] loving nothing on this earth, and cherishing no hopes beyond, yet keep aloof from sympathies with their kind, […] have their apportioned curse. They languish, because none feel with them their moral nature. They are morally dead.’ Owen’s selective readings of second-generation Romantic poets in his youth reveal a gross misprision of his predecessors. In terms comparatively more extreme than Keats’s, Shelley’s threat of an ‘untimely grave’ reveals that Owen not only risks artistic inertia but the finality of a poetic death through such indulgence with Poesy. In ‘A Palinode’, written five years after ‘To Poesy’, Owen recognises his alignment to *Alastor* in his earlier work and fully disengages himself from the beliefs of Shelley’s eponymous hero. Percy Bysshe Shelley, ‘Preface to *Alastor*’, in *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, ed. by Zachary Leader and Michael O’Neill (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 92-93 (p. 92, 93); Wilfred Owen, ‘A Palinode’, in *The Complete Poems and Fragments*,I, 77-78. [↑](#footnote-ref-220)
221. Sperry, *Keats the Poet*, p. 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-221)
222. O’Neill and Callaghan, p. 273. [↑](#footnote-ref-222)
223. Ricks, p. 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-223)
224. Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*,II, 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-224)
225. Richard Cronin, *Colour and Experience in Nineteenth Century Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-225)
226. O’Neill, ‘Romantic Re-appropriations of the Epic’, p. 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-226)
227. Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, II, 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-227)
228. Keats, ‘Preface to *Endymion*’, in *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, p. 505. [↑](#footnote-ref-228)
229. Owen, *Collected Letters*, p. 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-229)
230. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 2nd edn(New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997); Richard Woodhouse cited in Christopher Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-230)
231. In a discussion of Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, Claude Rawson attributes the ‘unfinished’ states of Wordsworth’s and Keats’s epics to an inability to sustain intensity throughout an extended poetic project, with such fragments ending ‘as though the epic impulse continued to lack stamina’. Claude Rawson, ‘Mock-heroic and English Poetry’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Epic*, ed. by Catherine Bates (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 167-193 (p. 186). [↑](#footnote-ref-231)
232. Michael D. Hurley and Michael O’Neill, *Poetic Form: An Introduction* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-232)
233. Paula R. Feldman and Daniel Robinson, ‘Introduction’, in *A Century of Sonnets: The Romantic Era Revival*, ed. by Paula R. Feldman and Daniel Robinson(Cambridge & New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 3-25 (p. 8). [↑](#footnote-ref-233)
234. Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*, in *Alexander Pope: The Major Works*, ed. by Pat Rogers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 17-39. [↑](#footnote-ref-234)
235. William Wordsworth, ‘Nuns fret not at their Convent’s narrow room’, in *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, ed. by Stephen Gill (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 286. [↑](#footnote-ref-235)
236. Max Nänny, ‘Iconic Uses of Rhyme’, in *Outside-In, Inside-Out: Iconicity in Language and Literature*, ed. by Constantino Maeder, Olga Fischer and William J. Herlofsky (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 2005), pp. 195-241 (p. 209). [↑](#footnote-ref-236)
237. Michael O’Neill, ‘The Romantic Sonnet’ in *The Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet*, ed. by A. D. Cousins and Peter Howarth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 185-204 (p. 200). [↑](#footnote-ref-237)
238. Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets*, p. 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-238)
239. Letter to John Hamilton Reynolds, 22 November 1817. John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. by Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011), I, 188. [↑](#footnote-ref-239)
240. The title of this poem will be shortened to ‘How many bards’ from hereon. [↑](#footnote-ref-240)
241. J. B. Broadbent, cited in Christopher Ricks, ‘Keats’s Sources, Keats’s Allusions’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*, ed. by Susan J. Wolfson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 152-170 (p. 152). [↑](#footnote-ref-241)
242. Woodhouse in Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets*,p. 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-242)
243. John Keats, ‘How many bards gild the lapses of time’, in *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, ed. by John Barnard, 2nd edn (London: Penguin Books, 1982), p. 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-243)
244. Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets*, p. 158, 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-244)
245. Woodhouse cited in Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets*, p. 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-245)
246. The strangeness of this moment is noted by Jennifer-Ann Wagner, who comments on ‘the poem’s peculiar repression of influence’ and an ‘apparent lack of effort […] [that] shows up as a crucial evasion’. Yet the comment overlooks the efforts Keats does make in the poem as to master formal technique and show discipline when feeling the effects of influence. Rather than a ‘lack of effort’, Keats’s poem preoccupies itself less with the nature of the influences that inspire him and more with how he plans to respond to them. Jennifer-Ann Wagner, *A Moment’s Monument: Revisionary Poetics and the Nineteenth-Century English Sonnet* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Press, 1996), p. 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-246)
247. Stuart Sperry, *Keats the Poet* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 73-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-247)
248. Woodhouse cited in Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets*, p. 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-248)
249. Ricks, ‘Keats’s Sources, Keats’s Allusions’, p. 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-249)
250. Wagner, p. 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-250)
251. Peter McDonald, *Sound Intentions: The Workings of Rhyme in Nineteenth Century Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-251)
252. Heather Dubrow, ‘The Sonnet and the Lyric Mode’, *The Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet*, pp. 25-46 (p. 33). [↑](#footnote-ref-252)
253. Wagner, pp. 87-88. [↑](#footnote-ref-253)
254. John Milton, *Lycidas*, in *John Milton: The Major Works*, ed. by Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg (Oxford & New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 39-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-254)
255. Walter Jackson Bate, *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-255)
256. McDonald, p. 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-256)
257. Dubrow, p. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-257)
258. The decision to combine the sonnet with elegy furthers Keats’s and Owen’s efforts to be positioned as heirs of canonical sonneteers. Ben Jonson, John Donne, and Milton each masterfully employ the sonnet to mourn their loved ones, as noted by R. Clifton Spargo in *The Ethics of Mourning: Grief and Responsibility in Elegiac Literature* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), and R. S. White, ‘Survival and Change: The Sonnet from Milton to the Romantics’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet*, pp. 166-185 (pp. 170-171). [↑](#footnote-ref-258)
259. Wilfred Owen, ‘Written in a Wood, September 1910’, in *Wilfred Owen: The Complete Poems and Fragments*,ed. by Jon Stallworthy, 2 vols (London: Chatto and Windus, 2011), I: *The Poems*, p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-259)
260. Sperry, *Keats the Poet*, pp. 73-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-260)
261. Sperry, *Keats the Poet*, p. 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-261)
262. Ricks, ‘Keats’s Sources, Keats’s Allusions’, p. 160. [↑](#footnote-ref-262)
263. John Keats, ‘To Autumn’, in *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, pp. 434-435. [↑](#footnote-ref-263)
264. Ricks, ‘Keats’s Sources, Keats’s Allusions’, p. 160. [↑](#footnote-ref-264)
265. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Adonais*, in *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, ed. by Zachary Leader and Michael O’Neill (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 531-545. [↑](#footnote-ref-265)
266. James A. W. Heffernan writes of the conflicted relationship between the elegist and elegised figure in *Adonais*, emphasisingShelley’s misleading use of autobiography: ‘Enough has been said, I think, to show that this strange story of Keats’s death was deliberately fabricated by Shelley. But it is not only a fabrication; it is also an insult […] Yet it is not enough to say that the facts of Keats’s life and death were consumed by Shelley’s quest for revenge. Shelley also wished to project onto Keats the vulnerability he felt in himself, and thus to resolve the profound ambivalence with which he regarded the delicacy of his own idealism’. James A. W. Heffernan, ‘*Adonais*: Shelley’s Consumption of Keats’, *Romanticism: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Duncan Wu (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 173-192 (pp. 177-78). [↑](#footnote-ref-266)
267. Adrian Caesar, *Taking it Like a Man: Suffering, Sexuality and the War Poets* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), p. 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-267)
268. Ricks, ‘Keats’s Sources, Keats’s Allusions’, p. 160. [↑](#footnote-ref-268)
269. Dominic Hibberd, *Owen the Poet* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1986), p. 209; John Barnard, in *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, p. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-269)
270. As noted in the previous chapter, Stuart Sperry observes that in *The Fall of Hyperion* ‘the “Palm, myrtle, oak, and sycamore, and beech” recall Milton’s catalogues of trees in the Garden; while the arbour, [...] brings to mind the bower of Adam and Eve, with “flourets deck’t and fragrant smells.”’ Stuart Sperry, ‘Keats, Milton, and *The Fall of Hyperion*’, *PMLA*, 77.1 (1962), 77-84 (p. 78). [↑](#footnote-ref-270)
271. Wilfred Owen, ‘To Poesy’, *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, I, 3-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-271)
272. John Keats, *Endymion*, in *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, pp. 282-3; John Keats, *The Fall of Hyperion*, in *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, pp. 435-449. [↑](#footnote-ref-272)
273. As discussed in the previous chapter, Keats’s journey from Milton’s Eden to the temple and subsequently Hyperion’s palace dramatises his poetic development in *The Fall of Hyperion*. The settings following the Miltonic garden allow Keats to claim new poetic territory and establish his unique take on the epic genre. [↑](#footnote-ref-273)
274. Hurley and O’Neill, p. 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-274)
275. Hurley and O’Neill, p. 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-275)
276. Caesar, p. 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-276)
277. Letter to George Keats, 24 October 1818. John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, I, 403. [↑](#footnote-ref-277)
278. Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-278)
279. Nicholas Roe, *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 100; Susan J. Wolfson, *Borderlines: The Shiftings of Gender in British Romanticism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 364. [↑](#footnote-ref-279)
280. Bate, p. 37; John Keats, ‘To Lord Byron’, in *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-280)
281. Jacqueline M. Labbe, ‘Memory, Posterity and the Memorial Poem’, in *Memory and Memorials: From the French Revolution to World War One*, ed. by Matthew Campbell, Jacqueline M. Labbe, and Sally Shuttleworth (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2009), pp. 132-147 (p. 133). [↑](#footnote-ref-281)
282. Labbe, p. 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-282)
283. Letter to George Keats, 20 September 1819. John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, II, 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-283)
284. Claude Lee Finney, *The Evolution of Keats’s Poetry*, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936), I, 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-284)
285. Labbe, p. 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-285)
286. Nicholas Roe, *John Keats: A New Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-286)
287. John Keats, ‘To Chatterton’, in *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, pp. 40-41. [↑](#footnote-ref-287)
288. Bate, p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-288)
289. Both Keats and Byron push their responses to influence to the fore of their poetry and vie for a position as inheritors of Milton. Critics have noted both Keats’s and Byron’s autobiographical and poetical affinities with their predecessor. Ricks states that ‘Keats made much of his poetic inheritance. Those who knew him thought of him as an heir who would have heirs. “Though born to be a poet,” his friend Charles Brown averred, “he was ignorant of his birthright until he had completed his eighteenth year”. This is to respect Keats along his own lines: “The Genius of Milton, more particularly in respect to its span in immensity, calculated him, by a sort of birthright, for such an ‘argument’ as the paradise lost”’. In *Byron and Romanticism* Jerome J. McGann explores Byron’s work as a continual response to that of Milton, whose ‘influence upon Byron’s gloomy and problematic heroes begins at least as early as 1812’. McGann argues that ‘Byron […] makes explicit the political and poetic inheritance to which, in his mind, he was the true heir. […] Wordsworth and Southey may affect the Miltonic style, may wear the trappings of the Muse, but it is Byron in whom Milton’s living spirit survives.’ Ricks, ‘Keats’s Sources, Keats’s Allusions’, p. 153; Jerome J. McGann, *Byron and Romanticism*, ed. by James Soderholm (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 20, 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-289)
290. Bate, p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-290)
291. Letter to George Keats, 19 February 1819. John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, II, 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-291)
292. Bate, p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-292)
293. Wolfson, p. 364. [↑](#footnote-ref-293)
294. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 3; Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets*, p. 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-294)
295. John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, I, 188. [↑](#footnote-ref-295)
296. The title of this poem will be shortened to ‘Sonnet Written at Teignmouth’ from hereon. [↑](#footnote-ref-296)
297. Wilfred Owen, ‘Sonnet Written at Teignmouth on a Pilgrimage to Keats’s House’, in *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, I, 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-297)
298. Helen Vendler, ‘Perfecting the Sonnet’, in *Bloom’s Modern Critical Views: John Keats*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York, NY: Infobase Publishing, 2009), pp. 227-249 (p. 244). [↑](#footnote-ref-298)
299. William Wordsworth, ‘Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*’, in *The Major Works*, pp. 595-616 (p. 611). [↑](#footnote-ref-299)
300. Vendler, p. 229. [↑](#footnote-ref-300)
301. Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets*, p. 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-301)
302. Milton invokes various bodies of water in *Lycidas* to aid in his lament, including the ‘fountain Arethuse’, ‘Smooth-sliding Mincius’, the River Cam which is personified as ‘Camus’, and the Greek river and god ‘Alpheus’ (*Lycidas*, 85, 86, 103, 132). [↑](#footnote-ref-302)
303. George Norlin, ‘Conventions of the Pastoral Elegy’, *The American Journal of Philology*, 32.3 (1911), 294-312 (p. 297). [↑](#footnote-ref-303)
304. Michele T. Sharp, ‘Mirroring the Future: *Adonais*, Elegy, and the Life in Letters’, *Criticism*, 42.3 (2000), 299-316 (p. 303). [↑](#footnote-ref-304)
305. John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*,I, 188. [↑](#footnote-ref-305)
306. Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 4-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-306)
307. Ramazani, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-307)
308. Sharp, p. 303. [↑](#footnote-ref-308)
309. Linda K. Hughes, ‘Dramatis and Private Personae: “Ulysses” Revisited’, *Victorian Poetry*, 17.3 (1979), 192–203 (p. 197). [↑](#footnote-ref-309)
310. John Keats, ‘To Charles Cowden Clarke’, in *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, pp. 68-71. [↑](#footnote-ref-310)
311. Hurley and O’Neill, p. 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-311)
312. Hurley and O’Neill, p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-312)
313. The title of this poem will be shortened to ‘If by dull rhymes’ from hereon. [↑](#footnote-ref-313)
314. Letter to George and Georgiana Keats, 3 May 1819. Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*,II, 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-314)
315. Wagner, p. 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-315)
316. John Keats, ‘If by dull rhymes our English must be chained’, *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, p. 340. [↑](#footnote-ref-316)
317. Wagner, p. 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-317)
318. McDonald, p. 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-318)
319. Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, II, 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-319)
320. William Wordsworth, ‘Scorn not the Sonnet’, in *The Major Works*, p. 356. [↑](#footnote-ref-320)
321. Grant F. Scott, ‘The Muse in Chains: Keats, Dürer, and the Politics of Form’, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 34.4 (Autumn, 1994), 771-793 (p. 787). [↑](#footnote-ref-321)
322. Charles Mahoney and Michael O’Neill, *Romantic Poetry: An Annotated Anthology*, ed. by Charles Mahoney and Michael O’Neill (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p. 442; McDonald, p. 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-322)
323. Susan J. Wolfson, ‘Late Lyrics’, *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*, ed. by Susan J. Wolfson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 86-102 (p. 105). [↑](#footnote-ref-323)
324. John Hollander, *Melodious Guile: Fictive Pattern in Poetic Language* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-324)
325. ‘The lightly stressed final syllable of “Poesy” is what must do the work here, and it may seem all the more fragile for being left on its own for so long’. McDonald, *Sound Intentions*, p. 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-325)
326. McDonald, p. 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-326)
327. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-327)
328. Scott, p. 778. [↑](#footnote-ref-328)
329. Betsy Winakur Tontiplaphol, *Poetics of Luxury in the Nineteenth Century: Keats, Tennyson, and Hopkins* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2011), p. 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-329)
330. Scott, p. 778. [↑](#footnote-ref-330)
331. Ricks, ‘Keats’s Sources, Keats’s Allusions’, p. 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-331)
332. Andrew Bennett, *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity* (Cambridge & New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-332)
333. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-333)
334. Dominic Hibberd, ‘Wilfred Owen’s Rhyming’, *Studia Neophilologica*, 50.2 (1978), 207-214 (p. 213). [↑](#footnote-ref-334)
335. Wilfred Owen, ‘Futility’ in *The Complete Poems and Fragments*,II, 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-335)
336. Santanu Das, ‘On Touching: War, Art and the Realm of the Senses’, in *In(ter)discipline: New Languages for Criticism*, ed. by Gillian Beer, Malcolm Bowie and Beate Perrey (London: Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2007), pp. 145-162 (p. 158). [↑](#footnote-ref-336)
337. Wagner, p. 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-337)
338. Douglas Kerr, *Wilfred Owen’s Voices: Language and Community* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 295. [↑](#footnote-ref-338)
339. McDonald, *Sound Intentions*, p. 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-339)
340. D. S. R. Welland, ‘Half-Rhyme in Wilfred Owen: Its Derivation and Use’, *The Review of English Studies*, 1.3 (1950), 226-241 (p. 238, 239). [↑](#footnote-ref-340)
341. Michael Roberts, cited in Welland, p. 237. [↑](#footnote-ref-341)
342. Welland, p. 237. [↑](#footnote-ref-342)
343. Sharp, p. 303. [↑](#footnote-ref-343)
344. Welland, p. 239. [↑](#footnote-ref-344)
345. Hibberd, p. 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-345)
346. Ruth Glancy, *Thematic Guide to British Poetry* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), p. 263. [↑](#footnote-ref-346)
347. John Keats, ‘On the Grasshopper and the Cricket’, in *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, p. 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-347)
348. Hurley and O’Neill, p. 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-348)
349. Ramazani, pp. 73-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-349)
350. Das, p. 156. [↑](#footnote-ref-350)
351. Ramazani notes that Owen’s ‘subsidiary questions […] 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?’ Ramazani, p. 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-351)
352. Hurley and O’Neill, p. 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-352)
353. Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets*, p. 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-353)
354. Wagner, p. 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-354)
355. McDonald, p. 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-355)
356. Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-356)
357. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-357)
358. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. E. H. Coleridge, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), II, 1139. [↑](#footnote-ref-358)
359. Ricks, ‘Keats’s Sources, Keats’s Allusions’, p. 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-359)
360. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, in *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, ed. by Zachary Leader and Michael O’Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 674-702 (p. 682). [↑](#footnote-ref-360)
361. Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, p. 682. [↑](#footnote-ref-361)
362. Herbert S. Langfeld, cited in Richard H. Fogle, ‘Empathic Imagery in Keats and Shelley’, *PMLA*, 61.1 (1946), 163-191 (p. 170). [↑](#footnote-ref-362)
363. Langfeld, cited in Fogle, ‘Empathic Imagery in Keats and Shelley’, p. 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-363)
364. John Keats, *The Fall of Hyperion,* in *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, ed. by John Barnard, 2nd edn (London: Penguin Books, 1982), pp. 435-449. [↑](#footnote-ref-364)
365. Stuart Curran, *Shelley’s Annus Mirabilis: The Maturing of an Epic Vision* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1975), p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-365)
366. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Triumph of Life*, in *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, ed. by Zachary Leader and Michael O’Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 604-623. [↑](#footnote-ref-366)
367. Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, p. 682; Wilfred Owen, ‘Insensibility’, in *Wilfred Owen: The Complete Poems and Fragments*, ed. by Jon Stallworthy, 2 vols (London: Chatto and Windus, 2011), I: *The Poems*, 145-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-367)
368. Neil Corcoran, ‘Wilfred Owen and the Poetry of War’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century English Poetry*, ed by Neil Corcoran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 87-103 (p. 89). [↑](#footnote-ref-368)
369. Sandra Gilbert, ‘Wilfred Owen’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Poetry of the First World War*, ed. by Santanu Das (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 117-129 (p. 126). [↑](#footnote-ref-369)
370. Percy Bysshe Shelley, ‘A Treatise on Morals’, in *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck, 10 vols (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1965), VII: *The Prose*, 71-83 (p. 75). [↑](#footnote-ref-370)
371. William Hazlitt, ‘*Edinburgh Review*, July 1824’, in *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Critical Heritage*,ed. James E. Barcus (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 335-346 (p. 342). [↑](#footnote-ref-371)
372. Langfeld, cited in Fogle, p. 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-372)
373. Charles Mahoney, ‘The Temptations of Tercets’, *A Companion to Romantic Poetry*, ed. Charles Mahoney (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 44-62 (p. 54). [↑](#footnote-ref-373)
374. Michael O’Neill, *The Human Mind’s Imaginings: Conflict and Achievement in Shelley’s Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-374)
375. Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 97-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-375)
376. De Man, p. 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-376)
377. Ross Wilson, *Shelley and the Apprehension of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-377)
378. Bernard Beatty, ‘Repetition’s Music: *The Triumph of Life*’, in *Essays and Studies 1992: Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Kelvin Everest (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1992), pp. 99-115 (p. 104). [↑](#footnote-ref-378)
379. De Man, p. 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-379)
380. De Man, p. 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-380)
381. Hazlitt, p. 342. [↑](#footnote-ref-381)
382. Donald Reiman, *Shelley’s “The Triumph of Life”: A Critical Study* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1965), p. 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-382)
383. Hazlitt, p. 342. [↑](#footnote-ref-383)
384. Mahoney, p. 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-384)
385. Hazlitt, p. 342. [↑](#footnote-ref-385)
386. J. W. Goethe, *Faust Part One*, trans. by David Luke (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008); Leader and O’Neill, in Shelley, *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, p. 816, n. [↑](#footnote-ref-386)
387. Leader and O’Neill also note the inversion of Faust’s positioning: ‘By contrast with Faust, [Shelley’s] narrator has his back to the day’, Leader and O’Neill, in *Percy Bysshe Shelley:* *The Major Works*, p. 816, n. 604. [↑](#footnote-ref-387)
388. Langfeld, cited in Fogle, p. 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-388)
389. Percy Bysshe Shelley, ‘On Life’, in *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, ed. by Zachary Leader and Michael O’Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 633-636 (p. 633). [↑](#footnote-ref-389)
390. Langfeld, cited in Fogle, p. 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-390)
391. Jerrold E. Hogle, *Shelley’s Process: Radical Transference and the Development of his Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 335. [↑](#footnote-ref-391)
392. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, in *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, pp. 229-314. [↑](#footnote-ref-392)
393. O’Neill observes that ‘There is a swift deadliness with which a vicious circle is described in lines 54-5: “Some flying from the things they feared and some / Seeking the object of another’s fear”’. O’Neill, *The Human Mind’s Imaginings*, p. 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-393)
394. The similarity between the narratives of these poems has been noted by Geoffrey Matthews and Jon Silkin. Geoffrey Matthews, ‘Brooke and Owen’, *Stand*, 4.3 (1960), 28-34 (p. 34); Jon Silkin, *Out of Battle: The Poetry of the Great War* (London: ARK, 1987), p. 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-394)
395. Wilfred Owen, ‘The Show’, in *The Complete Poems and Fragments*,ed. by Jon Stallworthy, 2 vols (London: Chatto and Windus, 2011), I: *The Poems*, 155-156; In a letter to Susan Owen, Owen writes that ‘No Man’s Land under snow is like the face of the moon chaotic, crater-ridden, uninhabitable, awful, the abode of madness.’ Letter to Susan Owen, 19 January 1917. Wilfred Owen, Wilfred Owen, *Wilfred Owen: Collected Letters*, ed. by Harold Owen and John Bell (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 429. [↑](#footnote-ref-395)
396. Peter Howarth, *British Poetry in the Age of Modernism* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-396)
397. Langfeld, cited in Fogle, p. 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-397)
398. Patrick Deer, *Culture in Camouflage: War, Empire and Modern British Literature* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-398)
399. Deer, p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-399)
400. Wilfred Owen, ‘Strange Meeting’, in *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, I, 148-149. [↑](#footnote-ref-400)
401. Wilfred Owen, ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’, in *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, I, 140-141. [↑](#footnote-ref-401)
402. Wilfred Owen, ‘The Sentry’, in *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, I, 188-189. [↑](#footnote-ref-402)
403. Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, p. 682. [↑](#footnote-ref-403)
404. Mark Rawlinson, ‘Owen, Rosenberg, Sassoon and Edward Thomas’, in *The Cambridge History of English Poetry*, ed. by Michael O’Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 824-844 (p. 830). [↑](#footnote-ref-404)
405. Rawlinson, p. 829. [↑](#footnote-ref-405)
406. Deer, p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-406)
407. Howarth, p. 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-407)
408. Santanu Das, ‘Reframing First World War Poetry: An Introduction’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Poetry of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 3-34 (p. 17). [↑](#footnote-ref-408)
409. Fogle, p. 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-409)
410. Fogle, p. 188. [↑](#footnote-ref-410)
411. Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry,* p. 682. [↑](#footnote-ref-411)
412. Deer, p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-412)
413. Wilfred Owen, ‘The Show’, in *The Complete Poems and Fragments*,II: *The Manuscripts and Fragments*, 316-318 (p. 318). [↑](#footnote-ref-413)
414. Letter to Susan Owen, 31 December 1917. Owen, *Collected Letters,* p. 521. [↑](#footnote-ref-414)
415. Jon Stallworthy, in *Wilfred Owen: The Complete Poems and Fragments*, I, 157, n. 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-415)
416. Shelley, ‘A Treatise on Morals’, p. 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-416)
417. Deer, p. 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-417)
418. Howarth, p. 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-418)
419. Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre-Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. by Michael Bradley Smith and Barbara Harshav (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-419)
420. Silvan S. Tomkins, *Affect Imagery Consciousness*, 2 vols (New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company Ltd., 1962), I: *The Positive Affects*, 224. [↑](#footnote-ref-420)
421. De Man, p. 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-421)
422. Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, p. 682. [↑](#footnote-ref-422)
423. Roberts, p. 766. [↑](#footnote-ref-423)
424. Levinas, p. 88; p. 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-424)
425. De Man, p. 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-425)
426. This extends Madeleine Callaghan’s observation that ‘The loss of Rousseau’s self-autonomy seems not a grievous matter, and more a necessary surrender’. Madeleine Callaghan, ‘Shelley and the Ambivalence of Idealism’, in *Grasmere 2011: Selected Papers from the Wordsworth Summer Conference*, ed. by Richard Gravil (Humanities-Ebooks LLP, 2011), pp. 60-68 (p. 64). [↑](#footnote-ref-426)
427. Percy Bysshe Shelley, ‘On Love’, in *The Major Works*, ed. by Zachary Leader and Michael O’Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 631-633 (p. 632). [↑](#footnote-ref-427)
428. De Man, p. 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-428)
429. Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1987), p. 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-429)
430. Wilson, p. 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-430)
431. Levinas, p. 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-431)
432. De Man, p. 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-432)
433. O’Neill, *The Human Mind’s Imaginings*, p. 201. [↑](#footnote-ref-433)
434. John Keats, ‘If by dull rhymes our English must be chained’, *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, p. 340. [↑](#footnote-ref-434)
435. Shelley, ‘On Love’, p. 632. [↑](#footnote-ref-435)
436. Victor Fournel, cited in Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 248. [↑](#footnote-ref-436)
437. Fournel, cited in Benjamin,p. 248. [↑](#footnote-ref-437)
438. Langfeld, cited in Fogle, p. 170; Fournel, cited in Benjamin, p. 248. [↑](#footnote-ref-438)
439. Timothy Webb and Alan M. Weinberg, ‘Introduction’, in *The Unfamiliar Shelley*, ed. by Timothy Webb and Alan M. Weinberg(Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 1-21 (p. 5). [↑](#footnote-ref-439)
440. D. S. R. Welland, ‘Half-Rhyme in Wilfred Owen: Its Derivation and Use’, *The Review of English Studies*, 1.3 (1950), 226-241, p. 238 & p. 239. [↑](#footnote-ref-440)
441. As noted in the Introduction to this thesis, Owen underlined the half rhymes used by Shelley in his copy of Shelley’s poems, which he bought in 1912. This suggests that Owen’s generous use of the technique in his later poetry was inspired, at least in part, by Shelley. See Jon Stallworthy, *Wilfred Owen: A Biography* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 69-70. [↑](#footnote-ref-441)
442. Lawrence Binyon, cited in Wilson, p. 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-442)
443. Roberts, p. 765. [↑](#footnote-ref-443)
444. Hugh Roberts, ‘Spectators Turned Actors: *The Triumph of Life*’, in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, 2nd edn (New York, NY: Norton, 2002), pp. 760-769 (p. 765). [↑](#footnote-ref-444)
445. Wilson, p. 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-445)
446. De Man, p. 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-446)
447. Roberts, p. 764. [↑](#footnote-ref-447)
448. Wilson, p. 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-448)
449. Wilfred Owen, ‘Strange Meeting’, in *The Complete Poems and* Fragments, I, 148-149. [↑](#footnote-ref-449)
450. Owen, *Collected Letters*,p. 521. [↑](#footnote-ref-450)
451. Corcoran, p. 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-451)
452. Letter to Colin Owen, 14 May 1917. Owen, *Collected Letters*,p. 458. [↑](#footnote-ref-452)
453. Adam Smith, *A Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. by Amartya Sen (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 2007),p. 8 & p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-453)
454. Howarth, p. 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-454)
455. Langfeld, cited in Fogle, p. 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-455)
456. Auguste de Lacroix, cited in Christopher E. Forth, *The Dreyfus Affair and the Crisis of French Manhood* (London & Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), p. 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-456)
457. See discussions of ‘Strange Meeting’ in Silkin, pp. 236-243, and Santanu Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 169-171; Silkin, p. 243. [↑](#footnote-ref-457)
458. D. S. R. Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1978), p. 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-458)
459. Howarth, p. 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-459)
460. Dante, *Inferno*, in *The Divine Comedy*, ed. by Robin Kirkpatrick, trans. by Robin Kirkpatrick (London: Penguin Classics, 2012), pp. 1-159. [↑](#footnote-ref-460)
461. O’Neill, *The Human Mind’s Imaginings*, p. 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-461)
462. Levinas, p. 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-462)
463. Shelley, ‘On Love’, p. 632. [↑](#footnote-ref-463)
464. Silkin, p. 238. [↑](#footnote-ref-464)
465. Letter to Siegfried Sassoon, 10 October 1918. Owen, *Collected Letters*, p. 581. [↑](#footnote-ref-465)
466. Alan Tomlinson also notes the intentional quality of Owen’s insensibility in this letter in ‘Strange Meeting in a Strange Land: Wilfred Owen and Shelley’, *Studies in Romanticism*, 32.1 (1993), 75-95 (p. 88). [↑](#footnote-ref-466)
467. Levinas, p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-467)
468. Langfeld, cited in Fogle, p. 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-468)
469. Langfeld, cited in Fogle, p. 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-469)
470. Howarth, p. 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-470)
471. Sven Bäckman, *Tradition Transformed: Studies in the Poetry of Wilfred Owen* (Lund: Liber Läromedel, 1979), p. 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-471)
472. Wilfred Owen, ‘Science has looked, but sees no life but this’, in *The Complete Poems and Fragments*,I, 35-36. [The title will be referenced as ‘Science has looked’ from hereon.] [↑](#footnote-ref-472)
473. Howarth, p. 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-473)
474. Welland, p. 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-474)
475. Tomlinson, pp. 87-88. [↑](#footnote-ref-475)
476. Wilfred Owen, ‘Preface’, in *The Complete Poems and Fragments*,II, 535-536 (p. 535). [↑](#footnote-ref-476)
477. Howarth, p. 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-477)
478. Shelley, ‘On Love’, p. 632. [↑](#footnote-ref-478)
479. De Lacroix, cited in Forth, p. 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-479)
480. Levinas, p. 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-480)
481. O’Neill, *The Human Mind’s Imaginings*, p. 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-481)
482. Stallworthy, in *Wilfred Owen: The Complete Poems and Fragments*, I, 149, n. [↑](#footnote-ref-482)
483. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*,in *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, ed. by Stephen Gill (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 375-591. [↑](#footnote-ref-483)
484. Bäckman, p. 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-484)
485. Smith, p. 8 & p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-485)
486. Letter to Susan Owen, 2 December 1914. Owen, *Collected Letters*, p. 300. [↑](#footnote-ref-486)
487. Callaghan, pp. 65-66. [↑](#footnote-ref-487)
488. O’Neill, *The Human Mind’s Imaginings*, p. 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-488)
489. Langfeld, cited in Fogle, p. 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-489)
490. Smith, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-490)
491. Owen, *Collected Letters,* p. 521. [↑](#footnote-ref-491)
492. Hazlitt, p. 342. [↑](#footnote-ref-492)
493. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, in *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, ed. by Zachary Leader and Michael O’Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 674-702 (p. 698). [↑](#footnote-ref-493)
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505. Wilfred Owen, ‘Preface’, in *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, II, 535-536. [↑](#footnote-ref-505)
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514. Burke, p. 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-514)
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518. Carol Jacobs, ‘On Looking at Shelley’s Medusa’, *Yale French Studies*, 69 (1985), 163-179 (p. 167). [↑](#footnote-ref-518)
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521. Jacobs, p. 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-521)
522. Burke, p. 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-522)
523. Kristeva, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-523)
524. Kristeva, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-524)
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529. Jacobs, p. 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-529)
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561. Burke, pp. 96-97. [↑](#footnote-ref-561)
562. Burke, p. 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-562)
563. Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, p. 680. [↑](#footnote-ref-563)
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572. Kristeva, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-572)
573. Wilfred Owen, ‘Apologia pro Poemate Meo’, *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, I, 124-125. [↑](#footnote-ref-573)
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575. Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, p. 698. [↑](#footnote-ref-575)
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589. Tim Kendall, *Modern English War Poetry* (Oxford & New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-589)
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592. Howarth, p. 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-592)
593. Howarth argues that ‘the brilliance is in the suggestion of the word “indifferent” within “in different”, because as he watches the boy’s eyes change, Owen is simultaneously half-aware of his own pain at not being responded to, at the indifference of death’. Howarth, p. 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-593)
594. Kristeva, p. 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-594)
595. Kristeva, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-595)
596. Burke, p. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-596)
597. This quotation is taken from Kristeva’s discussion of the poetry of Louis-Ferdinand Céline, the style of which she describes as ‘that fascinating crest of decomposition-composition, suffering-music, and abomination-ecstasy’. Both this and the comment quoted above seem particularly applicable to Owen’s poetic style and his approach to aesthetics. Kristeva, p. 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-597)
598. Howarth, p. 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-598)
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714. Morton, p. 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-714)
715. Ronald Tetreault, *The Poetry of Life: Shelley and Literary Form* (Toronto, Buffalo, & London: University of Toronto Press, 1987), p. 215. [↑](#footnote-ref-715)
716. O’Neill, ‘Sonnets and Odes’, p. 335. [↑](#footnote-ref-716)
717. The similarity between the opening of these poems is noted by Jon Stallworthy, who views the lines as ‘An ironic echo of Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale”’. Wilfred Owen, ‘Exposure’, in *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, I, 185-187 (p. 186, n. 1). Tim Kendall makes a similar observation in *Modern English War Poetry* (Oxford & New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-717)
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719. Letter to Susan Owen, 4 February 1917. Owen, *Collected Letters*, p. 430. [↑](#footnote-ref-719)
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721. O’Neill, ‘Sonnets and Odes’, p. 333. [↑](#footnote-ref-721)
722. *The Bible: Aurthorized King James Version*, ed. by Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett (Oxford and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-722)
723. Wilfred Owen, ‘Exposure’, in *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, II: *The Manuscripts and Fragments*, 365-370 (p. 368). [↑](#footnote-ref-723)
724. O’Neill, ‘Sonnets and Odes’, p. 335. [↑](#footnote-ref-724)
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727. Owen, *Collected Letters*, p. 430. [↑](#footnote-ref-727)
728. Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry* (New York, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971), p. 297. [↑](#footnote-ref-728)
729. O’Neill, ‘Sonnets and Odes’, p. 334. [↑](#footnote-ref-729)
730. Bloom, *The Visionary Company*, p. 298. [↑](#footnote-ref-730)
731. Sandy, p. 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-731)
732. Tetreault, p. 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-732)
733. Gifford, p. 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-733)
734. Kendall, p. 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-734)
735. Gifford, p. 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-735)
736. Jon Silkin, *Out of Battle: The Poetry of the Great War* (London: ARK, 1987), p. 204. [↑](#footnote-ref-736)
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