

## Violence and the Literature of War

—Kate Scheel

What is the appropriate response to violence? After 9/11, how should we react? What can we do to witness and acknowledge the trauma that it caused? In an examination of these questions, I undertook to teach a 20<sup>th</sup> century second-year survey course on the topic of war literature. As a class, we looked at texts whose subjects were some of the major conflicts of the century: both World wars, the Korean war, the Viet Nam War, and conflict in Latin America. Half of the works were by women writers and the majority of the authors were American; some were about battle experience and some about the trauma experienced by those more peripheral to battle, some were autobiographical and some fictional. What I'm going to do today is talk about three of the authors and their texts, in particular, the experiences of violence and conflict they relate and what that might offer to us in terms of strategies for our own experiences.

We began our study with several W.W. I poets: Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, Rose Macaulay and Kathleen M. Wallace, among others. On the one hand, it is somewhat misleading to refer to Brooke as a war poet since he never actually made it to the war, dying of blood poisoning en route to the Dardanelles. However, his book of poems, *1914 and Other Poems*, published posthumously, was so well read during the war years that he is inevitably associated with the war. I want to look at one of those poems, in particular.

### The Soldier

If I should die, think only this of me:

That there's some corner of a foreign field  
That is for ever England. There shall be  
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;

A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,  
Gave once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam.  
A body of England's, breathing English air,  
Washed by the rivers, blest by the suns of home.

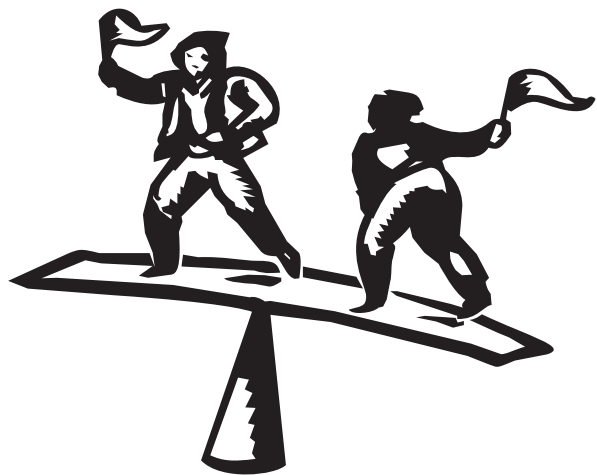
And think this heart, all evil shed away,  
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less  
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;  
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day  
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,  
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

This poet is nostalgic for a simple, pastoral time. Sacrifice in battle is seen as noble and necessary to protect this bucolic, yet fleeting vision of English life. The soldier's death ensures the continuation of English ideals as if the burial of his English body, even on foreign soil, would be a Dionysian act of renewal of English culture. The traditional values that the poem supports are reinforced by its conventional structure. In contrast to Brooke, the lesser-known Siegfried Sassoon was on the battle field, and his poetry reflects the sights, sounds,

smells and feelings of trench warfare. For example, his poem "Counter-Attack" begins thus:

We'd gained our first objective hours before  
While dawn broke like a face with blinking eyes,  
Pallid, unshaven and thirsty, blind with smoke,  
Things seemed all right at first. We held their line,  
With bombers posted, Lewis guns well placed,  
And clink of shovels deepening the shallow trench.  
The place was rotten with dead; green clumsy legs  
High-booted, sprawled and grovelled among the saps  
And trunks, face downwards, in the sucking mud,  
Wallowed like trodden sand-bags loosely filled,  
And naked sodden buttocks, mats of hair,  
Bulged, clotted heads slept in the plastering slime  
And then the rain began, — the jolly old rain!

The comparison between this poem and that of Brooke's is particularly telling. As my students were quick to note, Brooke's poem treats war as an abstraction—there is no 'blood and guts,' and his focus is a somewhat sentimental patriotism. Sassoon's poem, on the other hand, describes the procedural details of an early morning counter offensive, the language conversational, concrete yet poetic: "We'd gained our first objective hours before/While dawn broke like a face with blinking eye". While the men are "Pallid, unshaven and thirsty", "Things" are still "all right," suggesting that the norm for a day in the trenches is a harsh one. The first 6 lines average 10 beats a line, in a standard rhythm, but there are no end rhymes, which gives the lines more of a narrative quality, as if someone were speaking. Then Sassoon begins the discussion of the digging of the trench. My understanding is that the soldiers dug three parallel trenches in a zigzag formation to form a fire trench, a support trench and a reserve trench, with connecting communication trenches between them. Soldiers stood in the fire trench to shoot. Typically soldiers spent about half a month in the trenches during which time, they slept, ate and relieved themselves there, rain or shine. Many men succumbed to "trench fever", spread by lice. Sometimes the trenches had boards along the bottom to prevent the soldiers from sinking into the mud. It is interesting that when Sassoon's



attention shifts to the trench, the lines are indented, as a narrative aside. Previously given to believe that things were ‘all right’, Sassoon shifts from his factual account to the shocking announcement that “The place was rotten with dead”. The trenches, which were always there, seem to have only now come into Sassoon’s view and he portrays them in graphic detail. The mud becomes animate as it tries to suck in the soldiers who are still alive and trying to get a firm stand. The legs of the living mix with the bodies of the dead so that you can’t tell them apart. The confusion and urgency of the situation is mirrored in the structure, with each line of poetry spilling over into the next. It is as if the inherited, poetic form cannot contain the full extent of the speaker’s impressions or attest to the unspeakable nature of the experiences. Brooke’s symmetrical, rhyming lines could not do Sassoon’s experience justice. Where Brooke is reassuring, Sassoon’s anger and frustration are apparent in the sarcasm of the last line: “and then the rain began,—the jolly old rain!” There is nothing glorious nor high minded about the situation—it’s a pragmatic discussion of how to meet the objective, which in the end, fails. The concepts of the “objective” and the “counter-attack” are undermined by Sassoon’s insistence on including the personal experience of the soldier. And the contrast between those two segments of the stanza—both in content and structure—disrupt and interrogate the sacrifice that Brooke enshrines.

From all accounts, Sassoon was a daring soldier, whose exploits earned him the nickname “Mad Jack”. He was wounded twice and awarded a Military Cross for bravery on the field. While convalescing from his wounds in 1917, he became convinced that the war had shifted from one of “defence and liberation” to one of “aggression and conquest” and that it was being unduly prolonged at great cost to the troops. In his letter stating his concerns, which was published in *The Times*, he writes:

I am not protesting against the military conduct of the War, but against the political errors and insincerities for which the fighting men are now being sacrificed.

On behalf of those who are suffering now, I make this protest against the deception which is being practised on them. Also I believe that it may help to destroy the callous complacency with which the majority of those at home regard the

continuance of agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realize. (Sassoon in Copp 251)

We can see Sassoon’s frustration with the public perception of the war that elides the actual suffering that he has experienced, and his accusation that the government has no regard for the lives of the fighting men that are presumed disposable since they are not officers and are therefore, lower class. Sassoon expected to be court-martialed for making such a statement until Robert Graves, another poet and soldier, whom Sassoon had met in France, intervened at the War Office and convinced Sassoon to attend a Medical Board hearing where it was determined that Sassoon was suffering from shell shock. He was sent to Craiglockart War Hospital under the care of Dr. W.H.R. Rivers.

Shell shock was not well understood at the time, but was believed to occur following extreme psychological stress. Often there were no immediate symptoms, but once removed to safety, soldiers would begin to have recurring nightmares, flashbacks, insomnia, violent outbursts, and heightened sensitivity to noises. Contemporary trauma theory, as articulated by Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, Juliet Mitchell and others has built on these early observations to argue that experiences of helplessness and terror, loss of control, fear of death, or exposure to the point of exhaustion cause, in addition to physical infirmities, a psychic wound. This wound exists because the traumatic event so compromises our means of survival, that it cannot be fully assimilated when it occurs. Further, trauma theorists argue that the ordinary response to a traumatic event is to bury or repress it, a response that exists simultaneously with the desire to reveal the vent and acknowledge the psychic wound. The dual impulse to repress and reveal the trauma is evident in survivors’ accounts of their experience. Herman writes: “People who have survived atrocities often tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner which undermines their credibility and thereby serves the twin imperatives of truth-telling and secrecy.” In her clinical practice with trauma survivors, Herman has noted that the survivors often alternate between “feeling numb and reliving the event.” Often, the events are so traumatic as to be unspeakable. For

The contrast between the reception afforded Brook’s work and that of Sassoon reveals the way in which the private, “realistic” account of battle was stifled because it contradicted the established culture of war. Sassoon’s testimonial could only be admitted into culture as an artifact of mental instability, while Brook’s *pro patria mori* and championing of a disappearing British life was popular because it reinforced the public culture of war. Remembering is thus dually compromised—firstly, because the nature of the psychic wound is such that the survivor pushes the event out of consciousness, or represses it, and, secondly, because the culture refuses to acknowledge that the trauma exists.

example, Mitchell has noted that the most prevalent symptom of shell shock among veterans of World War I was mutism.

Healing for a trauma survivor requires a full integration of the event into the body and the mind. This is a complex process. First of all, the survivor must be assured of safety. It is significant that Sassoon wrote his letter of condemnation of the war after having been back in England and convalescing for several months. Second, it is not enough to merely tell the story—there also must be a witness. Dori Laub notes that the trauma story is “not yet memory” (69)—in other words, it hasn’t been fully processed. In order for it to become part of the survivor’s life story, it must be heard and acknowledged. Within the psychoanalytic framework, the therapist fulfills the role of the listener. However, James Pennebaker, in his article, “Telling Stories: The Health Benefits of Narrative,” notes that “the act of converting emotions and images into words changes the way the person organizes and thinks about the trauma.” Constructing a narrative allows the person to integrate the emotional reaction with their existing experience. But it is not enough to recount the events dispassionately; the speaker must relay, as Sassoon does, the smells, sounds, and sights of the experience. Sassoon’s recovery involved both the therapeutic encounter with Dr. Rivers as well as his own writing, of which we have seen a sample. Unfortunately, his recovery resulted in his return to battle, although he survived to publish his poetry in 1917 and 1918. But while Sassoon’s poetry received little attention, Brooke’s book of poetry, on the other hand, went through 20 printings during the war. The contrast between the reception afforded Brooke’s work and that of Sassoon reveals the way in which the private, “realistic” account of battle was stifled because it contradicted the established culture of war. Sassoon’s testimonial could only be admitted into culture as an artifact of mental instability, while Brooke’s *pro patria mori* and championing of a disappearing British life was popular because it reinforced the public culture of war. Remembering is thus dually compromised—firstly, because the nature of the psychic wound is such that the survivor pushes the event out of consciousness, or represses it, and, secondly, because the culture refuses to acknowledge that the trauma exists.

I want to turn now to a civilian’s account of war trauma—that of the poet, Hilda Doolittle, known as H.D. Although an American, H.D. lived through both world wars in London, England. The Great War was very debilitating to her; she lost her brother in France, her father died soon after, her first child was stillborn, her marriage failed and she herself nearly died in the influenza epidemic that followed the war. Then, during W.W. II, she endured bombings by the Germans almost every

night for nearly nine months between September 1940 and May 1941. During the bombings, she and other Londoners would be forced out of their flats onto the streets, now covered with broken glass, wondering if the shaking walls of the buildings would hold. Her survival strategy was to write, and she composed two texts during this period: her long poem, *Trilogy* and her autobiography, *The Gift*, both of which take up



the war, but in very different ways. It’s the latter that I want to discuss today. In *The Gift*, H.D.’s reminiscences of her childhood in the safety of Pennsylvania are interspersed with her immediate reactions to the destruction around her. The accounts of the trauma, however, are not foregrounded as one might expect, but rather leak into the dominant narrative of the childhood. Often, she makes only occasional, rather oblique paragraph references to the war. One of the first substantial entries occurs about half-way through the text, where the account of the war experience shifts from the background to become the dominant narrative. I want

to quote from one of these longer passages to give you a feel for the strategies which H.D. uses to render her experience:

The noise is not loud enough, the planes follow one another singly, so the mind is still held in the grip of vital terror. Tonight there may be fire, how will we get out? Is it better to stay in bed or crawl out to the hall in the dark, open the flat-door and wait in the entrance, even run down the four flights of stairs and crouch in the air-raid shelter? There are purely mechanical questions, mechanical intellectual reactions, for I know what I am going to do. I listen to hurried footsteps on the pavement outside my window, the clang of fire engines making off from a near-by station. There will be interminable silence, and then that whizz and the wait for the crash, but that will be the world outside.

When the noise becomes intolerable, when the planes swoop low, there is a movement when indecision passes, I can not move now, anyway. I am paralysed, “frozen” rather, like the rabbit in the woods when it senses the leaves moving with that special uncanny rustling, that means the final, the almost abstract enemy is near.

My body is “frozen;” nerves, tendons, flesh are curiously endowed, they re-gain the primitive instincts of the forest animal. I can not move now. Like the rabbit, like the wild-deer, a sort of protective “invisibility” seems to surround me. My body is paralysed, “frozen.” But the mind has its wings. The trick words again. It works every time now. Fate out of an old Myth is beside me, Life is a very real thing.

Death a personified Entity. I am on my own, as at the beginning. I am safe. Now exaltation rises like sap in a tree. I am happy. I am happier than I have ever been, it seems to me, in my whole life (110).

This passage shows both the urges to reveal and to repress. It begins in an impersonal voice: it is not her mind but “the” mind that is held in the grip of terror.

The pronoun “we” is inserted in the second sentence, where she imagines herself as part of a group of people trapped in a burning building; the event having occurred so frequently that her anticipation of it alone is fraught with fear and anxiety as she tries to decide in advance how to respond. Her sensory experience is auditory: the noise of the planes, the sounds of fire engine sirens, the explosion, and the footsteps outside. She then shifts to the singular pronoun, “I” as she moves from a state of hyper-arousal to one of numbed self-paralysis. This “trick” she has mastered of being “frozen” is one in which she dissociates from her body and moves into the safety of her mind. Here, she is outside of linear time and incapable of being harmed. Her last two sentences are joyful in her complete denial of her situation and her affirmation of her safety. Those last sentences belie the anxiety she states in the first paragraph and were we to take her final statement of joy as indicative of her full response to the situation, we would miss the impact the situation had upon her.

Not long after the war, H.D. had a complete breakdown, imagining that W.W.III had begun and that bombs were dropping in her backyard. She was hospitalized in Switzerland, her friends told that she had meningitis. While I would argue that H.D. was likely suffering from what we would now call post-traumatic stress disorder, conventional wisdom has it that H.D.’s fragile, artistic temperament was overwhelmed by work, which led to her illness. Her biographer, Barbara Guest, has written of H.D. that “She never expressed fear of the bombs” (265). Yet even a cursory reading of the original, edited version of H.D.’s autobiography contains lines, such as: “I could visualize the very worst terrors. I could see myself caught in the fall of bricks and I would be pinned down under a great beam, helpless. Many had been. I would be burned to death” (215). In a similar eliding of H.D.’s experience, several sections dealing with her war experiences, including the one that I read, were omitted from the first edition of *The Gift*, excised by the editors. It is only in 1998 that the entire text of *The Gift* was restored. How are we to make sense of these

refusals to acknowledge H.D.’s own account of her experience? One explanation is that while I have foregrounded H.D.’s accounts of the bombing here, they are less evident in the total work, comprising only about 10% of the text. Another may have to do with the difficulty of the role of the witness. Laub has noted that to listen to an account of trauma is to partially experience that trauma. To “read” H.D.’s trauma narrative then is to experience her fear and readers may elide the story to protect themselves. It is not uncommon for trauma survivors to be ignored when they tell their stories.

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The final work that I wish to discuss is *Dispatches*, Michael Herr’s account of the Viet Nam War. Herr’s account is interesting as he is there, as he says, “to watch” (20). He’s a journalist whose goal was to reveal the Vietnam that was not portrayed in the usual media accounts. As Herr quickly ascertains, there are always at least two accounts of any activity—one for public consumption stateside and the private reality:

A twenty-four-year-old Special Forces captain was telling me about it. “I went out and killed one VC and liberated a prisoner. Next day the major called me in and told me that I’d killed fourteen VC and liberated six prisoners. You want to see the medal?” (172)

Herr opts out of the regular media scrum with the military brass, which he disparagingly refers to as the “Five O’clock Follies”... “an Orwellian grope through the day’s events” (99), implying that much of the media was an unwitting accomplice to the construction of the stateside version of the war. Unwilling to accept blindly the military account as the full story, Herr refuses to stay with the other media in comparative safety. He prides himself on going into the field with the “grunts”, the common soldiers.

But like many trauma survivors, Herr was troubled by the inability of existing literary forms to adequately convey his experiences and those of the “grunts.” As he says in an interview, we had “to find an expression for a very extreme experience.... We had to find this in order to save our lives” (Schroeder 40). Herr utilizes the genre of ‘new journalism’ in which the author blends his observations with novelistic technique in order to present a fuller understanding of the experience to the reader. As a result, Herr’s account is a combination of the factual and the fictional, by his own admission, which hasn’t prevented it from being hailed as the “finest documentation” of Vietnam in the 1960s (Contemporary Authors).

Herr quickly bonds with the men in the field, switching from the personal pronoun “I” to “we” about 60 pages into the narrative. It seems important to Herr, a “heavy-set” guy (54) who suffered from asthma as a child, to demonstrate his ability to go the distance, to be one of the guys, even if he doesn’t intend to pull the trigger. It becomes apparent that in the world of the ‘grunt,’ the distinction is not between male or female, but man or coward. Fighting is eroticised and welcomed:

“Quakin’ and Shakin’,” they called it, great balls of fire, Contact. Then it was you and the ground: kiss it, eat it, fuck it, plow it with your whole body, get as close to it as you can without being in it yet or of it, guess who’s flying around about an inch above your head? Pucker and submit, it’s the ground..... Amazing, unbelievable, guys who’d played a lot of hard sports said they’d never felt anything like it, the sudden drop and rocket rush of the hit, the reserves of adrenaline you could make available to yourself, pumping it up and putting it out until you were lost floating in it, not afraid, almost open to clear orgasmic death-by-drowning in it, actually relaxed” (63).

Herr has been lauded for his uncensored, physical descriptions of battle conditions. He has also been critiqued by some feminists as having claimed war as the great proving ground for men. I think that both of these analyses miss the subversion and interrogation to which Herr subjects the cultural construct of war, even as he is implicated in it. It is culture that teaches men that war is, as Herr says, “a John Wayne wet dream” (20), referenced to Hollywood movies where “Nobody dies” (46). Part of the trauma of the Viet Nam experience is how unprepared the green recruits are, despite boot camp, because the culturally-constructed version of war is so sanitized. For example, as he notes facetiously,

The Soldier’s Prayer came in two versions: Standard, printed on a plastic-coated card by the Defense Department, and Standard Revised, impossible to convey because it got translated outside of language, into chaos – screams, begging, promises, threats, sobs, repetitions of holy names until their throats were cracked and dry, until some men had bitten through their collar points and rifle straps and even their dog-tag chains. (58).

Like Sassoon, Herr’s account is one of homage to what men endure and rage at, the indifference of military command for the lives of ordinary men. But it also portrays the addict waiting for the next adrenaline fix—one of “those poor bastards who had to have a war on all the time” (243) and the nostalgia, upon returning home, for the drama: “A few

extreme cases felt that the experience there had been a glorious one, while most us felt that it had been merely wonderful. I think that Vietnam was what we had instead of happy childhoods” (244). What Herr’s nostalgia doesn’t include are the nightmares he experiences when he returns to New York, awakened by dreams in which his living room is full of dead Marines. The war trauma deepens when, a couple of years after he returns, three of his journalist friends from Vietnam are killed. Their death triggers what he refers to as a “massive physical and psychological collapse. I crashed.... I was having these recurring post-apocalyptic war dreams, but they were all taking place in New York, and it was a jungle. Just going out in the streets required the cunning and skill of special forces.” (Ciotti 25).

Herr was probably suffering from the delayed effects of trauma. As Herman points out, despite what was known about war trauma, the first systematic, large scale investigation of the long term psychological effects of war trauma was not done until after the Viet Nam War. Called shell shock in W.W. I and battle fatigue in W.W. II, it was not until there existed a

substantial anti-war movement that the deleterious effects of the Vietnam war could be acknowledged. Just as Sassoon’s protest was minimized, H.D.’s trauma written off as an artistic temperament, Viet Nam vets found their experiences trivialized. The first ‘rap’ group was formed by a group of vets, Vietnam Veterans Against the War, who met with two psychiatrists in 1970, to talk about their experiences. Many of them, distinguished for bravery, returned their medals as they gave accounts of their war crimes. The movement

spread and the Veterans’ Administration was forced to develop an outreach program for psychological counseling. It wasn’t until 1980 that post-traumatic stress was acknowledged by the American Psychiatric Association as a medical disorder and as something which, we know now, can affect anyone suffering a traumatic experience.

Herman has noted that one of the final stages of healing from trauma is to ask the question “why me?” and ultimately, “why?” One of the reasons that experiences of trauma are so disturbing to the survivors, long after the experience is over, is that everything previously believed to be solid and fixed, is now revealed to be tenuous. Survivors often find themselves questioning their identity, their relationships, their belief systems and their faith in an orderly universe as they struggle to make sense out of what may be random occurrences. Yet, in asking those questions, survivors often find ways, as we have seen, in which to transform their experiences into a testimonial. And some, as Herman notes, seek to transcend

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the trauma “by making it a gift to others”, offering up their experience. In this way, the trauma may be redeemed so that it is no longer meaningless. We see this in Sassoon’s letter of condemnation of the war, when he uses his personal experiences as a vehicle to address social justice. And, as H.D. writes in *The Gift*, it was only with the onset of a second World War that she felt compelled to offer her gift of a syncretic religious vision of healing (166). Their work becomes what Shoshana Felman has called performative, in that it enables change (53).

This raises the pedagogical question of whether these poems and narratives are performative for students. Are the students changed? Is a topic such as war literature in itself traumatizing? Several students from the class noted that they couldn’t really comprehend the personal accounts of war that they read. As one individual put it, “Reading a novel about war is sort of like reading a novel about social life in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While you can understand what life must have been like, you can’t truly appreciate it without the first hand knowledge.” What students can comprehend, I think, is the power of the cultural construction of war, the isolation of those who refuse it, and the need to practice discernment when confronting it. I think possibly they also develop an appreciation for the testimonial and for their own role as witness.

In response, then, to the question, “What is the appropriate response to war and violence?” I am reminded of the picture of Nancy DiNovo on the cover of the *Globe and Mail* a few days after 9/11. She is weeping as she plays her violin at a memorial service at Christ Church Cathedral in Vancouver. This picture stayed with me, more than the oft-repeated images of the twin towers. It seems to me that her actions acknowledge the pain and grief she experienced, but also transform and transcend the trauma. In this sense, her art becomes performative. It is not a soothing anodyne of forgetfulness. Rather, the making of art can be a means of transforming the experience and allowing the survivor to move the static experience of trauma into time and history, so that the survivor is no longer held hostage to the trauma’s haunting effects. But that often can’t be done without the acknowledgement of the trauma by society.

How we mourn as a society is a complex question. For example, the construction of the Vietnam Memorial in the United States was a political as well as a psychological process. The proposed memorial for the World Trade Centre site is even more contentious. As you probably know, the Daniel Liebeskind design is conceived such that every year on “September 11th between the hours of 8:46 a.m., when the first airplane hit and 10:28 a.m. when the second tower collapsed, the sun will shine without shadow” ([www.structure.de/en/projects/data/pro117.php](http://www.structure.de/en/projects/data/pro117.php)). There are still 19,000 body parts, including those of the terrorists, that have been recovered from the site, which are to be freeze dried and buried at the location. It seems to me that a monument

has the curious function of serving both as a testimony to a traumatic event of mass proportions, allowing the public to acknowledge their grief and thus come to terms with it, while at the same time, it locks the past in time so that it can never be forgotten. So I want to close the formal part of this presentation with a question for discussion—what is the difference between grieving and fetishizing a traumatic event?

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