

## Silkin: Sassoon and the Imagery of Loss

Jon Silkin's "Death of a Son"<sup>1</sup> is a strangely moving poem which has attracted critical comment. John Berryman, for instance, speaking of poets who, faced with the 'terror' of their poetic vision, have, like Coleridge, given up 'original poetical composition ... because he was unable to bear it,' gone mad or committed suicide, asserts:

One poem does not edge into the terror but starts there and stays there: Jon Silkin's "Death of a Son"... it is as brave, and harrowing, as one might think a piece could be.<sup>2</sup>

Merle E. Brown, however, rejects the reading implied by this context of bleakness and despair (or 'incipient, suicidal madness, ... a harrowing stare into the heart of darkness')<sup>3</sup> in which Berryman places his comments on the poem and rightly stresses instead its 'thoroughly human' nature in terms of the working out of the father's 'loving attention' to his son. Both admit the powerful appeal of the poem; but neither locates that appeal where it surely resides, in the strange but evocative quality of the imagery.

Brown makes his nearest approach to an examination of the imagery by quoting the sixth and seventh stanzas which, in his words, contain 'abstract elements':

I have seen stones: I have seen brick  
But this house was made up of neither bricks nor  
stone  
But a house of flesh and blood  
With flesh of stone

And bricks for blood. A house  
Of stones and blood in breathing silence ...

In 'the evocation of the mystery of the relation of body to soul,' he sees an echoing of the first stanza of Marvell's "A Dialogue between the Soul and Body."

O who shall from this dungeon raise  
A soul, enslaved so many ways?  
With bolts of bones, that fettered stands  
In feet: and manacled in hands.  
Here blinded with an eye; and there  
Deaf with the drumming of an ear.  
A soul hung up, as 'twere, in chains  
Of nerves, and arteries, and veins.  
Tortured, besides each other part,  
In a vain head, and double heart.<sup>4</sup>

The sustained metaphor which makes up the poem is not, however, as in Marvell's poem, that of physical being as a

prison of the soul. Indeed, the two poems are very different in their imagery as well as in their central meaning. What, however, Silkin's poem does call to mind is the literature of loss in his own century, which has, perhaps, more than anything else, shaped our images of premature death, that of the First World War.

Specifically, "Death of a Son" is reminiscent of Sassoon's imagery in "The Last Meeting,"<sup>5</sup> the poem he wrote in May 1916 after the death of his friend David Thomas. Both poets concern themselves with the question of communication where it seems impossible. Silkin seeks communion with the child whose year of existence has been that of death-in-life, Sassoon with the recently dead Thomas.

Sassoon's prose work attests his feeling for Thomas; "The Last Meeting" is an attempt to hold on to something of the dead man in memory:

I thought, I will go up the hill once more  
To find the face of him that I have lost,  
And speak with him before his ghost has flown  
Far from the earth that might not keep him long.

The poem then charts the attempt to 'find' Thomas as the poet goes on as a physical journey through and beyond the abodes of the living towards the solitude of nature where he hopes to feel again the presence of the dead. This journey brings home to him the attraction of the living whose lives are not taken over by the war and its dead, and the sight of the people who 'Loitered about their doorways well-content,' temporarily, turns his step aside in response to the attractions of life and the living in the person and habitat of the miller whose existence is the opposite of the experience of the death of youth who is at the heart of the poem:

He was old.  
His days went round with the unhurrying wheel.

This is a pleasant picture for Sassoon, the English lover of country scenes and country ways, but it is made bitter-sweet by the implied contrast with the fate of his friend whom the earth might not long 'keep.' This bitter-sweet element is underlined in the fullness of life viewed in the inhabited houses where even the soldier is safe, home from the war and reintegrated in the community of the living:

Moving along the street, each side I saw  
The humble, kindly folk in lamp-lit rooms;  
Children at table; simple homely wives;  
Strong grizzled men; and soldiers back from war.  
Scaring the gaping elders with loud talk.

By contrast, the poet's path in search of the dead, 'goes to the big empty house' that has no lights or sound of

.....bustling life,  
And mirth and scolding;...

like those below. This house is

.....a ghostly hulk

As builders left in when quick-shattering war  
Leapt upon France and called her men to fight.

Its unfinished state becomes one with the dead youth whose uncompleted life is part of the wreckage of war. The pun on 'quick' in the line quoted above is typical of the sort of verbal precision and economy which one notices in some of the unexpected juxtapositions in Sassoon's satiric poems. Within the house there is no recognizable order or normality so that the seeker 'stumbled':

The dusty floors were strewn  
With cumbering piles of planks and props and beams;  
and he can find no possible communication there:  
I called him, once, then listened: nothing moved:

Quite empty was that house; it could not hold  
His human ghost, remembered in the love  
That strove in vain to be companioned still.

In part two of the poem, which consciously evokes stanzas XLII and XLIII of Shelley's "Adonais," Sassoon envisages himself going out of the building into the woods where he imagines his dead friend present, not in the unfinished house, but as a presence in the natural world that speaks to him in high-flown, romantic rhetoric reminiscent of the poet's earlier style. The man who, in 1915, could finish "To My Brother" with the assurance "But in the gloom I see your laurell'd head And through your victory I shall win the light" has had, in the intervening four or five months, sufficient experience of the speed with which, in war, the dead are wiped out of the memory of the living for him to be cautious of his earlier emotionalism and in Part Two here all the lyricism of the dead Thomas's imagined speech is somberly undercut in the last line by the phrase 'sundering sleep.' Part III of the poem accepts that although the dead may possibly have an existence, it is not one with which the living may have any communication:

Though his hushed voice may call me in the stir  
Of whispering trees, I shall not understand.  
Men may not speak with stillness; ...  
and all their thoughts  
Can win no meaning from the talk of birds

This accepted, the poet is reconciled. When he does envisage his dead friend in the beauty of the natural world, it will be because his 'heart is fooled with fancies, being wise;' thus, the dead youth will be given a positive life as part of the poet's consciousness to be conjured up in moments of beauty:

Thus when I find new loveliness to praise,  
And things long-known shine out in sudden grace,  
Then will I think: "He moves before me now."  
So he will never come but in delight.

In sum, the poet's search has led him past the warmly lit houses of the living through the house whose empty and disordered state symbolizes his dead friend's disrupted existence and beyond to the sanctuary of the woods, the realm of the poetic imagination in which the dead may, temporarily, live and a limited consolation may be found.

Silkin's poem also begins after an untimely death but one that is not mourned in the same way as that of David Thomas. Here the death is that of a son, but of a son with whom communication was never possible. The one-year-old life has left an impression that is presented in language suggestive of the poet's mind groping through pain and confusion for understanding, attempting to state precisely the experience and the feeling it aroused: 'Something has ceased to come along with me.' The first stanza deliberately rejects the sort of sentimental idealizing of the recent dead that is such a feature of Part Two of Sassoon's poem: "And there was no nobility in it Or anything like that" while its language, like the 'red as wound' of the final stanza, glancingly suggests the background of Sassoon's poem, that communal experience of a war in which, despite poetic attempts to ennoble death in battle, had repeatedly shown the dead to be simply 'cannon fodder.' Emotionalism, first indulged in, then rejected by Sassoon, is not given entrance here as Silkin seeks elucidation of the enigma of the one-year-old life with its barrier of silence. It is the imagery through which that search operates, not the emotion, that is so reminiscent of Sassoon.

Here the extended metaphor is of a house, not uncompleted, but so new as almost to seem so by contrast with the other, lived-in dwellings:

Something was there like a one year  
Old house, dumb as stone. While the near  
buildings  
Sang like birds and laughed  
Understanding the pact  
They were to have with silence.

Something of the brooding, still and mysterious atmosphere of Sassoon's unfinished house is to be found in the following stanzas that attempt to define the quality unique to the child's situation:

But rather, like a house in mourning  
Kept the eye turned in to watch the silence while  
The other houses like birds  
Sang around him.

And the breathing silence neither  
Moved nor was still.

As in Sassoon's poem, there seems a possibility of breaking through the barrier; death's approach seems to offer a significance to the silence:

This was something else, this was  
Hearing and speaking though he was a house drawn  
Into silence, this was  
Something religious in his silence.

Something shining in his quiet,  
This was different this was altogether something else:  
Though he never spoke, this  
Was something to do with death.

Of course, the breakthrough does not occur although the poet (as Sassoon had done in part two of "The Last Meeting") experiences the intense excitement of the moment when it seems possible, when

The look turned to the outer place and stopped,  
With the birds still shrilling around him.  
And as if he could speak

He turned over on his side with his one year  
Red as a wound  
He turned over as if he could be sorry for this  
And out of his eyes two great tears rolled, like stones,  
and he died.

The calm, deliberative tone of the poem's opening and the patiently built-up impersonal imagery allow the intensity of the desire and need at this point to strike the reader with their full force. That intensity is emphasized by the contrasting image of the other buildings, reminiscent of the warm domesticity of the dwellings in part one of Sassoon's poem. These are seen in the first half of "Death of a Son" as capable of meaningful communication ('Sang,' 'laughed'), but are now seen as performing no recognizable speech act. The rapt expectation with which the poet watches that repeated 'something' he seeks to understand in his son's silent approach to death makes other, normally meaningful communication, meaningless. What had 'laughed' and 'sang', "Understanding the pact They were to have with silence", now only sounds 'crazy' and 'shrilling.' As, in "The Last Meeting," Sassoon recognizes that men 'Can win no meaning from the talk of birds' just as they '...may not speak with stillness', so Silkin finds no communication

possible either with 'The silence (that) rose and became still' or, at this point, with 'the birds still shrilling around him' for that matter. He is alone before the mystery of his son's existence and death.

Both poems, then, deal with a basic human emotional experience and desire. Each begins in a quiet, confidential voice and rises to a pitch of emotional intensity that impresses as more genuine, less self-indulgent, in Silkin's case. Sassoon, of course, implicitly recognizes the self-indulgence and reigns in his emotionalism in the final section and his brief acceptance ('Men may not speak with stillness') expresses the burden of both poems. Silkin's sparse style, his worrying out of the mystery of his son's brief life and his death, have no room for the extravagant lyricism of Part Two of "The Last Meeting"; but his choice and use of the imagery of houses and birds, and the experience of silence where communication is ardently desired, are similar to those used by Sassoon to establish the situation and feeling in that poem.

In his diary entry for Easter Sunday, April 23, 1916, Sassoon, in describing events after his friend's death, speaks of seeing a civilian population 'well away from the danger-zone...soldiers contented and at rest—it was like coming back to life, warm and secure.' He adds, 'I climbed the hill and gazed across the town. ...I turned along a grassy, tree-guarded track that led to where a half-finished house stood, red and white, overlooking the town, with a lovely wood behind it'.<sup>6</sup> It would seem likely that the very concrete image used in "The Last Meeting" owes its origin to this building noted in the prose. Silkin, at a reading of his work<sup>7</sup>, told his audience that "Death of a Son" had been written immediately after his return from the hospital when his son died. Conscious and deliberate borrowing would not, therefore, seem very likely and his use of images so central to Sassoon's usage would seem to argue an unconscious assimilation of elements from the earlier poet. When, a number of years later, he published *Out of Battle*,<sup>8</sup> his critical work on the literature of the First World War, what Merle E. Brown calls his 'ideological commitment'<sup>9</sup> is evident, and his comments on "The Last Meeting" suggest an unsympathetic reading of Sassoon's attempts as 'imaginative realization'<sup>10</sup> of a strongly felt personal desire, so much in fact that he ignores Sassoon's own recognition of the limitations of that attempt, and compares the poem unfavourably with Shelley's "Adonais" without recognizing its true relation to that poem. Sassoon is criticized, in effect, for failing to make "The Last Meeting" an overtly anti-war poem:

He fails to show, or even recognize—as Owen did in 'À Terre'—that death in war is different from death through disease or age, ...Sassoon frequently fixed single targets in his sights, but forgets that his own responses to these targets, as well as the targets themselves, are incorporated into the poem, and that

therefore his own responses need to be more deliberately a part of the poem.<sup>11</sup>

As a critic Silkin has nothing to say of the earlier poet's use of the image of the unfinished house. Silkin the poet, it would appear, responds to "The Last Meeting" at a different, creative level. He too 'fixes' his subject; but his own individual and highly unusual use of the two images Sassoon had used, together with those phrases 'no nobility in it' and 'red as a wound,' suggest a creative faculty working on more

than one level. It incorporates into this moving and most honest-sounding poem of private experience a sense of the poetic mind working within a wider frame of reference in which wounds, lack of nobility and attempts to grapple with personal loss from premature death are all part of previous human experience. The result is a poem, not 'harrowing' in Berryman's sense, but moving in the humanity with which it depicts a painful experience and one which leaves an impression of a sensibility enriched by that experience.

## Notes

1. *The Peaceable Kingdom* (1954: rept. Herron Press, 1975), p. 26.
2. On Robert Lowell's "Skunk Hour," in *Issues in Contemporary Literary Criticism* ed. G.T. Pollete, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), p. 293.
3. *Double Lyric: Divisiveness and Communal Creativity in Recent English Poetry* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 101.
4. *The Complete Poems* ed. E. Story Donno (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p.p. 103-4.
5. *War Poems* ed. R. Hart-Davis (London: Faber & Faber, 1983), p.p. 31-35. All quotations from the poems are from this edition.
6. *Diaries: 1915-1918* ed. R. Hart-Davis (London: Faber & Faber, 1983), p.p. 57-58.
7. At the New University of Ulster.
8. *Out of Battle*, Oxford University Press, 1972
9. *Double Lyric*, p. 93.
10. *Ibid.* p.93.
11. *Out of Battle*, p. 145.

Kathleen Devine  
University of Ulster  
Coleraine, Co. Derry  
N. Ireland