Wilfred Owen and the Modern Elegy

Owen's elegies are characterised by his scepticism of the genre's consolatory power. Such wariness adheres to a precedent already set by his literary precursors; as Michael D. Hurley and Michael O'Neill put it, "the challenging of tradition in elegy is itself traditional practice" (2012, 112). Yet Owen's open admission that his war elegies "are in no sense consolatory" reveals his desire to make poetic drama from this underlying tension ("Preface" 535). Owen reinvents the genre by writing elegies that refuse their own defining trait. In "Asleep" he invokes the genre's stock devices at the same time as he makes his readers suspicious of the conclusions they draw:

After so many days of work and waking,
Sleep took him by the brow and laid him back.
There, in the happy no-time of his sleeping,
Death took him by the heart. There heaved a quaking
Of the aborted life within him leaping,
Then chest and sleepy arms once more fell slack.
("Asleep", 152)

Owen undermines the main function of the elegy as a lament for the dead to the degree that the soldier's death "in the happy no-time of his sleeping" is depicted as a non-event. "Death" is said to have "t[aken] him by the heart" in the same way that "Sleep took him by the brow" just two lines earlier, so that the similarity between the two events glosses over the tragedy of the soldier's passing. The euphemistic feel of the lines is uncharacteristic of a poet who often speaks of the War's horror in stark terms; calling sleep a "happy no-time" seems an insult to the traumatic dreams experienced by the speakers of "Dulce et Decorum Est" and "The Sentry". In turn, the dichotomy between those who are "Asleep" and those who are "waking" as parallels for the dead and the living points towards the genre's alleged readiness to settle for solutions that are too easily won. Shielding us from the unpleasantness of war in a manner that conspicuously goes against his usual style, Owen's subversive approach to the elegy makes it clear that we can no longer take comfort in metaphors.

Yet the final stanza of the poem changes tack. Owen shifts from assuming the voice of the detached elegist to the jaded sentiments of the soldier on the ground. The poem's closing lines undercut the previously offered consolatory gestures to the extent that Owen, turning on himself, criticises his decision to attempt to write an elegy:

Who knows? Who hopes? Who troubles? Let it pass!
He sleeps. He sleeps less tremulous, less cold,
Than we who wake, and waking say Alas!
("Asleep", 152)

In these lines "Asleep" comes close to drawing the most tragic conclusion of all of Owen's war elegies; the conclusion that death is simply not worth the "trouble". His final word on the matter, "Alas!", does little to provide closure. The anachronism seems out of place in the vocabulary of both a twentieth-century poet and

the soldierly voice of the speaker, opening itself up to Yeats's critique of Owen's tendency towards weak, outmoded style: "he calls poets ?bards', a girl a ?maid' & talks about ?Titanic wars'" (1940, 133). The term is flippant, hackneyed, and does little to encompass the magnitude of the suffering Owen saw as his duty to describe. Yet the word is not a misjudgement on Owen's part. Readers of "Asleep" are meant to feel doubly dissatisfied: firstly in the elegist's refusal to give answers regarding the dead soldier's fate, and secondly in eliding the degree and nature of the misery endured by the soldiers still living. In the word "Alas!", Owen makes us more vigilant, more critical, and more demanding of what the elegiac genre can provide. Superficial consolations are not enough for the reader of the modern elegy. That this final word seems to do so little for us encapsulates Owen's understanding that we expect more from the elegy than it can give us.

Works Cited

Hurley, Michael D., and Michael O'Neill. *Poetic Form: An Introduction*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Owen, Wilfred. "Asleep" in *Wilfred Owen: The Complete Poems and Fragments*. Volume I. Edited by Jon Stallworthy. London: Chatto & Windus, p. 152.

---. "Preface" in *Wilfred Owen: The Complete Poems and Fragments*. Volume II. Edited by Jon Stallworthy. London: Chatto & Windus, pp. 535-36.

Yeats, W. B. *Letters on Poetry from W. B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley*. Edited by Dorothy Wellesley. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940.
