Wilfred Owen's Poetics of Pity:
Evocation of Emotions through Uncanny Rhyme

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1. Introduction: War Poets and Modernists

Wilfred Owen drafted the "Preface" to his coming poems, presumably in the spring of 1918 in Ripon, North England:

> This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them.
>
> Nor is it about deeds, or lands about glory or honour, nor anything about any might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War.
>
> Above all I am not concerned with Poetry.
>
> My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity.
>
> Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the next. All a poet can do today is warn. (*Selected Poetry and Prose* 81)

The preface has been treated as a manifesto declaring Owen's attitude towards war and poetry, and the emotion of "pity" has been considered the essence of Owen's poetics. Owen served in World War I and wrote poetry during the summer of 1917 when he was recovering from shellshock at Craiglockhart Hospital, in Edinburgh. His personal experience is integral to his poetry and the content of Owen's poems is dependent on his trench warfare experiences.[1] His realistic depictions such as soldiers agonizing in pain during a gas attack ("Dulce et decorum est") and the terror of the roaring shells, could evoke pain and the emotion "pity." For example, Robert Graves points out in his essay "Modernist Poetry"(1926): "These lines of Wilfred Owen's describe with painful literalness a man dying from poison-gas" (129). The preface seems to strongly manifest Owen's position as being involved in the warfare itself, and Owen himself emphasizes that his poetry is connected with his own experience in a letter to his poet cousin, Leslie Guston: "I think every poem, and every figure of speech should be a *matter of experience*" (*Collected Letters* 510; italics original).

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[1] See for example, Caesar, who describes Owen as "synonymous with "war poetry"" (115).

The prepared preface could also be read as Owen's refusal of the aesthetics of poetry accentuating the personal involvement, and it is at this point that trench poets and modernists have been divided into different literary categories. Though sharing the same period, modernist poets such as Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats, and war poets such as Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg and Graves have not merged in literary tradition on the grounds of their front-line experiences or lack thereof. Keith V. Comer points out that the literary situation wherein "war poetry" has been "frequently ignored in both general literature survey courses and critical introductions to 'modernism'"(8). Whether a poet was a combatant or non-combatant is thus a significant dividing line, but it is crucial here to begin to reconsider this literary mapping.[2] Seeing Owen's poetry in relation to modernist poetics will shed a new light on Owen's poetry, and identify an influential interconnectedness between the two, leading to a reconsideration of rigid literary division between war poets and modernist.

Modernist poetry, through its experimental aspects and its works depicting a post-war wasteland, largely occupies the mainline history of English literature. For example, F. R. Leavis suggests that Owen would be no match for modernists in poetic technique (73). This literary categorical division between modernists and war poets has remained stable. However, to widen our vantage here on the literary situation of the time, both groups in fact very often addressed a common issue: an insufficiency of words, or to borrow Henry James's phrase, "a depreciation of all our terms" (145). Paul Fussell in his notable study, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, pointed out that "[o]ne of the cruxes of the war, of course, is the collision between events and the language available— or thought appropriate —to describe them" (169). The scope of World War I, that is, was far beyond existing words, metaphors, and styles.[3] Some peculiarities of the modernist texts, such as enumeration, fragmentation, and visualization were novel approaches they took to represent the new reality. Regarding soldier-poet verses and the realities of modern warfare, Bernard Bergonzi states that "The literary records of the Great War can be seen as a series of attempts to evolve a response that would have some degree of adequacy to the unparalleled situation in which the writers were involved" (41).

Also significant is the war poets' axis of poetics in the same discourse towards emotions and personal experiences: how to transfigure personal emotional experiences into poetry or how to avoid doing so. Owen's

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[2] As a famous example, W. B. Yeats excluded the trench poetry when he edited *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse in* 1936. For more detailed discussion of the division, see Howarth 1-8. Modernist works have often been discussed from the cultural or political points of view in relation to WWI. See Hynes and Stevenson. Although David Jones, who experienced the Western Front and wrote *In Parenthesis* (1937) is an exception, typically discussed as a modernist poet, there is a clear influence of Eliot's "Preface" on Jones's work.

[3] James deeply deplored this tendency in 1915: "The war has used up words; they have weakened, they have deteriorated like motor car tires; they have, like millions of other things, been more over-strained and knocked about and avoided of the happy semblance during the last six months than all the long ages before, and we are now confronted with a depreciation of all our terms (144-145). In 1917, similarly, Ezra Pound harshly criticized journalistic wordings in the article "Studies in Contemporary Mentality." For an discussion of "art and war," see Hynes 10-19, and Stevenson.

poetics of pity sticks to the level of personal involvement, and as his preface "My subject is War, and the pity of War" declares, his poems have an intensity of emotional buildup. On the other hand, regarding depersonalizing emotions, the most significant description is in Eliot's theory of emotion: "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" ("Tradition and the Individual Talent" 33). The impersonal theory, a reaction to Romanticism in literature, tries to avoid being overwhelmed by personal emotions through detachment from them.

Owen's poetic attitude seems to be the opposite of Eliot's impersonal theory. However, their concerns were nevertheless intertwined with each other, and the aesthetics of modernism is close to Owen's own experiences. Peter Howarth points out that the realities of Owen's experience embodies the ideas of Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent": "the impersonal discipline and anonymity of the army, the simultaneous present of the living and the dead, and the real, bloody fragmentations of his frontline experiences" (183). It could be said that Eliot distills Owen's realities to poetics through dislocating the realistic situation into an impersonal theory, and simultaneously, that the domination of Eliot's impersonal theory has moved Owen's art of emotion to the periphery of literary tradition. The contemporary critical reactions to Owen's "Strange Meeting," however, clarify what Owen achieved in his poetry, particularly in its artistic evocation of emotions.

2. Critical Cluster around "Strange Meeting" and Pararhyme

Eliot seldom alludes to Owen, and when he does, a few comments makes clear that Eliot's interest lies in the art of Owen's poetry rather than in its contents. A small edited volume, *A Tribute to Wilfred Owen*, was published to commemorate the establishment of the Owen Memorial Library in 1964. After being asked by the editor T. J. Walsh, Eliot contributed a short comment as follows:

> I am sorry that I cannot at present afford the time to write anything for you about the poems of Wilfred Owen. I should have to refresh my memory of these poems before doing so. But there is one poem of his at least, Strange Meeting, which is of permanent value and, I think, will never be forgotten, and which is not only one of the most moving pieces of verse inspired by the war of 1914-18, but also a technical achievement of great originality. (Walsh 28)

Eliot takes a rather indifferent attitude in the first part, but all the more for it, the second part appears to increase the significance he places on "Strange Meeting" and its "technical achievement." Interestingly enough, in a letter to his American friend Emily Hale, dated the 6th of October 1930, Eliot also mentions Owen's poetry, stressing the same point: "[Owen] belonged to no group, and his interesting technical innovations are all his own, though he may have known the work of Gerard Hopkins" (*Poems* 914).

Furthermore, Eliot's interest in Owen's versification reflected on the editorship of *The Criterion,* his

literary magazine, which ran from 1922 to 1948. Eliot's preoccupation with pararhyme led to the publication of an essay, "The Poems of Wilfred Owen" by Ian M. Parsons in the magazine. Parsons starts by raising a point regarding how war experiences are articulated, and the relationship between art and experience. Parsons finds "a kind of sublime indignation consequent upon present experience" in Owen's verse (659). After examining the directness and rawness of Owen's verses, Parsons continues to analyze details of technique in order to explore "how exactly the poet succeeds in communicating his experience to the reader" (662). Eliot might well have accepted the essay's argument, its distillation of artistic aspects from the verses produced out of the crude, bloody realities of war. The essay's focus is aesthetic distance, and the methods utilized to transmute personal subject matter into impersonalized emotional context.

It is noticeable that Eliot's critical reaction resonates with a cluster of other contemporary criticism of "Strange Meeting". In 1920, when the first version of Owen's poetry was published, Siegfried Sassoon predicted this critical interest in "The Introduction" to the book:

> The discussion of his [Owen's] experiments in assonance and dissonance (of which 'Strange Meeting' is the finest example) may be left to the professional critics of verse, the majority of whom will be more preoccupied with such technical details than with the profound humanity of the self-revelation manifested in such magnificent lines….(v)

Sassoon's words soon started to come true. In *The Guardian* of the 29th of December in the same year, an unsigned review accentuating "a technical innovation" in the poem states:

> This poem ["Strange Meeting"] happens also to be a good example of a technical innovation that is rather puzzling. Enough has been quoted to show that Owen uses traditional metres and rhymes, but, as here, he also uses, and uses throughout the poem, a device which is neither rhyme nor assonance. It is not assonance because the vowels are different, and in any case it could not be rhyme, because the initial consonants are alike: "spoiled-spilled," "laughed-left," "grained-ground" ("Review").

The unique rhyme, "a device which is neither rhyme nor assonance," is, in literary terms, called "half-rhyme" or "pararhyme." Whilst perfect rhyme has the same accented vowels and end consonants, a pararhyme has the same pattern of consonants but vowel variation. "Strange Meeting" depicts a scene in which the narrator escapes out of battle into a cavern, which reminds the reader of the Western Front, and encounters another soldier whom the speaker stabs with a dagger; it is composed of irregular iambic pentameter, and heroic couplets:

> 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; 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. (ll. 11-21; *SPP* 65)

Besides the aforementioned examples, "moan-mourn," "wild-world," "hair-hour-here" etc. are also found.

    Edmund Blunden, in an article titled "The Real War" in *The Athenaeum* (the 10th of December, 1920), similarly refers to "Strange Meeting" and again puts the focus on its rhyme: "The very make of his language is hard and remorseless or strange and sombre as he wills; the discovery of final assonances in place of rhyme may mark a new age in poetry" (807). For another example, John Middleton Murry mentions the poem in his review "The Poet of the War," published on the 19th of February 1921. Similarly, F. R. Leavis, in *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932), says: "Wilfred Owen was really a remarkable poet, and his verse is technically interesting. His reputation is becoming well established" (72-73).

3. Evoking Emotions and Objective Correlative

   As has been observed, "Strange Meeting" inspired a proliferation of criticisms, particularly of its technique. How then should this proliferation be interpreted? The pararhyme is not original to Owen: in England, its use was found in the poems of Henry Vaughan in the 17th century and Gerard Manly Hopkins in the 19th century, and Emily Dickinson also employed the rhyme in the United States. In Owen, some studies explore pararhyme as evidence of the influence of the poets just mentioned, while others attribute it to the French accent that Owen acquired while staying in France for about a year.[4] Though important, these approaches miss the point: what is noteworthy is not the pararhyme's source but the impact it had on contemporary readers. Indeed, the revolutionary utilization of pararhyme caused a flood of reactions.

   In the aforementioned review, Murry states:

> I believe that the reader who comes fresh to this poem ["Strange Meeting"] does not immediately
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> observe the assonant endings. At first he feels only that the blank-verse has a mournful, impressive,

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4 See Lewis, and Welland (1950) 226, 231.

even oppressive, quality of its own; that the poem has a forged unity, a welded and inexorable massiveness. The emotion with which it is charged cannot be escaped; the meaning of the words and the beat of the sounds have the same indivisible message. The tone is single, low, muffled, subterranean. The reader looks again and discovers the technical secret; but if he regards it then as an amazing technical innovation, he is in danger of falsifying his own reaction to the poem. Those assonant endings are indeed the discovery of genius; but in a truer sense the poet's emotion discovered them for itself. (706)

Murry states that the effect of the lyrical device intertwines with what the poem depicts. The peculiar "assonant endings," though unnoticeable at first, produce the sinister atmosphere disconnected from the content. Michael Roberts, in *The Faber Book of Modern Verse* (1936), also points out the emotional effect the rhyme creates: "In Owen's war poetry, the half-rhymes almost invariably fall from a vowel of high pitch to one of low pitch, producing an effect of frustration, disappointment, hopelessness" (28).

Though there is certainly a sound-effect relationship, what is most to be noticed is, as Murry implies, is Owen's emotion itself, and the process by which the emotion takes shape in the poem through this device. Murry restates this connection using the metaphor of clothing as follows: "Owen's search after some garment for his new comprehension more closely fitting than the familiar rhyme arose … from the inward need to say the thing he had to say most exactly and finally" (705). Owen's experiences and emotions find the pararhyme a perfectly articulable form.

The surge of critical attentions to "Strange Meeting" may suggest that the poem tactfully articulates a certain emotion through its form. There was a need for new literary forms to express inarticulate emotions. The literary term "objective correlative," which Eliot proposes in his early essay "Hamlet and His Problems" (1919), addresses this issue. The "objective correlative" is traditionally defined as "the only way of expressing emotion in the form of art" and "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion" (58). The term has been understood as capturing the artificial technical issue of finding a suitable form to give a shape to emotions; however, the opposite logic is apparent here. Eliot's primal concern lies in emotions themselves, and the objective correlative is for grasping undefinable emotions:

It is thus a feeling which he [Hamlet] cannot understand; he cannot objectify it, and it is therefore remains to poison life and obstruct action….In the character Hamlet it is the buffoonery of an emotion which can find no outlet in action; in the dramatist it is the buffoonery of an emotion which he cannot express in art. (58-59)

Eliot is not discussing the container of emotions, but the ambiguity of emotion itself. That is, the essay

reveals the reality and nature of inarticulate emotions, which have no referent. The literary issue that Eliot is concerned about here is the method of delineating these emotions, and this concern overlaps with the interest that Eliot shows in Owen's "Strange Meeting".[5]

The literary concern with new aesthetic forms was certainly in large part behind the critical reactions to "Strange Meeting." Parsons praises Owen's poetry on the grounds that "the intellectual and emotional content of his verse is valuable because it expresses, in terms of poetry, a personal reaction to experiences which, at the time of their incidence at least, left most men hopelessly inarticulate" (667). The word "inarticulate" communicates the unimaginable situations of the trenches concretizing and concentrating the broader irrationality of World War I, which was unparalleled in its mechanical and inhuman character. It can be understood that critical reactions to the work in the 1920s and '30s found a solution in Owen's pararhyme to the task of contouring emotions that any modernist poet would have found difficult to articulate.

Furthermore, Parsons' essay reveals how poetically resonant Owen's pararhyme is with Eliot's poetic imagination, and shows that modernists appropriate Owen's pararhyme:

> Inevitably lacking the conclusiveness of rhyme, assonance has, when used skillfully, certain positive qualities of its own. It has, for example, rather striking affinities with the elaborately ingenious conceits so generously exploited by the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century. (664)

The reference to "the metaphysical poets" strongly reverberates with Eliot's essay "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921), wherein emphasis is put on the mechanism of sensibility in which disparate experiences form a new whole (64); Eliot describes the group as "the elaboration…of a figure of speech to the farthest stage to which ingenuity can carry it" (242). Parsons's criticism obviously follows Eliot's understanding of the group, as shown in the use of the words that communicate how inventive or skillful Owen's rhymes are, such as "elaborately" and "ingenious," which overlap with Eliot's use of "elaboration" and "ingenuity." Eliot, who revalues abrupt connections of ideas and similes found in the metaphysical poets' work, concentrates his concerns on the unexpected effects produced by juxtaposing unrelated ideas and finds a musical model in Owen's pararhyme.

4. Uncanny Rhymes and Ghosts in Lines

Contemporary critics observed that Owen's pararhyme triggers certain feelings. The subsequent question arises: on what basis could Owen's pararhyme function as an objective correlative? The prefix "para-" in the term pararhyme, or "half" in half-rhyme, might provide a clue; these affixes respectively mean "ancillary to"

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5 Martin Stephen regards the main speaker of "Strange Meeting" himself as one of the "objective correlatives", to produce a pessimistic atmosphere with the somber setting, and states "[s]mall wonder that post-war critics hailed it ["Strange Meeting"] as the best of the bunch" (199).

and "imperfect, partial." This rhyme pattern, named due to its failure to meet the standard of the full rhyme, may be sensed by the ears as a lack of perfection, an imperfect sound compared to the full rhyme.

Reviews from Owen's time indicate how the sound was received. A short review, posted in *The Times Literary Supplement* for the 16th of December 1920, expresses that the rhyme pattern discards the goal of melodiousness or pleasantness to the ear:

> There is no lyric grace in these pages, no poetic melody…. Abjuring wholly the facile cadence or the familiar phrase, he [Owen] hammers out his meaning in strong, stark statements wretched, as it were, into rhyme and metre .… A curious vagary of technique may be noted in the writer's habit here and there – and throughout the opening poem of the book – to use imperfect rhymes. (18)

It is noteworthy that the reviewer disregards Owen's technique as "a curious vagary of technique." The review in *The Guardian*, which was referred to in section I, also shows bewilderment toward this rhyme pattern: "'Strange Meeting' would have been finer without it."

Another review, which appeared in 1921 (6th of January) in *The Times Literary Supplement*, is not as harsh as the previous one, but the reviewer perceives the pararhyme in particular as an unpleasant sound:

> He [Owen] invents a peculiar type of rhyme to aid him in the expression of that prevailing emotion of disgust, of weariness of illusion, of insistence on the bleak realities which he is determined to drive home. To put it briefly, he substitutes for vowel identity, with its pleasing music, a consonantal identity which neither pleases nor is intended to please, except with that remote pleasure we derive from a recognition of a true adaptation of means to ends. (6)

The reviewer points out the sound-effect relation: the rhyme produces a gloomy harsh mood, the very effect of the disgusting and hideous realities of the battlefield. The reviewer moreover mentions how the rhyme pattern is perceived: "[the] intention is to chastise our sensibility."

The sensation rising from this rhyme pattern can be epitomized in the word "discord," which is used in *War Poets* by Edmund Blunden: "Owen's assonances in place of rhymes have made him a name among later poets and prosodists.…The bitterness of his heart required some discord in utterance" (38). It is clear from letters by Owen that he himself was aware that his pararhyme did not achieve harmony: in a letter dated the 6th of December 1917 to Sassoon, Owen said "If simplicity, if imaginativeness, if sympathy, if resonance of vowels, make poetry I have not succeeded. But if you say 'Here is poetry,' it will be so for me. What do you think of my Vowel-rime stunt in this ['Wild with all Regret'], and 'Vision'? (*CL* 514). Or in a letter to Susan Owen dated the 8th of February: "Leslie's musical ear is offended by my rimes. Isn't that delicious?" (*CL* 530) Again, to Leslie Gunston (post-stamped the 2nd of December 1918), Owen restates, "I suppose I am doing

in poetry what the advanced composers are doing in music" (*CL* 531). The term elegy itself originates in the Greek elegiac couplets, accompanied by the flute, or by the oboelike double pipe called the *aulos* (Sacks 2), and carries dulcet expectations. Yet instead, Owen deliberately creates a musical discordance. While traditional rhyme patterns, such as full or even imperfect rhymes have corresponding endings, pararhyme produces a feeling of being left hanging or of remaining unresolved. The feeling of discomfort thus arises from the failure of the expected rhyme, which would have given certain stable qualities.[6]

Peter M. Sacks defines the aim of an elegy as "to displace the urgent psychological currents of its work of mourning into the apparently more placid, aesthetically organized currents of language" (145-146). On the other hand, Owen's unique rhyme pattern keeps emotions alive through *not* turning pain into art, *not* raising his pity to aesthetics, and not bringing a consolatory feeling. Feelings of inadequacy continue to haunt the poem in the absence of assonance. In this way, "the pity of war" can be evoked. Owen's use of pararhyme functions as a disturbance to ears used to comfortable and reassuring endings and keeps readers trapped in a trench with no chance of escape.

Eliot attempts to give a provisional shape to undefined feelings through "the objective correlative": a formula consisting of "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events" (58). In terms of a verbal or aural equivalence of it, Eliot explores sound correspondence in another essay, "Reflections on Vers Libre" (1917), in which the attribution of emotions to a set of objects is remodeled into sound. Eliot discusses in this essay the idea of a completely free verse, and then explores the new art of meter using an eerily shadowy metaphor: "the ghost of some simple metre should lurk behind the arras in even the 'freest' verse; to advance menacingly as we doze, and withdraw as we rouse. Or, freedom is only truly freedom when it appears against the background of an artificial limitation" (187). Eliot here evokes some form of phantom inaccessible through usual patterns or blank verse. In the sense that Eliot struggles to seize this ghost in the essay through artificial devices, the ghost could correspond to the existence of something lurking beneath the words or sounds. Owen's use of pararhyme enables this phantom to surface and to be felt, functioning as a technique to verbalize inexpressible things.

5. Owen's Elegy, or Lost Consolation

What should be considered next is how the effect of the pararhyme integrates with the content of "Strange Meeting." Observing only the sound aspect is not enough to clarify the many critical reactions the poem has elicited, because "Strange Meeting" is not the first poem in which Owen used pararhyme; the rhyme pattern

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6 With the title in mind, the discordance becomes conspicuous. The title "Strange Meeting" is from Percy Bysshe Shelley's *The Revolt of Islam* (1818), and there are some similarities between them: not only the phrase "strange meeting," but in imagery and plot between the two poems. Yet, what is mainly noticed is a sense of deviation in the end-rhyme in Owen's poem when read beside Shelley's. The canto consists of the Spenserian stanzas with an "ababbcbcc" rhyme scheme. "Strange Meeting" recalls Shelley's full rhyme and intensifies the rhyme deviation through this juxtaposition. On Shelley's influence on Owen, see Tomlinson.

is found for instance in earlier poems, such as "From my diary, July 1914" and " Song of Songs."[7] In addition, the device is used in his war poem "Exposure": "knives us/nervous," "faces/fusses" and "silent/sailient," which Owen Knowles regards as "a key poem in measuring Owen's increasing sense of displacement from Keatsian precedent" (17). Since the pararhyme is also found in Owen's other poems, it alone does not explain the cluster of critical remarks on "Strange Meeting." To consider how sound and sense are identified in the poem, it is necessary to observe how Owen refuses the conventional tradition of the elegy; Owen not only breaks the traditional rhyme pattern but also modifies the elegy as a genre in "Strange Meeting."

The elegy genre was in Owen's mind while composing "Strange Meeting." Owen himself said in the preface, quoted in section I of this paper: "these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory." Owen here names his own poems elegies. Furthermore, before deciding on the title *Disabled and Other Poems*, Owen considered *With Lightning and with Music,* and *English Elegies* as alternative titles.[8] The first alternative is a line from the pastoral elegy *Adonais* (stanza xii), which Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote in 1821 on the death of John Keats, and the second is thought to be a reference to Tennyson's *English Idylls* implying that the "Tennysonian idyll has been overtaken by catastrophe" (Kerr 278). These candidate titles show Owen's preoccupation with the traditional elegy.

Owen did not have the opportunity to go to university for financial reasons and did not receive a formal education in poetical genres, but he set himself to study them intensely through reference books. In particular, he devoured the canon of the elegy during the winter of 1917, and it is the next spring that Dominic Hibberd states that Owen began to consider the "poetry of pity," judging from his reading list (140). Owen read Andrew Lang's translations of classical elegies by Bion and Moschus in December of that year.[9] The title "Strange Meeting" is from Alfred Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1849) wherein Tennyson describes his friend Arthur Hallam as a "strange friend,"[10] and it has also been pointed out that there are some similarities between Owen's poems written around this period and famous elegies such as Milton's *Lycidas* (1637) and Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (Hibberd 140-141).

Prior to this period, the years 1912 and 1913 are also important to Owen's understanding of English elegies, because in this period, aside from elegiac works, he also read Laurie Magnus's *Introduction to Poetry of 1902* in April 1912. The book has a section titled "The Example of Elegy" that provides quotations from major elegy poems and defines the characteristics of these poems. Kerr believes that Owen's image of the elegy genre was based on this book (278-279). Kerr's definition of the elegy, with reference to Magnus's book, thus provides us with a clue to consider how Owen reorganized the genre:

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7 See Breen 180. The first was composed around 1915, and the second around 1917.
8 See Breen 240. Ramazani also mentions the candidate titles (69).
9 Kerr traces the influences of Milton's "Lycidas" in Owen's "Asleep" and of Gray's "Elegy" in "The Send-Off" (279).
10 See *WO* 32-3; *In Memoriam,* cxxix.

> Elegy recorded the bitterness of bereavement, a double grief which mingled a sense of the waste of a life lost too young (Watson's elegy for the octogenarian Tennyson may be allowed to be an exception: the elegies Owen knew, from Moschus to Sassoon, usually mourn *young* men) and the grief of the bereft survivor. But there was often a plot in elegy too…. For elegy is not only an expression of grief, but also a management of grief. It explores loss but it is in search of consolation, and often finds it. (282-283)

A traditional elegy provides the path from "grief" to "consolation," whereas Owen denies the possibility of consolation. Though "Strange Meeting" might be summarized as an elegy lamenting a soldier's death in World War I, Owen deliberately denies the fulfillment of elegiac conventions. As Kerr summarizes, an elegy consists of the mourned and the mourner: the person to be mourned was traditionally a friend of the mourner who passed away in their youth, e.g. Milton's friend, Edward King, in *Lycidas*. The setting of "Strange Meeting" traces this convention to some extent, as it implies that the enemy soldier passed away too young. Yet, the last part subtly indicates the refusal of the elegiac role:

> 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… (ll. 40-44; *SPP* 66)

The object to be mourned in "Strange Meeting" is the enemy in the cavern, as the phrase "you killed" indicates. At the same time, it is the mourner himself who is responsible for causing the enemy's death. Owen holds himself culpable for the death, confronting his guilt.

This is further complicated by the fact that the dead soldier has been interpreted as an alter ego of the narrator. For example, D. S. R. Welland suggests that, "The enemy Owen has killed is, he [Owen] suggests, his poetic self" (1968; 101). The location is in fact set in an imagined landscape, which is associated with Owen's subconscious, where his double lives. Kenneth Muir has the same interpretation, paying attention to the term "pity": "The words he [the enemy] uses are Owen's own. He speaks of 'The pity of war, the pity war distilled,' as Owen in his fragmentary poem had declared, 'The poetry is in the pity.' In other words Owen meets his doppelganger" (30). As Muir's point reflects, the enemy here could represent humane emotions such as compassion, love, and especially pity. The earlier version describes the opponent as "a German conscript" (*SPP* 227), and this substitution enables the segment to be read in a more figurative way, supporting the alter-ego interpretation. Elliott B. Gose, Jr. regards "the enemy" as "the narrator's primal self

from which he has been alienated," and asserts that the narrator has discarded his own humanity (418). It could be said that Owen here was lamenting his own "death" as a victimized soldier, while simultaneously confessing that he was the murderer. It is clear that the elegiac convention in such a case becomes nulled. Jahan Ramazani, who discusses the modern elegy, including war poems, argues "the modern elegist tends not to achieve but to reopen the wounds of loss" (xi). "Strange Meeting" resists bringing a consolatory closure in an acute way.

6. Conclusion: Elegy as a Warning

Instead of providing a passage through sorrow or grief toward consolation, "Strange Meeting," by deviating from docile rhyme and dismantling the genre in several ways, leaves the guilt-ridden narrator isolated, as if forbidding him to have consolation. What should be remembered here is the aforementioned preface: "these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the next. All a poet can do today is warn" (*SPP* 81). How can it be possible to warn through elegies? The clue is again in the notion of poetic genre. As Anis Bawarshi explains, the genre builds a way of recognition of situations through repetitive uses:

> as individuals' rhetorical responses to recurrent situations become typified as genres, the genres in turn help structure the way these individuals conceptualize and experience these situations, predicting their notations of what constitutes appropriate and possible responses and actions.… [Genres] help us function within particular situations at the same time they help shape the ways we come to know these situation. (340)

Poetic genre unconsciously shapes readers' views of the world and regulates their moral actions and human relations, through constant utilization. However, the traditional elegy that Owen had studied did not help him to recognize or understand the battlefield situation and did not provide an appropriate way to respond. Owen's preface reveals the genre's incapability to console.

Further, many of Owen's elegies aggravate a grievance as they reconstruct the genre. Among Owen's anti-consolatory elegies, "Strange Meeting" invites himself and his readers repeatedly to return to the emotion. While Eliot's poetics aim to eliminate any personal feeling through "a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (40), Owen's poetics transmutes his own feelings, produced through his personal experience, into a universalized emotion by reconstructing poetic forms, specifically, through the development of pararhyme and modification of the elegy. "Owen's poetry would suggest that the truth of certain feelings might depend on maintaining it" (Howarth 199). In a time when the idea of "tradition" stumbled catastrophically, Eliot attempted to restore it by extinguishing the personality and integrating fragments of past literary works into a new order. Owen, on the other hand, reconsidered traditional genres

themselves. He believed that warnings are not heeded if they do not disturb the literary tradition, and his poetry stands as a stark warning of "the pity of War."

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