

The Language of Siegfried Sassoon's 1916 Poems: Some Emerging Stylistic Traits

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Literary-critical analyses of Sassoon's war poetry generally make reference in some way to his style or rather his *styles* since there is a consensus that Sassoon's writing shifted in form and content across the 1915-1918 period. For example, Patrick Campbell speaks of Sassoon's 'steady progression'¹ in his development of a poetic fingerprint, Paul Moeyes discusses Sassoon's pre-war, war, and post-war verse in terms of stages,² and Michael Thorpe, responsible for one of the earliest critical coverage of Sassoon's output compartmentalizes Sassoon's war poetry into four descriptive styles: 'happy warrior', 'bitter pacifist', 'himself bewildered', and 'a larger sympathy'.³ Although all of these studies provide detailed readings of the poems, outlining their content and thematic concerns, they give little critical or forensic attention to the actual language that Sassoon employs in shaping his representations of experience. My own interest, as an academic linguist, relates to how we might begin to more systematically account for Sassoon's style by identifying and analyzing his language; the discussion below specifically focuses on some linguistic characteristics of Sassoon's 1916 war poems.

The importance of the period between Sassoon's arrival in France in November 1915 and his early experiences at the Front across into 1916 have been well documented. Although it is somewhat of a crude division to set out his pre-1916 verse from that of 1916 onwards, it does provide a starting point for a close examination of an emerging difference in Sassoon's use of language. This shift in style, in turn, may be understood both in the context of key events that occurred across the 1915-1916 divide, for example the loss of his brother Hamo and of his close friend David Thomas, and within his desire to be a more situational and observational poet, or as Sassoon himself writes 'to record my surroundings'.⁴ Sassoon's initial meeting with Robert Graves in November 1915 and the subsequent

¹ Patrick Campbell, *Siegfried Sassoon: A Study of The War Poetry* (Jefferson, NC: Macfarland, 1999), p.24.

² Paul Moeyes, *Siegfried Sassoon: Scorched Glory, A Critical Study* (New York, NY: St Martin's Press, 1997).

³ Michael Thorpe, *Siegfried Sassoon: A Critical Study* (London: Oxford University Press).

⁴ Siegfried Sassoon, *Siegfried's Journey* (London: Faber and Faber, 1945), p.17.

friendship between the two also greatly influenced his poetic identity and output. Sassoon's pre-1916 poems, described by Edward Marsh as having 'far too much of the worn-out stuff and garb of poetry',⁵ and which were, in Sassoon's own words, constrained by a focus on 'moons and nightingales and things',⁶ clearly take a shift in style, if not always in sentiment, subsequent to his meeting Graves. Sassoon's early reactions to Graves' poetry, 'some very bad, violent and repulsive. A few full of promise and real beauty. He oughtn't to publish yet'⁷ demonstrate his own initial distance from Graves' early war efforts that, in comparison, were more direct and less sentimental (although ironically Graves would subsequently move away from this style of writing). A good place, therefore, to start examination of Sassoon's language would be a pre-1916 poem in order to provide a clear contrast to his later work. 'Absolution' was written by Sassoon 'whilst learning to be a second-lieutenant' in mid 1915 and was 'manifestly influenced by Rupert Brooke's famous sonnet sequence'.⁸ Indeed Bernard Bergonzi places the poem squarely as 'an exercise in the Brookian mode'.⁹

It is unsurprising then that 'Absolution' sets up a series of idealized concepts through a succession of abstractions that underpin the whole sentiment of the poem, and which include 'anguish', 'beauty', 'scourge', 'freedom', 'horror' and 'anger'. Interestingly, a number of these occupy the initial position in the clauses in which they appear and so are presented as either agents of actions, 'The anguish of the earth absolves our eyes' or are highly prominent as the heads of descriptive clauses, 'war is our scourge'. In the second stanza, the more negatively oriented abstractions, which include the less specific and (perhaps) euphemistic 'loss of things desired', are dismissed by the speaker and replaced by confident markers of knowledge, 'must pass' 'we know' 'what need we more'. The poem juxtaposes these abstract concepts and markers of confidence to emphasize its sense of collective perspective. This is supported through the extensive use of the first person plural pronouns 'we' and 'us'

⁵ Siegfried Sassoon, *The Weald of Youth* (London: Faber and Faber, 1942), p.139.

⁶ Robert Graves, *In Broken Images, Selected Letters of Robert Graves 1914-1946*, edited by Paul O'Prey (London: Hutchinson, 1982), p.44.

⁷ Siegfried Sassoon, *Diaries 1915-1918*, edited and introduced by Rupert Hart Davies (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), p.21.

⁸ Siegfried Sassoon, *Siegfried's Journey*, p.17.

⁹ Bernard Bergonzi, *Heroes' Twilight: A Study of the Literature of the Great War* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1996, 3rd edition), p.92.

together with the possessive form 'our'. Forms like these typically refer to a group of two or more people and are usually, from the context of use, understood in varying degrees of specificity. For example, 'we can see' may refer to two people or to a larger but still clearly defined group. It may also be used in a general sense to refer to a group of undisclosed – or unknown – numbers, or to give the impression that the speaker represents a larger group even if they do not. In 'Absolution', the use of the first person is a significant stylistic trait (I'll return later to how pronoun use can be viewed in more nuanced ways in Sassoon's 1916 poems) and here, 'we', 'us' and 'our' are understood as being used generically; the 'we' to whom the speaker of the poem refers is thus a similar kind of abstraction to the concepts discussed at the beginning of the poem. It is interesting to note, however, that although this generic reference does nod towards the 'Brookian' mode with its echoes of a Homeric paradigm of warfare and its emphasis on collectiveness, the shift in pronoun use at the end whereby the more generic 'we' is replaced by the specific 'my' in 'my comrades' and 'my brothers' does clearly designate a particular speaker and so moves from the abstract and distant to the concrete and more personal. The phrase 'this heritage of heart' (compare the effect of the more distant 'that heritage of heart') also suggests that the speaker feels close to the concept and emotions described, albeit if we recognize, reading the poem from the vantage point of over a hundred years since its composition, that the closeness implied is still largely an idealized one and that a very different kind of poetic proximity emerges in Sassoon's work in the following year.

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A shift in style in Sassoon's early 1916 poems is generally best contextualized through scrutiny of his diary entries of the time which depict a mind coming to terms with its new surroundings and consequently which demonstrate the effect of experience and observation in facilitating a movement in his verse away from mere abstractions. Both Sassoon's diary entries and poems thus exemplify to increasing degrees his self-identification as 'a kind of minor prophet';¹⁰ his experiences in France resulting in a set of 'stored-up impressions and emotional reactions to the extraordinary things I had observed and undergone',¹¹ which in turn necessitate some kind of responsive poetic output. Although Sassoon's diary entries between January

¹⁰ D. Felicitas Corrigan, *Siegfried Sassoon: Poet's Pilgrimage* (London: Victor Gollancz), p.21.

¹¹ Siegfried Sassoon, *Siegfried's Journey*, p.21.

and March 1916 demonstrate complex and rather nuanced shifts in attitude towards the war, it is possible to identify some ways in which a new emerging language appears. Towards the beginning of that period, Sassoon's writing retains its largely conservative Georgian qualities; he writes that 'My voice shall ring through the great wood because I am glad for a while with beautiful earth'¹² and 'how strange it is that I came to the war prepared to suffer torments and to see horrible sights; and I have found hours in heaven'.¹³ Emotional responses are, however, represented in a different manner following more intense experiences. For example, his entries from towards the end of March 1916 when he set off 'to do six days in the trenches with C company'¹⁴ contain more sombre descriptions of the 'inaccessible caverns of death'¹⁵ where bodies are 'smashed and riddled' in the 'ever-present imminence of death and wounds'.¹⁶

Writing about cultural memory and the poems of Wilfred Owen, Eva Zettelmann argues that a fundamental stylistic trait of Owen's lyrical poems is that

[...] the poem's central voice always speaks firmly from a vantage point within the projected world. The speaker's sensual perceptions are the sensations of a body placed in a defined position: in a trench, in a German underground shelter, walking behind a cart [...] Reading Owen, we feel we know what being a soldier in the First World War was like.¹⁷

I would argue that it is also possible to view these characteristics in Sassoon's 1916 poems. As with his diary entries, Sassoon's movement from the sentiment of pre-1916 to the experience of 1916 onwards is realized in a more finely-tuned prophetism which reconfigures the abstract and idealized into a poetics of narrativity, experience and projected proximity where (to echo Zettelmann), the language of the poems position the reader as privileged, informed and close to the action. In the remainder of

¹² Siegfried Sassoon, *Diaries 1915-1918*, p.33.

¹³ Siegfried Sassoon, *Diaries 1915-1918*, p.34.

¹⁴ Siegfried Sassoon, *Diaries 1915-1918*, p.46.

¹⁵ Siegfried Sassoon, *Diaries 1915-1918*, p.47.

¹⁶ Siegfried Sassoon, *Diaries 1915-1918*, p.47.

¹⁷ Eva Zettelmann, 'Wilfred Owen and the Culture of Commemoration', 2018, <http://ww1centenary.oucs.ox.ac.uk/memoryofwar/wilfred-owen-and-the-culture-of-commemoration/>. Last accessed 24/11/18.

this article, I examine the linguistic features of some of Sassoon's 1916 verse and identify some ways in which these poems contain an emerging set of stylistic traits.

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One of the most striking - yet unsurprising – aspects of Sassoon's verse from 1916 — is the degree to which they present highly *tellable* scenes and events. That is, they move away from intense subjective lyricism and instead provide narratives that outline dramatic and interesting characters and events. This characteristic appears in those poems that flesh out their protagonists more fully so as provide some sense of their backstory. An early example of such a poem is 'In the Pink', which appeared in a diary entry of 10th February 1916, was published later that year, and which Sassoon later stated had been his 'first admonitory war poem'.¹⁸ Although he had by this time seen nothing of any significant action, Sassoon would have, as Paul Moeyes suggests, read and censored the letters of the men under his command.¹⁹ The tellability of this poem rests in its authentic portrayal of the concerns of the ordinary soldier Willie Davies through whose consciousness the poem is largely presented to the reader. The first of a number of poems where Sassoon merges his own narration with the voices of others, 'In the Pink' draws on Davies' idiosyncratic ways of thinking and speaking: the recounting of times with his 'sweetheart' Gwen, the everyday colloquialism of 'the simple silly things she liked to hear' and the direct thought processes that begin the third stanza 'tomorrow night we trudge'. The voice of a specific soldier and his backstory, albeit a brief one, provides an early attempt to merge the language of the observed within the prophet-poet's own narrative framing

Over time, other tellable aspects of the Front are utilized more precisely in Sassoon's verse. For example, 'A Working Party', an initial version of which was written in March 1916 has a more sustained focus on an individual soldier, his actions, his past, his family and his status among his peers. A similar, intense description of the experience of fighting and then subsequent death of a soldier, although this time a German one, appears in 'A Night Attack', whilst 'The Death-Bed' and 'Died of Wounds' both articulate their description of the experience of death away from the battlefield; again, in each case, the reader's interest is maintained through the account of an individual's struggle. In 'Died of Wounds', Sassoon resorts once more to using direct speech and drawing on the register of the ordinary man to

¹⁸ D. Felicitas Corrigan, *Siegfried Sassoon: Poet's Pilgrimage*, p.77.

¹⁹ Paul Moeyes, *Siegfried Sassoon: Scorched Glory, A Critical Study*, p.34.

capture the tragedy of the dying soldier who calls out for ‘Dickie’. And, in ‘The Hero’ the various perspectives on Jack death are presented through the different voices and their perspectives (mother, ‘Brother Officer’ and ‘Colonel’) that come together to use language in their different ways (to mourn, to perpetuate ideas about gallantry and to reflect on the reality of death), yoked together into a single form by Sassoon’s omniscient and thus ironic narrator.

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Sassoon’s commitment to capturing his observations and experiences in verse results in the development of a style that shows increasing concern with how the human form becomes integrated into the physicality of the trenches and surrounding land. As Santanu Das argues, life for a soldier at the Front was ultimately an engagement with dark, claustrophobic spaces and the rain-drenched earth gave rise to what he terms ‘muddy narratives’,²⁰ where body and land simply merge into one.

Sassoon exemplifies this characteristic through his multi-sensory descriptions of trenches. In ‘A Working Party’, verbs of movement at the beginning of the poem, ‘sliding and poising’, ‘groping’, ‘tripped’, and ‘lurched’, highlight the ways in which the physical landscape takes control of the soldier’s body causing it to work against its own instinctive movements. Equally, verbs of touch, ‘pawed the sodden bags of chalk’, of hearing ‘heard the drum and rattle’, and of sensation ‘splashing [...] where the sludge was ankle-deep’ emphasize the ways in which the trench becomes a synthesis of the various facets of the body. In turn, if we acknowledge that reading a poem enacts a kind of simulation of the actions, events and feelings outlined in that poem in our own minds,²¹ then the language of ‘A Working Party’ has the potential to immerse us in the fictional world and experience the poem as though we are close-by. This type of closeness is also evoked by Sassoon’s use of the language of orientation to map out the spatial parameters of the trench and to carefully construct a viewing position and a set of directions which focus our attention on aspects of the material landscape as experienced by the soldier. In ‘A Working Party’, this can be seen from the opening ‘blundered up’, the direct speech of ‘Keep to your right – make way!’ and the description of the flare and its upwards movement, ‘A flare went up [...] / And

²⁰ Santanu Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.62.

²¹ This is the idea of embodied simulation. See for example: Benjamin Bergen, *Louder Than Words: The New Science of How The Mind Makes Meaning* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2012), p.15-17.

flickered upwards'. The reader is invited to jointly inhabit the physical space from which the soldier 'pushed another bag along the top, / Craning his body outward' at the end of the poem which comes just before the abrupt description of his death. This form of directing is also evident in 'The Redeemer', another poem inspired by Sassoon's early experience of working parties. Here 'the rain sluiced down' and 'along the trench' set out the poem's spatial parameters and, when the Christ-like soldier appears in the second stanza, 'before me' and 'leaning forward' again orientate the reader to experience the events for themselves alongside (or possibly as) the poem's speaking voice.

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My discussion above suggests that language of proximity is a distinctive emerging feature of Sassoon's work. I would also suggest that there are a further three specific ways that we see this phenomenon in the poems. The first is due to a growing emphasis on action and description at the expense of a more reflective register. Although poems such as 'France', 'A Mystic as Soldier' and 'Secret Music' all have reflective speakers, for the most part the voices in the bulk of the 1916 poems are pre-occupied with presenting high-energy scenes and actions. Rich description, a feature of Sassoon's pre-war work, now moves from the simple pastoral to form vivid, largely shocking and highly specific images for the reader, 'Brown lines of tents [...] / Wide, radiant water [...] / Below dark, shivering trees' ('A Night Attack') and 'Warm rain on drooping roses; pattering showers / That soak the woods' ('The Death-Bed'). These descriptions form narratives in their own right: the injury or death of a soldier in the trench ('A Working Party', 'A Night Attack', 'The Road'); or in hospital ('Died of Wounds', 'Stretcher Case'); or a story from an alternative perspective ('The Tombstone-Maker', 'Two Hundred Years After'). In each case, the narrative builds towards a climax, which is then revealed either as a catastrophic event (death) or some memorable striking final – and usually highly visual - image or tag line.

A second way that the poems evoke proximity is in their conflation of event and narrating time so as to give the impression that we are viewing the events described in real time. For example, in 'Golgotha', Sassoon consistently uses present tense forms and gradually directs our attention from the poem's starting point, 'Through darkness curves a spume of falling flares', as he systematically unravels the poem's landscape to end on the striking images of the sentry and 'the brown rats, the

nimble scavengers'. The absence of any verb in the final line suddenly halts and removes the poem's sense of movement, providing a specific stylistic contrast to the motion that permeates the earlier sections of the poem and evoking a feeling of being stranded in the here and now of the physical landscape. Similarly in 'A Night Attack', the speaker's manipulation of the time frame through a flashback allows him to describe the death of the German soldier whom he found 'Dead in a squalid, miserable ditch' in order to bring together event time and narrating time and provide a sense of immediacy and projected closeness.

Finally, I return to my earlier discussion of pronouns to demonstrate an emerging characteristic in many of the early to mid 1916 poems. With some notable exceptions such as 'The Hero' and 'Stretcher Case', Sassoon largely uses the third person pronoun 'he' rather than a proper noun to introduce the soldiers at the centre of his narratives. The use of a third person pronoun typically means that in any kind of communication readers (or listeners) will need to draw on the surrounding co-text or context to work out to whom the writer (or speaker) is referring. In poems such as 'A Working Party', 'A Night Attack' and 'The Death-Bed', however, this strategy proves to be unsuccessful since it is not clear *exactly* who the soldier is. On one hand then, Sassoon presents a generalized archetype where the suffering soldiers of his poems are largely representative of many others and should be understood as such. On the other hand, since other possible options (increasing in specificity) such as 'that soldier', 'that soldier who fought in the First World War', 'John Smith' and 'John Smith from Coventry' only become necessary when a writer believes the reader will not be able to make use of the surrounding information to work out to whom 'he' refers', we can view that the use of 'he', although non-specific, assumes that a reader *is* able to draw on some form of knowledge in order to identify the soldier. In these terms, 'he' therefore gives the impression of referring to an individual that we feel we personally know.²² The naming strategy that Sassoon employs thus simultaneously generalizes *and* specifies his protagonists; we acknowledge the universality of the experience being outlined but also are encouraged to imagine real people within the (semi)-fictional worlds of the poems.

²² See the following study for a more detailed analysis of this phenomenon from a cognitive linguistic perspective: Marcello Giovanelli, 'Conceptual Proximity and the Experience of War in Siegfried Sassoon's 'A Working Party'', in *Cognitive Grammar in Literature*, edited by Chloe Harrison, Louise Nuttall, Peter Stockwell and Wenjuan Yuan (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2014), p. 145-160.

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Of course, my discussion above is limited to a specific timeframe and set of contexts as well as a relatively short selection of poems. It therefore needs to be read as part of larger developing narrative that focuses on Sassoon's style, not least because he continued to modify his use of language both during the remainder of the war and into and across his post-war output, where his writing has been viewed as reverting back to some extent to its pre-war traits or what Fran Brearton describes as 'a journey backwards rather than forwards in time'.²³ However, a consideration of Sassoon's emerging style across the 1915-1916 period does provide an insight into both the specific ways in which language is used to represent experience and how readers are positioned as witnesses to the events and characters the poems describe. Such an analysis allows for a more systematic account of exactly *what* we mean by style and facilitates an understanding of *how* Sassoon's poetry of experience manages to so powerfully convey what George Sherston, reflecting on his first few months in France, had called 'the texture of trench-life'.²⁴

²³ Fran Brearton, 'A War of Friendship: Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon', in *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, edited by Tim Kendall (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p.225.

²⁴ Siegfried Sassoon, *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston* (London: Faber and Faber, 1937), p. 276.