

A UNITED VOICE: RE-EXAMINING THREE BRITISH POETS OF THE GREAT WAR

Abstract: In this article, I consider three influential poets of the Great War: Siegfried Sassoon, Charles Hamilton Sorley and Rupert Brooke. Since the birth of the modernist movement, the historical legacy of Great War poetry has tended to focus on the differing levels of “disenchantment” expressed in the works of these three poets when considered separately, applauding Sassoon and Sorley and criticizing Brooke. While I recognize a separation of the works of Brooke from those of Sorley and Sassoon in terms of modernist disillusionment, I argue that analysing instead the literary elements which unify the works of all three poets offers a comprehensive understanding of the experience of trench warfare experience, unavailable through traditional methods of evaluating Great War poetry.

The roots of modernist literature are entangled in the chaos of World War I. As war poets muddled through unprecedented trauma, much of their writing became imbued with themes of disorientation and disenchantment. Firmly resting on these ideals, the British legacy of Great War poetry has since tended to segregate war poets, valorizing those like Siegfried Sassoon and Charles Hamilton Sorley, whose poetry reflects disillusionment, and “vilifying”¹ others like Rupert Brooke, whose works seem to embrace outdated values; however, to valorize some and vilify others ultimately obscures a complete picture of British trench-war experience. Thus, analyzing the poetry of Brooke, Sassoon and Sorley, I intend to illustrate how focusing on the commonalities between poets expressing differing degrees of traditional nationalism and disenchantment yields greater historical appreciation for shared British war experiences in the trenches.

The list of commonalities between the three poets begins at home. The England of Brooke, Sassoon and Sorley was furiously literary. In the early twentieth century, literacy rates had not only increased, but the appreciation for literature spread with unprecedented vigour, to the point of the “unparalleled literariness of all ranks who fought in the war.”² Renowned literary historian Paul Fussell attributes this fresh literary climate to two powerful “liberal” forces coinciding during the Great War:

On the one hand, the belief in the educative powers of classical and English literature was still extremely strong. On the other, the appeal of popular education and “self-improvement” was at its peak, and such education was still conceived largely in humanistic terms. It was imagined that the study of literature at Workmen’s Institutes and through such schemes as the National Home Reading Union would actively assist those of modest origins to rise in the class system. The volumes of the World’s Classics and Everyman’s Library were to be the “texts.” The intersection of these two

¹ Paul Moeyes, “Georgian Poetry’s False Dawn: A Reassessment of Rupert Brooke: His Poetry and Personality,” in *British Poets of the Great War: Brooke, Rosenberg, Thomas: A Documentary Volume*, ed. Patrick Quinn (Gale Group, 2000), 32.

² Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 168.

forces, the one “aristocratic,” the other “democratic,” established an atmosphere of public respect for literature unique in modern times.³

Thus, the three war poets entered the war from a society characterized by a universal appreciation for literature, which would both determine and enhance their modes of expression. Moulded by this common origin, Brooke, Sassoon, and Sorley each chose poetry as their primary form of written expression during their periods of service in the war. The motivations for this decision are speculative. In the context of the increased popularity of literature in general, poetry was often hailed as what historian Harriet Monroe called “the highest, most complete expression of truth and beauty.”⁴ Thus, to the war poets, it may logically have seemed the most appropriate means by which to communicate their experiences. Furthermore, poetry seeks to convey meaning through feeling and image, rather than simply through diction, which would appeal to writers endeavouring to express new feelings and traumatic images through writing.

More significant than their motivations to pursue poetry, however, is the fact that each poet conformed to traditional poetic procedures. Brooke, Sassoon and Sorley all wrote almost exclusively in iambic pentameter (the most common meter in traditional English poetry), and followed a similar rhyme scheme through most of their poems. Given this consistent loyalty to literary tradition, it is inaccurate to divide these poets into the camps of “traditional” and “progressive,” since all three maintained some loyalty to tradition. Advocates of such segregation necessarily oversimplify the differences between the poets. For example, literary scholar William Laskowski emphasizes Brooke’s failure as a poet, criticizing him for “never [succeeding] from breaking away from the nineteenth century.”⁵ This vague discrimination

³ Fussell, 70.

⁴ Dana Goodyear, “The Moneyed Muse: What can Two Hundred Million Dollars do for Poetry?” (*The New Yorker*, 19 February 2007).

⁵ William E. Laskowski, “Analysis of ‘The Old Vicarage, Grantchester,’” in *British Poets of the Great War: Brooke, Rosenberg, Thomas: A Documentary Volume*, ed. Patrick Quinn (Gale Group, 2000), 49.

between poets based on their adherence to tradition is flawed, since in terms of traditional literary customs, Sassoon and Sorley never “broke free” from the nineteenth century either—much unlike other English modernist poets who rejected the strict regulations of traditional poetry. Thus, devaluing Brooke’s poetry for its adherence to tradition while praising Sassoon’s and Sorley’s for its reflection of disenchantment without mentioning that their work, too, remains formally traditional is an overly simplistic reaction, one that curtails a more detailed understanding of shared trench-war experiences available through collective examination of these poets’ work. Though indeed, the three poets’ works reflect different levels of disillusionment, Sorley’s and Sassoon’s poetry does not symbolize a ubiquitous disregard for nineteenth-century tradition, just as Brooke’s poetry does not embrace it blindly. Rather, each poet works with the same harrowing contextual material as he struggles to negotiate his place in the common traumatic experience of the war.

One experience that crept nearly into every crevice of British trenches was shell shock—a debilitating condition triggered by trauma, known today as posttraumatic stress disorder. Coined by soldiers during World War I, shell shock became inextricably linked with artillery shells. Literary scholar Peter Leese notes that as early as November or December of 1914, “a splintering ‘shell’ [had become] connected to an obliterating ‘shock,’” further stating that “if the implicit association with the nervous system and with the anguish of war was not intended in the first use of ‘shell shock,’ front line soldiers quickly made it.”⁶ This connection is unsurprising, given the wild escalation of weapons development in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Leese observes that the Second Industrial Revolution “reversed the existing view of military technology, so that whereas to earlier generations a weapon was seasoned by age, by the

⁶ Peter Leese, *Shell Shock: Traumatic Neurosis and the British Soldiers of the First World War* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 1.

late 19th century, the newest gun or artillery piece signalled tactical advantage.”⁷ Thus, by the dawn of World War I, front line soldiers faced relatively unfamiliar technology, disoriented them with devastating force. Artillery shells in particular constituted the “really significant developments in the Great War,”⁸ causing 67 percent of all casualties.⁹ Compared with the earlier Franco-Prussian War, during which artillery claimed a mere 8.4 percent of German lives, the German deaths due to artillery in the First World War were staggering, at 58.3 percent. Such powerful weaponry proved a dramatic exaggeration of the already increased speed and noise of industrial society,¹⁰ and understandably contributed to countless cases of shell shock in the British army.

Unsurprising considering the power of these new weapons and the close quarters in which the war was fought, noise was among the most resonant of psychological disturbances stemming from artillery bombing. Accordingly, it seeped into war poetry as a dominant theme. One soldier who suffered from shell shock, Sergeant C. of the 1st Seaforth Highlanders, highlights sound in his description of artillery fire, describing it as “the most appalling noise.”¹¹ Another compares the clamour of artillery bombing to a violent storm, “[raging] around [his] refuge like a typhoon-scoured sea around an island.”¹² Noise also appears frequently as a motif in Sorley’s early poetry. He contrasts pleasant, “peaceful” noises with the sound of war: “We’ll grasp firm hands and *laugh* at the old pain, / when it is peace. But until peace, the storm / the darkness and the *thunder* and the rain.”¹³ Here, Sorley completely removes pleasant sounds like

⁷ Ibid., 19.

⁸ Ian F.W. Beckett, *The Great War* (Pearson Education Limited, 2007), 223.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Leese, 2.

¹¹ Ibid., 24.

¹² Leese, 25.

¹³ Charles Hamilton Sorley, “To Germany,” in *Marlborough, and Other Poems* (Cambridge University Press, 1919), 12-14.

laughter from war, associating them instead with peace. Meanwhile, he illustrates his perception of war by comparing his experiences with a thunderstorm, alluding to the thunderous crashing of artillery fire. Sorley expresses other noises associated with trauma, as he laments hearing the “grindstone groan and cry,”¹⁴ an unsettling sound often heard on the battlefield after artillery bombing.¹⁵ Furthermore, he mentions deafness repeatedly throughout his poetry, reflecting one of the common symptoms of shell shock. In one of his best-known poems, “When You See Millions of the Mouthless Dead,” he demonstrates disorientation resulting from deafness: “give them not praise. For deaf, how should they know / it is not curses heaped on each gashed head?”¹⁶ Thus, working with the motif of sound throughout his poetry, Sorley traces the association of “appalling noise” with the trench experience of shell shock and trauma.

Sound also reflects the experience of shell shock, throughout Sassoon’s poetry; however, unlike Sorley’s, Sassoon’s descriptions of sound are often conflicted. For example, in his poem “The Dragon and the Undying,” he writes: “All night the flares go up; the Dragon sings / and beats upon the dark with furious wings.”¹⁷ One can reasonably assume that the dragon here represents artillery shells, since it flies through the air and destroys bell spires, and that the sound the dragon makes consequently reflects the noise of artillery. However, the sound-word “sing” generally evokes positive connotations, so it seems strange that the sound spewing from the dragon’s mouth—presumably unpleasant—is described as a song. Later in the poem, Sassoon clearly associates music with loveliness and value, as he describes the dragon “[lusting] to break

¹⁴ Sorley, “There is Such Change in All Those Fields,” in *Marlborough, and Other Poems* (Cambridge University Press, 1919), 22.

¹⁵ Leese, 26.

¹⁶ Sorley, “When You See Millions of the Mouthless Dead,” in *Marlborough, and Other Poems* (Cambridge University Press, 1919), 5-6.

¹⁷ Siegfried Sassoon, “The Dragon and the Undying,” in *Collected Poems 1908-1956* (Faber and Faber Limited, 1961), 1-2.

the loveliness of spires, / and hurl their martyred music toppling down.”¹⁸ Therefore, as he attaches positive connotations to a clearly destructive image, he expresses the sentiment of severe disorientation and confusion that ensues as shell shock grips soldiers within the chaos of artillery fire. Sassoon further illustrates disorientation as the speaker of his poem, “A Whispered Tale,” expresses surprise that the addressee of the poem had no “babbling phrases,”¹⁹ hinting at the pervasiveness of such disjointed and traumatized speech. Leese stresses disorientation as a primary symptom of shell shock, explaining that soldiers could become disoriented in a number of ways: “They could lose direction in smoke, flames, or debris, be deafened by crashing shells or the noise of gunfire, be distressed by the yells and moans of the wounded.”²⁰ He further expresses the crippling effect of this disorientation, calling artillery the “great leveller,” and saying that “no one could stand [it] more than three hours.”²¹ Thus, Sassoon’s conflicting and pointed descriptions of sound clearly reflect the disorientation that Leese asserts is inherent in shell shock.

Rupert Brooke, too, was exposed to trench life through his service in the Royal Naval Division (composed of Royal Navy volunteers and reservists not needed at sea), during which he participated in the shallow trench conflict at Antwerp in 1914.²² Though his poetry is often segregated from Sassoon’s and Sorley’s for being overly traditional and nationalistic, his poetry and his descriptions of sound supplement those of his counterparts in that they reflect a common psychological strategy to resist the grasp of shell shock. For soldiers, a key contributing factor in avoiding shell shock was to maintain a positive relationship with their officers.²³ In other words,

¹⁸ Ibid., 5-6.

¹⁹ Sassoon, “A Whispered Tale,” in *Collected Poems, 1908-1956* (Faber and Faber Limited, 1961), 9.

²⁰ Leese, 26.

²¹ Ibid., 26.

²² J.E. Edmonds, *Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1914* (Macmillan and Co. Ltd, 1922).

²³ Leese, 28.

clinging to traditional respect for “paternal authority” offered psychological protection against the posttraumatic stress of shell shock. Closely associated with this ideal, nationalism and patriotism also played significant roles in upholding mental integrity, since comradeship and “belief in the rightness of the cause” affected morale as much as did losses.²⁴ Therefore, when Brooke proclaims the glory “that is England,”²⁵ he reflects a conscious effort to guard against shell shock by maintaining comradeship and patriotic belief in the war. Also inherent in this attempted avoidance of shell shock was a negative view of those who did suffer from posttraumatic stress. Leese observes that “front line soldiers for their part often recognized intuitively the psychological injuries of combat, but at the same time, they could not help viewing shell shock as a shameful condition, a threat to reputation and peer group status.”²⁶ In this context, Brooke’s descriptions of sound throughout his poetry perhaps reflect the common desire among British soldiers to separate themselves from any association with shell shock, since they saw it as a manifestation of cowardice and lack of moral fibre. Unlike sound in Sassoon’s and Sorley’s poetry, sound in Brooke’s poetry is altogether pleasant. He depicts “birds singing,”²⁷ bugles blowing over the dead,²⁸ and laughter unshakeable even by war.²⁹ These lines are strikingly optimistic in the context of violent conflict with the Germans at Antwerp and elsewhere; however, it is precisely in their unflinching optimism that these poetic verses reflect the common and conscious effort to resist shell shock and all its shameful connotations by asserting moral fibre. Viewed from this perspective, Brooke’s poetry becomes a valuable historical resource for understanding perceptions of and reactions to shell shock more fully..

²⁴ Ibid., 29.

²⁵ Rupert Brooke, “The Soldier,” in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* (April 1915), 3.

²⁶ Leese, 33.

²⁷ Rupert Brooke, “Safety,” *Poetry Foundation* (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/safety>, 2018). 7

²⁸ Brooke, “The Dead,” in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* (April 1915), 1.

²⁹ Brooke, “Peace,” in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* (April 1915), 12.

In addition to associations with shell shock, artillery fire was also closely linked to the weather, since “accuracy depended upon wind speed and atmospheric conditions.”³⁰ Indeed, front line soldiers during the First World War were intimately attached to weather conditions, not only through connection with artillery shell accuracy, but also through the threat of exposure, made harsher by living conditions in the trenches. Following defeat at the Battle of the Marne, on 10 September 1914, German soldiers dug the first trenches of World War I under the direction of General Helmuth von Moltke. Once the Allies followed suit, the dynamic phase of the war came to an end, devolving into four-year stalemate.³¹ However, since German forces were the first to dig in, they frequently established footing in higher ground more suitable for trenches, forcing Allied soldiers to settle for lower ground. Consequently, British soldiers more often struck underground water, flooding early trenches. Furthermore, unlike later, more developed trenches, initial dugouts had no wooden linings, no iron roofs, no duckboards, and were often “just holes in the ground,”³² exposing front line soldiers directly to adverse weather conditions—especially including rain, which further flooded muddy trenches. Rain is certainly among the most recorded complaints of trench experience. A front-line soldier, Bruce Brainsfather, illustrates the frequency of rain in the trenches, sourly noting in his memoir that “whenever I don’t state the climatic conditions, read ‘raining.’”³³ A major reason for this disdainful perspective toward rain is the association of excessive moisture with trench foot—a painful disease that attacked the toes and feet. As early as 1914, special medical correspondents attributed the spreading disease to the “soaking of men’s limbs in cold and muddy water.”³⁴ Thus, conflating rain and water with the

³⁰ Beckett, 223.

³¹ Eric Brose, *A History of the Great War: World War I and the International Crisis of the Early Twentieth Century* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 124.

³² Bruce Brainsfather, *Bullets and Billets* (Garden City Press, 1916), 63.

³³ *Ibid.*, 44.

³⁴ Robert Atenstaedt, “Trench Foot: The Medical Response in the First World War 1914-1918,” in *Wilderness and Environmental Medicine* vol. 17, no. 4 (2006), 283.

discomfort of mud and disease, front line soldiers understandably viewed rainy weather as a contributing factor to the miserable conditions of war, as Brainsfather reflects in his memoir, wherein he grumbles of “perpetual and inescapable dampness.”³⁵ The war poets would also make frequent reference to the inclement weather and its adverse effects.

As in other British writing about trench experience, the war poetry of Sassoon, Sorley and Brooke relies heavily on motifs and themes related to water and rain. Sassoon blatantly depicts the constancy of rain in the trenches, saying outright that “it’s always raining.”³⁶ Additionally, he illustrates the emotional and physical burden of perpetual moisture throughout his poems by imbuing clearly negative phrases with verbs alluding to trench flooding. For example, in “Golgotha,” falling artillery flares “*flood* [emphasis added] the field with shallow blanching light,”³⁷ while the huddled sentry is “*submerged* [emphasis added] in gloom.”³⁸ This deliberate construction of imagery powerfully signals the negative emotions commonly associated with rainy weather throughout the British ranks. Sorley’s poetry is no less pessimistic. Alongside darkness and thunder, rain embodies “old pain,” and is separated from any semblance of pleasure, which Sorley suggests is available only in peace-time.³⁹ Like Sassoon, he also uses verbs related to water to create negative imagery. For instance, he laments that “the laden heat came down and *drowned* [emphasis added] my brain.”⁴⁰ Furthermore, he even likens German rain to English rain, expressing his disassociation from nationalistic sentiment and treasonously sympathizing with the enemy. Describing German rain as “the rain that fell in England,”⁴¹ he recognizes the ubiquity of miserable (and constructed) war conditions, regardless of national

³⁵ Brainsfather, 63.

³⁶ Sassoon, “Died of Wounds,” in *Collected Poems, 1908-1956* (Faber and Faber Limited, 1961), 8.

³⁷ Sassoon, “Golgotha,” in *Collected Poems, 1908-1956* (Faber and Faber Limited, 1961), 2.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁹ Sorley, “To Germany,” 12.

⁴⁰ Sorley, “German Rain,” in *Marlborough, and Other Poems* (Cambridge University Press, 1919), 2.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

allegiance. Thus, the poetry of Sassoon and Sorley together illustrates not only the dampening effect of rainy weather on troop morale, but also the increasing opposition to nationalistic sentiment, partly as a result of being subjected to such harsh conditions

Brooke's treatment of water motifs and themes conveys a drastically different perception. His water is not the muddy swamp of typical trenches; rather, it is a purifying basin into which soldiers "as swimmers into cleanness [leap]."⁴² Like his counterparts, Brooke employs imagery reflecting inundation in trenches, writing of soldiers leaping into water, yet his generous descriptions of water perhaps represent a calculated effort to inject positivity into a view of trench conditions. Though trench-life certainly offered miserable conditions, military historian Stephen Bull rightly notes the favourable role of trenches: "The alternatives in late 1914 were stark: dig in and accept heavy casualties, or stay on the surface indefinitely and be annihilated. As a Canadian writer would put it within a few months of the actual events, 'They had to hide in the mud of the trenches to escape German bullets. It was a choice of mud or death.'"⁴³ Throughout the war, trenches operated as a "live and let live system,"⁴⁴ reducing the number of casualties on both sides by shielding soldiers from the devastating effects of machine guns. Given this obvious and generally positive role of the trenches in the war experience of front line soldiers, it is reasonable to interpret Brooke's description of water as an acceptance of trench conditions as a favourable alternative to exposure to enemy fire. His "cleansing" water and washing rivers⁴⁵ reflect the view of trench flooding as an acceptable condition, promoting not only the safety of the individual, but the war interests of the nation as well. Thus, as Bull asserts,

⁴² Brooke, "Peace," 4.

⁴³ Stephen Bull, *World War I Trench Warfare* (Osprey Publishing, 2002), 17.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴⁵ Brooke, "Peace," 4.

Brooke's poetry supplements the works of Sassoon and Sorley in its representation of an alternative view of trench conditions.

To starkly segregate war poetry based solely on the poet's expression of disenchantment or adherence to tradition is not only partially inaccurate—as I have shown by illustrating Sassoon's and Sorley's failure to break from nineteenth-century literary traditions—but it also unnecessarily abridges the narrative of British trench-war experience. Analyzing each war poet's treatment of sound highlights the trauma and disorientation of shell shock, in addition to its effect on the social dynamics of front line soldiers. Additionally, the motif of water and rain present in each poet's writing reveals not only the disdainful association of rain and mud with discomfort, disease, and stewing frustration, but it also complicates this perception, offering alternative views of acceptance of such conditions. Though expressions of disenchantment even in the early works of the three war poets certainly vary, moving beyond that category and considering instead the historical information offered by certain literary attributes of Brooke's, Sassoon's and Sorley's poetry lends greater insight to multiple perspectives of trench experience in World War I. Thus, to *unify* our perceptions of these Great War poets is to better preserve the voices of the past.

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