

N I L S C L A U S S O N

*Sassoon's Prose Trench Lyric and the Romantic Tradition:
The Ending of Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*

Poetry is made out of other poems.

—Northrop Frye

That we have set too much store by originality is one of the great lessons taught by textual theoreticians.

—Robert Scholes

PERHAPS THE MOST PERSISTENT MYTH ABOUT BRITISH POETRY of the Great War is that it became progressively more realistic as soldier-poets learned more about the horrors of modern trench warfare. According to this orthodoxy, the pastoral patriotism of Brooke (“If I should die think only this of me”) soon gave way, in the mud and blood of Flanders, to the angry realism of Sassoon and Owen.¹ Thus when we think of World War One poetry today, the poems that instantly come to the minds of most readers are those angry and satirical anti-war poems, such as Sassoon’s “Base Details” and “Blighters” and Owen’s “Dulce et decorum est,” the last being probably the most famous, certainly the most widely anthologized, poem of the War. The problem with this view is that it is based on a relatively small group of poems that, despite their indisputable excellence, are in many ways atypical of the bulk of poetry, including much of the good poetry,

written during the War. That poetry was deeply indebted to the nineteenth-century poetic tradition running from Wordsworth and the Romantics through the major Victorian poets to Hardy and beyond. The majority of the war poets worked within this tradition to produce, as I have recently argued, the trench lyric.² But it is not just much of the poetry of the Great War that belongs to this tradition. The last two paragraphs of what many regard as one of the best memoirs to come out of the War, Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (1928), emerge from the same tradition and constitute a prose version of the trench lyric composed by the solidier-poets. It is within this tradition, and the war poetry created out of it, particularly the poetry of Isaac Rosenberg, that I would like to place the lyrical coda to Sassoon's elegiac *Memoirs*.

At first glance, a work by the author of some of the bitterest and most angry anti-war poems of the Great War may seem an unlikely place to observe the conventions of Romantic poetry, but the ending of *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* reveals just how insistently the Romantic lyric imposed its form and structure on the imaginations of the writers of the Great War. At the end of the memoir, George Sherston is watching dawn break over the trenches on Easter Sunday, 1915:

Back in the main trench, I stood in the firestep to watch the sky whitening. Sad and stricken the country emerged. I could see the ruined village below the hill and the leafless trees that waited like sentries up by Contalmaison. Down in the craters the dead water took a dull gleam from the sky, I stared at the tangle of wire and the leaning posts, and there seemed no sort of comfort left in life.³

As Paul Moeyes has noticed,⁴ the language self-consciously echoes Thomas Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush," which opens:

I leant upon a coppice gate
 When Frost was spectre-grey,
And Winter's dregs made desolate
 The weakening eye of day.
The tangled bine-stems scored the sky
 Like strings of broken lyres,
And all mankind that haunted night
 Had sought their household fires.⁵

Recalling his recent leave, Sherston says, "I remembered how I'd *leant* my elbows on Aunt Evelyn's front *gate*" (312). In another verbal echo, Sassoon

transforms Hardy's "tangled bine-stems" into "the tangle of wire" (312) out in No Man's Land. And, of course, Sassoon's bird singing somewhere "beyond the splintered tree-tops of Hidden Wood" (313) is the counterpart of Hardy's frail, gaunt and small thrush.

But it is not just a single poem by Hardy that lies behind Sherston's elegiac meditation at the end of *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*. Sassoon is doing more than including an "oblique reference"⁶ to a specific poem. Both Hardy's lyric and the ending of Sassoon's fictional memoir belong to a structurally identifiable Romantic and Victorian lyric genre running from the early Wordsworth and Coleridge to such late nineteenth-century incarnations as Hardy's lyric and on into the twentieth century.⁷ By imitating this form of the Romantic and post-Romantic lyric, Sassoon is aligning himself with a tradition of English poetry and a particular lyric form more than a century old. The structure of this lyric closely resembles that of the poems M. H. Abrams identifies and examines in his famous essay "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric." In that seminal essay, Abrams defines the genre, explores its origins in the eighteenth-century local poem, and accounts for its appeal to the Romantic sensibility. The speaker in this lyric, says Abrams, "begins with a description of the landscape; an aspect or change of aspect in the landscape evokes a varied but integral process of memory, thought, anticipation, and feeling which remains closely interwoven with the outer scene. In the course of this meditation the lyric speaker achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem."⁸ As it was handed down to later poets, including Hardy and Sassoon, the form typically consisted of the first-person utterance of a thoughtful, sensitive, and perceptive speaker who is usually alone in (or close to) a natural landscape. This landscape is described in some detail, usually in the opening lines. Then some particular aspect of that landscape (daffodils, a thrush) attracts the attention of the speaker, who is moved to reflect, speculate, or otherwise respond to this arresting aspect of the natural scene. The rest of the poem consists of his (or her) reaction, reflection, or analysis as the poem shifts from the perceived object to the perceiving mind of the speaker. The prototype of this genre is, of course, Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," but his short lyric "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" offers a conveniently condensed version. These poems established a pattern for thousands of later Romantic and Victorian lyrics that, like Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach," typically open with a description of a natural setting ("The sea is calm tonight"), then shift their focus to one aspect of that scene (Arnold's ebbing tide), and finally move associatively to a reflection on some personal or public issue whose significance is the real focus of the poem (for Arnold, the decline of traditional religious faith). So strongly had this genre enforced itself upon the literary consciousness of poets and readers alike that, by the end of the nineteenth century, it had become virtually synonymous

with the lyric poem. The soldier-poets of the Great War carried this model with them in their minds and in their copies of *The Oxford Book of English Verse* into the trenches of France and Flanders, along with their rifles, their kitbags, and (before long) their gas masks.

True to the three-part structure—opening description, narrowing of focus, and reflection—established by Wordsworth and recently imitated by Rosenberg and other war poets, Sassoon's prose trench lyric includes a solitary speaker musing in a landscape; a bird that is the equivalent of Hardy's thrush and Keats' nightingale; and finally a reflection on the meaning Sherston takes from the experience. The prose poem opens with a view from the firestep in the trench, from which Sherston can see the "sky whitening" and under it the "sad and stricken" country emerging, specifically "the ruined village below the hill and the leafless trees that waited like sentries up by [the village of] Contalmaison." Then the focus shifts to Sherston's reaction to the landscape and his recollection of his recent leave: "I stared at the tangles of wire and the leaning posts, and there seemed no sort of comfort left in life. My steel hat was heavy on my head while I thought of how I'd been on leave last month. I remembered how I'd leant my elbows on Aunt Evelyn's front gate. (It was my last evening.) That twilight, with its thawing snow, made a comfortable picture now" (312-13). The contrast between Sherston's "comfortable" recent past and the absence of "comfort... in life" in his present represents the larger contrast between the comforting, pastoral innocence of his earlier life as a fox-hunting man and the fallen ("sad," "stricken," "leafless") landscape of the war. Then the speaker returns to the present, jolted out his reminiscence by a bird singing in "the splintered tree-tops of Hidden Wood" (313). The reason a bird sings at this point is not that the historical Sassoon, standing in the trenches, heard birds singing, though he certainly must have. The bird, or more accurately its song, is there because the conventions of this genre require a bird (or an equivalent object in the natural landscape). But Sassoon's bird, unlike Hardy's thrush and certainly unlike Keats' nightingale and Hopkins' windhover, offers no comfort, no hope, and Sherston's "heart in hiding" has not "stirred for a bird" singing beyond Hidden Wood: "Without knowing why, I remembered that it was Easter Sunday. Standing in that dismal ditch, I could find no consolation in the thought that Christ was risen. I splashed back to the dug-out to call the others up for 'stand-to'" (313). The "sad and stricken" landscape—"the ruined village," "the tangled wire and the leaning post," "the dead water," "the splintered tree-tops"—offers "no sort of comfort," "no consolation," and so an unconsolated Sherston "splosh[es] back to the dug-out" (313).

Just how closely the lyrical ending of *Memoirs* follows the generic pattern of the trench lyric is revealed by the similarities between it and two of Isaac Rosenberg's best (and best known) poems, "Returning, We Hear the Larks" and "Break of Day in the Trenches."⁹ The similarities of the former to Shelley's and Wordsworth's

poems both entitled “To a Skylark” have, of course, been pointed out,¹⁰ but what has been overlooked is the fact that both of Rosenberg’s poems closely follow the pattern of the Romantic lyric. Like its generic models, “Returning, We Hear the Larks” opens with a description of the setting (the first line, “Sombre the night is,” alludes to the opening line of “Dover Beach”: “The sea is calm tonight”), then moves (as in Hardy’s “Darkling Thrush”) to an encounter with a thought-provoking aspect of the natural scene (the sudden, unexpected sound of the larks’ singing), and concludes with the speaker’s reflection on the meaning and significance of his strange experience in No Man’s Land.

Even more striking are the similarities between the ending of *Memoirs* and “Break of Day in the Trenches.” Rosenberg’s speaker in this ironic aubade is, like Sherston, a sentry alone on duty as dawn breaks, and the poem opens with a brief description that establishes the time and place:

The darkness crumbles away—
It is the same old druid time as ever.

As the speaker reaches to pluck a poppy from the parapet protecting the front of the trench, a rat—familiar denizen of the trenches—leaps over his outstretched hand. The rat then becomes the object of the speaker’s attention, and it functions (along with the poppy) analogously to Wordsworth’s daffodils, Shelley’s skylark, or the larks in “Returning, We Hear the Larks.” The arrival of the “Droll rat” with its “cosmopolitan sympathies” prompts the speaker’s reflections on the absurdity of the situation: a lowly rat—the very opposite of Shelley’s ethereal “blithe spirit” or Keats’s invisible nightingale—can do what Rosenberg would be shot for doing, fraternize with the enemy.

But Sassoon is not only writing within a tradition; he is also partly writing *against* it, and thereby transforming and renewing it. He does not just imitate the structure of Hardy’s poem; he uses it as a counterpoint to his ironic prose aubade. Both poems open with a description of a bleak, lifeless landscape, but whereas Hardy’s poem ends with the hope of rebirth (symbolized by the spontaneous, inexplicably joyous singing of the thrush), Sassoon’s bird singing “beyond the splintered tree-tops of Hidden Wood,” like Rosenberg’s larks, offers no such hope. (Sassoon’s bird may very well be a lark, since three pages earlier Sherston had remarked, “Now and again a leisurely five-nine shell passes overhead in the blue air where the larks are singing” [307].) Nature provides no consolation, and, as in “Dover Beach,” neither does Christianity. Although it is Easter Sunday, Sherston finds no hope in Christ’s Resurrection. Just a few pages earlier he had remarked that in war “the principles of Christianity were either obliterated or falsified for the convenience of all who were engaged in it” (304). The approaching spring, which “arrived late that year”

(310), brings not rebirth and renewal, only a spring offensive in which thousands will die. The only comfort arises not from the future, but from the past, from the remembrance of things past, from the memory of the lost pastoral world of Aunt Evelyn, Tom Dixon (who is now dead), and John Homeward, the carter:

That twilight, with its thawing snow, made a comfortable picture now. John Homeward had come past with his van, plodding beside his weary horse. [...] He had pulled up for a few minutes, and we'd talked about Dixon, who had been such an old friend of his. [...] He had said good-bye and good-night and set his horse going again. As he turned the corner the past seemed to go with him.... (312)

The tone of the passage is distinctly elegiac. *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* is an elegy mourning the loss of an era that came to an end with the Great War. And so Sassoon appropriately echoes what was, at the time, probably the best known and most quoted elegy in English literature, Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," a precursor of the Romantic lyric genre that both Hardy's poem and Sassoon's prose poem belong to. (One of the reasons Gray's late-Augustan meditation on mortality was so popular throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century was that it could be easily assimilated into the conventions of the Romantic lyric.) The passage I just quoted echoes the opening stanza of the "Elegy":

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.¹¹

We read the words "John Homeward [...] plodding beside his weary horse" (313) and, if we are readers in 1928, Gray's memorable (and perhaps memorized) lines reverberate subliminally in our minds.

Generically, the ending of *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* is a hybrid of elegy, aubade and trench lyric. If printed separately, say in an *Oxford Book of WWI Poetry*, the ending might be called "Elegiac Lines Composed Near Contalmaison, Easter Sunday, 1915," recalling all those Romantic and Victorian poems entitled "Lines Composed ..." and "Stanzas Written in ...", followed by a location and date. The last two paragraphs are a tissue of allusions, and thus a confirmation that, as Scholes' "textual theoreticians" never tire of reminding us, all texts are inter-texts. The passage's intertextuality shows that Sassoon cannot write an account of his

war experience simply by representing that experience directly. The only way he can write about it is by imitating an antecedent genre, or in this case genres, that provide the literary form required to turn his raw, unmediated experience of the war into literature. “Poems are not made out of experience,” says David Lodge, “they are made out of poetry—that is, the tradition of disposing the possibilities of language to poetic ends—modified, to be sure, by the particular experience of the individual poet, but in no straightforward sense an expression of it.”¹² The ending of *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* demonstrates that, as Paul Fussell points out in his book on Samuel Johnson,

Every piece of writing which strikes readers as successful is the realization of a paradigm. When we say that a piece of writing is bad, one of the things we mean is that it has imitated unsuccessfully the archetype we perceive it is trying to resemble. Another way of putting it is to say that every new work—it will be well to abandon the propaganda word original—is a virtual translation into local terms of a pre-existing model.¹³

Sassoon, like Rosenberg, does not abandon a set of worn-out poetic conventions so he can write directly and realistically, and hence originally, about it. Rather he translates a pre-existing model into local terms.¹⁴ Even literary memoirists, who are expected to respect the facts, can only be as realistic as the artificial literary conventions available to them will allow them to be. Writers write realistically not by directly “telling it like it is,” but by telling it like it’s told in literature. They must, as Northrop Frye told us half a century ago, find, or adapt, a set of literary conventions, and out of this old paradigm create a new literary form.

Notes

1. The standard view of the emergence of the trench lyric is that Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, and Siegfried Sassoon wrote their best poems only when they abandoned the “poetic,” conventional, Georgian style of Rupert Brooke and Julian Grenfell, and started to write realistically, and hence truthfully, about the war. “It has become a critical commonplace,” says Ted Bogacz in “A Tyranny of Words’: Language, Poetry, and Antimodernism in England in the First World War,” “to say that such famous war poets as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon were able to encompass the realities of modern warfare in their verse only after they had rejected [the] inflated language” of their early poems (*Journal of Modern History* 58.3 [Sept. 1986], p.644.)
2. See my “Perpetuating the Language’: Romantic Tradition, the Genre Function, and the Origins of the Trench Lyric,” in *Journal of Modern Literature* 30.1 (Fall 2006): 104-28.

3. Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 312. All subsequent page references are included parenthetically in the text.
4. Paul Moeyes, *Siegfried Sassoon: Scorched Glory* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), p. 165.
5. Thomas Hardy, "The Darkling Thrush." In M. H. Abrams, ed. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Vol. 2, 5th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), pp. 1743-44.
6. Moeyes, p. 165.
7. Arnold's "Lines Composed in Kensington Garden," though set in London, is a mid-century example. Hopkins's "The Windhover" and D. H. Lawrence's "Snake" are modern instances. Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" and Robert Frost's "Desert Places" and "Design" are American contributions to the form. The most conspicuous postmodern instance is perhaps A. A. Ammons' "Corsons Inlet," which opens (alluding to the first line of "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud"), "I went for a walk over the dunes again this morning."
8. Abrams, M. H. "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric." In his *The Correspondent Breeze: Essays on English Romanticism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), p. 77.
9. Rosenberg, Isaac. "Break of Day in the Trenches" and "Returning, We Hear the Larks." In *Up the Line to Death: The War Poets 1914-1918*. Ed. Brian Gardner (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1964), pp. 104 & 105-06.
10. Matt Simpson, "Only a Living Thing—Some Notes Towards a Reading of Isaac Rosenberg's 'Break of Day in the Trenches.'" *Critical Survey* 2.2 (1990): 128-36.
11. Thomas Gray, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard." In M. H. Abrams, ed. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Vol. 1, 5th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), p. 2444.
12. David Lodge, "Modernism, Antimodernism and Postmodernism." In his *Working with Structuralism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 5.
13. Paul Fussell, *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Writing* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), p. 113.
14. In search of a model for his war poetry, Sassoon rejected the Romantic lyric and turned to the earlier Augustan tradition of satire, epigram and didactic verse. A notable exception is "Spring Offensive," in which the structure of the trench lyric is clearly discernible.

NILS CLAUSSON has taught at the University of Regina since 1984. He has published articles on Benjamin Disraeli, D. H. Lawrence, Oscar Wilde, H. G. Wells, Wilfred Owen, G. K. Chesterton, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Susan Glaspell. He is completing a book on Arthur Conan Doyle.