

Pity and Indignation: The Processing of Trauma in the War Poetry of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon

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Of the poets who blossomed between 1914 and 1918, Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon produced in British World War I poetry perhaps the best examples of the empathetic connectivity and therapeutic abilities of literature. Owen is often referred to as the “more significant” by literary critics; his verse is more frequently anthologized and seems to enjoy a greater degree of familiarity with general readers than the work of Sassoon (“Biography”). In the poetry of both men, however, shifts in tone and word choice often denote a corresponding shift in emotion or mindset that in turn comments upon the psychological state of the poet. During their respective treatments for shell shock in Edinburgh’s Craiglockhart Hospital, the voice of pity in Owen’s poetry develops in sharp contrast to the voice of indignation in Sassoon’s poetry. Such disparate attitudes not only mark the differences in the personalities of these two men, but also indicate their differing

psychological progressions in confronting and processing war trauma. Wilfred Owen's wider appeal among both scholars and general readers is due largely to his retaining a degree of Romantic influence throughout the war and his ability to convey his psychological healing and development through his poetry.

Drawing on affect theory, one can explain the lasting appeal of Owen's poetry through the psychology behind the poetic conflict of a poem like "Dulce et Decorum Est." Within the context of literature, affect theory, or the study of affect, is the inquiry into the forces or "interior movements" in a work that speak to the reader on an emotional, sensational, aesthetic, or cognitive level and leave a lasting psychological impression (Wehrs 1, 3). Among Owen's works, "Dulce et Decorum Est" is unique because it showcases most clearly the internal struggle between the two halves of the soldier-poet, which subconsciously conveys the psychological healing process Owen underwent in Craiglockhart.

Owen deals directly with the scenes and emotions of war in "Dulce et Decorum Est," recounting not only a plausible scenario, but his own personal experience. With the lines "In all my dreams, before my helpless sight, / He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning," the poem shifts from discussing a past event to ruminating on present emotions (ll.15-16). Mary J. Bruhn observes that in affect theory "sobering empathetic considerations become available to the speaker and to [the readers] only in the space of reflection opened by temporal displacement" (681). The ability to reflect upon past trauma is beneficial not only to Owen himself, but also to the readers, who are able to detect psychological progress through the poetic shift in "Dulce et Decorum Est" that signals self-awareness and an ability to engage with trauma. In addition, Donald R. Wehrs maintains that the Rousseauian-influenced poetry of the Romantics, in attempting to reconnect man with nature, stimulates an affective response in readers and prompts them to nurture

regenerative thought. In this way, most Romantic poetry, according to Wehrs, is inherently therapeutic—a significant fact in discussing the psychological appeal of Owen’s and Sassoon’s poetry (28). Even amidst the jarring words and violent images of “Dulce et Decorum Est,” Owen’s tendencies towards the Romantic are not lost, though they have been shaped by his exposure to the realities of trench warfare.

Reflection, again, is a major component of Owen’s “Mental Cases.” The poem opens with a series of rhetorical questions peppered throughout the first stanza, beginning with “Who are these? Why sit they here in twilight?” (l.1). The speaker is initially distant, and the use of impersonal pronouns like “these” further illustrates the disconnect between disturbed shell-shock patients and mentally healthy individuals. By the end of the first stanza, however, the speaker has been included in his verse with the first-person plural pronoun: “Surely we have perished / Sleeping, and walk hell; but who these hellish?” (ll. 8-9). The theme of identity lost is carried throughout the rest of the poem as the speaker then begins to answer his own inquiries: “These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished. / Memory fingers in their hair of murders, / Multitudinous murders they once witnessed” (ll. 10-12). Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, “Mental Cases” acknowledges a common bond to be found in a psychologically traumatic experience. The last lines of the poem describe a soldier’s fidgeting hands that are continually “Snatching after us who smote them, brother, / Pawing us who dealt them war and madness” (ll. 27-28). It is interesting that Owen’s speaker, earlier established as a soldier as well, here seems to include himself as a source of the “war and madness” that has been visited upon shell-shock patients. The lines between cause and effect are blurred, reasserting instead a brotherhood of the present moment—humanity as a whole is to blame for the war, and humanity as a whole is a victim of war. When “Mental Cases” was drafted, Owen wrote a letter to his mother in which he said he was

hoping to “behave in an owlsh manner generally” in order to “contemplate the inwardness of war” (Owen, *Collected Letters* 543). Owen’s proclivity towards “inwardness” predates “Mental Cases” and the war itself, though it was obviously refined during his time in Craiglockhart.

Perhaps the most striking difference between Owen’s voice and Sassoon’s is the continuation of a Keatsian theme of community or brotherhood in Owen’s poetry that harkens back to his earlier and more purely romantic verses. In “Dulce et Decorum Est,” Owen addresses his readers with three conditional premises: (1) if you could pace; (2) if you could watch; and (3) if you could hear (ll. 17, 19, 21). These premises are clear attempts to bridge the gap between soldier and civilian, as well as poet and audience; Owen is “supplying the ‘sufficient imagination’ that Sassoon had said ‘those at home’ lacked” (Benz 11). This outreach implies a sense of union, brotherhood, or connectedness that works in combination with any psychologically appealing forms of Owen’s poetry to produce a sympathetic understanding that can be detected through the frustration or anger expressed in verse. Poems like “Anthem for Doomed Youth,” “Miners,” “Asleep,” and “The Calls,” the first three of which were written at Craiglockhart, seem to have originated out of compassion more than bitterness (Silkin 207).

Though Siegfried Sassoon’s war poetry was more widely published and distributed during his lifetime than Owen’s, contemporary critics were less than pleased with his work. H.W. Massingham admitted in a review of *Counter Attack* (1918) that the “hot fluid of honest rage and scorn” gave Sassoon’s work a heartfelt quality, but he ultimately decided that “these war-verses are not poetry” (qtd. in J. M. Wilson 360). Similarly, John Middleton Murry wrote in 1918 that despite its best-seller status, *Counter Attack* was “not poetry,” because there was no evidence of “triumph over experience” in his art (qtd. in Maguire 115). Massingham’s and Murry’s criticisms were not unique:

the success *Counter Attack* enjoyed was mostly due to its popularity among servicemen rather than with civilian audiences. Even today, Sassoon's turgidity and indignant tone can be off-putting to the reader, especially when coupled with horrendous war imagery and when compared to the pity in Owen's verse. Psychologically speaking, Murry is partially correct in his claim that Sassoon's war poetry shows no triumph over the traumatic experiences of trench warfare. The poetry Sassoon wrote at Craiglockhart, some of his most striking and well-remembered work, does not convey to the reader a therapeutic psychological progression in the way that Owen's poetry does.

Sassoon's poetry is often targeted, and his most conscious attacks are usually directed at non-soldier others—ignorant civilians and military officials who direct the war as opposed to fighting it themselves. "Blighters," "The General," and "Base Details" are such poetic attacks, and Michael Thorpe refers to these kinds of poems as "fierce, contemptuous pieces, moments of hate" (22). "Blighters," written before Sassoon returned to France in 1917, establishes clearly the us-versus-them mindset that is present in the majority of Sassoon's war poetry. A crowd of civilians watching a patriotic show are prompted by their misconstrued perception of the battlefield to laugh, "We're sure the Kaiser loves the dear old Tanks!" (l. 4). The scene is painted in caricature, and Sassoon's speaker, as righteous prophet, introduces reality into the last four lines with the declaration:

I'd like to see a Tank come down the stalls,
Lurching to rag-time tunes, or "Home, sweet Home,"
And there'd be no more jokes in Music-halls
To mock the riddled corpses round Bapaume. (ll. 5-8)

The speaker's bitterness is apparently justified in the last line by the equation of misunderstanding or incomprehension with the mockery of sacrificed corpses (Thorpe 22-23). This and similar "biased outburst(s)" in other poems often prevent Sassoon from accessing the voice of pity

that Owen exercises, and his work becomes “purely destructive . . . in that it creates nothing with which to rebuild” (Thorpe 32). Whereas Owen narrows or closes the gaps between soldiers and civilians, Sassoon seems to generate tensions with the combative final stanza of “Blighters,” in which he turns against those at home, presumably his own countrymen.

In contrast to Owen’s relatively smooth measure and softer tone, Sassoon’s tone can be harsh and bitter, but also condescendingly didactic. One of his most blatantly propagandistic verses, “Suicide in the Trenches,” is perhaps the best example of the sharpness of his voice and the abruptness with which it can attack. The poem begins rather innocently, with the speaker telling of “a simple soldier boy” he once knew, but the second stanza takes a dark turn when the reader is informed that the simple soldier boy “put a bullet through his brain. / No one spoke of him again” (ll. 1, 7-8). As if this revelation weren’t jarring enough, Sassoon takes his verse a step further with the lines

You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye
Who cheer when soldier lads march by,
Sneak home and pray you’ll never know
The hell where youth and laughter go. (ll. 9-12)

Several transitions take place at this point in the poem. First, Sassoon’s direct address shifts the tone of the poem from sympathetic to accusatory, and the civilian reader suddenly comes under fire. Secondly, this shift in tone establishes a clear boundary between soldiers and civilians—the latter is perhaps even an enemy unto the former—and, unlike Owen’s, Sassoon’s sympathies are marked as limited. Lastly, rather than letting the narrative speak for itself, Sassoon becomes a propagandist in the last four lines. The story of the unheroic, passive soldier-victim of the first two stanzas cannot be read as an objective account after the editorialization of the last four lines (Sternlicht 49-50). In this way, the reader is not given much opportunity

to interpret the poem or make inferences, and thus any potential for dialogue between poet and audience is lost.

At Owen's suggestion, Sassoon published four of his war poems in *The Hydra*, Craiglokhart's magazine, and of the four, "Dreamers" is most easily paralleled with Owen's "Anthem for Doomed Youth." Like "Anthem," "Dreamers" is written in sonnet form, but the similarities between the two works do not extend far beyond their formal qualities.

Thorpe describes "Dreamers" as "over-explicit," and it is an accurate description when the poem is compared to the timid and vague Georgian poetry of Sassoon's youth (34). While Owen's poetry often retains the lyricism and thematic emphasis on interconnection of the Romantics, Sassoon almost entirely rejects any such influences from his Georgian muses and instead embraces a poetic discordance. Affect theory can explain Owen's appeal in terms of community: "Aesthetic pleasure in discerning a 'particularly harmonious interrelationship of parts' is entwined with rational and affective assent to entering into moral community with the poet and other readers similarly moved" (Wehrs 11). Essentially, poetry is an attempt at creating a psychological experience by capitalizing upon mutual emotions. While Sassoon seems to write to a like-minded moral community (unintentionally, or in some cases, intentionally alienating civilians and military officials), Owen is more open in anticipating his audience. In "Dreamers," the soldiers are separated from normalcy, but any sympathy extended is limited. Sassoon does not acknowledge any kind of shared suffering between soldiers and civilians, and "his protests, at root, are sarcastic and satirical attacks on those he deems unwilling or unable to listen" (Summers 309). In comparing "Anthem for Doomed Youth" and "Dreamers," it becomes apparent that Owen's pity in "Anthem" has a wider range. He has a greater understanding of the effects of war on those at the home front as well as in the trenches. Sassoon, in contrast,

demonstrates only an “increasing pity for the exploitation of the many by the privileged few” (Stockwell et al. 148).

In December 1917, Owen wrote a letter to Sassoon in which he asked his advice regarding a draft of a new poem “Wild with all Regrets” (Owen, *Collected Letters* 514). Though it draws its title from Tennyson’s “The Princess,” “Wild with all Regrets” is one of Owen’s most Sassoon-like poems, with enjambment, pararhyme, and well-placed, if sporadic, punctuation that breaks up what might otherwise have been the longer phrases more typical of Owen’s style. As seen in his other works, however, “Wild with all Regrets” does not shy away from personal reflection: the majority of the poem’s 37 lines detail an injured soldier’s rumination on his physical and mental state.

As the months passed and Owen was again on active duty, “Wild with all Regrets” was expanded in July 1918 and retitled “A Terre.” This ten-stanza poem cannot be definitively established as Owen’s last war poem, but being at least one of the last, it provides insight into Owen’s mental state shortly before his death. In comparison to its first draft, “A Terre” is noticeably kinder in tone, though by no means without bite. It is difficult not to identify the speaker of “A Terre” as Owen himself, especially when reading the lines

Certainly flowers have the easiest time on earth.

“I shall be one with nature, herb, and stone,”

Shelley would tell me. Shelley would be stunned:

The dullest Tommy hugs that fancy now.

“Pushing up daisies,” is their creed, you know. (ll. 43-48)

“A Terre,” much like “Dulce et Decorum Est,” blends Romantic influence and modern realism into an ironic commentary on the First World War, but it also blends the voices of Sassoon and Owen himself to create a tone of pitying indignation. For example, the final lines of “Wild with all Regrets” are “I think on your rich breathing, brother, I’ll be weaned / To do without what blood remained me from my wound”

(ll. 36-37). The final lines of "A Terre," however, have been changed to read, "Carry my crying spirit till it's weaned / To do without what blood remained these wounds" (ll. 64-65). Of the two versions, "A Terre" is the more conversational poem, and the last lines shift the responsibility for the soldier-poet's spirit onto the addressee—a gesture that acknowledges the importance of human connection as well as the connection between poet and audience. Sassoon's poems do not offer the reader a poetic olive branch. In fact, even his satiric protests often bypass the idea of conversational outreach that begins with the poet. Stephen Summers remarks,

When Sassoon dispels the myths of the war for his mostly civilian readers, he also argues that their duty is only to listen, not to respond. Yet poetic ethics requires a conversation between writer and reader; without a site of equal exchange, there cannot be social progress. Sharp lines between writer and reader, warrior and civilian, must soften to heal war's wounds. (309)

In contrast to Sassoon, Owen has a unique ability to break down "sharp lines" in his poetry. He not only comments on his own psychological progress but does it in such a way as to engage with his readership by addressing the complexity of the emotions common to all. In this way, "A Terre" becomes an amalgam of hope and despair that engages sympathetically with the (presumably civilian) reader and still avoids pulling too-violent punches in communicating the effects of war. As a whole, the transformation from "Wild with all Regrets" into "A Terre" gives insight into Owen's post-Craiglockhart psychological and poetic development. Unfortunately, one can only speculate about the kind of poet Owen would have become after the war. A few months after penning "A Terre," Owen was killed in action while leading a troop of men across a canal in France.

In conclusion, Owen seemed to know, more than did Sassoon, what elements of poetry are important, psychologically and emotionally, to bridge an experiential gap and communicate on an intimate or even subconscious level with an audience. In 1918, Owen wrote a preface for a collection of war poems that he intended to publish the following year. This preface appeared in the posthumously published *Poems* (1920), which was compiled and edited by Sassoon. It reads, in part, “Above all I am not concerned with Poetry. My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity. Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the next. All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful” (Owen, *Collected Poems* 31). These words, coming from a young man who had grown up worshiping Keats, are especially poignant and betray the surprising maturity of their twenty-five-year-old author. Owen believed that “poets could teach you how to live,” and he seems, more than Sassoon, to have always turned to poetry for guidance—a means of coping not only with war, but with life in general (Kerr 247). It is impossible to determine, of course, the degree to which Owen might have been aware of his poetry’s power and its reach, but he seems at least to have had a superior understanding of his own person and of those elements of human nature that could be successfully spoken to and moved by pity. Beginning at Beaumont Hamel, where he first saw combat, the war disturbed Owen psychologically, but it also seemed to produce in him a charitable hyperawareness of humanity. In fact, perhaps Owen himself best summed up his own psychological and poetic development when he wrote to his mother a little over a year before he died, “Tennyson, it seems, was always a great child. So should I have been, but for Beaumont Hamel” (Owen, *Collected Letters* 482).

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