

Wilfred Owen's Voices: Language and Community, by Douglas Kerr. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994. Pp. 346. \$54.00.

The Great War and the Missing Muse: The Early Writings of Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon, by Patrick J. Quinn. Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1994. Pp. 297. \$45.00.

Since the publication of Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* in 1975, the literature of the First World War has attracted an abundance of perceptive scholarship, a trend that continues, I'm pleased to say, in these two new studies. Both books add considerably to our understanding of the war poets and—Kerr's in particular—open intriguing new avenues for future investigation.

In *Wilfred Owen's Voices*, Douglas Kerr probes that most elusive of topics, literary creativity, by examining Owen's exposure to the language of four different communities: his family, the Church of England (specifically turn-of-the-century Evangelicalism), the British Army, and the intertextual community of writers, particularly Keats and Shelley, whom Owen admired. Though this approach might initially seem deterministic and reductive, through its suggestion that Owen was a product of his environment, of the various "discursive roles" forced upon him by his family, church, army, or literary predecessors, Kerr actually postulates a laudably complicated dynamic: "the human subject," he writes, "is his or her discursive roles—not just the sum of them but the interaction between them, which includes the possibility of tension, incompatibility, conflict, and contradiction" (3). Thus, in this fascinating "life of the poet's language" (5), Kerr enables us to listen to the "polyphonic," sometimes discordant voices in Owen's war poetry, voices that combine in a "complex playing—a playing-up, even a playing-off—of roles, themes and values from different discourses" (16).

This may sound terribly theoretical and dry. Yet Kerr succeeds brilliantly, partly because of his effortlessly readable style, and, more specifically, because despite his indebtedness to recent theorists (particularly Bakhtin), he keeps his heady conception of Owen's creativity grounded in a painstaking examination of artifacts drawn from Owen's discursive milieu, including turn-of-the-century Evangelical temperance tracts, manuals for First-World-War junior officers, and volumes of poetry selected from Owen's own library. Kerr immerses us in the language of Owen's world, patiently exhuming long forgotten samples of Edwardian and Georgian discourse (including the romantic, fluffy verse of Owen's cousin, Leslie Gunston, who represents the kind of poet that Owen might have been without the Great War) until we begin to discern both Owen's reliance on the discursive resources provided by his environment and his ability, due to his unique (albeit environmentally determined) personality and experiences, to transform these resources into startling new configurations. And, so compelling is Kerr's analysis of this paradox at work within individual poems such as "Exposure," "Futility," "Spring Offensive," and "Disabled" that the reader comes away from this book unlikely ever to see Owen's work in the same way again.

Even the well-worn anthology piece "Dulce et Decorum Est" emerges from Kerr's scrutiny illuminated by fresh insights. For example, in a chapter focusing on the Evangelical literature of temperance, entitled "Drink and the Devil," Kerr convincingly argues that "Dulce et Decorum Est" draws upon the techniques of "naturalistic or photographic shock" (95) that Owen encountered through the Church of England Temperance Society (of which his mother was a member). Then, while surveying a more abstract community, Owen's library of English literature, Kerr points to an intriguing "textual ancestor" (238) for "Dulce" by tracing the lines "Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud / of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues" to Hamlet's description of his mother's corruption (*Hamlet* III. iv. 40-4):

Such an act
That blurs the grace and blush of modesty,
Calls virtue hypocrite, takes off the rose
From the fair forehead of an innocent love
And sets a blister there.

Suggesting "how blunt an instrument is encased in our usual assumptions about literary 'influence,'" Kerr uses this oblique Shakespearian allusion to demonstrate that "the codes of poetry and of family are entangled [in "Dulce"] at a profound level of language." Thus, Hamlet's mother, Kerr claims, is merely one version of the "corrupting older woman," a figure evoked in the poem under several different guises, including Jessie Pope, the jingoistic poetess whom the speaker addresses directly, and, more implicitly, Owen's own mother, for whom Owen gently, but perhaps impatiently, described the horrors of war in his letters (239).

By the end of this provocative analysis, we can regard the deceptively simple "Dulce et Decorum Est" as a complex amalgam of different discourses, one that utilizes the shock tactics of the temperance movement in its hellish portrayal of the Western Front, while simultaneously registering Owen's place within the English literary tradition, as well as the tensions present in his wartime familial discourse. The voices of Owen the son (and former member of the Young Abstiners Union), Owen the indignant front-line officer, and Owen the student of Shakespeare interweave, each building upon or playing off of the language of the others.

Owen's poetry has not lacked astute commentators, and much of Kerr's study rests on the contributions of critics such as Dominic Hibberd and Paul Norgate. Nevertheless, the originality of this book is striking and, while Kerr's tendency to create a category of discourse for virtually any form of interaction occasionally becomes cumbersome or distracting (as, for example, in the distinction between "fatherly" and "motherly" discourse), his approach to literary creativity is seldom reductive or simplistic. Nor, fortunately, is it hidden behind the often cryptic language of contemporary theory.

Engaging and lucid, Kerr's own voice(s) should be listened to by anyone interested in Wilfred Owen or the language of great poetry.

While Kerr speculates on the creative process that came to fruition at the close of Owen's tragically abbreviated career—Owen was just 25 and only months away from his death when he completed his finest poems, including "Exposure" and "Spring Offensive"—Patrick J. Quinn focuses in *The Great War and the Missing Muse* on the early work of two poets, Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon, whose prolific careers began during the First World War and extended well beyond the Second. This dual treatment of Graves and Sassoon is nothing less than ideal, not only because of the celebrated wartime friendship between these two writers, followed by postwar enmity, but because of the fascinating contrasts between their artistic sensibilities after 1918. As Quinn demonstrates, the 1920s were, for Graves, a period of frenetic literary experimentation, familial stress, and lingering neurasthenia, all of which led to his cathartic farewell to England, in *Good-bye to All That* (1929), and self-imposed exile in Majorca. Sassoon, on the other hand, also searched for a sympathetic muse: throughout the '20s he strove unsuccessfully to apply the satirical techniques of his war poetry to civilian subjects before discovering, through the writing of *The Heart's Journey* (1928) and *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (1928), that his talents were best suited to the introspective exploration of his prewar and wartime past. Though both writers turned to autobiographical prose at the end of the 1920s, each benefiting from the sudden demand for First-World-War memoirs, they had moved in completely different directions, Sassoon committing himself artistically to his English past, Graves to an expatriate future and the inspiration of Laura Riding.

Unlike Kerr, Quinn eschews theoretical concerns and offers a solid example of traditional scholarship, one that deftly interweaves formalistic textual analysis with biographical discussion, much of which draws upon sources only recently made available, such as Sassoon's diaries. At times, this

approach seems too facile—What, one might ask, are the author's basic assumptions about the nature of language and creativity? Within what kind of conceptual framework does Quinn define his own critical endeavor?—but the lack of theoretical foundation laying in this text is a minor deficiency, and detracts nothing from the wealth of fresh insights and new contextual information that Quinn provides. Moreover, through his sensitive and exceptionally informed explication of Graves' and Sassoon's early writings, Quinn accomplishes his goal of "demonstrat[ing] that a number of their poems have languished in dusty volumes too long" (14).

After offering a brief history of the ultimately acerbic relationship between these two writers, Quinn examines each poet's output, volume by volume, ending with the prose works of the late 1920s. Then, in a brief conclusion, entitled "Poetry to Prose," he summarizes each man's solution to the creative dilemmas imposed by the Great War. For readers familiar only with Sassoon's vitriolic war poems or Graves' *Good-bye to All That*, Quinn's patient treatment of each successive volume may become tiresome; however, this straightforward method of organization is appropriate to a book that sets out, in part, to spark interest in neglected material.

And, indeed, *The Great War and the Missing Muse* does prompt one to take a second look at some of those "dusty volumes"—even though, as Quinn demonstrates, neither writer found his true voice until the end of the decade. Graves' poetry from the 1920s, in particular, emerges from Quinn's study as an astonishingly diverse, though uneven, body of work, containing more than a few passages of memorable verse. In the opening of "Rocky Acres," for example, part of the 1920 collection *Country Sentiment*, Graves masterfully evokes a barren Welsh countryside filled with foreboding imagery:

This is a wild land, country of my choice,
 With harsh craggy mountain, moor ample and
 bare.
 Seldom in these acres is heard any voice
 But voice of cold water that runs here and there

Through rocks and lank heather growing without
care.

No mice in the heath run, nor no birds cry
For fear of the dark speck that floats in the sky.

Nothing could be further from this sinister landscape of predator and prey than the wistful, enchanting doggerel of “Whipperjenny,” the title poem of Graves’ 1923 collection. Though the poem assumes darker shades in its final stanza, through its assertion that love is a strange, even frightening mixture of “the beautiful, ugly, and fanciful” (96), the bucolic opening reflects Graves’ ability to capture a mood of childish innocence and wonder:

Come closer yet, sweet honeysuckle, my coney, O
my Jenny

With a low sun gliding the bloom of the wood.
Be this heaven, be it Hell, or Lands of Whipperginny,
It lies in a fairy lustre, it savours most good.

As a poet, Sassoon does not fare nearly as well; however, Quinn’s analysis of the often tepid verse that Sassoon produced between 1918 and 1928 contains some of his best insights, and offers a compelling explanation for Sassoon’s progress from polemical satirist to introspective autobiographer. One key to this seeming transformation, Quinn suggests, is Sassoon’s homosexuality, a side to his character sometimes avoided in previous studies. In fact, the Sassoon whom we meet in Quinn’s book is, in many ways, a revelation: a man painfully isolated by his sexual orientation—even while leading an active “double life” divided between his fox-hunting cronies and literary circle—and prone to bouts of depression and ennui (222).

Provoked in part by sexual frustration, Sassoon’s “spiritual malaise” during the 1920s did not end, Quinn demonstrates, until he retreated from social issues into a narcissistic process of self-scrutiny that lasted for nearly twenty years (234). Yet this shift represented a return, rather than a movement forward, since Sassoon merely reverted to the “love of solitude and quiet

introspection" that had characterized him as a young man (152-3). Therefore, in Quinn's view, Sassoon's polemical war poetry becomes less a starting point for his artistic development than a detour. The inferiority of Sassoon's satirical verse after 1918 reveals not only his inability to maintain political convictions outside the charged atmosphere of wartime, but the fundamental incongruity between the kind of writing that made Sassoon famous as a war poet and the kind most attuned to his personality.

A generally unassuming and unobtrusive critic, Quinn sometimes betrays a dislike of Sassoon that the reader cannot help but share, as in this passage, which identifies a thrill-seeking component in Sassoon's self-absorbed personality: "There was something of an ambulance-chaser mentality in Sassoon. He seemed to crave excitement for its own sake, and the basic human issues underlying the event were not as important to him as the thrill they created" (225). Though *The Great War and the Missing Muse* offers a perceptive treatment of Graves' artistic development during the 1920s, it is Quinn's at times sharply critical presentation of Sassoon—a surprisingly complex, but often unsympathetic figure—that offers the most new information.

Quinn's book may be less provocative and exciting than Kerr's, but it is not necessarily less valuable. Ultimately, these two fine studies, the products of critical sensibilities at opposite poles, illustrate the virtues of theoretically informed interpretation—when freed of jargon—and those of more traditional, less self-conscious literary scholarship. The work of the war poets, a body of literature still unexamined in many important respects, will continue to benefit from both approaches.

—Steven Trout
Fort Hays State University