

# Sensuous Devotion and Spiritual Crisis in Wilfred Owen

by

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## **An Abstract of the Thesis of**

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This thesis explores moments at which the spiritual crisis of World War I poet Wilfred Owen is connected to his use to sensuous language and imagery. Scholars have offered conflicting interpretations of Owen's relationship to the Christian faith of his upbringing and his broader spiritual outlook. I argue that Owen's war experience devastated his ability to perceive spiritual meaning, but that through the use of sensuous language to elegize the bodies of soldiers at the moment of their deaths, Owen creates a space in which the human body appears sacred even as spiritual faith is impossible. In Chapter 1, find the origins of this idea in Owen's devotion to the sensuous Romantic poet John Keats in his early letters and poetry. In Chapter 2, I explore the implications of this spiritual crisis, and, in Chapter 3, I provide close readings of the war poems "Insensibility," "Futility," and, "I Saw His Mouth's Round Crimson."

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## Chapter 1: Sensuous Devotion

### Owen's Sensuous Devotion to John Keats

The term sensuous devotion can be understood through Wilfred Owen's devotion to his early literary idol John Keats, the most famously sensuous of the Romantic poets. Despite being born nearly one hundred years after Keats died in 1821, Owen's early letters and poetry reveal that he read and imitated Keats with a single-minded reverence. My understanding of the sensuous devotion present in Owen's war poems comes from the concept of erotic sympathy put forth in James Najaran's study "Keats, Wilfred Owen, and a Tradition of Desire." This study is the final chapter in Najaran's book exploring the different ways in which writers of the Victorian era used Keats's biography and letters to develop language for and an understanding of same-sex desire. This investigation of Keats's influence upon Owen is different from other critical work on the topic because it examines the unique way in which Owen personally read Keats's work and understood his biography and letters. Najaran is concerned with how Owen's highly subjective relationship to the figure of Keats influenced his poetry, rather than his relationship to a more standard critical understanding of Keats's work.

Najaran establishes that Owen's reading of Keats to develop allowed him to develop a homoerotic ethics wherein Owen's homosexuality and the recognition of his own same-sex desire holds a social and ethical role as his recognition of this desire is transformed into the ability to feel sympathy, or to use Owen's language "pity," for his fellow soldiers. Najaran understands the erotic elements of Owen's poetry, the imagery and language that recognizes and evokes sexual desire, as serving a broader ethical

purpose within his poems. Eroticism refers to the more overtly sexual imagery within Owen's poems, while the sensuous refers to the evocations of sexual desire through sensory pleasure. Najaran's concept of erotic sympathy finds its origins in Keats's reading of William Hazlitt and Paul de Man's understanding of the way in which sensuous love, because it was for Keats was more easily imagined than experienced, could be easily redistributed among others in the form of sympathy, which he defines as "a forgetting of the self for the sake of others, especially when the other is in a state of suffering" (165). Owen finds his model for sensuous love as that which engenders sympathy in "Endymion," Keats's poem based upon the Greek myth. "Endymion" demonstrates this way in which, "For Keats, sensuous love imperceptibly merges into friendship and into sympathy; bonds of love and friendship are made out of the same material. Sensual love effectively provides the loss of self that Keats thinks is necessary for affective bonds to be formed" (166).

Observing that the sensuous love between Endymion and Cynthia is redistributed among others as sympathy, Najaran suggests that Keats also leaves open the possibility that this kind of love includes same-sex desire through the ways in which he emphasizes Endymion's physical desirability. For example, Endymion's beauty is compared to the physical beauty of other males, such as Ganymede, who have attracted the attention of male gods. Thus, "Owen notices how immaterial gender is in Keats's scheme. This flexibility gives the later poet a chance to establish a social role for his prohibited desire. He will state what Keats only suggests: that same sex desire produces sympathy" (167). In this way, Owen locates in "Endymion" the source of his own erotic

sympathy, a theme that Najaran locates and explores in the poems “My Shy Hand,” “Miners” and “Greater Love.”

Keats is not only a “literary confederate,” however; he is a “figurative objection of affection (163). Owen does not just devote himself to Keats's verse, but draws upon his biography to make pilgrimages to look upon relics of Keats, such as manuscripts of his poems at the British Museum and portraits at the Keats House, so as to form a bond with the person of Keats that is itself figured as erotic attachment. He creates this bond by relating himself as Keats, observing “his writing is rather large and slopes like mine” when looking upon a Keats manuscript, for example, and figures this bond as erotic attachment by establishing Keats himself as a possible object of same-sex desire. For example, he describes seeing Severn's portraits of Keats with the statement, “Two paintings of his 'extraordinary beauty' were also there. – One of the whole figure, painted by Severn in Rome, after his friend's death” (178). Najaran concludes that, “in his most powerful poems, the erotic attraction to the male body and the erotic attraction combine, so that he renders the soldier's body as Keats's” (180). Najaran's analysis of erotic sympathy in “A Terre” and “I Saw His Mouth's Round Crimson” explores how Owen uses imagery from Shelley's elegy of Keats so that the soldier's body appears as Keats's, and Owen devotes himself to the soldier through his devotion to the body of Keats.

My project builds upon this concept of erotic sympathy in two ways. First, I locate erotic sympathy in two poems that Najaran does not mention in his study, “Insensibility” and “Futility,” and I further explore how erotic sympathy appears in “I Saw His Mouth's Round Crimson.” While Najaran explores how specific imagery from

Keats's poems appears as erotic sympathy, my own analysis explores the idea of erotic sympathy as a broader concept that is not necessarily derived from specific images in Keats's poetry, and which I find present in Owen's representation of sensuous devotion to the bodies of dying soldiers. Secondly, I will explore early letters and poetry to show how Owen's sensuous devotion to Keats became intertwined with his rejection of the Evangelical Christianity in which he was raised, opening up the possibility that the sensuous and erotic can hold their own kind of sacredness, one which is equally as powerful but distinctly separate from spiritual faith. Najaran briefly examines the way in which Owen's understanding of erotic sympathy has a "biblical antecedent," but does not explore the implications of how this idea relates to Owen's spiritual outlook (174). Understood through the frame of Owen's spiritual outlook, however, witnessing the death of a soldier's body engenders erotic sympathy and it provides a space in which Owen can express his own spiritual crisis as he is able to juxtapose the impossibility of spiritual knowledge with his sensuous devotion to the physical body.

### **The Influence of Keats**

Before exploring how Owen's pre-war devotion to Keats allowed him to articulate a sacredness to the human body that exists without the certainty of religious faith, I will first show the importance of Keats to our understanding of Owen's poetic development. It is virtually impossible for any student of Owen's early poetry and letters to ignore the feverish, infatuated devotion with which he read and imitated Keats in the years before the war. His pre-war letters and poetry show that he viewed Keats with an intense reverence, referring to him as both a lover and a religious idol and writing devotional poems such as "Before Reading a Biography of Keats for the First



Time” and “On Seeing a Lock of Keats's Hair.” Furthermore, both Owen and Keats died prematurely, at the age of twenty-six, and wrote nearly all of their major poems in the period of one year. Though the circumstances of their deaths are vastly different; Owen was killed in battle (only seven days before the war was over) while Keats died from a lengthy struggle with tuberculosis, the works of both poets remain haunted by the reader's knowledge of their early death.

These connections led Edmund Blunden to write in his 1931 *Memoir*, the first biography about Owen's life, “it is impossible to become deeply acquainted with Owen's work and not be haunted by comparisons between his genius and premature death and the wonder and tragedy of his admired Keats” (147). In subsequent criticism, however, this statement, and the portrait of Owen as a doomed Keats and a heir of the Romantics which Blunden's biography puts forth, has been critiqued by Samuel Hynes as “a classic myth-making text” (487). The general critical understanding of Owen's early love of Keats is succinctly summarized by Najaran's assessment:

It is a commonplace move to call Owen's verse Keatsian because his effects of sound were borrowed from Keats and because the young Owen was fascinated by the poet. But for most critics, Owen's Keatsianism is an embarrassment. The standard line is that he turned against his own Romanticism in light of the realities of the front. (163)

Owen's Keatsianism is often seen as an embarrassment not only in how radically unmatched the deeply luxuriant and sensuous poetry of Keats appears to his experience of war, but also in the sheer wild intensity of the passion for Keats which shows up in his early letters and poetry.

This critical view often appears adjacent to the myth that Owen's poetic powers came into being enigmatically and almost solely through his war experience. In his Introduction to *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen* C. Day Lewis writes:

No gradual development brought his work to maturity. It was a forced growth, a revolution in his mind, which, blasting its way through all the poetic bric-a-brac, enabled him to his subject clear – 'War and the pity of War'. The subject made the poet: the poet made the poems which radically changed our attitude towards war." (12)

The claim 'the subject made the poet' suggests that the early influence of Keats is not especially relevant to our understanding of Owen's war poems. Lewis understands Owen's devotion to Keats only as evidence of an early poetic temperament, not as relating to any significant poetic development he underwent before the war. Though this view of Owen's development as a poet accurately describes how radically the subject and overall quality of his poetry was transformed by war, such a view does not adequately grapple with our knowledge that Owen was, in fact, intensely devoted to writing poetry for nearly his whole life leading up to the war.

Owen's poetic development can be better understood through Hibberd's claim that, "the First World War may have made Wilfred Owen a better poet than he would otherwise have been, but it did not make him a poet. . . the war brought the fulfillment of a poetic destiny that had been taking shape all his life" (*Wilfred Owen*, 5). The origins of Owen's poetic yearning are understood by the poet himself as having taken root when he was only eleven-years-old during a family visit to the countryside of Broxton (Stallworthy, 28). Owen's brother Harold substantiates this memory with the claim, "it was Broxton among the ferns and bracken and the little hills. . . that the poetry in Wilfred, with gentle pushings, without hurt, began to bud, and not on the battlefields

of France” (Monro, 103). Though it is necessary to consider this account of the fated beginning of Owen's poethood with some skepticism, its very existence works to controvert the notion that he was made a poet by the war. Though we cannot know with complete certainty when he began writing poetry in earnest, early letters and poetry show that by the age of eighteen Owen was intensely devoted to poetry, and that for a number of years this devotion appears single-mindedly focused upon Keats.

The adolescent, feverish quality of Owen's passionate love for Keats during this period from 1911 to 1913 has led to what Najaran describes as “some critical distaste” (177). Though Owen continued to read Keats up until his enlistment in 1915, during his time as a tutor in France beginning in 1913 Owen's love appears tempered as his literary tastes continue to broaden and he devotes himself to other poets in addition to Keats, particularly Percy Shelley and Alfred Tennyson. The fading intensity of Owen's all-consuming love for Keats has led many critics to address Owen's connection to Keats by understanding it as youthful infatuation. For Hibberd, this focus on the immature qualities of Owen's love of Keats is accompanied by a distaste for the wild intensity of his early devotion, remarking in *Wilfred Owen* that the influence of Keats is “is all too obvious” in Owen's early poems and focusing instead on the influence of Shelley (41). Though certain aspects of Owen's idolization of Keats appear, as Sven Backman observes of his habit of going into mourning on the anniversary of Keats's death, somewhat “ridiculous,” other aspects have been dismissed as immature without their implications being fully explored (49).

Readers of Owen have observed the way in which Owen's love of Keats appears in his early letters and poetry with a reverence that seems to overwhelm the religious

faith of his upbringing. However, this is often understood as an immature element of his infatuation. In *Wilfred Owen: A New Biography* Hibberd states:

Having often been told that the Christian believer could hear the voice of God speaking through the bible, he was now reading and hearing Keats in that same Evangelical spirit, and the poet who had longed for a life of sensations rather than of thoughts spoke to the heart of the adolescent schoolboy more powerfully than the Bible ever had. . . and poetry begins to replace scripture as a guide to life.” (54)

As Hibberd's description of Owen as an 'adolescent schoolboy' illustrates, the way in which Owen's devotion to Keats's poetry of sensation begins to establish itself as separate from his religious devotion is understood here as a youthful phase of the young poet's development. In my project, however, I argue that Owen's pre-war devotion to Keats is actually intertwined with his early spiritual disillusionment in a meaningful way that can be understood as the origins of the moments of spiritual crisis I locate in his war poems.

### **Owen's Pre-War Crisis in Spiritual Faith**

In his earliest letters and poetry Owen often describes Keats not only as an object of erotic desire, as Najaran has explored, but also with reverence and spiritual devotion. For example, in the fragmentary sonnet “Before Reading a Biography of Keats for the First Time,” which is believed to have been composed when Owen first began reading Keats in 1911, Hibberd observes, “Keats, whom he elsewhere speaks of as a lover, is here seen a 'like a God on a high uprist” (7). When visiting the British Museum in 1911 to read manuscripts of Keats's poems, Owen refers to his experience as “holy-ground treading” (*Selected Letters*, 24). During his 1911 visit to Teignmouth, where Keats once lodged, he describes the spot at which at which “Ode to a

Nightingale” was written in similar terms: “In this garden the 'Ode to a Nightingale' was written so that it is one of London's most holy spots” (*Selected Letters*, 16). In these very early letters and poems Owen's reverence for Keats exists alongside a complacent acceptance of the Evangelical Christian faith in which he was raised. However, Owen's rejection of the orthodox Christianity of his youth in 1913 brings much deeper complexities to this early reverence for Keats. In the following section of my project I will explore how Owen uses his sensuous love of Keats to articulate the existence of a distinct sacredness of the human body as an object of erotic desire. The way in which Owen understands this sacredness as in conflict with the spiritual faith of orthodox Christianity reveals the origins of the moments of spiritual crisis that I locate in his war poems.

Owen's crisis of religious faith occurred while he was serving as an assistant to the Vicar in the small village of Dunsden for sixteen months, two years before his enlistment in the military at the age of 19. Owen's early letters show that he was not particularly dedicated to the Evangelical Christianity of his upbringing at this time, and it does not appear that he had engaged in any particularly significant spiritual reflection or questioning before this position at Dunsden. His decision to serve as the Vicarage assistant was motivated by practical and financial concerns. However, over the course of these sixteen months, Owen experienced a deep disillusionment with the religion of his upbringing that culminated in his decision to leave Dunsden in seriously ailing physical health and haunted by nightmares. Hibberd states that, “leaving Dunsden in February 1913 was by far the most traumatic event in Owen's life until he saw the trenches in 1917” (*A New Biography*, 99).

Three months before this decision to leave his position as the Vicarage assistant, Owen explicitly rejected the Christian faith of his upbringing in a letter to his mother:

Murder will out, and I have murdered my false creed. If a true one exists, I shall find it. If not, adieu to the still falser creeds that hold the hearts of nearly all my fellow men. Escape from this hotbed of religion I now long for more than I could ever have conceived a year and three months ago.  
(68)

The main factors contributing to this crisis of spiritual faith have been understood by Hibberd and Jon Stallworthy, two of Owen's leading biographers, as both his newly intellectualized skepticism and his own sexual maturity and the attendant awareness of his homosexuality which this maturity brought. Hibberd understands the importance of this time upon our reading of Owen's war poetry as the awakening of a social conscience and intellectual disillusionment with organized religion that occurred through his Parish meetings with villagers living in poverty and through his reading of Percy Shelley ("A New Biography," 8). Though Hibberd also observes the ways in which Owen's sexual maturity contributed to his crisis in faith, he does not further examine this topic through the frame of Owen's devotion to Keats.

In *Wilfred Owen* Jon Stallworthy describes Owen's poetry from his time at Dunsden in the following manner: "In poem after poem he describes, often luxuriantly, the beauty of the human body and, with hardly an exception, it is the male body that is celebrated" (70). In this way, Owen's poems from this time often contrast erotic representations of the body with the stern demands of Orthodox Christianity. In many poems, Owen's devotion to the male body can be understood through examining his devotion to Keats himself. His letters and poetry from Dunsden show that Owen was still intensely devoted to Keats at this time, and we know that only a few months after

leaving Dunsden he made a second Keatsian pilgrimage to Teignmouth. Writing to his mother about his visit to the places where Keats had walked, Owen makes a particularly revelatory comment: “I fear domestic criticism when I am in love with a real live woman. What now I am in love with a youth, and a dead 'un!” (qtd. in “*A New Biography*” 101). I agree with Hibberd's reading that Owen is making a veiled admission of his own homosexuality through his reference to his love of Keats: “he was preparing himself – and his mother – for the possibility that when he fell in love it might be with a real live youth” (101).

In a letter written to his Mother during the first few months of his stay at Dunsden, Owen describes his experience reading the account of Keats's death in William Rossetti's *Life of Keats* in the following manner:

I have more than once turned hot and cold and trembly over the first haemorrhage scene; and sobbed over Severn's 'He is gone. . . ' But I never guessed til now the frightful travail of his soul towards Death; never came so near to laying hold of the ghastly horror of his mind at this time. Rossetti guided my hand right to the wound, and I touched, for one moment, the incandescent Heart of Keats.” (66)

Owen's response to the scenes that describe Keats's tuberculosis-induced hemorrhage is described through the experience of his own physical body, turning “hot and cold and trembly.” These descriptions communicate a feverish passion, and Owen is not repelled but sensuously affected by the description of the “haemorrhage scene.” The admission that he has “more than once” experienced this physical response communicates that he has re-read this passage; showing a desire to continually experience such sensation. In *Owen the Poet* Hibberd observes that this response seems “partly sexual” (9).

Elsewhere he writes that Owen is “responding to it almost as though he were St Thomas reaching into Christ's side” (“*A New Biography*,” 89). This way in which Owen uses

imagery of Christ to imbue sensuous, physical experience with a sacred quality reappears in the war poems I will analyze.

Owen is not focused upon the soul of Keats, which he imagines as engaged in a “frightful travail,” but instead imagines his own physical body, “my hand,” touching “the incandescent Heart of Keats.” The image of his hand being guided draws out the presence of Owen's own physical experience and suggests a kind of magnetism, even though he is touching a wound. This can be compared to the central image in the fragmentary poem “I Saw His Mouth's Round Crimson.” In this poem the speaker's experience watching a mouth “deepen” as it falls to the ground draws out this experience in luxuriant manner even as the mouth is bloodied and crimson. Here, Owen represents his own person reaching out to touch “for one moment, the Incandescent heart of Keats.” His capitalization and underlining of “incandescent” communicates the importance of this word, which is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as, “emitting light on account of being at a high temperature; glowing with heat,” and also as, “*fig.* Becoming or being warm or intense in feeling, expression, etc.; ardent, fiery; ‘flaming up.’” These two definitions appear equally important to how Owen represents his experience. On one hand, the first definition of incandescence as glowing with heat from a high temperature establishes that this light is something that can be physically felt by Owen's own hand.

The second definition communicates that this experience is not only physical but also includes a fiery intensity of feeling with clear biblical connotations. The Oxford English Dictionary communicates the biblical significance of “incandescent,” citing an 1859 passage describing how, “Holy Scripture become resplendent; or, as one might



say, incandescent; through~out, and taking effect on all minds.” In this way, Owen uses a word with clear biblical connotations to communicate his devotion. His desire to gain intimacy to Keats's heart communicates deep love and affection that recognizes erotic desire as it uses religious imagery to imbue Keats's body with a sacredness that is not determined by religious faith.

The religious imagery that Owen uses to describe his devotion to Keats is given a new complexity as it appears interwoven with his rejection of his early faith in orthodox Christianity. This connection is demonstrated in the letter to his mother announcing his decision to leave the Vicarage, in which Owen writes, “this morning I managed to broach the subject of my leaving, to the Vicar. He had only been waiting for me to be first in the matter” (*Selected Letters*, 103). Following this announcement, Owen ends his letter: “My allegiance to you and my Father is never to be shaken. For the rest, I have not the slightest feeling of humility for anything in existence, but the Eternal Being, the Principle of Beauty, and the Memory of Great Men” (103). The latter part of this statement is nearly a direct quote from Keats's well-known letter to J. H. Reynolds: “I have not the slightest feeling of humility towards the public – or to anything in existence – but the eternal Being, the Principle of Beauty, and the Memory of great Men – ” (*Collected Poems and Letters of John Keats*, 1:183). It is striking that Owen's announcement of his decision to leave the Vicarage contains a direct quotation by Keats, as he uses Keats's own reference to great men to express his love for Keats himself.

This way in which Owen represents his sensuous devotion to Keats as one of his central conflicts with the Christian faith is expressed in the notes of Owen's draft of a

letter to the Vicar expressing his decision to leave Dunsden, of which this fragment is all that remains:

To Vicar – solely on the grounds of affection. I was a boy when I came to you and held you in the doubtful esteem that a boy has for his Headmaster. It is also true that I was an old man when I left. . . The Christian Life affords no imagination, physical sensation, aesthetic philosophy. There is but one dimension in the Christian religion, the straight line upwards whereas I cannot conceive of less than 3. But all these considerations (?) are nothing to the conviction that the philosophy of the whole system as a religion is a religion and therefore one Interpretation of Life & Scheme of Living among a hundred and that not the most convenient. (68)

Here Owen's rejection of Christianity is haunted by his need for the recognition of sensuous experience. The three things Owen finds lacking in Christian life, 'imagination, physical sensation, aesthetic philosophy,' could be describing the most powerful and distinctive qualities of Keats's poetry. The naming of 'physical sensation' as one of the major areas of life that is not addressed by Christianity shows the importance of physical experience and sensation in Owen's crisis in spiritual faith.

The early poem “Maundy Thursday” provides the most striking evidence of the way in which Owen's early rejection of Christianity appears as devotion to sensuous experience through his devotion to Keats. Jon Stallworthy indicates this poem was composed in 1915, two years after Owen's experience at Dunsden (“*Poems of Wilfred Owen,*” 86). This later date shows how relevant the issues raised at Dunsden remained for Owen. Also, Stallworthy indicates that Owen returned to editing this poem during the time in which he hospitalized for shell-shock at Craiglockhart, which demonstrates the enduring relevance of this poem during the war. “Maundy Thursday” describes a ceremony at a Christian mass wherein the congregation, one by one, approaches the altar to kiss a silver cross:

Between the brown hands of a server-lad  
The silver cross was offered to be kissed.  
The men came up, lugubrious, but not sad,  
And knelt reluctantly, half-prejudiced.  
(And kissing, kissed the emblem of a creed.)  
Then mourning women knelt; meek mouths they had,  
(And kissed the Body of the Christ indeed.)  
Young children came, with eager lips and glad.  
(These kissed a silver doll, immensely bright.)  
Then I, too, knelt before that acolyte.  
Above the crucifix I bent my head:  
The Christ was thin, and cold, and very dead:  
And yet I bowed, yea, kissed - my lips did cling.  
(I kissed the warm live hand that held the thing.)

Purkins writes that this poem “may go back ultimately to Keats's 'This living hand, now warm and capable’” (83). Publishing posthumously (during Owen's lifetime) in 1898, Keats's “This Living Hand” fragment is one of the works that critics believe may have been his very last piece of writing. As such, it has been critically received as an uncanny experience in which Keats is literally reaching out from the grave as he imagines the reader haunted by the death of his living hand and concludes eerily “see, here it is – / I hold it towards you” (7-8). Without exploring “This Living Hand,” I only suggest that the potent symbolism of this poem as what Najaran calls “a personal utterance and a living relic of Keats” offers a link by which “Maundy Thursday” can be read a site of sensuous devotion to the death of Keats himself (168). The use of the sonnet form, which is the genre of love poetry, communicates that the poem is a site of love and devotion.

Though its tone is witty and irreverent, this poem marks a point at which Owen's rejection of Christian ceremony is quite shockingly predicated upon his devotion to the truth of a sensuous experience. This poem is overwhelmed by its unmistakably erotic overtones. Different forms of the word "kissing" appears eight times in a poem that is only fourteen lines long, and Owen's final description of how "my lips did cling" communicates a deeply sensual desire. The way in which the final line is placed in parenthesis evokes the feeling that this is an intimate experience for the speaker, one which sharply contrasts the public setting in which he is placed. Jon Stallworthy's manuscript of this poem includes two crossed out descriptors which Owen considered before settling upon the word "live" to describe the server-lad's hand: "sweet" and "soft" ("*Complete Poems and Fragments*," 265). Our knowledge that Owen considered both of these words imbues the word "live" with tender sensuousness, suggesting that the speaker can perhaps taste the sweetness of this hand in his clinging kiss and feel the softness of it with his own lips. These things are possible because the hand is warm and alive.

The most striking part of the poem is that Owen does not reject spiritual reverence itself, but instead contrasts the truth of his sensuous devotion kissing the server-lad's hand with the false piety of the way in which everyone else kisses the "cold, and very dead" cross. The men are falsely "lugubrious," the women are truly devoted but only because of their meekness, and the children are innocent to what is happening as they kiss "a silver doll." In this way, Owen's shocking move, kissing the hand of the server-lad, actually appears as the truest demonstration of devotion. As Kenneth Cox observes of this moment, "so does [Owen] indirectly deny two thousand years of

Catholic doctrine and affirm the precedence of the real over the Real presence.” The real in this context is that which is warm, human, and alive over the Christ that is “thin, and cold, and very dead.”

Erotic sympathy is apparent in the way in which the speaker devotes himself to the server-lad through the recognition of his own physical desire. Owen does not reject devotion itself, but instead establishes the speaker's display of sensuous devotion as the truest expression of this ceremony. In this way, he rejects the spiritual faith of orthodox Christianity by rendering its devotion to that which cannot be physically experienced as false and insincere, and juxtaposing this lack of spiritual meaning with the sacredness of the server-lad's live hand. Owen's representation of this clinging kiss is an expression of sensuous devotion to Keats himself, reaching out to the hand which Keats places before the reader in “This Living Hand.” By showing how Owen uses his sensuous devotion to Keats to articulate the sacredness of the human body in the absence of spiritual faith, “Maundy Thursday” is the origin of the moments of spiritual crisis that I will explore in Owen's war poems.

## Chapter 2: Spiritual Fault Lines

I will now explore the meaning of the moments of spiritual crisis that I locate in Owen's war poems. I understand these moments as spiritual fault lines. The nature of this term can be introduced by an excerpt from *Wilfred Owen: A New Biography*, in which Hibberd describes the impact of living through the horrors of trench and gas warfare upon Owen's spiritual outlook:

[Owen's] early skepticism had been learned from books and from Dunsden, but his later experience of what Swinburne called 'the mystery of the cruelty of things' had brought him knowledge far exceeding that of nineteenth-century poet. He had descended into one of the many mouths of hell at Serre. He had seen the unsurpassable sweetness of a smile on a boy's murdered mouth, perhaps at Beaumont Hamel, and had felt the searing heat of Jones's blood on Joncourt ridge. 'My senses are charred,' he said. (356)

Though we know that Owen had lost his faith in orthodox Christianity when he was serving as a parish assistant at Dunsden, Hibberd suggests that Owen's war experience caused him to possess something beyond this pre-war skepticism. The phrase "the mystery of the cruelty of things" suggests that the previously unimaginable violence and sorrow which Owen and his fellow soldiers experienced was, at its core, impossible to make sense of through any belief system, spiritual or otherwise.

Yet, as Hibberd's connection of Owen's poems to his lived experience communicates, though Owen's senses are charred, he is still able to represent through poetry not only the horror of a living hell but also the shocking beauty of witnessing a smile on a boy's murdered mouth. From this point, I propose that one way to understand how Owen's war experience impacted his spiritual outlook is through the concept of spiritual fault lines within his poetry. A fault line is the visible surface trace

of a fault, or deep fracture, in the earth's crust. Within my project, a spiritual fault line is a visible marker that signifies an immense fracture within Owen's spiritual faith. I understand the spiritual as an eternal force that is deeply connected to human life but exists beyond what can be generally perceived by the human senses. Owen's relationship to the spiritual at these fault lines is sometimes linked to Christian imagery but speaks to broader conception of spiritual meaning. A spiritual fault line does not represent the coherent, philosophical absence of spiritual faith that is communicated by terms such as atheism and skepticism. Instead, a fault line is representative of a profound break in the ability to formulate a coherent understanding of the spiritual devastation created through Owen's encounter with "the mystery of the cruelty of things:" the totally unfathomable atrocity and sorrow of the violence of trench and gas warfare.

It is clear from Owen's wartime letters and poetry show that he gave more serious thought to the teachings of Christianity during this time than he had ever done previously, excepting perhaps his experience at Dunsden. This focus demonstrates the impact of war upon Owen's spiritual outlook. Though he did not claim a resurgence of religious faith, his war poetry is permeated with the religious imagery and themes. For example, in "Exposure," a poem about soldiers in the trenches dying from frostbite as they "cringe in holes, back on forgotten dreams," the speaker claims, "Our love of God seems dying" (22, 35). Because Owen expresses his spiritual crisis through Christian language, many critics have explored the impact of war upon his spiritual outlook in terms of his relationship to Christianity. For example, in *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study* D.S.R. Welland writes, "It is hardly surprising that Owen's poetry should contain such

statement such as 'God seems not to care' and 'love of God seems dying,' though his refusal to word either of them more dogmatically indicates the strength of the religion in which he had been brought up” (88). Welland claims that, because he does not insistently describe a crisis in faith, Owen's spiritual outlook should still be understood through his relationship to Christianity. However, in my view, this assumption that the sheer presence of biblical themes is indicative of Owen's basic faith in Christianity does not satisfactorily grapple with the force of statements such as “God seems not to care.”

Critics have observed the difficulty of discussing the state of Owen's own spiritual faith during the war. Hibberd's characterization of Owen's spiritual belief captures the difficulty of attempting to formulate such an understanding: “He did not regain his early religious belief, even though he might never have described himself as an atheist” (XIX). In this way, as the impact of Owen's war experience upon his spiritual faith cannot be understood through the term skepticism; neither does the term atheism adequately grapple with the representations of spiritual crisis which appear in his poetry. The halting uncertainty of this phrasing captures the fundamental ambiguity which underlays any study of Owen's spiritual faith. Though we have no way of definitely knowing where Owen's own spiritual belief stood before he was killed in battle, my project is an attempt to examine the significance of this very inability to express a coherent spiritual outlook as it appears in his poetry. In this way, I suggest that the inability to dogmatically express a crisis in spiritual faith, which Welland claims is indicative of the enduring power of Owen's Christian faith, actually demonstrates the inexpressibility which is the deepest truth of Owen's spiritual experience of war.



The nature of the relationship between unfathomable trauma and the writing of poetry is elucidated in Daniel Hipp's book *The Poetry of Shell Shock*, in which the author explores how Owen's poetry may be seen as what he calls a "poetic confrontation with the unspeakable," or a way for Owen to confront the debilitating psychological trauma of his war experience (63). Owen expresses such trauma in the statement "my senses are charred." Hipp's study focuses upon Owen's three month stay at the Craiglockhart War Hospital for the treatment of shell-shock, an ill-defined medical term used at the time to describe the debilitating ways in which soldiers reacted to the trauma of the front. Owen's shell-shock, of which the most noticeable outward symptom was a stammer, was the response to a harrowing experience in which he was forced to lay with the remains of a fellow soldier for several days in a dugout in France. The time spanning from his arrival at Craiglockhart in June of 1917 to his death seventeen months later marked a turning point in Owen's poetry. He wrote virtually all of his major war poems during this time, and "Insensibility" and "Futility" were both written during his stay at the hospital.

Hipp explores how Owen's profoundly meaningful relationship with his poetic mentor and editor Siegfried Sassoon (whom he met at Craiglockhart), and the poetry-writing prescribed by his doctor as a work cure allowed him to confront the trauma of his war experience. Through the process of searching for language to articulate his experience, Owen could confront the initially inexpressible trauma of his experience through memory and imagination. Yet, as Hibberd perceives, the spiritual impact of the unfathomable darkness of Owen's war experience was impossible to make sense of through any philosophical system; and Hipp suggests that Owen's poetry is itself

haunted by these experiences which language cannot articulate, concluding that his poems are themselves the site of “Owen's ultimate truth about war – its inexpressibility” (106). This understanding of Owen's poetry serves as the background for my reading of spiritual fault lines, which speak to the spiritual devastation caused by war just as much as they reveal the speaker's inability to coherently express this devastation.

I will explore spiritual fault lines in the poems “Insensibility,” “Futility,” and “I Saw His Mouth's Round Crimson.” Within these poems the speaker bears witness to the moment at which an anonymous fellow soldier passes from life into death. In the instant of utter shock and blank desolation which exist in the wake of this soldier's death, Owen represents a liminal space existing between the end of his sensory perception of this soldier's life and the potential rebirth of meaningfulness through faith in a greater spiritual force. In each poem, there is a representation of this liminal space described in the language of ancient, primordial nature: the sea, sun and stars. In “Insensibility,” for example, this is “the last sea and the hapless stars” (56).

This language allows Owen to represent the space between sensory and spiritual meaning because these phenomena are themselves situated on the border between them. On one hand, we can easily see the stars, smell the ocean and feel the sun, and yet the primordial vastness of these bodies can never be wholly perceived through our senses, and in this way they also speak to our most deeply felt questions about creation and eternity. The speaker of each poem encounters this space to express their total inability to perceive meaning beyond the body of the soldier himself, asking at the end of “Futility,” “– O what made fatuous sunbeams toil / To break earth's sleep at all?” (13-14). The tone of each spiritual fault line is different: in “Insensibility” the tone is

yearning, in “Futility” it is outraged, and in “I Saw His Mouth's Round Crimson” it is utterly heartbroken, yet each speaker expresses a profound inability to perceive any spiritual meaning beyond the life of the soldier who has just died.

Though Owen crafts a speaker in each poem, the force of these moments is derived from our knowledge that they are based upon his own experience witnessing death. As readers we know that each death Owen represents in a poem is matched by his witnessing of an incalculable number of deaths which have passed unrecorded. This knowledge is hauntingly expressed in a short fragment in which Owen asks; “But what of them buried profound, / Buried where we can no more find, / Who ( ) / Lie dark for ever under abysmal war?” (“As Bronze May Be as Much Beautified,” 9-12). My understanding of the need to pay attention to these fault lines as a small marker of profound fracture in Owen's spiritual understanding, and as an expression of immeasurable grief, is informed by the weight of these lives which have passed anonymous and unremembered. Thus, even as an unspeakable spiritual desolation is revealed at these spiritual fault lines, I believe that in in these moments Owen is as Hibberd claims of him “above all an elegist” (*Wilfred Owen*, 27).

Because Owen is foremost an elegist at these moments, the true focus of each poem is not his own devastated spiritual faith, but the soldier whose death he has just witnessed. This is communicated through Owen's experience of sensuous devotion to the body of the dying soldier. Sensuous devotion is the profound dedication, connection and reverence for another human life that Owen creates through his sensuous representation of the body itself. In “Insensibility,” for example, Owen calls upon his reader to hear the “moan” of a dying man who lies at the brink of “the last sea and the

hapless stars” (56). Just as Owen intimates the doomed futility of cosmic significance in his description of 'hapless stars,' this moan not only reveals pain, but also asks the reader hear the pleasure that this man has experienced in his life.

This analysis deals with the distinctly erotic imagery present in many of Owen’s pre-war and war poems. John Purkins describes how:

In several editions [Owen's early poems] were not admitted or they were placed at the back of the volume. In fact, a good many of these minor poems were on erotic themes, and might provoke the reader to censor them or to regard them with distaste. It might have been easier if such poems were all 'early' – to be superseded by the bleaker vision of the war poet – but in fact Owen continued to produce these '1890s verses' while writing his more famous elegies of war. (31)

This eroticism was often overlooked in early criticism because it was not yet widely accepted that Owen was gay. In *Wilfred Owen: A New Biography*, the 2002 book which established this fact beyond a reasonable doubt, Hibberd writes, “although there are still people who prefer not to believe it. He was gay. . . There is abundant evidence in his writing of a strong homoerotic impulse, something that he seems to have recognized and accepted without much difficulty.” (XIX). However, the eroticism within Owen's poetry remains a topic which is not generally given as much critical space as more conventional ways of understanding his response to war. By exploring how Owen's sensuous devotion to a soldier's body relates to his spiritual response to war, I hope to further explore how the erotic elements of Owen's poetry can be used to understand his unique response to war.

At the site of a spiritual fault line, this sensuous devotion does not signify any higher call of the spirit or recognition of universal connectedness, and in the instant at which the body passes into death the poem’s speaker encounters an unspeakable

spiritual emptiness. The end of sensuous experience indicates the end of intelligible truth, and at the moment of death Owen cannot feel any meaning beyond the life that has disappeared from the body. This sensuous devotion marks the site of a spiritual fault line, as it is only through the truth of the physical body that the blank, unintelligible emptiness of a spiritual void can be understood as signifying meaningful loss. By juxtaposing the truth of the human body as something that can be felt through sensuous experience with the impossibility of feeling spiritual truth in this moment, Owen's sensuous devotion provides the space in which inexpressible spiritual devastation can be made intelligible.

## Chapter 3: Close Readings

### “Insensibility”

The beginning stanzas of “Insensibility” describe how the conditions of warfare destroy a soldier's capacity for sensation and feeling to such an extent that their very souls are damaged. The speaker describes how:

Happy are men who yet before they are killed  
Can let their veins run cold.  
Whom no compassion fleer  
Or makes their feet  
Sore on the alleys cobbled with their brothers. (1-4)

The bitterly ironic designation of these men as “Happy” introduces a reality so horrific that the best possible response is complete numbness. Soldiers are happy if they, “Can let their veins run cold,” because compassion will only laugh jeeringly at them. The image of compassion “fleering” further communicates the soldiers’ immersion in suffering so beyond the scale of human conception that to feel pity would only mock their inability to affect this suffering. It would also mock the part they must play in it, because their feet would become “sore on alleys cobbled with their brothers;” they would feel the weight of their dead companions and the weight of having killed men on the enemy side who are, in Owen's view, their brothers as well. This denial of compassion establishes itself as linked to sensory experience; it requires “cold” veins and the ability to become numb to “sore” feet that would feel the weight of violence and death in the earth.

The ever-present death threat of war, “The tease and doubt of shelling, / and Chance's strange arithmetic,” does not only make these soldiers' blood run cold with

compassion for others, it also destroys their ability to feel their own humanity as “some cease feeling, / Even themselves or for themselves.” Thus:

Happy are these who lose imagination:

They have enough to carry with ammunition.

Their spirit drags no pack.

Their old wounds, save with cold, can not more ache. (19-23)

Here, the destruction of the sensory feeling leads to the destruction of imagination and then the spirit itself. It is the carrying of ammunition, the burden of being equipped to kill other men that leads to a description of total spiritual emptiness in the line “their spirit drags no pack.” The impact of this description of spiritual emptiness is created by the way in which the physical shortness and small syllable count of the line itself is couched between two wordy, expansive lines describing the burden of ammunition and wounds, as if to illustrate how the spirit itself becomes small and insubstantial compared to these burdens.

Thus, “Their senses in some scorching cautery of battle / Now long since ironed, / Can laugh among the dying, unconcerned” (28-30). This image of the process of burning the wound with metal to stop bleeding and infection reinforces the pragmatism of the soldier's destruction of their senses; leading to a numb madness which allows them to laughingly face death as a daily reality. It is from this point that poetry itself, which was questioned in the first stanza when the speaker critiqued the use of figurative language to elegize soldiers is brought back into focus: “The front line withers / But they are troops who fade, not flowers / For poet's tearful fooling” (6-8). The speaker shifts from contrasting the inexperienced soldier with the experienced one, “He sings

along the march / Which we march taciturn,” in Stanza IV to asking in the opening of Stanza V (36-37):

We wise, who with a thought besmirch  
Blood over all our soul,  
How should we see our task  
But through his blunt and lashless eyes? (19-22)

By using the same pronoun, “we,” to describe both the experienced soldier and the role of the war poet, “We wise,” the speaker separates his poetry from “poets tearful fooling” by emphasizing that it is based on experience of the realities of warfare. The role of the poet as “We wise,” stands in contrast to “poets tearful fooling” because it is not elevated above the soldier's barren inability to feel, but instead constrained within it, communicated by the image of a soul dirtied by blood. This image subverts conventional religious imagery, which would position the soul above the realities of blood and dirt. Instead, Owen imagines “our soul” tainted by the atrocities of war so that the poet's role, the ability to be “we wise” can only be through the ability to “see our task. . . through his blunt and lashless eyes.” In this way, the potential for any spiritual vision of war through poetry is drawn down to earth by the image of a shared and bloody poetic soul.

This image leads into and frames our reading of the speaker's denouncement of the “cursed” and “wretched” civilians who, “By choice they made themselves immune / To pity and whatever moans in man / Before the last sea and the hapless stars;” (54-56). Significantly, not all editions of the poem include this moan, as in the original draft of the poem Owen had originally written “mourn” in line 55, but then crossed out and replaced it with “moan” (“*Complete Poems and Fragments*,” 301). Owen's worrying



and focus upon this word demonstrates the importance of it in his process of writing. In my reading, the sensuous force of “whatever moans in man” is essential to the spiritual implications of the final lines. My understanding of the weight that this moan carries for our overall experience of the poem differs from Hibberd's reading of “Insensibility,” which focuses instead on the implications of Owen's call to pity. While pity is the response that civilians make themselves insensible to, this moan is a representation of what they refuse to respond to. I argue that the dual meanings evoked by a moan, both pain and pleasure, call forth the full scope of human sensuous experience: not only an immediate communication of physical agony, but also an evocation of what has once been desire in the same man's life. Owen's designation of the civilians who cannot hear this moan as making themselves “immune” in this way implies a resistance to the physical symptoms of an experience that can potentially overtake the whole body. Thus, to feel pity, we are being asked to draw upon our own physically-felt sensuous perception to make ourselves vulnerable to hearing this moan not only as a weary cry of suffering, but as a cry of desire as well.

The speaker stated that he cannot see but through the “blunt and lashless” eyes of the insensible soldier, and so the role of the reader in responding to this moan is, I argue, to hear the potential connotations of pleasure carried by a moan which the poem does make explicit when writing from the perspective of a soldier. In Owen's poem “Miners,” Najaran observed that Owen imagines and hears the buried, “moans down there / Of boys that slept wryly sleep, and Men / Writhing for air,” in a way that is “sexually charged” (14-16)(169). I suggest that the moan in “Insensibility” carries sexually-charged connotations of physical pleasure as well. But while Najaran argues

that the significance of the sexually-charged moans in “Miners” is to engender bonds of pity based in homoerotic desire, in “Insensibility” this single moan is also the site of a spiritual fault line that reveals itself in the conclusion of the poem:

To pity and whatever moans in man  
Before the last sea and the hapless stars.  
Whatever mourns when many leave these shores.  
Whatever shares  
The eternal reciprocity of tears. (55-59)

Owen calls us to hear this moan “Before the last sea and hapless stars;” we are not within or beyond this liminal space, but instead held right before it. In this way, the liminal imagery of the last sea and stars can be seen to stand between this moan and the reality of death. In my reading of the poem, Owen's treatment of this imagery does not, as some readers argue, evoke spiritual connectedness, but actually shows a disintegration of spiritual understanding.

The critical understanding of the lines as evocative of profound spiritual connectedness is demonstrated by Gertrude White's identification of “The eternal reciprocity of tears” as, “Owen's most memorable and moving expression of his theme of pity, the knowledge and the confession of a universal bond” (66). Hibberd, however, views these lines, which depart from the interweaving of highly-specific realism and figurative language present in the first five stanzas, as detracting from the success of the poem as a whole:

It [“Insensibility”] is an extraordinary achievement, though weakened by a final stanza in which the author succumbs, as he had done in 'Hospital Barge,' to the attractions of Tennysonian rhetoric as a substitute for profound thinking. The 'last sea and the hapless stars', for example, do not bear much looking into; perhaps all that lies behind them is a phrase from 'Oenone', 'the loud stream and the trembling stars.' (31)

Regarding this imagery as nothing more than an empty echo of lyrical poetry, Hibberd focuses instead on the influence of Shelley present in the angry denouncement of civilian ignorance and the evocation of “pity and whatever moans in man” in the preceding lines. My reading of the conclusion of “Insensibility” lies somewhere between these two readings. In my reading, the profundity of the imagery of “the last sea and the hapless stars” and “the eternal reciprocity of tears” lies in their ability to symbolize Owen's inability to feel “the knowledge and confession of a universal bond,” even as the poignancy of this description shows his intense yearning to do so. It is the sensuous, human force of “whatever moans in man” which actually prevents the final lines from dissolving into empty rhetoric, and allows us to feel how this lack of spiritual meaning is representative of profound spiritual loss.

If the poem were to conclude at “the last sea and the hapless stars,” as Hibberd suggest that it should, it could not reveal the fracture in Owen's spiritual belief that appears in the final three lines. In the context of only “whatever moans in man,” this space of the last sea and the stars is not liminal, but earthly, and the description of the stars as “hapless” could be easily understood as foretelling doom for this soldier and the others who will die like him. Only by engaging with the *potential* for spiritual connectedness does Owen encounter the possibility that this sea is truly the “last,” the end of intelligible meaning, and the stars themselves are “hapless,” unfortunate in themselves because they truly hold no spiritual significance. The force of this reading appears as a broken connection between what lies before this liminal space, our immunity to “pity and whatever moans in man,” and what lies beyond it, “Whatever

mourns when many leave these shores. / Whatever shares / The eternal reciprocity of tears.”

The nature of this broken connection is communicated in large part by Owen's use of rhyme. “Pity and whatever moans in man” is strikingly detached from the following four lines, and connected through rhyme to no other line in the poem. The gentle consonance of 'e' sounds in the final lines lends this final evocation a lulling, melodious quality. Yet, Owen's use of half rhyme, between the words “stars,” “shores” “shares,” and “tears,” speaks to something much more unsettling in these final lines. Though Owen's poetry is well known for its use of half rhyme, the four repetitions of a single unfulfilled rhyme in these final lines is remarkable. The unfulfilled rhyme between the “hapless stars” and “whatever mourns when many leave these shores” suggests that the stars cannot forge an unbroken connection to the many men who die in war. Then, this leads into two more half rhymes of the same sound in the concluding lines, “Whatever shares / The eternal reciprocity of tears.”

Here, it feels as if are floating in a disjointed search for completion, as the liminal “last sea” before which we heard man's final moan has transformed into “the eternal reciprocity of tears.” This phrase, on one hand, suggests that human sorrow may be matched by some eternal response. Yet, there is an unsettling strangeness to the triple repetition of “whatever,” which qualifies the speakers evocation of a final moan and his evocation of something which mourns and shares in an eternal reciprocity. This repetition suggests that “whatever” may be the same thing in all three contexts. Yet, the word “whatever” also signifies broadness so overwhelming that it could lead to nothing at all. The word “whatever” here signifies an unknown quality that cannot, at this point,

transform “the eternal reciprocity of tears” into anything like a reassurance of universal connectedness. Instead, we must face the possibility that “*whatever* moans in man” is unconnected from the force which Owen yearns might offer some semblance of a reply to an infinite sorrow. The only point of clear truth is the actual “moan” of a dying man, as “whatever” spiritual force this moan may be connected to has been revealed to be ambiguous and uncertain.

### **“Futility”**

While the tone of the spiritual fault line in “Insensibility” is yearning and ambiguous, “Futility” ends with an unanswerable question that is urgent, desperate, and outraged. Unwilling to accept whatever force of creation would allow one soldier's warm body to pass into death, the speaker eventually experiences spiritual meaning itself as incomprehensible, asking in final desperation “ – O what made fatuous sunbeams toil / To break earth's sleep at all?” (13-14). Imagery creating an experience of erotic sympathy, which was compressed into the utterance of a single moan in “Insensibility,” is interwoven throughout “Futility.” The poem focuses upon a scene in which the speaker looks upon the body of his dying fellow soldier on a cold morning. As Owen interweaves sensuous and erotic imagery describing the soldier's body with an image of the sun as a creator of life, the soldier's physical body is itself invested with sacredness for the speaker as erotic sympathy between the speaker and this soldier is engendered in the luxuriant description of the soldier's body.

The abrupt realization of the finality of the soldier's death at the conclusion of the poem cancels this imagery, and, instead of turning towards the sun for consolation, the incomprehensibility of this moment causes the speaker to invalidate his faith in the

spiritual meaning of the sun itself. As Bernard Bergonzi puts it: “With considerable economy of means, Owen places the tragedy of an individual death on a plane of cosmic significance; or rather, this death, so futile in its finality, points to the ultimate futility of the whole order of things” (123). While Hibberd points out that “present behind 'Futility is our knowledge that war is a man-made thing and not the responsibility of whatever power gave us life,” I read the poem as actually creating an experience in which the we relate to the speaker's outraged despair so completely that this knowledge is itself suspended (“*Wilfred Owen*,” 33). Not only is speaker's experience of sensuous devotion to a single body more deeply felt than any spiritual faith, but the cancellation of this devotion by the cruelty of war is revealed to be that which makes any spiritual understanding of universal meaning impossible.

The poem begins with a brief command, “Move him into the sun – ” that immediately communicates a sense of urgency, even as we are unaware who it is being spoken to or about (1). We can infer that whoever he is cannot move himself, and that to move him into the sun will change his condition in some way. The expectations of military vocabulary suggested by a command, however, are immediately reversed in the following lines, “Gently its touch awoke him once, / At home, whispering of fields half-sown” (2-3). What originally appeared as the terse command of an officer is suddenly imbued with a tender sweetness through the speaker's personification of the sun, and the description of how the sun “gently” once awoke this man shapes our experience of the way in which they are moving the soldier into the sun. The gentle consonant sounds in the internal half rhyme between “touch” and “once” in this line creates a soothing tone, yet the unfulfilled rhyme ending at the word “once” imbues this word with a precarious

uneasiness. The word “once,” meaning “on some past occasion; formerly,” communicates the speaker's distressingly ambiguous understanding about whether this soldier is somehow unconscious and can be awoken, or if he is gone past any point of return.

The suggestion carried by the usage of this word situates the soldier in a liminal state between life and death that is carried throughout the poem. In a way that is distinctly Keatsian, the increasing urgency of this fast-narrowing distinction between life and death in this first stanza does not negate eroticism, but actually corresponds with heightening poetic awareness of the sensuousness of the soldier's body. A tone of tender sensuousness is introduced in the following line as the speaker enters a realm of intimacy by imagining the soldier “at home.” In this image, the sun has awoken the soldier by “whispering of fields half-sown.” This agrarian image provides a metaphor for the idea of cruelly wasted potential which underlies Owen's protest against the death of this soldier. Like the fields, the potential harvest of this soldier's young life is brutally destroyed by war; a meaning which is powerfully demonstrated by the effect of incompleteness in the half rhyme between “sun” and “sown.”

The importance of this image for my reading of the poem, however, lies in equal part in the sensuous and erotic implications of the line. The image of the sun “whispering” to awake the man is a particular choice of word which, when coupled with the earlier description of the sun as gentle, suggests the tender sensuousness of lovers murmuring in intimacy. This suggestion is lent an erotic charge by the image of the fields “half-sown,” which in this context also speaks to the dying soldier's wasted sexual potential and his own seeds which cannot be sown. The most striking part of this

suggestion of eroticism, however, is that it is immediately cut off and juxtaposed by speaker' statement, "Always it woke him, even in France, / Until this morning and this snow" (4-5). These lines abruptly bring the reader's focus back to the immediate reality, in which the soldier has faced imminent death many times before, and the speaker's reference to the site of the bloodiest battles of the war speaks to the harrowing nature of this memory. Yet, even the horror of this past experience is positioned in positive terms because the soldier has lived through them, and in this way it is measured against the speaker's realization that he will not be roused on this morning: "Until this morning and this snow." Instead of bearing light and warmth, the morning is associated with the cold of snow and death.

Yet, in the next line, "If anything might rouse him now / The kind old sun will know," the speaker does not return to this knowledge that the man will not be awoken, but instead appeals to the sun (6-7). His reference to the sun is here affectionate; as if to a father figure. A sense of almost childlike trust is communicated by the simplicity of this affirmation of the sun's knowledge. The establishment of such trust sets up the next stanza, in which the speaker asks us to share in his thoughts and, "Think how it wakes the seeds – / Woke, once, the clays of a cold star" (8-9). This imperative feels like an attempt to bolster the speaker's trust in the life-giving powers of the sun through evoking its most essential and primordial power. The way in which the sun wakes the seeds to life, the specificity of "the" suggests that these could be the seeds of the soldier's half-sown fields, leads from the most everyday symbol of life awakening to the oldest and most primordial. The imagery in line 9 is biblical, and can be understood in connection to the Genesis verse: "Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the



ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature” (*Holy Bible: English Standard Version*, Genesis 2:7). By referencing this ancient biblical story of creation, the speaker is asking the reader to consider the sun as a force of universal and infinite life-giving power.

Yet, in the visual scene provided by the poem, in which the speaker is looking at a sunlit body and has just realized this man will not be able to wake up, the soldier's body is the focus of the poem to such an extent that this imperative appears directed not only to the reader but also to the body itself. The speaker's reference to the sun with the third person pronoun “it” functions as a diminution of the sun's immediate significance, suggesting that in these two lines his true focus is not the sun but rather the body itself. In this way, we get the sense that he is not turned towards the direction of the sun but bent towards the soldier's body, and these lines can be read in this way as a desperate entreaty to the soldier's warm body itself. The repetition of forms of the word awake in these lines, “wakes” and “woke,” and the consonance of sharp 'k' sounds, in the words “think,” “wakes,” “woke,” “clays,” and “cold,” recall an image of sharply shaking an unconscious body in a desperate attempt to wake it up.

This reading is substantiated in the following lines as the image of the ancient “cold” star is brought into contrast with tender and vividly sensuous imagery describing the soldier's body as the speaker asks: “Are limbs, so dear achieved, are sides, / Full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir?” (10-11). The shortness of these declarations and the terse way in which they are separated by commas is held in contrast to the deep feeling communicated by them, as if to restrain a potential overflow. As the previous two lines seem directed to the body as well as the reader, these lines also appear to forge

an intimate connection between the speaker and the soldier's body. The word "limbs" is inexact at first, and almost appears more fitting to describe the carnage on a battlefield, but this small reminder of the way in which limbs are usually described in Owen's poetry only enforces the effect of the description which follows, "so dear achieved." "Dear" is defined as, "Regarded with personal feelings of high estimation and affection; held in deep and tender esteem; beloved, loved." How are limbs "dear achieved"? On one hand, they are dear achieved because of the love and care that goes into creating and raising a child, and also they are also dear in this present moment to the speaker.

The almost shocking sweetness of this description of the limbs as "dear achieved" leads to the speaker's question, "are sides / Full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir?" The description of touching not just one side but the "sides" of this soldier's body suggests an intimate and tender image in which the speaker is holding onto the sides of the soldier in an embrace. The description of these sides as "full-nerved" communicates a luxuriance in feeling that goes beyond the soldier's ability to feel through the web of fibers which carry impulses of sensation throughout our bodies. Describing his body as "full" nerved conveys the soldier's ability to feel the complete scope of human sensation; pain and pleasure and everything that lies in between. Finally the speaker describes the sides as "still warm." The consonance of the lulling 'll' sounds in these descriptions communicates an easeful, luxuriant sense of pleasure even as the speaker must face his knowledge that the soldier is dead. The warmth of the soldier's sides contrasts the cold clay of an ancient star; prioritizing the warmth of immediate life over the cold distance of creation itself. Yet, the word "still" ultimately reveals a moment of utter helplessness and sorrow that cannot be held at bay through any

tenderness of description; the speaker feels the promise of life offered by a warm body but he is also communicating that the soldier is dead; he is “still” warm even past this death.

The speaker concludes his question by asking if all of these things are “too hard to stir?” Kenneth Cox observes that, “The questions he asks, prompted by the sight of his dead comrade, seem direct and rhetorical at the same time.” In this way, this question is not simply a rhetorical device derived from the speaker's relationship to the soldier's body. In one sense it is rhetorical, because the previous lines have revealed to us the speaker's knowledge the soldier will not wake up on this day, and so the speaker is himself is aware that no satisfactory answer is available. Yet it also is direct because, as the radically heightening urgency of the following questions show, the speaker expects an answer.

This way in which the speaker demands a reply to an unanswerable question demonstrates the intensity of his devotion to the body of the soldier, even as he is not explicitly addressing the body. “Stir” connotes a gentle rousing, as if the speaker is showing how easy and natural it would be to awaken the soldier. The word “stir” communicates a figurative as well as literal significance, meaning “movement of feeling or thought; emotion,” so that through this word speaker is also relating his description of the body to the emotional feelings which it arouses. In this way, the tone of this question retains the tenderness of lines 10 and 11; the speaker is still attempting to appeal to the sun, though it also moves beyond the luxuriant sensuousness of his descriptions to reveal a heightening urgency The word “hard” communicates the force

of this urgency through its figurative and literal significance; meaning on one hand, difficult, and also communicating how a body begins to turn hard after death.

The image of the sun as the creator of life stirring a young body into life creates parallels between this scene and the resurrection of Christ, yet the force of this image is conjured only at the moment that reveals its total inability to be achieved. This allusion further elevates the body's significance to the level of the sacred, and can be compared to the speaker's act of choosing “the warm live hand that held that thing” over the Christ that is “thin, and cold, and very dead” in “Maundy Thursday.” In “Wilfred Owen and the Poetry of War” Neil Corcoran observes that:

Those 'limbs' and 'sides', particularized in a succession of achingly poignant epigraphs, might well, in another kind of poem, have been the spur to further erotic reverie. . . Here, however, the eroticism is also curtailed: the license of kissing the warm live hand in 'Maundy Thursday' has become the anguish of watching the warmth disappear forever from limbs now, just, 'still warm.' (94)

In this poem the human warmth that prompted the speaker in “Maundy Thursday” to kiss the server lad's hand as a symbol of reverent, sensuous devotion is destroyed. The radical shift in tone that follows the speaker's question at the end of line 11 shows how the canceling of this eroticism results in a destruction of the speaker's ability to put any faith in any understanding of a universal force that has given us life.

The speaker's tone gives way to sorrow, desperation, and outrage as the poem ends in the wake of the speaker's final questions, “Was it for this the clay grew tall? / – O what made fatuous sunbeams toil / To break earth's sleep at all? (12-14). The force of this ending lies in the ways in which the poem refuses and actively works against giving the reader any sense of closure or conclusion. The word “this” sounds like an outburst of sputtering horror in reference to the now-dead body before the speaker and to his

own feelings of betrayal and sorrow. The sun whose universal power he earlier appealed to by remembering how it once woke human life, “woke once the clays of a cold star,” now appears utterly pointless in the abrupt question: “was it for this the clay grew tall?” The final lines raise this unanswerable question to a universal significance, “– O what made fatuous sunbeams toil / to break earth's sleep at all?” Beginning this question with “–O” feels like an invocation or prayer, yet the bitter irony is that the speaker is now addressing this accusatory question to nothing at all; nothing which can give any semblance of a reply.

The liminal space between life and death represented by the image of sunbeams is judged to be “fatuous,” and their ability to begin life on this planet is registered as mundane and difficult through the words “toil” and “break.” This conclusion is a deeply bitter accusation to which no adequate response can be given, and the outraged tone of the speaker's spiritual crisis is driven by his despair at feeling the warmth fade from the body of the soldier who lies before him. The reader is here joined with the speaker to stare into the void to which he calls out. As we too feel the impossibility of a reply, it is only through joining with the speaker in devotion to the still warm body lying before him that we can garner any sense of meaning from the utter futility of his outraged cry of despair.

### **“I Saw His Mouth's Round Crimson”**

Like “Futility,” the fragmentary poem “I Saw His Mouth's Round Crimson” also opens with the image of a sun: “I saw his round mouth's crimson deepen as it fell, / Like a Sun, in his last deep hour” (1-2). This sun is not described as holding life-giving powers, but is instead represented as the mouth of a soldier whom the speaker is

witnessing fall to his death. In this way, this poem can be read in dialogue with the rejection of the sun as a source of spiritual meaning that was established in “Futility,” as the religious significance which Owen divested the sun of in “Futility” is actually placed in the body of the soldier. In Najaran's reading, Owen's erotic sympathy culminates in this poem as he devotes himself to the body of the soldier through replaying his attraction to the soldier and giving him the body of Keats. This reading shows how Owen places the constellation of the heavens and stars in which Shelley imagines Keats in the final stanza of “Adonias,” his elegy for Keats, in the soldier's body. Najaran writes, “Owen's erotic sympathy reaches its culmination when he can figure love by placing Shelley's last figure of Keats within the body of this soldier” (183). With this awareness of how the eroticism of this poem can be read as devotion and love for both Keats himself and the soldier, my own close reading will explore how the erotic imagery in “I Saw His Mouth's Round Crimson” can be understood as the site of a spiritual fault line.

This spiritual fault line is engendered by the utter shock of sensuous love at the moment of its disappearance, as the sacredness with which this devotion has imbued the soldier's body vanishes at the moment of his death; bringing the speaker into an encounter with a universe that appears void of spiritual meaning itself. The first lines of the poem introduce the speaker's relationship to this soldier as both imbued with erotic desire and situated at the moment of his death. Najaran comments, “The eroticism of the fragment is apparent in the attraction to the red, round mouth, which does not repel even as it is bloodied” (183). In this way, the description of the mouth as “crimson,” which can be understood through the definition, “*fig.* Of or relating to blood; sanguinary. Also:

suffused with blood; blushing,” immediately creates an image of a bloodied mouth. The speaker's description of this mouth as “round” is a sensuous description that communicates youth and fullness, yet it also creates an image of a mouth in a round 'o' of shock; demonstrating the premature, unanticipated nature of his death. The speaker's attraction to this mouth is established through the way in which he describes remembering see it “deepen as it fell,” an image which lets the reader know that his eyes are fixed to the mouth as it falls

The word “deepen” can be read both literally and figuratively. The syntax in the description of “his round mouth's crimson;” the words “round” and “mouth's” are used to describe “crimson,” suggests that the crimson quality of the mouth is the ultimate focus of the speaker's gaze. In this way, the adjective “deepen” describes the way in which the bloodiness of the soldier's mouth becomes more intense and deep as it is pooled with more blood. In the next line however, “Like a Sun, in his last deep hour,” this literal meaning is expanded, and it communicates a further deepening of the bloodied mouth and also introduces the simile of a sunset to describe the speaker's face. This image makes the reader aware that the speaker is witnessing the last moment of this man's life; actually bearing witness to the moment of his death. In this way, the description of “his last deep hour” expands the temporal experience of this moment so that there is a slow-motion effect applied to our experience of the imagery used to describe the soldier's face.

Finally, this usage of the word “deep” heightens the eroticism which was established in the opening line of the poem. Corcoran links this deepening to the flushed sensuousness of Keats:

The feeling with which the 'mouth's crimson' is gazed at is certainly erotic: the repetition of 'deepen' and 'deep' is a kind of pulsation and the conjuration of that flush on the soldier's dying cheek carries into a strangely perturbed register the flushes of arousal which Owen would have noticed in Keats. But the poem is charged with other sympathetic recognitions too which elaborates sexual feeling into a quasi-religious 'recession' of mourning. (90)

This way in which the erotic gaze of the speaker can be understood as Keatsian is an important part of how I understand this poem. The “other sympathetic recognitions” which Corcoran apprehends can be linked to the way in which Najaran understands the imagery communicating these flushes of arousal as signifying the body of Keats himself, so that Owen's recognition of his own arousal and desire engenders erotic sympathy as it is transformed into love and devotion. While Corcoran claims this “elaborates sexual feeling into a quasi-religious 'recession of mourning,’” I understand this recession not as almost or apparently religious, but instead as the speaker employing religious imagery to communicate his devotion to the soldier's body as something which is sacred in itself.

The simile “Like a sun, in his last deep hour” communicates the sacredness of the soldier's body. By referring to the sun as “he,” even though it is not capitalized and not spelled as one would refer to Christ, the speaker is not only using the image of the sun to describe the soldier's face, but also evoking an allusion to Christ. This makes the reader aware of how, like the figure of Christ, this youth is both beautiful and cruelly killed before his time. However, as in “Futility,” this biblical allusion is evoked as a muted undercurrent rather than a central image of the poem. The poem does not assert that the body of this youth is like Christ, but rather this allusion to Christ is one of the



ways in which the speaker employs religious imagery to imbue his body with a sacredness that is secular rather than based in spiritual or religious faith.

Another way in which the speaker establishes the sacred nature of the soldier's body is through imagery befitting a grand and royal elegy. The multi-syllabic, expansive language of the following line, "Watched the magnificent recession of farewell," registers the elevated language befitting a formal procession, as if watching the soldier is akin to witnessing a royal ceremony (3). This image, like the eroticized attraction to his mouth, communicates the intensity of the speaker's devotion to the soldier. Yet, he does not sustain this elevated diction, and the grand splendor of this imagery falters in the following line, "Clouding, half gleam, half glower" (4). While the rest of the poem echoes the form of a blazon, focusing on the specific body parts of the speaker's object of devotion; his mouth, cheek and then eyes, these two lines are more inexact in what they are referring to, as there is no specific part of the soldier's face linked with the "magnificent recession." In this way the image of the clouding "magnificent farewell" shapes our understanding of the speaker's broader experience witnessing the soldier's face.

"Clouding" is defined as, "*transf.* and *fig.* To render obscure; to dim, obscure, darken." This description immediately qualifies the resplendent splendor of the previous line by indicating that it is also dimming. This image of the face as both intensely magnificent and simultaneously darkening makes us aware of how quickly he is losing life and introduces a sense of urgency to the poem that contrasts the temporal expansion established by the phrase 'his last deep hour.' The speaker's description of this clouding as "half gleam, half glower" further communicates this urgency as it locates both the

light of life and the youth's impending death. A gleam is, "*fig.* A bright or vivid manifestation (of some quality, etc.); in mod. use chiefly with the notion of limitation, a faint, transient, or intermittent appearance." In this way, the gleam that the speaker sees is also becoming fainter with each second, yet he also sees the face as "half glower." A glower is, "the action of glowering; a fixed and intent look; an open-eyed gaze or stare." This glower communicates the soldier's relationship to the speaker himself by relaying the shockingly intent and open way in which he is stared at. For a moment, we too can see the utter vulnerability which the speaker has borne witness to in this soldier's eyes.

This moment of connection leads into line 5, where the image of a sunset reaches its final, expansive heights as the speaker beholds, "a last splendor burn the heavens of his cheek" (5). By describing only the heavens which burn the soldier's cheek, the speaker divests the heavens of their religious significance and marks his corporeal cheeks with the highest point of spiritual transcendence. As Corcoran observes of the sensuousness and eroticism of this image, the burning flush on his cheeks also registers a feverish arousal echoing Keats. This burning can also be understood in context of the speaker's own experience, not quite desire in this moment but his own feverish bodily response to his connection to the soldier, and the moment at which sensuous devotion is at highest point right before its disappearance. Then, the speaker describes, "And in his eyes / The cold stars lighting, very old and bleak, / In different skies" (6-8). Though there is no explicit temporal separation between these two descriptions, the sensory language of temperature: splendor that "burns" and then "cold stars," communicates that we are bearing witness to the moment of death on the most visceral level, literally watching a body lose the warmth of life.

In these final lines the reader understands that the moment of death has just occurred; the speaker is now staring into lifeless eyes, and can no longer sustain the sensuous warmth of love poetry or the expansive diction of elegy. Instead, there is a deeply unsettling abruptness to what the speaker sees in the soldier's eyes; not the hopeful "starry-eyed" cliché of love poetry that is evoked by the rhyme between "eyes" and "skies," but instead, an image of ancient and barren coldness. Though he sees the stars "lighting," they seem deeply separate from this man's existence; unable to speak of any life beyond this life. The pun for "indifferent" in the phrase "in different skies" indicates that the stars exist far beyond the concerns of this world, and they possess a desolation, communicated by the word "bleak," that stands in stark opposition to the resplendent beauty of the man's dying face.

The description of these stars as not only desolate, but also "very old and bleak," evokes a barren, primordial universe in which the passing of one life may be truly inconsequential. While the rest of the poem has built up to a sense of profound meaning, here it refuses to give the reader a way to understand this meaning. The moment of death has marked the end of any intelligible sense of spiritual meaning, and we must stare with the speaker into the oblivion left in the wake of this soldier's death. While the previous speakers have expressed both yearning and outraged despair, the speaker in "I Saw His Mouth's Round Crimson" is utterly heartbroken.

## Conclusion

In “Insensibility,” “Futility,” and “I Saw His Mouth’s Round Crimson,” traces of Keats do not immediately reveal themselves through specific intertextual references. The erotic language and imagery present in these poems is not immediately apparent either. Instead, the poems present two layers of meaning to the reader. In “Futility,” for example, readers do not usually explore the potential eroticism of the description of “full-nerved, still warm sides.” Yet, rather one reads it as erotic or not, the most basic meaning of the line is not changed. Either way, it communicates the preciousness and vitality of the dying man’s life. The poem’s ability to communicate two layers of meaning makes sense in the context that Owen was writing. The eroticism is based upon Owen’s homosexuality, which was rarely discussed by scholars until only about 15 years ago. It was definitively not an acceptable part of his poetic voice during his own lifetime.

So, the war poems mask their own eroticism. While each poem clearly deals with a moment of spiritual crisis, the speaker’s eroticized relationship to this dying body is less immediately clear to the reader. In “Insensibility,” for example, the line “whatever moans in man” is not unambiguously erotic, but erotic in a veiled and subterranean way. Najaran’s study of erotic sympathy describes an unambiguous homoerotic ethics that is exclusively related to same sex desire, and is the central focus of each poem he examines. What, then, is the purpose of exploring the subterranean appearance of sensuous devotion at moments of spiritual crisis? My project explores how the distinctly homoerotic relationship defined by Najaran is actually interwoven

with another layer of meaning in the poem: an experience of spiritual crisis that I refer to as a spiritual fault line.

While the moment of spiritual crisis may be the most immediately apparent meaning in each war poem, it does not appear as something that can be understood by the reader who has not lived through the hell of war. This idea that the reader is always closed from understanding the true experience of war is crucial to Owen's war poetics. A fault line reveal can only reveal a glimpse of a spiritual faith that has been unutterably fractured by the experience of war. In this way, though the crisis occurs on a level of spiritual significance, it is an experience of inexpressible devastation that cannot be wholly communicated in language, let alone understood by the reader. In this context, the speaker's sensuous devotion further communicates the way in which the reader's full understanding of such an experience is not possible.

The eroticism present in these poems is so important because it is so personal. Not only is it same sex desire, but the link to the poetry and figure of Keats establishes that such sensuous devotion is closed to the reader's understanding because it is absolutely personal to Owen's experience of war. His pre-war reading and relationship to Keats reveals how deeply his eroticism is bound to this experience of spiritual crisis. Yet, from these layers of meaning that both push away from universality, there arises something that reaches for universal meaning. These are the moments at which the body of a soldier is sacred even as spiritual faith is utterly devastated. By communicating this elegy through his own erotic experience, Owen uniquely uses the sensuous influence of Keats to express the value of single life within the devastation of war.

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