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Sidney Keyes: *The War-Poet Who 'Groped For Death'*

If the Second World War (1939-45) was marked by the unforeseen annihilation of human beings—with approximately 60 million military and civilian deaths (Mercatante 3)—the second global belligerence was also marked by an unforeseen scarcity in literary commemoration of the all-destructive belligerence. Unlike the First World War (1914-18) memories of which were recorded mellifluously by numerous efficient poets from both the sides of the *Triple Entente* and *Central Powers*, the period of the Second World War witnessed so limited a publication of war-writing in its early stages that the Anglo-Irish litterateur Cecil Day-Lewis (1904-72), then working as a publications-editor at the English Ministry of Information, was galvanised into publishing "Where are the War Poets?" in *Penguin New Writing* of February 1941, exasperatedly writing: 'They who in folly or mere greed / Enslaved religion, markets, laws, / Borrow our language now and bid / Us to speak up in freedom's cause. / It is the logic of our times, / No subject for immortal verse—/ That we who lived by honest dreams / Defend the bad against the worse'.

Significantly, while millions of Europeans and Americans enthusiastically enlisted themselves to serve in the Great War and its leaders were principally motivated by the ideas of patriotism, courage, and ancient chivalric codes of conduct, the 1939-45 combat occurred amidst the selfishness of politicians, confusing international politics, and, as William Shirer notes, by unsubstantiated feelings of defeatism among world powers like England and France, who could have deterred the offensive Nazis at the very onset of hostilities (795-813). The *Anschluss* (1938), *Munich Agreement* (end-September 1938), and *Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact*

(August 1939) had effectively deleted words like 'dependability' and 'accountability' from the lexicon of international politics, and the 'greed' of world leaders became only too obtrusive. While the Nazis and Fascists were uninterruptedly 'enslaving' laws and beliefs of the people of countries they annexed, the 'bad' politicians and military commanders of England, France, Russia, Canada, and the United States of America felt helpless or remained strategically withdrawn. Fortunately, in spite of such volatile scenario, both Britain and Germany had a few war-depicting-litterateurs, especially John Pudney (1909-77), Alun Lewis (1915-44), Keith Douglas (1920-44), and Sidney Keyes (1922-43) in England, and Peter Huchel (1903-81), Günter Eich (1907-72), Johannes Bobrowski (1917-65), Heinrich Böll (1917-85) and Günter Grass (b. 1927) in Germany. Adam Piette, however, refuses to attach much importance to the perceptible dearth of Second World War English writings, writing instead,

> "The Second World War is now recognised as a watershed for British poetry, breaking the dominance of high modernist orthodoxies (signalled by the death of Yeats), transforming the openly political poetics of the Auden group into a war poetry of symptom and reportage (inaugurated by the immigration of Auden and Isherwood to the U.S.A.), releasing a contained and self-censored British surrealism in the form of the New Apocalypse, and seeing the redefinition of formal genres such as the religious ode, sonnet sequence, elegy, and ballad within a range of new registers, from Rilkean-Jungian (Sidney Keyes) to psychoanalytic-demotic (G.S. Fraser) (*The Cambridge…Second World War* 13).

Samuel Hynes even refuses to accept the fact that unlike the First World War, the 1939-45 belligerence did not 'inspire a lot of very interesting poetry'; reviewing *The Collected Poems of Sidney Keyes*, whose expanded edition was published in 1988, he writes that war poetry was easier to write during the second global belligerence than during the Great War because Keyes and his compatriots contributed to a subgenre already developed by Owen, Rosenberg, and Gurney (296). Of the 'major' Second World War English poets—if the term 'major' could be applied for a list so paltry at all—Keyes is the youngest and died the earliest: less than a month to his twenty-first birthday. Often compared to Douglas for his conception of poetry, employment of startling imagery, daring attitude, desert-fighting-experiences, unreciprocated love for 'exotic' girls (Douglas loved the Chinese 'Yingcheng' Betty Sze and Antoinette while Keyes sought the German Cosman and Renée-Jane Scott), and early death in valorous action, Keyes wrote approximately one hundred and

ten poems during his service-days (his poems written after his frontline-posting to Tunisia could not be collected) which were later collected in *The Collected Poems of Sidney Keyes*, edited by Michael L. Meyer, and published by *Routledge* in 1945. The Manchester-based *Carcanet Press* brought out an edition of his collected poems in 2002, introducing the anthology as:

> "[i]ncluding a wide variety of poems and dramatic monologues, this collection of Sidney Keyes's work demonstrates the poet's mastery of literature. Keyes was considered by some to be a prodigy, writing strikingly even before his undergraduate years at Oxford. His work illustrates his fusion of Romanticism and Continental style derived from his interest in such artists as [Rainer Maria] Rilke, [William] Wordsworth, [William Butler] Yeats, [Johann Christoph Friedrich von] Schiller, and [Paul] Klee. His unique, macabre, pastoral landscapes wildly separate him from his contemporaries"[1].

Until 1943, two of Keyes's poetry-collections were released internationally. Both *The Iron Laurel* (1942) and *The Cruel Solstice* (1943) were published by *Routledge*. Carter and McRae write, "There were two collections of the poems of Sidney Keyes: *The Iron Laurel* (1942) and the posthumous *The Cruel Solstice* (1943). His elegiac tone expresses regret rather than anger. Keyes's *Collected Poems* appeared in 1945" (385). *The Cruel Solstice* was awarded the *Hawthornden Prize* in 1943. Along with Meyer, Keyes also edited *Eight Oxford Poets* (1941) in which were included the early poems by Keith Douglas (1920-44), Gordon Swaine, John Heath-Stubbs (1918-2006), Meyer (1921-2000), Roy Porter, Drummond Allison (1921-43), J.A. Shaw, and Keyes. In the 'Foreword' to the collection Keyes mentions that all the poems "have been written since the beginning of the present [Second World] [W] ar, mainly at Oxford", and that "in technique, there is also some similarity between [...] [the writers]; [...] [they] are all, with the possible exception of Shaw, *Romantic* writers [...] [with] little sympathy with the Audenian school of poets" (*Eight* vii). He concludes by adding,

> "We are now widely scattered; one is serving in the Near East, and three in this country, while four remain at Oxford.[...] The selections have been arranged in a roughly chronological order, from Douglas, who went down in June 1940, to myself, the latest recruit to the group" (viii).

Among the eight poets, Allison, an intelligence officer in the English *East Surrey Regiment*, participated in the *North African Campaign*, much like Douglas, and was killed in action near Minturno, south-western Italy, on 2 December 1943, seven months after his editor Keyes's own death. Arguably the greatest English soldier-poet of the Second World War, Keith Douglas participated in the *Western Desert Campaign* (1940-43) and was killed on 9 June 1944, three days after the beginning of the Allied armies' invasion of Normandy, France. Simon Jenner informs that Keyes's exclusion of Philip Larkin (1922-85), who was also an Oxford student when Keyes was editing *Eight Oxford Poets* was galvanised into a resentful opposition to Keyes because of his omission:

> "On or about 2 November 1941, British poetry changed. [...] *Eight Oxford Poets*, edited by rising Oxford poet Sidney Keyes, went to press without Philip Larkin. It began a feud with the posthumous Keyes lasting forty years and fissuring the perception of a whole poetic decade. Keyes's neo-romantic stance fuelled his antipathy to the then Audenesque Larkin. It also made him highly influential, so particularly reviled. Writing to Robert Conquest on the latter's prospective inauguration of *New Lines* and *Movement*, Larkin was fuelled by—in 1955—revenge on 'our Sidney'. Larkin's animus against Keyes enshrined the Forties for him. It fuelled Larkin's bid at recognition in another decade, that might underwrite his existence"[2].

Before reading Keyes's poems, it is necessary to pay attention to the socio-literary group he belonged, other than being self-classified as an 'Oxford Poet'. Importantly, Philippa Lyon has used the phrase 'the slightly less well-known Keyes' while referring to the poet (*Twentieth* 147). Truly, though Keyes enjoys reputation as a 'Second World War English soldier-poet' in Britain, and, perhaps, in Canada and Australia, he is not as famous as his two other 1939-45 contemporaries: Lewis and Douglas. In India and many other countries of the Commonwealth, he is virtually unknown, much like the sub-genre of 'Second World War poetry' itself, though Lewis is sometimes discussed for his association with southern India. Keyes is what can be referred to as a 'Salamander' or 'Oasis' poet', his poems having had been included in publications of the *Salamander Oasis Trust*. Kenneth Baker writes, "Some of the most interesting poetry of the Second World War, which has been splendidly preserved and published by the *Salamander Oasis Trust*, was written by men and women who had had no especially privileged upbringing, but who, finding

themselves caught up in the great drama of war, discovered, perhaps for the only time in their lives, the gift of poetry as a means of recording their experiences and voicing their emotions" (*The Faber Book* xxiv). As the website of the *Trust* records:

> "The *Oasis poets* came together in Cairo during the Second World War, and published their first selection of wartime poetry there in 1943. Whereas most of the poetry of the First World War was written on the Western Front in France and Flanders—the great majority of it by officers—it was the desert war in North Africa that first inspired many of the poets of the Second World War. Later the poetry of the Second World War would be written in battle areas all over the world from El Alamein to Burma, and from the beaches of Normandy to the islands of the Pacific. It was written by men holding every kind of rank in the three services, many of whom had never written a word in their lives before. [...] After the war, the *Salamander Oasis Trust* was set up to collect, edit, and publish not only the original *Cairo poems* but selections from all the other poetry written during the Second World War. The one requirement was that it had all been written at the time or soon after by people serving in the Forces between 1939-45 or, in the case of the Balkans, 1946"[3].

Keyes 'qualified' for all the criteria necessary for inclusion in the *Trust*'s publications. He was an English lieutenant of the *Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment*. He had participated in the 1939-45 global combat and wrote excellent poetry. He had experiences of desert fighting, and though he was not a 'Cairo poet', he fought in northern Africa during the *Tunisia Campaign* (17 November 1942-13 May 1943), and as Rawlinson writes, writings of such soldier-poets participating in actions at deserts often demonstrate 'isolation and marginality' (115). Other 'Salamander' or 'Oasis' writers included Alan Rook, Terence I.F. Armstrong (1912-70), George S. Fraser (1915-80), and John S. Waller (1917-95). The other literary group of North African English soldier-litterateurs was the 'Personal Landscape' group, arguably more intellectually active and mellifluous than the 'Salamander'-group of war-writers. Other than Keith Douglas, this literary congregation included Henry R.R. Fedden (1908-77), Charles B. Spencer (1909-63), and Lawrence G. Durrell (1912-90). Included in the Fedden-edited *Personal Landscape: An Anthology of Exile* (London: Editions Poetry, 1945) were Douglas, Durrell, Harold Edwards, Fedden, Fraser, Diana Gould, Charles Hepburn, Robert Liddell (1908-92), Olivia Manning (1908-

80), Elie Papadimitriou, Hugh Gordon Porteus (1906-93), Geōrgios Seferiádēs (1900-71), Ruth Speirs (d. 2000), Spencer, Terence R. Tiller (1916-87), and David G. Williams (1904-90). Keyes, understandably, was not included.

While suggesting the 'minor'-status of Keyes in comparison to Lewis—though the former's poems appeared in *Poetry* (London), *The New Statesman*, *Horizon*, and *The Listener*, and appreciated—Dickey writes, "He was just beginning to [write excellent poetry] when he was killed" (260). Keyes's life was indeed short but adventurous. Sidney Arthur Kilworth Keyes was born on 27 May 1922 at Dartford, Kent, twenty-six kilometres south-east of London, to Captain Reginald Keyes, a British-Indian Army-officer, and his wife who died in July 1922 because of inflammation of coelom. Reginald Keyes chose to live with his own parents and the motherless Sidney Keyes was brought up by his paternal grandfather, Sidney K. Keyes, to whom he would, in July 1938, address an eighteen-line "Elegy", concluding with 'A year again, and we have fallen on bad times/ Since they gave you to the worms. / I am ashamed to take delight in these rhymes/ Without grief; but you need no tears. / We shall never forget nor escape you, nor make terms/ With your enemies, the swift departing years' (l. 13-18). In 1931, the precocious Keyes was admitted to *Dartford Grammar School*, and in 1935, to *Tonbridge School* of Kent, where his literary talent was recognised by his history teacher and poet Thomas Staveley. Staveley encouraged his young student to compose more that forty poems by 1940—the year he left Tonbridge—and later reminisced that Keyes 'had that rare hallmark of poetic genius, his capacity to hit the ear and eye at once with the impact of a single image'[4]. The budding poet thereafter studied History at the Queen's College, Oxford. According to Meyer, as an Oxford student Keyes, who also edited the university-newspaper *The Cherwell* and formed a dramatic society, avidly read the works of William Blake (1757-1827), Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller (1759-1805), Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843), William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), and René Karl Wilhelm Johann Josef Maria Rilke (that is, Rainer Maria Rilke, 1875-1926), at least three of whom were either Germans or wrote in the Prussian tongue (Keyes xiii). In her brief biography of Keyes, Milein Cosman (b. 1921), with whom Keyes was involved in an unreciprocated relationship, writes,

> "Sidney's involvement with German literature—Schiller, Hölderlin, Heine, Rilke, Kafka—I found very endearing: they were, however remotely, part of my early life, my native language. It was a wonder to meet those poets again in the light of Sidney's enthusiasm and in England at war (had one not heard of German composers banned here during the

> First World War?) [....] He loved going to the cinema, and those silent or semi-so German pre-Hitler films made a huge impression. 'Holstenwall' was written under the influence of seeing [the 1920 German silent horror film] *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari*. If only he had lived, might he not have involved himself in film-making, writing extraordinary scripts, a kind of cross between Cocteau and German Expressionism?"[5]

Most probably Keyes's love for Germany, its language and its literature was potentiated by his affair with the German artist Cosman, an year senior to him, who immigrated from Geneva to London in 1939, attended the *Slade School of Art* (temporarily relocated to *The Ashmolean Museum*, Oxford, during the Second World War), and in 1943 was an Oxford-based polytechnic student. During the tumultuous relationship which lasted from May 1941 to July 1942 (and following which Cosman married the Austrian-English musician and writer Hans Keller, 1919-85), Keyes's addressed some stirring poems to Cosman, like the twelve-line "Not Chosen" (1942) and "North Sea", written in October 1942. "Not Chosen", one of the concluding Cosman-poems in John Guenther's assessment (116), ends with Keyes's awareness of the hopelessness of their affair: 'I am the watcher in the narrow lane—/ My tongue is schooled in every word of fear. / O take me back, but as you take remember / My love will bring you nothing but trouble, my dear' (l. 9-12). In "North Sea", which Guenther regards as Keyes's last poem before separation from Cosman (141), he writes about how Düsseldorf has brought about sorrow for Cosman because of her exile from her native town and thereafter for Keyes himself by bringing Cosman to his life: 'And eastward looking, eastward wondering/ I meet the eyes of Heine's ghost, who saw/ His failure in the grey forsaken waves/ At Rulenstein one autumn. And between/ Rises the shape in more than memory/ Of Düsseldorf, the ringing, river-enfolding/ City that brought such sorrow on us both' (l. 5-11). Though in love with Cosman, the future soldier-poet was a keen observer of defects in his beloved artist, satirising her propensity for being '[d]istracted by a pebble's size/ And every mountain's cringing littleness' in the comparatively-lengthy "The Mad Lady and the Proud Talker" (included in *The Iron Laurel*), whose sarcastic tone is observable from the beginning: ''Lady, we knew a mountain country rising/ To love's own passes, and your light feet spanned,/ Mocking, the pale crevasses of that land'' (l. 1-3). As Merliss writes, "'*The Mad Lady and the Proud Talker*', though inspired by [Robert] Graves's 'Rocky Acres', is typical in its Teatsian flavour of most of the *poems Keyes* wrote for Milein. The *poem* [...] [occurs as] a dialogue between the *poet* and his disdainful mistress [...]" (115). Because of

Cosman's steady refusal to love him, Keyes often compared her to a 'disdainful ladylove'.

While Cosman was introduced to Keyes at their mutual friend Mary Stanley-Smith's house by John Heath-Stubbs in Winter 1940, the soldier-poet met (his post-Cosman beloved) Renée-Jane Scott, another immigrated art-student, at Cosman's studio which Scott shared. His May 1942-poem of thirty-three-lines, "The Promised Landscape", is addressed to Scott: 'How shall I sing for you— / Sharing only / The scared dream of a soldier: / A young man's unbearable / Dream of possession? / How shall I sing for you / With the foul tongue of a soldier?' (l. 1-7). Robert Richman writes in his March 1990 *New Criterion* article,

> "The poem is dedicated to Renée-Jane Scott [...]. As in 'The Gardener', the dream of love the poem spells out remains just that, an unfulfilled dream. But here the force keeping the pair apart is not the reluctance of the object of Keyes's desire, as it is in 'The Gardener', but Keyes himself, who feels unworthy of Renée-Jane's affection. What 'The Gardener' and 'The Promised Landscape' reveal is a mind that was haunted, not with death [...] but with the promise of love and companionship. The truth is, however, that Keyes was unable to love anyone, and he made it extremely difficult for anyone to love him. One does not want to blame Keyes for this: his emotional handicaps are almost expected of someone so young. But understanding Keyes's emotional turmoil is important in understanding his poetry. Keyes apparently had impossibly high expectations of others—so high that after a few disappointments he would refuse to become enmeshed in the compromises and obligations that friendship and love demand. When he did find himself entangled, as he did with Milein, he pressed the other party to adapt entirely to his wishes. John Guenther [...] reports that Milein 'felt that [Keyes] was making her into a symbol and seeing in her all kinds of things he wished to be there'. In fact Keyes had cautioned Milein in the poem 'Not Chosen' that his 'love will bring you nothing but trouble, my dear'. The situation with Renée-Jane Scott was only slightly different. Following the ordeal with Milein, Keyes concluded that lovers were for him far too impulsive and unpredictable [...] for him ever to hope of abiding them. So he chose simply to distance himself from Renee-Jane. In a notebook entry from October of 1942, one month after he wrote 'The Promised Landscape', Keyes speculated whether 'it [would] be better [...] to stop [his relationship with Renee-

> Jane] now, to tell her that she is wasting her time and resources [with me], to refuse to talk about a different life, to withdraw?' And in a letter to Renee-Jane, Keyes declared that 'The thought of anyone becoming my wife seems slightly farcical, even to me. It will always be so. I am afraid it would be (for the woman) rather like being married to a stone or a tree, as I believe some kinds of Indian priestesses or Vestals are'"[6].

Keyes's problems with Cosman and Scott were ruefully reviewed in a 6 March 1943-letter to Heath-Stubbs where he wrote that his past life has had been "all quite worthwhile except for the sex part" (Guenther 164). While sending in July 1942 a copy of *The Iron Laurel* to Drummond Allison, he dejectedly wrote on the cover, 'Love is like gout; for both disease spread/ A kind of gloomy pomp about the bed'. After his 'official' separation from Cosman, he tired to "find some consolation with Renée, while acknowledging that Milein remained the most attractive person he had ever known. He wrote in his diary on 28 July [1942]: 'I am a damnably self-centred, irresponsible, and often cruel man. But Renée can cure me, if she will'" (*British Poets* 437). However, even before Scott could 'cure' him, his military duties necessitated his presence in northern Africa where he was to die within less than a year. "Remember your Lovers", originally written inside an examination hall in end-1940 on the theme of women bereaved in wartime, could not have found better substantiation as in Keyes's mental condition in 1942-43: 'When truth came prying like a surgeon's knife/ Among the delicate movements of your brain/ We called your spirit from its narrow den / And kissed your courage back to meet the blade—/ Our anaesthetic beauty saved you then. / Young men whose sickness death has cured at last / Remember your lovers and covet their disease' (l. 10-16). Scott-Kilvert *et al*. comment, "[T]he few poems he wrote on the theme of love are either nostalgic or uneasy. He contemplated resignation and death more steadily than love" (*British Poets* 439).

Importantly, unlike Douglas and almost similar to Lewis, Keyes did not witness or participate in head-on military engagements for a considerable period of time. It may be mentioned here that Rawlinson has taken a dig at Lewis for 'never seeing combat' in his *British Writing of the Second World War* (127). Keyes left Oxford without completing his history studies on 8 April 1942 and joined the English army at Omagh, County Tyrone, in Northern Ireland to briefly train at the *Infantry Training Centre*. In April 1942 he also wrote two poems, "Ulster Soldier" and "The True Heart". "Ulster Soldier", a poem of twenty-three lines, is a psychological reviewing of the poet's mind in a European milieu ravaged by war, and concludes

with: 'The wind cries through the valley. Clouds sprawl over / This exiled soldier, sprawling on his bed. / Sleep takes the bartered carcass, not the brain, / It's only love could save him from his mind' (l. 20-23). "The True Heart" is a related poem in which the future soldier-poet focuses on his own sadness and hopes for its ending through various images: 'Guarded from love and wreck and turbulence/ The sad explorer finds security/ From all distraction but the thin lament/ Of broken shells remembering the sea' (l. 9-12). On 8 May 1942 Keyes was shifted to the *Officer Cadet Training Unit* at Dunbar, forty-five kilometres east of Edinburgh, where he met and was appreciated by Edmund Blunden (1896-1974), who had first recognised the literary excellence of Douglas, his former student at Merton College, Oxford. While preparing himself to serve in Europe which had already been engulfed by a truly global war, Keyes wrote "Dunbar, 1650" in a reference to the *Battle of Dunbar* (3 September 1650 Saturday) in which the *English Parliamentarian* forces under Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658) decisively defeated the *Scottish Covenanters* under David Lesley (c. 1600-82): 'Crossing the little river/ Their pikes jostled and rang./ The ditches were full of dead./ A blackbird sang.// The southern terrible squire/ Rode them down in the marsh./ The preachers scattered like crows—/ The name of the day was WRATH' (l. 9-16). Whether it was Keyes's resentment at militarism or his imperialistic awareness at work during his composition of the poem it is difficult to perceive, but "Dunbar, 1650" is one of the more frequently anthologised of his poems, other than his most famous 12-line "War Poet", written in March 1942: 'I am the man who looked for peace and found / My own eyes barbed. / I am the man who groped for words and found / An arrow in my hand. / I am the builder whose firm walls surround / A slipping land. / When I grow sick or mad / Mock me not nor chain me; / When I reach for the wind / Cast me not down / Though my face is a burnt book / And a wasted town'. Kendall writes that "'Dunbar, 1650' may be the work of a poet expecting the worst, but at least its specific incidents and temporal remoteness prevent an obvious equivalence to Keyes's own situation" (192). Scott-Kilvert *et al*. thus describe Keyes's writings and development between March and May 1942:

> "More than one commentator has found fault with Keyes for employing the image of an arrow rather than a *Bren gun* [in his 'War Poet']. One might as well censure William Blake for summoning a bow of burning gold, arrows of desire, a spear, chariots of fire, and a sword, on grounds that, in Blake's day, those weapons of war were obsolete. A poet works through

> images that kindle his imagination, whether they are contemporary or archaic. [....] 'Dunbar, 1650' [...] displays some of the characteristics of the Auden school, held in such disfavour by Keyes and his fellow poets at Oxford. Other good poems followed rapidly, displaying an assurance and a disciplined passion that he had hitherto seldom commanded. Two linked poems belong to August [1942], 'Dido's Lament for Aeneas' and 'Rome Remember'. Keyes wrote a number of dramatic monologues, none more rhythmically delicate and emotionally convincing than dido's speech before her death. [...] 'Rome Remember', whose title comes from the burden of a poem by John Lydgate, is even more impressive, a lament for Carthage and for the city that destroyed her and will in its turn be destroyed by the barbarians from the north: 'O Rome, you city of soldiers, remember the singers/ That cry with dead voices along the African shore' (l. 8-9). The blank verse is both firm and flexible, an instrument designed to encompass the entire range of emotions awakened by the theme of imperial triumph and decay" (*British Writers* 438).

After completing his military training, Keyes received commission as a lieutenant in the *Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment* in September 1942. By that time the Second World War had reached an even *more serious* stage, if such a thing is possible. Though the American and Australian forces successfully battled the Japanese at Guadalcanal, the Germans were steadily gaining strength in Europe and Africa. *Wehrmacht* personnel had surrounded the Russian city of Stalingrad and the Allied attack on Jalu, north-eastern Libya, had been repulsed. Even as German towns like Düsseldorf, Munich, and Saarbrücken were being heavily bombed by especially the *Royal Air Force* fighter-bombers, the German morale remained as strong as ever. In spite of the crucial state of war, Keyes's regiment was sent to Algiers as late as on 13 March 1943. The soldier-poet carried photographs of both Cosman and Scott during his voyage to northern Africa, writing to the latter on 27 March 1943 that he had recently dreamed of getting married to her. After a brief halt at Algiers, Keyes's battalion was ordered to Tunisia in the middle of April 1943. On the night 28-29 April, Keyes and *C Company* launched an attack on the road between Oued Zarga and Tunis, near Sidi Abdallah. At daybreak of 29 April, the lieutenant and his orderly Harold Smith were patrolling against the Germans on a hill-slope when they lost contact with their comrades. Perceptively killed in action or briefly imprisoned in a grievously-wounded state, Keyes and Smith remained untraced until their graves were found by the Allied *Army Graves Service* personnel

on 21 June 1943. The poet was later buried at the *Massicault War Cemetery* at Borj El Amri, Manouba, Tunisia. The poems he wrote during his fortnight of frontline service could not be recovered, and therefore, unlike Douglas's poems—including "How to Kill" (1943) and "Vergissmeinnicht" (1943)—written out of his experiences of direct confrontation at Tunisia, Keyes's war-poems were written in anticipation. Keyes as a poet is best analysed through rereading of poems written at Oxford.

Meyer writes that as an Oxford student Keyes turned to William Wordsworth (1770-1850), John Clare (1793-1864), Thomas Hardy (1840-1928), Vincent Van Gogh (1853-90), Alfred Edward Housman (1859-1936), and Edward Thomas (1878-1917) for his emotional sustenance, while his love for the macabre was exacerbated by his attraction for John Donne (1572-1631), John Webster (c. 1580-c. 1634), Francisco Goya (1746-1828), Thomas Lovell Beddoes (1803-49), Charles Dickens (1812-70), Paul Klee (1879-1940), Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), Georges Henri Rouault (1871-1958), and Henry Graham Greene (1904-91) (Keyes xiii). Keyes admitted his literary debt in a 1941-sonnet "William Wordsworth", reposing faith in the permanence of poetic reputation: 'He'll never fail nor die / And if they laid his bones / In the wet vaults or iron sarcophagi / Of fame, he'd rise at the first summer rain / And stride across the hills to seek/ His rest among the broken lands and clouds' (l. 5-10). His admiration of the Rilke is registered through his usage of lines from the Bohemian-Austrian poet's "The Sixth Duino Elegy" (1923) for writing the epigraph of his "The Foreign Gate", a poem of four hundred lines which he composed in February-March 1942. In "The Foreign Gate"—to which Adam Piette gives importance because of its neo-Christian perspective (The *Cambridge...Second World War* 16)—Keyes writes about soldiers who have transformed themselves into heroes by sacrificing their lives and thereafter passing through the 'foreign' gate of death to eternity: 'Between two woods/ Between the forest of fire and the club-handed/ Wood of hard ice, pace the forgotten/ Lovers defrauded by despite and war/ And frigid veins and jealous father-figures/ And time and too much company and fear/ And dreams and violence, and separation/ Who are my speakers first, the homing voices/ Vocal in me, the images/ That burn in me like seeds of climbing fire/ In a damp chimney. These are my client spirits' (III, l. 1-11). In Keyes's lines, ancient and modern combatants who have had been slain form a unified mass and tradition. Kendall writes that in spite of the poem's resonant passages and 'intermittent brilliance', it has been considered a failure by such critics as Jeffrey Wainwright and Vernon Scannell and its origin traced to Geoffrey Hill's 'agonising over his obligation to speak for the war-dead' (193). As Kendall rereads, "The poet [in 'The Foreign Gate'] acts as a medium, having had made a 'bridge' for the 'voiceless

speakers' and given them the opportunity to 'Cry through the trumpet of my fear and rage'. He therefore becomes not a man but the voice—or rather, the voices—of the dead, who 'call continually' from their curious afterlives of iced woods and fiery forests, foliage of bone, marble trees, gates with pillars of mist, ruins, and cold rocks. Illuminated by 'starshine' they tell snatches of their stories, or cry out to lovers without expecting answers. Keyes's historical perspective is geographically and temporally panoramic, so that the dead of Naseby and Tannenberg press no urgently than the voice recalling that 'At Dunkirk I/ Rolled in the shallows'" (*ibid*. 194). Geoffrey Hill writes that Keyes "later referred to 'The Foreign Gate' as one of his 'nearest misses'; John Guenther calls it 'Auden's fain notion fatally injured', and goes so far as to say that 'Certainly [Keyes] should not have published it'. I think that he is wrong. In 'The Foreign Gate', as in 'Schiller Dying', Keyes is vindicating the historical imagination in a very particular sense" (*The Oxford* 409).

What is observable in most of Keyes's poems is his preoccupation with death—it can be, using words from his most famous poem, metaphorically likened to 'groping for death'. In his early poems, including "Meditation of Phlebas the Phoenician" (1939), he was intrigued by such ideas as death, destruction, and drowning. "Meditation of Phlebas the Phoenician" is narrated by a 'corpse long-drowned, / Trickled out in foamy lace'. The images of drowning and annihilation also occur in "Nocturne for Four Voices" (where the stars are imagined as 'drowned men's eyes, tangled in floating spars/ Of trees') and "Elegy for Mrs. Virginia Woolf" (beginning 'Unfortunate lady, where white crowfoot binds/ Unheeded garlands, starred with crumpled flowers, / Lie low, sleep well, safe from the rabid winds/ Of war and argument'). The 1941-written "Glaucus" ('Let no cliff-haunting woman, no girl claim Kinship with *Glaucus*, neither sow/ The tide with daffodils, nor call his name/ Into the wind, for he is glorified—/ And cold Aegean voices speak his fame', l. 1-4) on the Greek prophetic sea-god celebrates him for his drowning and glorification. Keyes also wrote "Gilles de Retz" in May 1941 (commemorating the Breton knight, Joan of Arc's companion, and child-killer Gilles de Montmorency-Laval, 1404-40), a poem described by Adam Piette as 'a dramatic monologue in which Gilles betrays his abandonment to evil in his cherishing of pain in wartime after the death of Joan of Arc" (*The Cambridge…Second World War* 15). His other poems from this period include "Europe's Prisoner" (in May 1941, which employs Dachau, a south-Germany town housing a Nazi concentration camp, as a symbol of human suffering), and "The Cruel Solstice" (1941, 'A cruel solstice, coming ice and cold/ Thoughts and the darkening of the heart's flame', l. 2-3) on similar themes. However, mortality is not the central theme of the January 1942-written

"The Wilderness" (beginning 'The red rock wilderness/ Shall be my dwelling-place. / Where the wind saws at the bluffs/ And the pebble falls like thunder/ I shall watch the clawed sun/ Tear the rocks asunder'), which, according to Dickey, "is a poem about the evolution of the self, especially the English self, in terms of modern European historical evolution" (256). Guenther traces in this poem the influence of William Shakespeare's "The Phoenix and the Turtle" (1601) and Thomas Sterns Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) (154). Keyes's death-awareness and depression might have stemmed from his admiration of Rilke. As Scott-Kilvert *et al*. write, he regarded Rilke and William Butler Yeats to be 'the greatest and most influential poets in the last hundred years' and that,

> "In a diary entry of March 1943, after tracing the burgeoning of the death wish implicit in romanticism, he continues: 'That is why there had to be a 'poet of Death' in the twentieth century; and why Rilke is the most important European poet since Goethe and Wordsworth'. He was undoubtedly influenced by Rilke, especially by that poet's conception of death as something that we bear within us like a child awaiting birth. In the summer of 1942 he worked on a translation of passages of Rilke's prose and in the autumn of that year he translated an eight-line poem entitled 'The Poet'. [...] [However] it is likely that Rilke's metaphysical speculations about death merely intensified and deepened the intuitions and discoveries of which Keyes was himself aware. Moreover, Keyes knew that charnel romanticism and the German obsession with the death wish were dangerous models" (*British Poets* 436).

Kendall also suggests that Keyes later tried to distance himself from Rilke and from the 'craziness' of German passion for death (188). Keyes's tribute to Yeats, his other much-admired-litterateur, was "William Yeats in Limbo" (1940).

It is difficult to analyse Keyes's attitude to war, though he is what is now identified as an 'English soldier-poet', like Owen, Sassoon, Rosenberg, Thomas, and several others. Though Blunden has commented, "The cruel solstice was to him not war, so much as the larger commotion and dissonance of which war is a partial embodiment" (qtd. in *British Poets* 440), Keyes's "War Poet", written in anticipation of being conscripted for defending England against the Nazis, is frankly dejected in tone. Mark Rawlinson observes that for poets like Herbert Reed and Sidney Keyes 'soldiering was drill and waiting', something developed in Keyes's 1942-poem "Two Offices of a Sentry" (*The Cambridge...War Writing*

204). Written in September 1940, "Cervières" is an address to the French owners of a cherry orchard (symbolic of, for example, Europe itself) which is being spoiled by birds and a potentially-harmful invader. The September 1942-composed "Timoshenko" focuses on a distant mythological figure rather than on modern confrontation. The early "Advice for a Journey" (1941) begins with 'The drums mutter for war' but does not deal with belligerence in details. "Four Postures of Death" (1942) is an exclusive address to death, while "Moonlight Night on the Port" (1942) anticipates the poet's drowning—identifiably in war—without describing the actual engagement. "An Early Death" (1942) catches a mother mourning for her son killed in war and links it to the grief of Mary over the crucified Christ. "Poem from the North", concluding 'Winter, the hunter's season, will not pity/ The people afraid to be born who crowd the streets/ Or those afraid of death who crouch in bed/ Behind the darkened windows of this city. / I hear the hunter's horn, the long halloo, / The cold wind beating at a stone-dead statue' (l. 17-22), describes a world doomed by war. In such times of turbulence, religious thoughts can provide ways out of tension and hopelessness. Keyes was not pronouncedly religious, though his poems like "William Byrd" (1942)—the Renaissance composer who refused to renounce his Catholic faith—and "The Grail" (1942), referring to the Arthurian legend, directly or covertly address the issue of religiosity. About the style of his poems, Simon Jenner writes,

> "Keyes was a master of blank verse, of deft metonymic manipulation, disturbed pastoral. Although Eliot blew wind into longer poems, Keyes individuated themes shared by contemporaries Allison, Larkin, Ross, Douglas. Auden was a common factor, literariness peculiar to Keyes. [Geoffrey] Hill was his inheritor"[7].

Regarding Keyes's limited oeuvre, Andrew Sanders observes, "The poems that Keyes wrote during the early stages of the war look back to ancestral forms for refreshment. The ideas of chain of experience interlinking writer and writer, and of humanity swept up in great creating nature, seem to have held a particular attraction for him, in a time of unnatural change" (575).

Finally, no discussion of Keyes's oeuvre could be complete without a brief comparative study of him and Douglas, his Oxford contemporary. Both were born in Kent, associated with *The Cherwell*, and fought at Tunisia. Though both Michael Meyer and John Heath-Stubbs have denied that the two—Douglas and Keyes—ever met, Douglas's biographer Graham quotes Francis King, another

Oxford contemporary, to 'prove' that they not only met but were also known to one another (99). Importantly, though in his essay "Poets in this War" (May 1943), Douglas dismisses Heath-Stubbs and John Lehmann; he cautiously appreciates Keyes for his 'technical competence'. Kendall writes that in spite of their different literary choices, Douglas and Keyes dislike army-ranks and share visions of impending death (186). Sanders notes that both were sons of army officers "and both discovered that a new kind of war poetry, quite distinct from that of the First World War, was wrenched out of them by the distinct nature of the new conflict" (575). Clive James thus continues the comparative study:

> "Keith Douglas and Sidney Keyes go together, or rather went together, like Owen and Rosenberg—they were the Second World War version of the pair of utterly different young poets yoked by death. Keyes died in North Africa in 1943 before he had turned twenty-one. Douglas also served in North Africa but had to wait until the Normandy invasion before getting killed: it happened after he had been in France three days. He was twenty-four. [....] Turning to Keyes, we see little of the maturity Douglas bore like a divine attribute. More correctly, we see none of it: he is altogether otherwise both in personality and mind—the type of the swot where Douglas was the type of the demigod—and immature even beyond his years. You have only to look at their war-time photographs to see the difference: Douglas the very image of the lean-lidded fighter, Keyes the large-lipped fish out of water. It is easy to imagine them on patrol together, Keyes mooning along with his head up and Douglas shouting at him to get it down. Incoherence was practically Keyes's medium. It was not so much that his ear was tin, as that it simply was not listening"[8].

In his 'Introduction' to *Poetry of the Second World War*, Desmond Graham, who has excluded Keyes from his anthology, writes that though the "Second World War and Auschwitz have often been said to have silenced the poet, to have gone beyond words", a number of efficient versifiers have commendably captured the ravages of belligerence in their respective poems (xv). The posterity is thankful to such poets as Lewis, Douglas, Pudney, and Keyes because they have consistently refused to be silenced by destructions caused by the Second World War. The *Auschwitz Concentration Camp* was already operational in southern Poland by the time Keyes was writing his poems, and Theodor Adorno has commented in his "Cultural Criticism and Society" (1953) that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is

barbaric' (Thomson 123). Literary world has been saved that the Rilkean Keyes, in spite of his awareness of the Holocaust and of his preoccupation with annihilation, continued to write and publish his poems—even after finding a rifle 'in his hand' instead of the usual pens.

Notes

1. "Sidney Keyes's *Collected Poems*". *Google Books*. Accessed on 5 May 2013. *<http://books.google.co.in/books?id=LggeAQAAIAAJ&q=Sidney+Keyes+poems&dq=Sidney+Keyes+poems&hl=en&sa=X&ei=pJaGUYjkHZG0rAeyn4D4Aw&ved=0CDcQ6AEwAQ>*

2. Jenner, Simon. "On Sidney Keyes: Review of *Sidney Keyes: Collected Poems*". *The Recusant*. 2008. Accessed on 19 May 2013. *<http://www.therecusant.org.uk/#/simon-jenner-on-sidney-keyes/4530346315>*

3. "About the Trust". *The Salamander Oasis Trust*. 2012. Accessed on 12 May 2013. *<http://www.salamanderoasis.org/about/>*

4. "Notable Old Tonbridgians—Journalists and Writers: Sidney Keyes, 1922-43". *Tonbridge School*. Accessed on 12 May 2013. *<http://www.tonbridge-school.co.uk/about-the-school/history-of-the-school/notable-old-tonbridgians/journalists-and-writers/sidney-keyes/>*

5. Cosman, Milein. "Memories of Sidney Keyes". *Carcanet—Biography of Sidney Keyes*. 2000. Accessed on 12 May 2013. *<http://www.carcanet.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?showdoc=7;doctype=biography>*

6. Richman, Robert. "Ruined Squire". *The New Criterion*. March 1990. Accessed on 17 May 2013. *<http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/Ruined-squire-5645>*

7. Jenner, Simon. "On Sidney Keyes: Review of *Sidney Keyes: Collected Poems*".

8. James, Clive. "Keyes and Douglas". *The Metropolitan Critic*. 1994. Accessed on 21 May 2013. *<http://www.clivejames.com/pieces/metropolitan/keyes-douglas>*

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