

Aftermath: The Implicit Processes of Integrating Traumatic Experience in the Poetry of Siegfried Sassoon

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Abstract: The creation of narratives often allows individuals to bear witness to traumatic events. This study looked at connections between the processing of traumatic, affect laden experience and levels of symbolization and symmetry within the context of poetic expression. The sample for this pilot study is composed of selected works by Siegfried Sassoon (1886–1967), a British soldier–poet of the Great War. The language of the poems reflected the deepening trauma of the war experience by showing a progression toward paranoid (concrete)/symmetrical experiences. As the years passed and the poet was able to process the memory of the events, the poetry reflected a more balanced shift toward integration of depressive (symbolic)/asymmetrical experience. In terms of affect, the most significant changes were seen after Sassoon left the front and witnessed the flagrant dichotomy between civilian and military life. The results suggest a way in which traumatic events are processed. The routine horror and brutality of the Western Front initially lay outside of the realm of language and symbols and were thus highly concrete and unprocessed experiences. Time, place, and identity collapsed in on itself, leading to the increase of symmetrical experience, while the extreme “us versus them experience” of the trenches can be seen in the balance of asymmetrical experience. The study has implications for the treatment of war trauma, suggesting that writing provides a vehicle through which events can be processed and an internal sense of balance can be approached.

How does one make sense of that which is unimaginable or put words upon that which is unspeakable? How does a soldier, who is stripped of so many things that we cherish as human when he enters into battle, begin to reconstruct his humanity? This article explores how one soldier, Siegfried Sassoon, attempted to answer these questions through the creation of art. For, when the unspeakable and the unimaginable do indeed

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come to pass, it is often the formation of a narrative that allows both the creator and the clinician to bear witness to traumatic events.

This article will examine the language of Sassoon's poetry in an effort to determine possible key factors in the healing process. One of these is the development of the ability to use metaphor and symbolization to express the concretely experienced events of trauma, striking an internal equilibrium between symmetry and asymmetry (to use the language of Matte Blanco, 1975), and integrating both positive and negative affect into a balanced appraisal of experience. The researcher hypothesized that the poetry would reflect the deepening trauma of the war experience by showing a progression toward paranoid (concrete)/symmetrical experiences; as the years pass and the poet is able to process the experience, the poetry would reflect a shift toward depressive (symbolic)/asymmetrical experience.

Siegfried Sassoon was chosen from among many British poets for a variety of reasons. Unlike many poets of the Great War, Sassoon wrote poems while still a civilian, entered the war toward the beginning of the conflict, fought in many major engagements, and survived to grow old. Thus, he left behind an emotional map of sorts, a chronicle of the different stages of the war through his words. Second, there are concrete dates for his work (unlike, for example, Wilfred Owen), so a clear chronology can be created. Finally, there is concise biographical information linked to the writing of these poems, events that include the death of Sassoon's brother at Gallipoli and the poet's hospitalization for "shell shock" in 1917.

Sassoon's work provides good material for a study of how trauma is expressed in words. Four poems (Sassoon, 1984) were selected for study: "A Poplar and the Moon," written in 1912, served as the prewar work; "To My Brother," written in 1915, was the early war poem; "Does it Matter?" written in 1917 was the later war, institutional work; and "Picture-Show," written in 1920, was the postwar work. All of the poems are provided for review following this article. With the exception of "A Poplar and the Moon," the poems had to meet the criteria of mentioning the experience of the First World War, and were selected through expert consensus from among the hundreds of poems Sassoon composed.

PLOUGHSHARES, PENS AND SWORDS: SIEGFRIED LORRAINE SASSOON

Siegfried Sassoon was perhaps the Great War's most famous victim of shell shock. The paradoxes and dichotomies of his early life bred an outstanding officer of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers. The horrors and tragedies

he experienced as an officer bred an outstanding poet. Ironically, had it not been for the First World War, we might never have heard his name.

Sassoon was born in Kent in 1886, the second son of Alfred Sassoon, who traced his Sephardic roots back to ancient Persia. This Jewish half of Sassoon's heritage presented a mysterious and glamorous vision of "oriental decadence," for which the young man felt great ambivalence. Though elements of the drama and romance of the Sassoon clan found their way in some of Siegfried's earliest poetry, Sassoon desired above all else to be an English gentleman. He occasionally let slip a loathing for this alien part of himself; letters with an anti-Semitic tone written to his friend Robert Graves attest to this (Wilson, 1998a). Sassoon's father left the family for another woman when the boy was five and died of tuberculosis when Sassoon was nine. Again, this early separation from Alfred Sassoon, who represented all of the despotic grandeur of the powerful Sassoon merchant clan, created a schism of sorts within the boy, one that he struggled to reconcile for the rest of his life. He both resented the man who betrayed a mother to whom he was "unusually close" (Wilson, 1998a), and at the same time he longed to gain the approval and attention of a father whom he adored. Another division with which Sassoon was to struggle for the rest of his life was his sexuality, for the ideal of the hunter and adventurer was, in that era and culture, irreconcilable with being gay.

Overall, Sassoon's youth was privileged, pastoral, and seemingly idyllic, with the presence of his larger-than-life mother, Theresa Thornycraft, always looming. Residents of Thornycraft Hall since the 13th century, Sassoon's "thoroughly English" maternal ancestors (Wilson, 1998a) were stout farmers, prodigious cheese makers and surprisingly, artists of some note. Siegfried's grandmother Mary achieved fame as a sculptor that few other Victorian women could rival. The young man studied both Law and History at Cambridge before leaving without earning a degree. He never felt that he fit into the school, and not being awarded the Chancellor's Medal in Poetry was more than he could tolerate. After leaving university, Sassoon lived the life of a gentleman, hunting, riding and playing cricket until the outbreak of the War. He continuously dabbled in poetry, and while his early work received some attention, it did not truly stand out from other pieces of Georgian romanticism. Campbell (1999) comments that during these years, Sassoon wanted to combine the apparently antipathetic roles of aesthete and athlete; to enjoy a "double life" which required one half of him to be a hunter and the other half gentleman writer.

Sassoon enlisted in the army on August 2, 1914, two days before the British declaration of war. He assumed that he would be "a dashing cavalry officer, but a riding injury kept him out of the show" for over a year.

When he finally did join the ranks, the realities of the trenches crushed his dreams of glory. Between November 1915 and April 1917 he served as a second lieutenant in both the First and Second Battalions Royal Welsh Fusiliers.

By all accounts Lieutenant Sassoon was a splendid officer; though a bit reckless with his own life, he did his utmost to ensure the safety, comfort, and dignity of his men. The poems that he wrote such as "A Testament" and "To Victory" are patriotic, exploring themes of heroic sacrifice and seeming to pander to the sentiments of the public (Campbell, 1999). As the war progressed, and Sassoon witnessed the traumatic annihilation of the British Army, his tone began to change. On November 1, 1915 Sassoon suffered his first personal loss of the war, when his younger brother Hamo, for whom Siegfried and the family had maintained a protective role, was mortally wounded at the senseless debacle that was Gallipoli. Sassoon marked this family tragedy with the poem entitled "To My Brother," which continued the heroic Georgian themes of his other early bellum work.

Following the death of his dear friend David Thomas in the trenches, Sassoon seemed determined to wreak revenge upon the Germans, going out on personal and unplanned raids into no-man's-land. Such reckless enthusiasm earned him the nickname "Mad Jack," and as Sassoon lobbed hand grenades at "the Boche," his legend grew. When his platoon was involved in a raid on Kiel Trench shortly afterwards, Sassoon's actions in getting his dead and wounded men back to the British trenches earned him a Military Cross in July of 1916. Sassoon was one of the rare officers who earned the respect and praise of his men. By this point, however, all of his initial idealism and had been shattered alongside the bodies of his men, and keeping them safe seemed to be his only reasoning for living. Disasters such as the Somme, in which Lord Kitchener's New Army was decimated at the rate of 20,000 an hour (Gilbert, 1994), disillusioned Sassoon to the point in which he abandoned his earlier beliefs of a war for King and Country and began to openly question the motives of governments and generals who were so willing to send the finest young men of their nations to their deaths.

Sassoon participated in the Second Battle of the Scarpe where he was wounded in the shoulder. This particular incident started a train of events which culminated in his "Declaration." While on convalescent leave, he conversed with several prominent pacifists, including John Middleton Murry and Bertrand Russell. Back in England and away from the cohesion provided by his men, Sassoon, as is often the case in soldiers returning from the front (cf., Shay, 1995; Shepard, 2002), found an irreconcilable division between the attitudes of the civilians around him and the actual experiences of war. Feeling alone and isolated in an expe-

rience that even those whom he loved could never comprehend, his war shifted to the home front, with those who were alien to the experience of combat becoming enemies even more hated than the Germans. His "Declaration of Willful Defiance," in which he questioned the government's motives for and prosecution of the war, was taken by the British command to be an act of open rebellion.

Fortunately for Sassoon, his friend Robert Graves was influential in saving him from a court-martial. Graves intervened, pulled strings with the authorities, and managed to persuade them to have Sassoon committed to Craiglockhart War Hospital in July 1917, officially suffering from "shell-shock." Sassoon wrote a good deal of poetry while at Craiglockhart, which later appeared in *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*. His work during this period is characterized by a savage and cynical attitude toward a world he viewed as fatally polarized and damaged. It is filled with the irony and bitter anger that was to be the defining notes of his finest writing.

Gone was the patriotism, optimism, and flowery metaphor of earlier work, to be replaced by an unsettling realism and visceral brutality. He masterfully conveyed the senseless futility of the struggle through short and elegantly constructed verse that seems to have been created by a different hand than the one that penned "France" but months earlier; trauma does indeed have the effect of making a soldier feel as if the person who existed before the war was utterly annihilated amidst the carnage. While in the trenches it may have been impossible to put words to indescribable feelings, and Sassoon's ability to do so suggests that the work of therapy had allowed him to begin the processing of his experience.

His therapy was conducted by W.H.R. Rivers, who provided that benevolent father figure that Sassoon had previously been denied. Sassoon reported the nightmares, panic attacks, and occasional hallucinations that were to plague him for the rest of his life. Applying his process of "re-education" to his work with Sassoon, Rivers sought to provide a space for the gentle reintegration of traumatic memories with "the ordinary personality"; in this case Sassoon's personality was that of the good officer who was willing to lay all on the line for his men. Rivers greatly encouraged Sassoon's writing as a way to affect this integration. Sassoon eventually came to believe that his protest had achieved nothing, except to keep him away from those men; his decision to apply for General Service seems to have been based on his perceived responsibilities at the front. After four months at Craiglockhart, Sassoon was again passed fit for General Service abroad.

After three months serving in Palestine, Sassoon's battalion was posted to France and Sassoon eventually found himself in the front line.

His active service ended with a wound to the head in July, 1918. He returned to civilian life with trembling hands and tormenting dreams. Sassoon spent the remainder of his life (he died in 1968 at 80) attempting to chronicle and make sense of the years between 1900 and 1920 through the writing of memoirs and poetry.

THE STUDY: MEASURE OF IMPLICIT PROCESSES

This is a qualitative, longitudinal study of the change of a single individual's language patterns over a specific period of time. For this first step in what will be a larger study, a single poet and a single measure was chosen. As a preliminary study using a fairly new measure, all efforts were made to meet acceptable research practices for qualitative research (e.g., Malterud, 2001; Silverstein, Auerbach, & Levant, 2006). A qualitative design, which involves the systematic collection, organization, and interpretation of textual material, was deemed the most appropriate for this research as qualitative methods "are used in the exploration of meanings of social phenomena as experienced by individuals themselves, in their natural context" (Malterud, 2001, p. 484). The researcher hoped to do just this, to capture and analyze, by looking at his own words, the experience of a soldier as he passed through different contextual realms. The poems were assigned to the four chronological groups detailed previously, as the researcher hoped to discern shifts in emotion, symmetry/asymmetry, and symbolized/concrete processes that might be linked with Sassoon's trauma and over time.

The Matrix of Mental Experience (MOME; Newirth, 2001) attempts to assess symbolization and psychic transformation through a two-dimensional model, focusing upon symmetry and asymmetry in conscious and unconscious processes (Matte Blanco, 1988), as well as the Kleinian concepts of concrete/paranoid and symbolic/depressive modes of experience (Klein, 1975). The measure was originally created to examine therapy session transcripts; this is the first study that the researcher is aware of that it is applied to poetry. It has been previously used to examine various forms of texts and was applied to "study the intersection between aspects of emotionality and levels of symbolization" (p. 2) in transcripts from the film *Ulysses' Gaze* (Tsolas, 2003), and to differentiate between psychotic and nonpsychotic states in the songs of Syd Barret (Brown, 2005). As it was derived as a way to operationalize theory, the measure meets standards for construct and theoretical validity.

The MOME is based upon Matte Blanco's (1975, 1988) biological principles of sameness (symmetry) and differentiation (asymmetry) and the Kleinian principles of the paranoid and depressive positions. As discussed by Matte Blanco, the concepts of asymmetry and symmetry deal

with whether an individual relates to objects more by generating difference and discrimination in terms of time, place, person, or causality (asymmetry) or by attempting to create a sense of sameness by collapsing the frames of linear thought (symmetry). The measure attempts to categorize mental processes into four categories along two dimensions. The first dimension is composed of CONCRETE and SYMBOLIC thinking while the second is expressed SYMMETRICAL and ASSYMETRICAL thinking.

PROCEDURE

The first step in analyzing the poems of Sassoon was to divide the works into individual "thought units," which noted content shifts in terms of affect or idea; the units ranged from a few words to a single mark of punctuation (Sassoon used ellipses and hyphens to convey ideas through visual symbols). The division was done by the researcher, two senior faculty members (both of whom had been involved in the development of the MOMES), and five trained graduate students, all of whom had participated in at least four similar studies. All of the participating students had been trained using the "Manual for a Two Dimensional Measure of Psychic Experience" (Saad & Shani, 2002). To maximize reliability and descriptive validity, final decisions were reached through group consensus. Interrater reliability for the divisions fell within acceptable levels (Cohen's Kappa = .88)

Two examples of these divisions are:

"To My Brother"
 /Give me your hand, my brother,/search my face;/
 /Look in these eyes/lest I should think of shame;/
 /For we have made an end to all things base./
 /We are returning by the road we came./
 "Does it Matter?"
 /Does it matter?—/losing your legs?/ . . . /
 /For people will always be kind,/
 /And you need not show that you mind/

(Sassoon, 1984, p. 11)

"A Poplar and the Moon," a ten-line poem, was divided into 13 units; "To My Brother," an eight-line poem, was divided into 12 units; "Does it Matter?" a 15-line poem, was divided into 23 units; and "Picture-Show," a 15-line poem, was divided into 18 units. The total number of units across the four poems was 66.

The next phase in the analysis involved the application of the MOMES measure. Six raters (two faculty members and four graduate students)

participated in the study. Once again, all of the participating students had been trained using the "Manual for a Two Dimensional Measure of Psychic Experience" (Saad & Shani, 2002) and had participated in at least four other coding studies using the MOMES. When working with the poems, to avoid bias, the raters were given the poems without titles or chronological information (the writer of this study being the exception). The main goal of this phase, to maximize reliability and descriptive validity, was for the six raters to achieve consensus regarding the codes to be assigned for each of the thought units. Consensus was accomplished through an agreement on final interpretations that was satisfactory to each rater, following a discussion of their initial conceptualizations. While some disagreement did occur, they were all eventually resolved through discussion. Following an initial reading of the entire poem, the raters first attempted to assign values for orientation and valence. Occasionally, the prior experiences of the raters were called in to supplement the limitations of the manual (i.e., coding punctuation marks). Interrater reliability fell within acceptable levels (Cohen's Kappa = .85)

RESULTS

The researcher hypothesized that the poetry would reflect the deepening trauma of war experience by showing a progression toward paranoid and symmetrical experiences; as the years passed and the poet was able to process his experiences, the poetry would reflect a shift toward depressive and asymmetrical experience. An analysis of the data did indeed indicate that Sassoon's style of writing shifted significantly over time. In all areas, symbolization and symmetry, significant changes occurred.

As an initial test, chi squares were run. Significant differences were found between symbolized and concrete contents ($\chi^2(3) = 25.26 p < .001$). Significant differences were also found between symmetrical and asymmetrical content ($\chi^2(3) = 8.59 p < .05$).

Measures of Symbolization

An initial content analysis revealed a statistically significant greater amount of symbolized (depressive) content in the first poem, "A Poplar and the Moon," a trend which had reversed dramatically in Poem 2, "To My Brother." (Poem 1: 0% symbolized, 100% concrete content; Poem 2: 83.3% symbolized, 16.7% concrete content.) This difference remained consistent in Poem 3, "Does it Matter?" (30% symbolized, 70% concrete content) and had once again reversed itself in the final Poem, "Pic-

ture-Show" (72% symbolized, 28% concrete content). Though in the final poem the ratio between symbolized and concrete language is more balanced than it was in the first poem.

Despite the small sample size, all previous studies utilizing this measure as suggested by the manual, employed a one-way ANOVA, and the researcher decided to follow convention and do the same; in future studies, a General Linear Model may serve better. The one-way ANOVA revealed significant differences between poems; therefore the Tukey post hoc test of honest significant difference was also run. This conservative test indicated significant differences primarily between Poems 1 (prewar) and 2 (early war), Tukey $F(3, 62) = 12.82$ $p < .001$, poems 1 and 3 (late war) $F(3, 62) = 12.82$ $p < .001$, and, to a lesser degree between Poems 2 and 4 (postwar) $F(3, 62) = 12.82$, *ns*.

Measures of Symmetry

An initial content analysis revealed a significant difference between symmetrical (92%) and asymmetrical content (8%) in Poem 1 (prewar), a trend which once again reversed itself in the early war Poem 2 (symmetrical 42%, asymmetrical 38%), though not at a level that reaches statistical significance within the poem. The writing becomes more balanced in late war Poem 3 (symmetrical 48%, asymmetrical 32%), and postwar Poem 4 (symmetrical 56%, asymmetrical 44%).

Once again, as suggested by the manual, the researcher employed a one-way ANOVA, which revealed significant differences between poems; therefore Tukey comparisons were also run. In this conservative test significant differences were indicated between Poems 1 and 2, Tukey $F(3, 62) = 3.092$, $p < .05$, and Poems 1 and 3, Tukey $F(3, 62) = 3.092$, $p < .05$.

DISCUSSION

Sassoon's use of language significantly changed over the time that he was exposed to the traumas of the Western Front. This confirms the author's initial hypothesis; these empirically measurable shifts coincide with the shifts in Sassoon's situation in the War.

When the unspeakable and unimaginable do come to pass in the form of traumatic events, it is often the creation of a narrative that allows the individual to begin the healing process. The findings grant some insight into how this process takes form, with implications for how we, as clinicians, may conceptualize treatment with those who have been trauma-

tized. The study also provides clinical and theoretical language, symmetry and symbolization, to describe some of the shifts noted in Sassoon's biography.

In terms of symbolization and symmetry, the most significant changes were seen after Sassoon suffered the trauma of losing his brother and comrades, while witnessing the horrors of trench warfare. The shifts from Depressive to Paranoid and Asymmetrical to Symmetrical were significant; these findings also confirm the author's hypothesis. In terms of affect, the most significant changes were seen after Sassoon left the front and witnessed the flagrant dichotomy between civilian and military life. The results suggest a way in which traumatic events are processed. The routine horror and brutality of the Western Front initially lay outside of the realm of language and symbols and were thus highly concrete and unprocessed experiences. Time, place, and identity collapsed in on itself, leading to the increase of symmetrical experience, while the extreme "us versus them experience" of the trenches can be seen in the balance of asymmetrical experience. In a world where survival depended upon action, negative feelings had to be dissociated or repressed, and often came in overwhelming torrents when soldiers returned from the front. With time, as the horrific losses of war became integrated into Sassoon's experience, the unspeakable became more acceptable to consciousness and a greater sense of balance between symmetrical/asymmetrical and symbolic/concrete (signs of greater health) are evident. It is possible that in the case of Sassoon, there was a reciprocal relationship between creativity and integration, in which his writing aided the process of integration, which then enabled him to be a more effective writer.

These findings suggest that writing provides a vehicle through which events can be processed and an internal sense of balance can be approached. Trauma, with its attendant formal regression, may lead to a loss in the ability to symbolize and use metaphor, with the individual trapped in a concrete, symptomatic world that object relations theorists call the paranoid schizoid position. Composing poetry, perhaps creative writing generally, encourages one to enter a world of symbolized expression that calls for integration of experience and affect.

A limitation of the study is that it examined only a small selection of poems by one educated man of privilege who saw his innocence and idealism lost forever on the fields of France. The researcher plans to expand the present study to include other poems of Sassoon, as well as other poets such as Wilfred Owen, Edmund Blunden, Joyce Kilmer, and Rupert Brooke. Such an analysis can also be used upon the work produced by soldiers in other wars, including selections from poems and journals of present day soldiers in Iraq.

THE POEMS**From *Collected Poems of Siegfried Sassoon*****A Poplar and the Moon (1912)**

There stood a Poplar, tall and straight;
 The fair, round Moon, uprisen late,
 Made the long shadow on the grass
 A ghostly bridge 'twixt heaven and me.
 But May, with slumbrous nights, must pass;
 And blustering winds will strip the tree.
 And I've no magic to express
 The moment of that loveliness;
 So from these words you'll never guess
 The stars and lilies I could see.

To My Brother (1915)

Give me your hand, my brother, search my face;
 Look in these eyes lest I should think of shame;
 For we have made an end of all things base.
 We are returning by the road we came.
 Your lot is with the ghosts of soldiers dead,
 And I am in the field where men must fight.
 But in the gloom I see your laurel'd head
 And through your victory I shall win the light.

Does it Matter? (1917)

Does it matter?—losing your legs?...
 For people will always be kind,
 And you need not show that you mind
 When the others come in after hunting
 To gobble their muffins and eggs.
 Does it matter?—losing your sight?...
 There's such splendid work for the blind;
 And people will always be kind,
 As you sit on the terrace remembering
 And turning your face to the light.
 Do they matter?—those dreams from the pit?...
 You can drink and forget and be glad,
 And people won't say that you're mad;
 For they'll know you've fought for your country
 And no one will worry a bit.

Picture-Show (1920)

And still they come and go: and this is all I know—
 That from the gloom I watch an endless picture-show,
 Where wild or listless faces flicker on their way,
 With glad or grievous hearts I'll never understand
 Because Time spins so fast, and they've no time to stay
 Beyond the moment's gesture of a lifted hand.
 And still, between the shadow and the blinding flame,
 The brave despair of men flings onward, ever the same
 As in those doom-lit years that wait them, and have been...
 And life is just the picture dancing on a screen.

"Does It Matter", "Picture-Show", "A Poplar and the Moon", "To My Brother", from COLLECTED POEMS OF SIEGFRIED SASSOON by Siegfried Sassoon, copyright 1918, 1920 by E.P. Dutton. Copyright 1936, 1946, 1947, 1948 by Siegfried Sassoon. Used by permission of Viking Penguin, a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

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