

**FALTERING SENTENCES, FALTERING SELVES:
ON WILFRED OWEN’S POETRY – DULCE ET DECORUM EST
AND FURTHER**

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Wilfred Owen’s poetry suggests – through dramatic propositional interchange between speech, breath, eye-contact and touch – the impossibility of an ultimate and complete achievement of sense in threshold situations where human beings’ lives often appear to be little more than objects of itemizing contemplation. In time of war, humanity gets jeopardized and meaning is “constructed” of interruptions, omissions, losses and ironic shifts of fate, as in *Dulce Et Decorum Est*, *Insensibility*, *Strange Meeting*, *The Calls*, *Mental Cases*, *Disabled*, *Spring Offensive* etc. Through the prism of modern European existential analytics and hermeneutics (Gadamer, Levinas, Derrida) this paper examines the ontological value of speech as contact in order to indicate the poet’s awareness of the notion of the end as obtainable from, and imparting meaning to, human existence.

Key words: Wilfred Owen, tongue, speech, contact, sense, being, death, memory, ontology, hermeneutics

“*Differance* is what makes the movement of signification possible only if each element that is said to be “present,” appearing on the stage of presence, is related to something other than itself but retains the mark of a past element and already lets itself be hollowed out by the mark of its relation to a future element. This trace relates no less to what is called the future than to what is called the past, and it constitutes what is called the present by this very relation to what it is not, [...]. In order for it to be, an interval must separate it from what it is not; but the interval that constitutes it in the present must also, and by the same token, divide the present in itself, thus dividing, along with the present, everything that can be conceived on its basis, that is, every being – in particular, for our metaphysical language, the substance of subject. Constituting itself dynamically dividing itself, this interval is what could be called *spacing*; time’s becoming-spatial or space’s becoming temporal (*temporalizing*). And it is this constitution of the present as a “primordial” and irreducibly non-simple, and therefore, in the strict sense nonprimordial, synthesis of traces, retentions, and protentions [...] that I propose to

call protowriting, prototrace, or differance. The latter (is) (both) spacing (and) temporalizing” (Derrida 2002: 561).

An investigation of the interrelationship between speech, voice and contact as a basis for building on the major theme of human existence in Owen’s poetry requires an especial focus on his war poems. It appears that from *Dulce et Decorum Est* (composed in October 1917) onwards, the significance of voice and speech as contact surges – to the extent of becoming that “nonprimordial”, “retention-protention” subject matter which distinguishes Owen’s poetics as exclusively historical and ontological. Though not limited by the War, Owen’s reputation can be said to be guaranteed by his association with this event (Cf. Rawlinson 2009: 114). The Great War embossed “the triumph of the material over men, the invisibility of the enemy and randomness of death” within the “conjunction of trench warfare and industrial weaponry” which severed the link between space, vision and danger, thus robbing man of a conventional perception of time (Das 2009: 75). Voices of guns and agonizing men (and in earlier poems, before *Dulce Et Decorum Est*, the voices of emblematic English Romantic and Victorian poets – present inter-textually, and implying a harmonious vibrant Nature) “hollow out” – to use Derrida’s words quoted in the above excerpt – the observing self as they create a dependence on knowledge of events before and now. Voice, speech, and language as contact foster a peculiar state of *differance* – of constant admission to the fact of feeling a duty to something other than the present, something that guarantees its hold on man further in the future by setting boundaries to one’s conscience as well as to man’s verbal prowess. This state, so typical of human existence, works as a regulative mechanism of poetic self-expression in Wilfred Owen’s mature work as it makes the lyrical speaker both *different* and *deferential*. Recurrent images suggestive of Owen’s interest in the dichotomy *war–death* as a theme which emphasizes human existence in terms of (breach of) communication within the ambiguity of constantly looking back/forth in time/space include: the “innocent tongues” of the gas-poisoned lot, the “corrupted lungs” which choke for meaning, “the eternal reciprocity of Tears”, the “hunger for blood”, self-inflicted maladies, dissolution and eventual loss of identity, the speech of bullets, the tolling of bells, “last breaths”, Nature’s silence and yet an air shrieking with meaning.

The earliest surviving manuscript of *Dulce Et Decorum Est* is dated “Oct. 8. 1917”, as Prof. Jon Stallworthy informs in his editorial remarks on the poem whilst also noticing that this work of Owen’s would also have been

originally dedicated to the famous poet Jessie Pope – author of numerous motivational pre-war and war-poems (Cf. Stallworthy 1990: 117 – 118). In addition to entrusting to us the truth of war about which we should do something, this poem, which, like all poems by Owen, underwent dramatic editorial changes and re-drafting by the poet himself, comes to remind us also that meaning comes to us, happens as experience and that this experience which urges understanding as application of knowledge further in life is certainly verbal, to rephrase Gadamer (Cf. Gadamer 1994: 384). There is “coughing”, cursing, “yelling out and stumbling”, “guttering, choking, drowning”, blood “gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs”, and the “incurable sores on innocent tongues” (ll. 2, 11, 16, 22, and 24). The question is: can, how does, and should, one translate feasibly, coherently and comprehensively such experience that has a didactic value for the reader, being at the same time an experience of breach of communication between people by describing the loss of the ability to speak of those poisoned by gas and the lyrical speaker’s fumbling for words as he observes, contemplates on, and thus partakes of, these events. Owen deliberated on this poem of 28 lines particularly in terms of phrasing the issue of breach of dialogue because of a wound inflicted on man’s ability to speak, to express and to interpret (Cf. Stallworthy 2013, vol. 2: 296 – 297). In the final version, there appears to be nearly a whole stanza omitted from an earlier variant. This stanza deals with the initial shocking effect of gas poison inhaled by soldiers (from “Then somewhere near in front [...] to “hit us in the face [...])”). Line 16 in the manuscript shows the poet’s search for an appropriate verb as he crosses out three (“gargling”, “gurgling”, “gogging”) in favour of a fourth: “guttering” (Owen 2013: 296). The poem’s title is derived from a well-known Latin tag from Horace’s *Odes* (III. ii. 13) but it fails to attain the “glorious” military composure that fulfillment of duty and dignity in battle ostensibly presupposes:

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! – An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime . . .
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

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

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, –
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.

The poem clearly suggests a type of broken dialogue: between different participants in the same event, between observer/survivor and sufferer/dying man, as well as between one occasion and another in literary-historical terms, as the Latin quotation ingrained in this poem shows. Most prominently, there is a vividly naturalistic description of the corruption of those organs which are directly involved in the process of communication, in speech: the throat, the lungs, the tongue, hence the threat to the process of interpretation which also relies on a properly functioning physiology. The reader is able to partake of the bitterness of blood coming from “the froth-corrupted lungs” and yielding meaning, “bestowing sense,” as Levinas puts it, to the onlooker (Levinas 2002a: 529 – 530). “The froth-corrupted lungs” attempt to produce meaning and they fail to do so, just as the “incurable sores on innocent tongues” prevent a speaker from self-expression. Sense remains locked within gestures – it is reached for, aimed at, but never fully achieved and could never therefore be adequately grasped and interpreted, as it comes out “sore”, “blistered”, “deaf”, *maladied*, annihilated. In hermeneutic terms, the common ground for knowledge here is the common military experience of the gas attack, but commoner than this is the experience of death described in the poem. Owen creates a captivating image which implies a request to be heard, not to be left alone: the face on

which “the white eyes writhe” as though that were the “hanging” face of “a devil’s sick of sin” (ll. 19 – 20). The face – the most distinctive part of the human body which represents an address, a request for meaning and expectation of an answer – contains, as Levinas puts it, “a concrete expression of mortality: [...] a nakedness starker than any other in the uprightness of an exposition to the invisibility of death, to the mystery of death, to the never to be resolved alternative between Being and not Being” (Levinas 2002a: 535). The face, an uppermost layer of a complex system of forming and expressing meaning in physiological terms, is allocated a unique place amidst a canvas of imagery which implies an endeavour to be interpreted. This endeavour may come out in profane words, yet it requests rescue and a hand which would get extended and would save one from drowning. The soldiers are both equipped for the gas-attack and are not, they are both dressed and are not, they both speak, and are deprived of the chance to speak, they can both hear and are not heard when that is necessary, they both breathe in air and they fail to breathe out: “coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge” (l. 2); “[...]. Many had lost their boots/ But limped on, blood-shod All went lame; all blind; / Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots/ Of tired, outstripped/ Five-Nines that dropped behind” (ll. 5 – 8); “yelling out and stumbling” (l. 11); “He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning” (l. 16); “smothering dreams” (l. 17); “[...] at every jolt, the blood/ Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,/ Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud/ Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues” (ll. 21 – 24) etc.

What we have is a case of confirmation of one’s own existence – that of the observer – by way of confronting another man whom the surviving observer both associates with and distances from. These extreme circumstances represent a type of morality one cannot evade, just as one cannot, in the words of Jean-Paul Sartre, evade the fruitful confrontation with another man who makes me: “I cannot obtain any truth whatsoever about myself, except through the mediation of another. The other is indispensable to my existence, and equally so to any knowledge I can have of myself. Under these conditions, the intimate discovery of myself is at the same time the revelation of the other as a freedom which confronts mine, and which cannot think or will without doing so either for or against me” (Sartre 1970: 45, 50). The poem also intricately suggests the theme of ageing, of getting more experienced, yet also physically weaker (“coughing like **hags**”). The idea of death as a reward for patriotic diligence is finally renounced as an “old lie” (that it is sweet, decorous and

proper to die for your own country).¹ The poem contains an actual address of a dying man to “a friend” who survives and who is supposed to restore and amass meaning by remembering and interpreting and who shall thus get transformed from a child into an adult. Amidst other things, this broken dialogue, this broken speech and inability to express oneself leads to another, larger theme in war poetry – truth telling as a symptom of a self that falls apart and finds unsatisfactory responses for existential dilemmas both from military men and amidst those who stayed behind, waited, and watched, incapable of curing the pervasive physical and spiritual ugliness of this great abyss in human communication.²

Another poem, *A Tear Song* (November 1917 – January 1918), furthers Owen’s idea about ugliness and indifference which breach communication and understanding. During sermon, there is but one sincere chorister – perhaps still a child, a boy, who sings “of friendly bees”, as he reverberates the morning breeze which is said to “pipe on his lip” (ll. 17 – 20). In the seventh stanza we suddenly read that God has decided to take the boy’s anthem-book: He “flings” it “on His waste-basket”, unresponsively and cold-heartedly, as he is pronounced to have “no ears”. Broken speech, broken dialogue is implied again and the contrast is even more shocking as the poem also discusses the importance of religion, of holy music, holy songs, the holy word, the Holy Scriptures – a source of wisdom and a reciprocally acting medium of communication between people in historical terms. The “gruff organ”, the indifferent choristers (contrasted hereby with a reference to the “merry men” of “Robin the Forester” – Robin Hood and the Foresters are implied) and a superficial deity who acts upon instinct rather than upon mercy and careful consideration – these are all components of a world which looks like a disarranged mosaic of significations which disclose some eternal state of incapacitation, of a dysfunctional being in eternal muteness and blindness. Relevant poems include: *Sonnet* (“Be slowly lifted up, thou long black

¹ Santanu Das notices how this typical “gas poem” starkly “climaxes on a savage contrast between tongues: the lacerated tongue of the soldier and the grand polysyllabic sound of the Latin phrase as he plays on the two meanings of ‘lingua’ (in Latin, it means both tongue and language)” (Das 2009: 83 – 84).

² On truth telling, see also Rawlinson 2009: 125. In his study on modernism and English literature of the First World War Pericles Lewis quotes Owen who wrote from the front: “I suppose I can endure cold, and fatigue, and the face-to-face death, as well as another; but extra for me there is the universal pervasion of *Ugliness*. Hideous landscapes, vile noises, foul language... everything unnatural, broken, blasted” (Lewis 2008: 111).

arm” – May – July 1918),³ *Arms and the Boy* (3 May 1918), *The Show* (November 1917, May 1918), *The Calls* (May 1918), *The Next War* (September 1917), *Greater Love* (November 1917 – January 1918, July 1918), *The Send-Off* (April – May, July 1918), *Exposure* (December 1917 – September 1918), and *The Sentry* (August – October 1917, September 1918). Owen’s poetry from *Dulce Et Decorum Est* onwards displays, in loud and disturbed overtones, an insatiable yearning for normality shadowed by the knowledge of: youth lost to the monster of the war, the ghostliness of remembered images of heart-tearing pain, the disillusioned realization of the eternal doom of solitude, and the unavoidable dissolution of the wholeness of one’s selfhood in a universe which fakes a grasp of the past and of dutiful engagement with the future. Direct observation by way of abstraction from an object of research is highly improbable with regard to the experience of war. The speaking self in the poems is involved in what he describes, as he acts events out (even though a lot has been written about the fact that the directness of experience in Owen’s work is highly contingent as the poet spent a very limited time in actual military action⁴). We have a lyrical self who displays a historical consciousness by way of letting the multifariousness of voices from the past (voices of people seen, heard, read, remembered) hand down a sort of knowledge which is in constant need of revision, interpretation, reference, and sorting out. Owen’s poetry is as much focused on war as an object of research as it becomes itself the object of research – how to talk about war when words actually fail us. One may die in action and one may also dwindle away for lack of a reliable phraseology to describe this state of total, mutual, savage, and alienating incomprehension. Owen views war not so much directly as

³ Jon Stallworthy notes that the major problem with Owen is rooted not in the legibility of his manuscripts but rather in their chronology, in choosing which may be considered an earlier, and which a later, version of one and the same work whereby the scholar is prompted “to rely almost exclusively on internal evidence” (i.e. the uniqueness of themes and structure, for instance), as well as to delve in Owen’s letters (Stallworthy 1990: xix).

⁴ There appear to have been two significant time spans during which Owen was directly involved in military action, in France: January 1917 – March 1917, and then in September 1918 – November 1918. Despite this fact, however, Owen has become known as a poet absorbed in contemplating the war in humanitarian terms. He also benefited from the companionship of the other, great, war poet Siegfried Sassoon whilst being a patient treated for shell-shock at Craiglockhart War Hospital, Slateford, near Edinburgh in June – September 1917 where Sassoon also stayed and for whose sake Owen is known to have revised and fair-copied many of his poems (Cf. Stallworthy 1990: xxi).

actually an opportunity for transposing our own consciousness – the consciousness of a reader, interpreter, and survivor – into a concrete historical horizon whereby tension arises between viewer and actuality, as well as between reader and poetic text. Gadamer advises: “the hermeneutic task consists in not covering up this tension by attempting a naïve assimilation of the two but in consciously bringing it out” (Gadamer 1994: 306, see further in Gadamer 1994: 284 – 285, and 304). The fearful attractiveness of Owen’s verse lies precisely in the ambiguous suggestion that whilst mutism may be seen as the most common symptom of shell-shock it is also a universal state of being in a society which seems to be unable to maintain sense in peaceful terms as it proves deaf, deficient in empathy in the first place, if it should have allowed for this tragedy to occur. Owen’s “obsessively corporeal imagination” (throat, eyes, lungs, face etc.) and explicit drawings of war disfigurements and deformities (as found in his personal correspondence) provide ample evidence of the above problem (Cf. Das 2009: 73, 81 – 82).

In *Sonnet (On Seeing a Piece of Our Heavy artillery Brought into Action)* speech and voice, hand (here the “dark arm”) and touch, yield meaning and annihilate meaning, at once reach for sense and delete sense, “cast a spell” and destroy it. These elements are all blended in the “long black arm” of the “Great Gun towering towards Heaven, about to curse” (*Sonnet*, ll. 3 – 4, 11, 13 – 14). Weapons use an unnatural, perilous language which abbreviates human beings’ chances of self-expression. In a metaphysical way, the phrase “the bosom of our prosperity” in line 12 indicates once again a systematic totality of the production of breath, sound and meaning in the human body first of all. The idea that meaning is brought about in a constant fierce struggle (between a machine and a human being) whereby breathing, eating and bleeding suggest some savage competition for existence and supremacy is seen in the poem *Arms and the Boy* (very obviously a response to G. B. Shaw’s *Arms and the Man*, as well as to, Jon Stallworthy notices, Shelley’s “*Mask of Anarchy*, lxxvii. ll. 311 – 314, Stallworthy 1990: 131). Here, “the bayonet-blade” is “keen with hunger of blood”; it “longs to nuzzle in the hearts of lads” also torn by its “fine zink teeth” (ll. 1 – 2, 6 – 7). Against the background of an unyielding practice of interruption of communication, of surveillance, mass murder and mass extinction of mercy there is outlined a young man’s defenselessness. Being denied protection, he is guaranteed to become part of human sense which emerges out of destruction, out of non-optional insertion into eventness through death imposed, as “[...] God will grow no talons at his heels, / Nor antlers through the thickness of his curls” (ll. 11 – 12).

The matter of simultaneous consumption and production of sense in death, with an especial focus on the bodily organization of speech, breath, eating and mental activity as inter-related is starkly presented in the poem *The Show* (ll. 6 – 11, 14 – 15, 19 – 22, and 25 – 29), especially in the words bold-typed: [...] 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. / By them had slimy paths been trailed and scraped / Round myriad warts that might be little hills. // [...] / (**And smell came up from those foul openings / As out of mouths, or deep wounds deepening.**) // [...] / Those that were gray, 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.// [...] **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 above lines clearly speak of hectic motion, of an inability to escape, of the peril of becoming partial, also of the danger of becoming one out of many (a caterpillar, or “the feet of many men”), of being identified and denied identity at the same time. Mark Rawlinson comments on this poem that Owen managed to make “the soldier’s body the object of sacrifice and transubstantiation” (Rawlinson 2009: 130). It may also be useful to note that whilst “wire” (l. 6) creates the image of imprisonment (i.e. barbed wire), of limitation and stifling uniformity in spatial-temporal terms, it may also refer to the telegraph – a technical means of communicating news and important decisions during the First World War – certainly a method of holding people together, but also of dispersing hopes and announcing death. The poem is very probably obliged to Henri Barbusse’s novel *Under Fire* (1917), Jon Stallworthy remarks, as he quotes Owen’s own letter to his own brother Colin (14 May 1917). It reads: “Then we were caught in a Tornado of Shells. The various “waves” were all broken up and we carried on like a crowd moving off a cricket-field. 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” (Stallworthy 1990: 133–134). Owen’s experiential impressionability seems to have produced this poetic tribute whereby he demonstrates, on the one hand, fascination with the awe-inspiring grandeur of this event, and on the other, a deaf-mute, shell-shocked, naïve, devastated comprehension of war as loss of words, yet a riveting actuality that, by way of prompting (self-)estrangement (and,

eventually, the speaker's own death by way of punitive decapitation, as the last line referred to indicates) denies impartiality. We may witness a devaluation of the human potential – men's bodies "plug" ditches whilst they are "eaten" up by shells and bullets fired by other men in a near cannibalistic way, the cannons speaking "foul" words. Speech appears to be a perversion in this case, rather than a means of coming together.

The Calls presents a mixture of tongues, voices, sounds and emblems of the daily life of a community. Sense oscillates between familiarity and alienation, the home and the outside world, sobriety and mental derangement, pain and alleviation, motion and standstill, passivity and an impetus to act, day and night, being and non-being. The lyrical speaker considers the time of war as both a distant event and a proximity all around, of which his identity partakes. The sounds he registers both muffle his own voice and reinstate a feeling of belonging to, and ownership of, a living environment which has been bestowed upon him as an existential task he must accomplish in an ontologically considerate manner. All the sounds he hears denote agitation, pain and an urge for response: the "dismal fog-hoarse siren" that "howls (l. 1), the "quick treble bells" which ring at nine o'clock announcing the beginning of school (ll. 5 – 6), the "stern bells" of the "organ moan" which remind one of "the first amen" for the day as well as the smallness and mediocrity of an illiterate private "religion" (ll. 9 – 12), the "blatant bugle" which "tears" the afternoon as the speaker remembers the "Tommys/ [...] Trying to keep in step with rag-time tunes" (ll. 13 – 15), the "gongs hum and buzz" as they prompt the thought of culinary satisfaction/peace and hunger/distress at the same time (ll. 17 – 19), then the distant "bumps" of "gunnery-practice" heard at night which make the listener's heart "thump" (ll. 20 – 21), and finally, "the sighs of men" which speak of distress and which cry for help (even though he admits he has no skill "to speak of their distress") and compel the speaker to go and be partial (ll. 25 – 27). Suggested is both disruption and completion of sense through a variety of voices denoting regular activities and division of space and time in ontological terms, and there can be registered a constant exchange of motion in and out of a perceiver's mind.

In *The Send-Off* we can once again hear the "great bells" announcing the send-off of soldiers few of whom are possibly going to return, to "creep back, silent, to village wells", outnumbered by those returning in coffins, by those who will come back silent, with breasts "all white with wreath and spray" (ll. 4 – 5, 16 – 20). This poem commemorates the moral contribution of all those who give up their lives for the sake of the country's benefit in time of war. Nonetheless, the lyrical speaker stresses

the absurdity of war as a time of silence, of mutual distress and of denial of the possibility of achieving sense through social bonding which would normally be significantly mediated by one's ability to hear/receive and speak/respond. The "train-loads" mentioned in this poem may also be seen to allude to the size of loss of human lives (i.e. loss in bulk) and to the greatness of loss of meaning therefore in humanitarian terms, to an aporetic peril of plunging into a history of gaps and incompletions. Another example of a poem where the silence of death, or rather, the silence before the face of death, reigns and yields meaning can be found in *Exposure*.⁵ The voiced-out expression of disharmony and enmity (the bullets) is starkly contrasted to the silence and serenity of the wintry landscape at a moment of doomed search for a rescuing contact. Parts of the human body are made prominent ("Our **brains** ache, in the merciless east winds that knife us," "Pale flakes with fingering stealth come feeling for our **faces**," "Slowly our **ghosts** drag home," "Shriveling many **hands**, puckering **foreheads** crisp," "All their **eyes** are ice") within the metonym of the laceration of the intactness of the human self which also suggests the dismemberment of the sense of historical continuity and of intra-communal trust in an atmosphere of delusional standstill and apathy, emblemized by the epiphoric "But nothing happens" (ll. 5, 15, 20, 40); and "We turn back to our dying" (l. 30), and finally, "For love of God seems dying" (l. 35). What human society (and soldiers) lacks is made to look outstanding against the snowfall: togetherness, unanimity, patience, thoughtfulness, consideration, steadfastness, certainty and firmness: [...] **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. / Pale flakes with lingering 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? [...] // To-night, **this frost will fasten on this mud and us, / Shrivelling many hands, puckering foreheads crisp. / The burying-party, picks and shovels in their shaking grasp, / Pause over half-known faces. / All their eyes are ice, / But nothing****

⁵ With regard to this poem, Santanu Das provides a helpful explanation of the interrelationship between "unchecked lyric impulse", actual sensory experience, consciousness and language in exploring Owen's early months of war involvement in 1917 (Das 2009: 85).

happens” (ll. 16 – 25, 36 – 40). The soldiers hide in ditches, stupefied and desolate amidst the profuse beauty of a nature where, however, instead of rain-shower we have bullets showering down. The implication is obvious: just like the water cycle, the bullets circumrotate – once shot into the air from the land by humans they return to humans. In hermeneutic terms, implied also is the circumrotation of sense whereby meaning gets built up on the basis of regular returns to, and cathartic revision of, the past with regard to the present which contains the future. The dramatic description of “the air that shudders black with snow”, as well as the impersonality in enumerating the “hands”, “faces” and “eyes” in the last stanza – these elements force out a recognition of the anonymity and the unpredictability of the emergence of sense at moments of “black”, unidentifiable, perilous, mass accumulation of sound and view in a universe engineered by chance.

The theme of the acquisition of sense by chance, blindly – literally and figuratively – is also developed in *The Sentry*, which obviously rests on Owen’s own memory (recorded in a letter to his own mother, Susan Owen, and dated 16 January 1917) and feeling of regret over the fact that he had rejected his first servant who was thence appointed on Sentry Duty (a job requiring a man of higher social standing) and who, having been separated thus from his superior, was blown down and blinded during bombardment (Owen 1990: 166). In this poem a sudden “blast of whizz-bangs” “buffets” both the “eyes and breaths” of soldiers, undermining their ability to get orientated (stanza 2, ll. 11 – 26). The simultaneous and interrelated impairment of the two senses that would normally guarantee proximity and contact between a person and the outside world – vision and breath/speech – deprives the soldier of the ability to act and respond properly and confuses his capacity to judge soberly. He is hardly able to “whine” that he is unable to see when he actually can (though being injured) and is still alive, and to “shout” that he is able to see when there are actually no real lights but those of the beyond, of the otherworldly and of Heaven (ll. 18 – 22, 35 – 36). It appears rather startling that a poet who spent a mere two months in direct involvement in war (both on a course in the base area and in front line service in the early months of 1917) and had a minimum taste of what could be described as “standard Western Front experience”, has been so unyieldingly categorized as a ‘war poet.’ Perhaps it would be right to assume that he became even more of a ‘war’ poet as he was recovering in Craiglockhart hospital (though he was never physically wounded), and pondering on the predicament of being in War as a predicament of his own inner self, a challenge to his own integrity of existence, as Mark Rawlinson argues in his contributive study on Owen

(Rawlinson 2009: 118 – 119, 122). Rawlinson also stresses that a very limited number of Owen's poems was published in his own lifetime – a fact that may suggest Owen's poetic reticence and introversion which balance an otherwise prominent traditionalist image of him as an outspoken realist or satirist.⁶ In any case, war experience, accompanied by the figure of a capricious, unpredictable, agonizing death and the hours of boredom and “subhuman conditions” of existence, would have urged the poet to respond whilst offering “awesome material in [one's] quest for new understandings of timeless truths”, as Vivien Noakes informs us (Noakes 2009: 174 – 175, 189). As a war poet, Owen achieves a shocking linguistic impact both on the reader and on himself, it seems, as his lyrical speakers waver amidst a variety of expressions of disillusionment that ruins self-certainty. Owen's work may be seen to reverberate a Darwinian divorce between evolution and teleology in insisting on the building of meaning randomly, by blind chance – something which may also be perceived in the fact that in almost all of Owen's poems one is hardly able to track down any immediate perpetrators of disasters, any individuals directly responsible for the tragedy of war. This “self-referentiality” of Owen's war poetry reflects “a widespread feeling of exhaustion and cultural crisis” that predominates the war period and specifically the time of its aftermath, as Pericles Lewis maintains in his research on Modernism (Lewis 2008: 11, 16, 19). A world “devoid of inherent significance” indeed encourages the belief that “reality could never be disentangled from our representations of it” whereby the effect achieved (in Walter Benjamin's terms) is a “crisis of perception itself” (ibid. 2, 6, 8).

To Owen, blindness – in building sense – has a carnal representation: it is related to bodily dysfunctions, most commonly to a breach of one's capacity to breathe, see and speak. Sense gets intensified through an instance of death, when the failure of an organ in the human body is reciprocally compensated for by profusion in ideological terms: men begin to matter when they are no more and because they are no more. Such is the case, for instance, with the dead man in the poem *Asleep* (November 1917, May 1918). The phrases describing the sudden and tormenting death of a soldier who falls asleep out of utter exhaustion point at his greater significance as a body rather than as a living person. There, “having heaved a quaking/ Of the aborted life within him leaping,” he is said to “sleep less tremulous, less cold, / Than he who wake, and waking say

⁶ Those four poems were: *Song of Songs* (“first in *The Hydra*, the Craiglockhart journal that Owen edited, then as a competition runner-up in *The Bookman*”), *Miners*, *Hospital Barge*, and *Futility* (“all in *The Nation* during 1918” – Rawlinson 2009: 118).

Alas” (ll. 5 – 6, 20 – 21)! In a near necrophiliac manner, sense streams down from the body, as “stray blood came creeping/ From the intruding lead, like ants on track” (ll. 8 – 9). The image suggests partitioning as well as wholeness, continuity, progression and gradual amassment. Bleeding or coughing – both processes exemplifying interruption of normal bodily functioning – produce sense by capturing the actuality of mass destruction in a personalized manner which particularizes reality: “[death] spat at us with bullets, and he’s coughed/ Shrapnel. We chorused if he sang aloft, / We whistled while he shaved us with his scythe” (*The Next War*, September 1917, ll. 6 – 8). In *The Next War* we stumble upon an externalized representation of human suffering whereby the weapon (which causes Death) metonymically comes to mean Death and is further described as ill, “coughing” shrapnel, spreading death like a disease – unnoticeably, immeasurably and insensitively. Owen’s verse coughs all the time over the lyrical speaker’s inability to come to terms with loss – even, or perhaps especially, in cases of anonymous deaths being registered, as in *Greater Love* (October-November 1917, January/July 1918): “Your voice sings not so soft, – / Though even as wind murmuring through rafted loft, – / Your dear voice is not dear, / Gentle, and evening clear, / As theirs whom none now hear, / Now earth has stopped their piteous mouths that coughed” (ll. 13 – 18). Dolorously vocalized, dulcet personal happiness is hushed by the embittered remembrance of the many that have been silenced through death.

Whilst men get deprived of the ability to speak and produce sounds that matter and build meaning, sense gets built, instead, by way of transposing human qualities and skills onto inanimate objects that begin to speak for men, being actually products of human activity. Thus, “bullets chirp”, “machine guns chuckle”, “the Big Gun guffaws”, “the Bayonets’ long teeth grin”, “rabblies of Shells hoot and groan”, as soldiers say their last prayers (addressing Jesus, their own mothers or fathers), beaten down by the “hissing” of “the gas;” with heads inclined downwards, they “kiss the mud” (*The Last Laugh*, February 1918, ll. 1 – 6, 12 – 15). The image is one where the contact with death is oral and the production of sense therefore acquires a very openly vocalized, carnal, it may even be argued sexual, representation. The question of the maiming of the most important organ of the production of meaning – the speech apparatus (including the lungs, the throat, the teeth, and the tongue) – is also raised in one of Owen’s most anthologized poems, *Mental Cases* (May, July 1918). This dramatic monologue contains a narrative about the disruption of the speech/meaning-production system in man’s being (including: tongues drooping, teeth bared

like those of skulls, blood treading from lungs, “this hilarious, hideous, / Awful falseness of set-smiling corpses”) set within a detailed, hectic confession about the lyrical speaker’s partiality to human misery as he turns out to be one of many to have caused this misery of “flying muscles”, “eyeballs [shrinking] tormented/ Back into their brains” and the hands “Snatching after us who smote them, brother, / Pawing us who dealt them war and madness” (ll. 25 – 28). The address “brother” surges amidst this hellish “human squander” suggesting sense-building by denial. The memorable image of death by falling down and kissing the earth is further developed in *The Kind Ghosts* (revised July 1918). We see “red mouths [...] torn to make [roses] bloom” in a “palace” full of the ghosts of dead men sacrificed in war. Colour is important in conveying a sense of belonging, of heredity, of space and of continuity at a place where the perished soldiers’ “quiet blood lies in [the] crimson rooms” of present-day blindness. Oblivion reigns over an inchoate awareness of human presences of before that furnish the palace which struggles to be an ontological receptacle of humanitarian knowledge (consider especially the words “pall” and “hecatombs” in the last stanza; ll. 1 – 3, 5 – 6, 8, 10 – 11).

The reality immediately accessible to Owen in the years 1914 – 1918 was the War in which he participated directly for a very short while: he was killed on 4 November 1918 – a week before the Armistice was signed. He explored the way this war entered human lives and summoned men to partake of it in broader, ethical and ideological terms by engaging all mental potential for the sake of something whose outcome contained, above all else, uncertainty. And yet it was this particular involvement that led Owen to recognize, describe and peruse, in his verse, a type of significance that could not be lost and that proved independent of all the circumstances of time, or, to paraphrase Gadamer: “a kind of timeless present that is contemporaneous with every other present” – death (Gadamer 1994: 288). The faltering sentences and the shuttered selves that we come across in Owen’s work result from his poetic negotiation with the awareness of the historicity of one’s (own) being – preservation of language, ideas, memories, knowledge and humanity “amid the ruins of time” which foster tradition (ibid. 289). The dying men in his poetry represent a growing grasp of “that part of the past which [offers] the possibility of historical knowledge” through that of its thematic components which could be said to be both “significant in itself” and interpreting itself (ibid.) and ensuring a walkway towards a timeless historicity as a mode of human being in the world (ibid. 290). Owen’s reflections on the disintegration of the speech/meaning apparatus border on

his general search, evidenced by his entire work (and since the earliest of his poetic work extant: *To Poesy*, 1909 – 1910), for a topical commonality that could be seen as binding all men, of all ages, to a tradition constantly being formed, a tradition which could be declared to lie at the heart of “the ontological structure of understanding”, if we should like to rely on Gadamer’s perception of tradition and truth yet again (ibid. 293). All these dead men gurgling their last words, choking for air, issuing blood and despair, function as both “historically intended, distanciated objects” and as sure elements of the tradition of being hermeneutically, in an eternal state of temporal-spatial inbetweenness (ibid. 295). They declare Owen’s interest in the knowledge of one’s openness to the ultimate experience of finiteness as the only genuine experience one can ever possess without being its master – “the experience of one’s own historicity,” of expecting and going through death, which both empowers and defeats one – linguistically as well as ontologically (ibid. 355, 357).

Tradition, sense, poetic talent, communal belonging and verbal capacity are all bound in one of Owen’s most well-known works: *Insensibility* (drafted October-November 1917, revised November 1917 – January 1918). Jon Stallworthy directs our attention at a significant excerpt of Shelley’s *A Defence of Poetry* that might serve as a contextual prop for the appearance of this poem and which argues that “[Poetry’s] footsteps are like those of a wind over a sea, which the coming calm erases, and those traces remain only, as on the wrinkled sand which paves it. These and the corresponding conditions of being are experienced principally by those of the most delicate sensibility and the most enlarged imagination; and the state of mind produced by them is at war with every base desire” (Shelley as qtd. in Stallworthy 1990: 124). The latter may be read as an indirect implication of the notion that sense gets built in time, in layers, often by chance, and that poetic sensibility rests on tracking down remnants that begin to signify something once they have been reconsidered, relived and re-suffered textually and contextually. Historical amassment of sense requires multitudinousness in performance that both contextualizes and detextualizes space and time, sound and view, breath and touch, life and death, whereby the principle of reciprocal exchange between sufferer/dying/remembered and perpetrator/survivor/memorializer humanizes being as obligation, obedience and humbleness because of the eternal presence of an Other who draws the contours of our conscience and consciousness. Thus, in *Insensibility*, we are able to see the value of: “alleys cobbled with their brothers” (l. 5), to recognize “Chance’s strange arithmetic” (l. 16), to feel “the scorching cautery of battle” (l. 28), to hear

the many “mourns when many leave these shores” (l. 57), to swallow “the eternal reciprocity of tears” (l. 59). These are not merely cornerstones of the poet’s impressionability or evidence of the storage capacity of his memory – rather, they vindicate the hermeneutic understanding of the significance of being in posterity, as one amongst the many who comes to recognize that sense is something that gets bestowed upon one, it is gifted, even in time of perilous and savage denial of human life and culture, such as the time of war. Men are said to be “gaps for filling” (ibid. l. 9) as they always depend on the exchange between one and many, present and past, the known and the unknown, the friend and the enemy – even if peace should reign and there should be no need for substituting imagination for ammunition (ibid. ll. 19 – 20). Space is manifestly vocal and meaningful in Owen’s war poetry: it is a collection of alleys, channels, ditches and underground expanses which whisper the dead who urge one to have a word with them and thus revise one’s own deeds. Space is layered: it is human space with a humanizing effect on the viewer who is drawn into it through memories of his own past.

In *Strange Meeting* (January – March 1918)⁷ we are led down “some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped/ Through granites which titanic wars had groined” (ll. 2 – 3). We meet the “encumbered sleepers” who “groan” yet they seem immune to what happens above – no blood “reaches” this subterranean space, “no guns thump”, no “moans” could be heard (ll. 4, 12 – 13). In the dialogic exchange between viewer and dead man it becomes clear that a sense of regret prevails over the life of both men and that speech is the mechanism of compensating for the hopelessness of the “undone years” in actual, living life. Courage and wisdom appear to be of no more avail and no more the personal property of either of the two – the world is described as “retreating [...] / Into vain citadels that are not walled” (ll. 30 – 33). As wisdom wanes, blood comes to “clog” the “chariot-wheels” of those carts which transfer meaning from one space to another and thus make space meaningful itself. The dead man’s speech dominates over that of the living person’s as he finally pronounces the truth: “I am the enemy you killed, my friend” (l. 40). The

⁷ Mark Rawlinson defines this work of Owen’s as a “humanist subterranean elegy” which “resolves its diagnosis of the world’s deafness to the saving discourse of poetry in the transfigured embrace of the foemen” (Rawlinson 2010: 841). Yet it may also be seen as an elegy which adulterates this typically consolatory lyrical genre as it contains (like many other poems of Owen’s: e.g. *Disabled*) a yearning which “undermines any elegiac principle of assuagement” as it shocks readers “out of indifference by confronting them with actuality,” as Neil Corcoran rightly observes (Corcoran 2007: 91).

poem contains an impressive descent into the earth wherefrom meaning issues, derived and let out into the open through an illusory conversation between two men who appear to form a dichotomy in which the inner, the spatially lower, the covert, is the focal point in the poet's discussion of sense as contact between two. Speech mediates presence and immunizes external, physical space against stillness, uneventfulness and immobility: it makes it be one regulated by exchange as tantamount to existence. Though, as Mark Rawlinson argues, this traumatic "dream-vision" may feel incomplete and fails to leave the reader satisfied with a possible return to the upper world (Rawlinson 2009: 128), it fails not to leave one with a feeling of sense. Far more important is the dialogue between the two participants: the dialogue's finale – three dots in punctuation – is not deficient in sense: it may be perceived to suggest the temporality, partiality and ethereal nature of speech which remains, however, preserved in poetic memory and certainly textually by way of literary interpretation. The poem owes its intricate texture to Dante, Keats and to the Bible; it is also one which has come to incorporate another excerpt ("Earth's wheels run oiled with blood"), as Jon Stallworthy notes that Owen himself "may not have regarded the poem as complete" (Stallworthy 1990: 126). The three dots signal temporalization of meaning which builds in dialogue, through exchange: meaning may never be finalized because of the historical nature of human existence which declines the extremity of full-stops.

The production of sense as exchange between inner self and outer reality is often spatially concretized via the participation of the mouth which both shapes, releases, and cuts short, disallows, constricts. Examples are to be found in poems like *S.I.W.* (September 1917, May 1918) and *Training* (June 1918). The former recounts of a case of a self-inflicted wound (hence the military jargon "S.I.W.") whereby a young soldier assuages "the hunger of his brain" by kissing "the muzzle" of the gun with his teeth to "die smiling" (as the letter written to his mother officially informs, ll. 13, 37 – 38). In the latter the lyrical speaker hopes to "drink space, mile by mile" with his "lips, panting," as he both dreams of love and shuns it, burdened with some heavy task which both brings, and rules out, content and satisfaction (Christ's sacrificial deed is hinted at by Jon Stallworthy in one of the notes to this poem – Cf. Stallworthy 1990: 141). Physical suffering has a mentally stimulating effect for Owen's lyrical speakers who seem to exist more wholesomely the more constrained by circumstances, pain and memories, they are. Communal, religious, historical, psychological, masculine and personal identities meet in a sinisterly volatile and captivating manner in *Disabled* (October 1917, July 1918). To the ghastly

crippled war veteran (“legless, sewn short at elbow”) voices both resound with life and aggravate his awareness of his physical, mental and spiritual maiming: “Voices of boys rang saddening like a hymn, / Voices of play and pleasure after day, [...]” (ll. 4 – 5). The memories are certainly physiological and presuppose contact (embracing girls’ slim waists, holding their warm and subtle hands, meeting women’s eyes, playing football, bruising his knee) and sound, or voice (he recalls how he was once “drafted out with drums and cheers,” l. 36). Physically immobilized as he is, he is mentally active yet word-bound. A maimed body may only be partially able to accomplish contact with the outside world. Ironically enough, the outside world may be the one to profit more from maintaining contact with a self that has undergone such dramatic reworking of the apparatus of perception, of one’s physical shape and one’s own mental disposition. The outside world becomes a provocative need when man has been retailored into a dependant, as is indeed the case with *A Terre* (December 1917, July 1918). The speaker’s mind requires to be attended to as the man has lost his eyes⁸ and the ability to move: only to a person of some physical deficiency can “spring wind [...] work its own way to [his] lung, / And grow [him] legs as quick as lilac shoots” (ll. 23 – 24).⁹ By being partially physically invalidated, the lyrical self gets contextualized, and poetically re-confirmed as a “mummy-case”, “a dug-out rat” who shall eventually feed the earth and prove Shelley’s belief that one may become “one with nature, herb and stone” (ll. 27, 36 and 44 – 45). The man is finally seen “grappling your chest” (the place of initial production of sound), of “climbing your throat on sobs” and wishing to be “weaned” from his physical confines yet wishing for a heaven which flings him back onto the earth – amidst plants, shower, “soft rains”, and the sun – where he would be impervious to the crash of guns and human folly which has once “ripped [him] from [his] own back/ In scarlet shreds” (ll. 61 – 63, 9 – 10). This dreamed-of abandonment of human physicality is nonetheless accounted for in a very bodily manner – as a

⁸ The speaker claims that the “bandage feels like pennies on my eyes” (l. 7). A note after the poem explains that “it was once customary to place coins on the eyelids of a corpse to keep them closed” (Stallworthy 1990: 157). This may also suggest that whilst the patient’s specific medical needs may have been met, he has been treated like a redundant element to be “evaluated” as a body, as an impersonalized item, rather than as a living person.

⁹ Jon Stallworthy remarks that the original fragment *Wild with All Regrets* was later expanded into *A Terre* (Stallworthy 1990: 189). A careful insight into the fragment (37 lines in all) allows one to perceive that in the original version the poet lays greater emphasis on a vocal way a contact between one and many, self and other, man and the world, gets built.

speech in a dramatic monologue where the lyrical self clearly addresses someone who is physically there, who is physically present, as the initial imperative signals: “Sit on the bed” (l. 1). As Mark Rawlinson observes, the poem is one of many where Owen implies that a sort of “uncanny harmony amidst disorder” is achievable after all (Rawlinson 2010: 831). Versification depends on difference, on differentiation from something seen which the poet is not fully, and distances from in time; this uncanny form of *differance* simultaneously blends and separates the present as solitude and communion – by way of observation. The living present – to use Derrida’s formula – becomes “a primordial and incessant synthesis that is constantly led back upon itself, back upon its assembled and assembling self by retentional traces [...],” by memory (Derrida 2002: 566). So that, “the ontology of presence is the ontology of beings and beingness” which dispels the pure nominal unity of poetic self-expression by inserting different substitutions of living experiences which multiply the poet’s own persona as that of a survivor doomed to remember, re-mix and interpret life as constant loss and gain of sense meaning to be struggled with linguistically” (Cf. *ibid.* 565 – 566, 571).

Corruption of speech as self-expression is to be found in many of Owen’s war-poems, not least in: [*I Saw Round His Mouth’s Crimson*, November – December 1917], *Apologia Pro Poemate Meo* (November – December 1917), *Hospital Barge* (December 1917), *The Rime of the Youthful Mariner* (November 1917 – January 1918) and *Miners* (January 1918). In these cases we also notice some change of position in physical terms, some movement, shifting and provocative sense-building by way of reiterations of omission. Thus, a dying man’s “crimson” round his mouth “deepens” as the sun also sets, “cold stars” are lit, “very old and bleak, / In different skies” (“*I Saw Round His Mouth’s Crimson*” – ll. 1 – 2, 7 – 8). The mutilation of the speech organ is likened to the descent of night whereby the muteness of the nocturnal sky and stars implies a provocative dissemination of the feeling of despair and the experience of mourning across unexplored territories, perhaps far from human knowledge. Much has been written about Owen’s war poetry in terms of the general air of exultation and even *jouissance* that war may convey to the observer directly involved who may be said to at least “own the experience”, unlike us, readers, distanced by time (see, for instance, Das 2009: 88 – 89). Mark Rawlinson reads “insensibilities” and passivity as a mental transformation: “an active glorification of battle” whereby the soldiers, in order to survive, can be said to achieve “moral and intellectual cauterization – the cessation of compassion, empathy, perspective – which symbolizes the usurpation of

their humanity by war” (Rawlinson 2009: 126). We may, on the other hand, see the cessation of speech as a symbol of the inability to commune in any comprehensible familiar terms when there is but “the silentness of duty”, “curses”, “scowls”, and “wretched” smiles (as in *Apologia Pro Poemate Meo*, ll. 2, 1 – 14, 27). What we have is a dramatic shift in terms of the referential context, unlike the earlier (juvenile), pre-war poems which abound in inter-textual implications about a harmonious Natural whole which contains, amongst other things, the voices of Romantic bards with whom Owen dialogizes actively. It is not “cauterization”, passivity and lack of empathy that we see: the speech apparatus gets transferred onto inanimate objects – machine-guns – once again, products of human activity and therefore extensions of men themselves who may now be seen to find “peace where shell-storms spouted reddest spate” (*Apologia Pro Poemate Meo*, l. 28).

Sounding by echoing loss (rather than muting) becomes the theme of Owen’s war poems which often imply a journey, as in *Hospital Barge* (December 1917), whereby he is transported back into the past to heal a feeling of loss of ground and touch with reality in time of war (we read of Avalon, King Arthur being healed by Lancelot, and Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, as Owen notes himself – Owen 1990: 104). In the poem *The Rime of the Youthful Mariner* (November – January 1918) we delve, seemingly unobtrusively, into the realm of jail life: flogging, or silencing criminals by gagging their mouths. Here, the observer re-emerges as the one who was once a violator but is now the one with a “tongue ... thicker than mine/ And black as any slug” (l. 15 – 16). In Owen’s war poetry, observation comes to mean survival as speech, reflection and contact by way of remembering in an especial way which implies some ironic balance of loss of words for one person and gain of language for another person. In *Miners* (composed on 13 – 14 January 1918, following upon a real pit explosion at the Podmore Hall Colliery, Halmerend, on 12 January 1918, when about 140 men were killed) the lyrical speaker grasps the “sighs of the coal” and the sound of “men/ writhing for air” as he sees “white bones in the cinder-shard, / Bones without number” (ll. 1 – 2, 13 – 16). The “whispering in his heart” is the memory of the tragedy observed. This whispering is poly-vocal as it implies the groans of many people expiring in anti-human, subterranean conditions, at the same time. Apart from the obvious closeness between this experience and the war experience (especially the enclosure and the gas-chambers in concentration camps as marked by labour, over-exertion and utter mental and spiritual exhaustion) Owen suggests the historical lastingness of voice as human culture: “the centuries

will burn rich loads/ With which we groaned, / Whose warmth shall lull their dreaming lids, / While songs are crooned; / But they will not dream of us, poor lads, / Left in the ground” (ll. 29 – 34). Speech becomes the privilege of survivors: voice is a terrestrial physical potency which can only be coached on the earth, rather than “in the ground” or underneath. Yet just as we dig coal, we dig human presences from the underneath as a source of warming up life on earth. Implied is mass anonymity – in coal-mining as well as in dying – but also, a breach of contact and communication between the dead and the living: “the years stretch their hands, well-cheered/ By our life’s ember”, yet “[...] they will not dream of us, poor lads, / Left in the ground” (ll. 27 – 28, 33 – 34).¹⁰ Many of Owen’s poems stress thirst and disorientation – a thirst for a sip of water, for which there is no time, just as there is no “light to see the voices by... / There is no time to ask... he knows not what” (as in *Conscious*, January-March 1918, ll. 10, 15 – 16). Men dwell in utter negation, in a void of unconcern and apathy and only memories soar and vocalize the past whence Horatiuses, Macaulays and stern yet enthusiastic schoolmistresses “bleat” (as in *Schoolmistress*, January-March 1918, ll. 3, 6, 9 – 10). Owen builds a stark contrast – especially in a poem like *Dulce Et Decorum Est* – between the naturalness of recitation of “classic” lines and the immediate reality of manslaughter (through, say, suffocation) to criticize a society which refuses to get enlightened by experience but rests on pre-given “decorous,” inflated patriotism and empty promises that fail to achieve an actual catch on life and current concerns.

Owen’s poetry resounds with images referring to a universe polyvocal yet deaf and uncaring. Most of his war poems bear traces of an urban reality, that of “cavernous slaughter-houses” where “crowing sirens blare” – a world where the lyrical speaker is typically represented as a ghost (e.g. “the ghost of Shadwell stair”), with “flesh both firm and cool” and eyes reflecting the myriad of images in the water, in the Thames (both continuity and cessation is implied in the natural presence of the river flowing and the ghost’s dying with the advent of dawn), as in [*I Am the Ghost of Shadwell Stair*], written in 1918 (ll. 1 – 4, 13 – 16). Water, indeed, works as a medium of transferring sense – temporally and spatially, as it quivers with sound waves that demonstrate the poet’s memory of happier moments which suggest a more capacious reality now lost (that of youth and a verdant peaceful Nature resounding with the

¹⁰ Sarah Cole sees this poem as an example of Owen’s scything criticism directed at modernity’s indifference, industrial composure, oblivion and refusal to be emotionally “dislodged” whereby a sense of futility is seen stepping in (Cole 2009: 503).

lullabies of Romantic poets like Keats and Shelley). We see that in *Elegy in April and September* (April-May 1918, September 1918, ll. 1 – 4, 16 – 21) where again a rift in communication and a failure in comprehension is implied: “Mourn, corn, and sigh, rye. / Men garner you, but youth’s head lies forlorn. / Sigh, rye, and mourn, corn... // Brood, wood, and muse, yews, / The ways gods use we have not understood. / Muse, yews, and brood, wood...” This is one of Owen’s finest achievements in arguing that misunderstanding is a general feature of existence, which, if solved, would almost make it impossible to speak, as there would be no transgression of boundaries between the familiar and the unknown. This poem argues that it is just as hard for men to attain mental equilibrium, peace and appreciation of the past, as it is for gods and for Nature to acknowledge human contribution and sacrifice: much is “garnered” yet little is sieved through, or perceived. Reciprocity and expansion through closure and denial is also the case in *Spring Offensive* (July, September 1918) where men and nature abide in a kind of mutual infiltration which, provocatively, both extends and precludes existence. Summer is seen “oozing through” the veins of soldiers “like an injected drug for their bodies’ pains”, brambles “clutch and cling [...] like sorrowing arms” as the soldiers “breathe like trees unstirred”. Until the sudden, unforeseen explosion of “buttercups” which may be read as a sudden outburst of life (i.e. flowering), or a sudden rain of shrapnel: “[...] earth set sudden cups/ In thousands for their blood; and the green slope/ Chasmed and deepened sheer to infinite space” (ll. 30 – 31, see also, 8 – 12, 14 – 18). Savage, sacrificial spilling of blood feeds the earth and human memory. Muteness reigns, the deceased drown amidst the stupefying unresponsiveness of the living (“Why speak not they of comrades that went under”, l. 46). Whether we choose to interpret this poem as a case of war-time astonishment and pausing, concessional poetic rendition, awe and admiration (Cf. Cole 2009: 492 – 493), or “homoerotic fantasizing about the faces of young men” whereby the gazing on a dying body provokes erotic feelings and mourning becomes recessional (Corcoran 2007: 90), or an example of a “disjunctive between causality and survivor” (Rawlinson 2010: 839), we are faced with some traumatic silence about an experience which asks for speech and for interpretation.

It may be interesting to note that the so-called “fragments” of Owen’s works (i.e. poems that had only ever been drafted without being finally fair-copied and separated from the rest as single poems, but which, in Jon Stallworthy’s 2013 complete edition, occupy volume II and just as originally authenticate the poet as the “poems” included in volume I) also display a movement away from Romantic pastoral poetry and towards

disturbing pictures of a diseased reality of misconception and militant denial of trust. Solitude, ageing and parting surface as the poet departs from a peaceful understanding of the past as a harmonious, reciprocating balance between natural and human activity. Examples can be discovered in: [*Full Spring of Thought*], [*I know the Music*], [*But I was looking at the Permanent Stars*], *Spells and Incantation*, [*Cramped in that Funnelled Hole*], *Wild With All Regrets*, and *The Roads Also*. From a nature vibrating with Romantic, Shelleyan, tongues (as in [*Full Spring of Thought*]), we move towards grass whispering and lamentable bells chiming off evening prayers and counting deaths (in [*I know the Music*]). We gradually drown amidst the bugles singing and the “dying tone of receding voices that will not return” (in [*But I Was Looking at the Permanent Stars*]), we vanish amidst the “fog-bound [...] auburn autumn cloud,” “September mist” and “quiet amber” of the evening but then we suddenly receive “the fury of the noondays and the sun” from a “mouth” observed (*Spells and Incantation* – this is directly related to a poem previously discussed “*I Saw His Round Mouth’s Crimson Deepen as It Fell*”). Mortality is definitely guttural, to be swallowed, tasted, sipped, to be physically felt and sensed: it shall come and it shall be observed as we fall prey to “death’s jaws,” “mouths of Hell,” “teeth of traps” ([*Cramped in That Funnelled Hole*]); the spirit shall “climb your throat, on sobs, until it’s chased/ On sighs, and wiped from off your lips by wind” (*Wild With All Regrets*). Owen’s representation of contact in and with reality is certainly one which relies on speech and breath as imparting meaning to existence: “Spring air would find its own way to my lung”, or “I think on your rich breathing, brother, I’ll be weaned/ To do without what blood remained me from my wound” (ibid.). A sinister thriving on another person’s demise as an informative source of knowledge is implied here. Another, later poem – [*The Roads Also*] – may help us perceive that in his mature verse Owen had begun to see death almost born in advance, as a ubiquitous and permanent state of interruption which speaks, writes, addresses and confirms our being alive: men feature as “empty trams”, on their way to the “drome”, whilst “the cries of other times hold men”, “In the gardens unborn child-souls wail, / And the dead scribble on the walls” (ibid.). It is implied that sense gets immured all around us and that its attainment is very much a matter of arbitrariness, coincidence, but mostly, and unavoidably, the result of glancing back towards the past which speaks as it delineates the spatial co-ordinates of our own self-awareness.¹¹

¹¹ This poem abounds in metaphors which denote human activity, purpose and linguistic exchange which mimic a human being’s mental activity and a desire to measure

For Owen, contact and communication appear to be exclusively verbal as they require at all times an audible gesture of extended meaning from a speaker to an addressee, if often/only through the gaze of a passive survivor bound to inherit memories of corrupted dialogue. Faces of wounded/dying compatriots oblige the viewer to speak, thus questioning the integrity and attainability of his own identity as part of an infinite signification through loss and remembrance. We may want to phrase this by quoting Emmanuel Levinas: “Every recourse to words presupposes the comprehension of the primary signification, but this comprehension, before being interpreted as “consciousness of,” is society and obligation. Signification is the Infinite, but infinity does not present itself to a transcendental thought, nor even to meaningful activity, but presents itself in the Other; the Other faces me and puts me in question and obliges me by his essence qua infinity” (Levinas 2002b: 524). “[...] it is as if my very self were constituted only through a relation to others, a relation that was gratuitous with respect to accounting for what may be mine and what another’s. Responsible without being culpable, I am as if open to an accusation which the alibi of my otherness cannot excuse. A brother despite my strangeness! Fraternity, accusation and my responsibility come before any contemporaneousness, any freedom in myself, out of an immemorial-non-representable-past, before any beginning to be found in myself, before any present” (Levinas 2002a: 536). In Owen, “these who die as cattle,” mourned only by “the shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells” (as in *Anthem for Doomed Youth*, September – October 1917, ll. 1, 7) – those many anonymous but calling for a response – are the ones that the poet chooses to remember and build his idea of perception and self-perception around in a world where speech and language mark selfhood as communal belonging. The anonymity of deaths observed in this case may also remind us that a modern, technocratic approach to existence which, generally speaking, forbids mourning as an outdated and unprofitable practice (as it diverts the mourner’s attention towards the past and away from the current needs of material survival), ironically enough, also confirms that we can only ever forbid that which we can name and therefore remember (Cf. Steiner 2014: 75 – 76). We try to name death as an ultimate otherness, ultimate difference to our own being alive and this makes us deferential. Mark Rawlinson argues that “the majority of [Owen’s] poems are conceived around a suffering consciousness, not an observing one” (Rawlinson 2010: 830) yet it is hardly unlikely that a

and discuss the passing of time and of life: “the roads also have their wistful rest”, or “the old houses muse of the old days”, or “the streets also dream their dreams.”

distant versification on a common theme, detached from certain actual war incidents, personally experienced and seen, could ever convey such a sense of reality, anguish and self-reproach as Owen's poems do, particularly with regard to works like *Dulce Et Decorum Est*, or, say, *Apologia Pro Poemate Meo*. Psychological dramatisation of actual experiences is consonant with self-reflexivity and a decision to actually relate to life. Owen's war poems, not least *Dulce Et Decorum Est*, ultimately also indicate the conflict between a chosen thematic time and space and an externally imposed actual situation whereby the stakes are higher as the randomness of confronting death incidentally surges and whets one's sense of self-perception as relative survival despite, unlike, or thanks to, another man who at all times confirms our non-voluntary involvement in history (Cf. Gadamer 1994: 276, 302). This features as incompleteness of knowledge, as linguistic deficiency, perceived in the poetic depiction of the instability of being in isolation: survival depends on speech as communal belonging – living and remembered.

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