

Repeated Trauma:

Examining Three Manuscripts of Siegfried Sassoon's "The Rear-Guard"

"The Rear-Guard" by Siegfried Sassoon is a war poem seemingly removed from battle. It instead takes place in a dark, hellish tunnel, and features remnants and relics of war. The narrator, supposedly Sassoon, is the rear-guard of an infantry. He is lost in the seemingly never-ending series of underground tunnels fifty feet below the battle. In this unearthly place in the earth, Sassoon discovers the decomposing body of a soldier, unnamed and unidentified. After this horrifying encounter he finds a staircase leading up to the battle, and returns to the war.

I present in this essay three different manuscript publications of "The Rear-Guard". The first is a notebook that Sassoon was writing in while on the front (Figure 1). This particular notebook chronicles the dates April 11, 1917 – June 2, 1917. It is in this notebook where "The Rear-Guard" (then "untitled") was first sketched out. The second manuscript is a hand-written, titled version of "The Rear-Guard" now housed in the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library (Figure 2). It is dated April 23rd, and could be assumed to be from the year 1917 though it is not specified. It is worth noting that in the previously discussed notebook, Sassoon writes the date "April 22nd". Finally, the third manuscript is the book "Counter-Attack, and Other Poems", first published in 1918 (Figure 3).

Each version of this poem represents a return. Specifically, a return back to the traumatic events that the poem chronicles. From the notebook sketches scrawled onto worn notebook paper, to the serene and perfect looking typed out and type-set published page of text. It is the differences between these three manuscripts that can help place us in the headspace of Sassoon as an author, and also as a soldier.

First I will speak about the rhythmic and rhyming conventions of Sassoon's writing in this poem, and how it reflects repeated trauma and a conflict between the idyllic and the hideous. The rhyme structure is broken and inconsistent. The rhythmic patterns for each of the four stanzas are as follows:

ABB
CDCD
ABBA CDCD FFG
ABA ABBC

What stands specifically are the broken fragments of sonnets. For example, the first stanza features an "ABB" rhyming pattern without another "A" rhyme to finish out a natural set of four lines. The second stanza then proceeds with a "CDCD" rhyme scheme, which is an echo of a sonnet without the full completion of one. The third stanza is a mix of a Petrarchan sonnet (ABBA) and a Shakespearean sonnet (CDCD) with a discordant final three lines that form a broken version of the normal "EFEF GG" rhyme scheme for the end of a Shakespearean sonnet. The final stanza almost has an ABBA rhyme at the end, but instead finishes with a "C" rhyme, which is an echo of the first line ("step by step"). This echo creates a sinister circular motion to the poem, as if it has the ability to be repeated again and again. This repetition can represent Post-Traumatic-Stress-Disorder, and the incontrollable return to traumatic events from your past. For a Shakespearean sonnet, the final two lines would be a "G" rhyme in the form of a couplet, and therefore have finality. In a Petrarchan sonnet, any number of combinations (including CDED CD or CDCDCD) would be used, but the final rhyme would be present *somewhere* in the final stanza. Instead, we are left with "step" and a sense of unease. Each stanza of "The Rear-Guard" forms a semi-sonnet that is never truly finished.

Therefore, “The Rear-Guard” is alluding to a poetic convention (i.e. the sonnet) that is frequently used for poems about romance and the beauty of nature. But because the sonnets are fragmented, Sassoon leaves the shadow of romance and nature and, at the same time, places the reader in the hellish environment of war. It is ironic, and also jarring to hear broken pieces of sonnets in a poem that describes in gruesome detail a dead rotting corpse. The rhyming scheme dresses this dirty and demented scene up as a fractured form of idyllic poetry, and this furthers the clear sense of unerring unease.

A clear example of the idyllic “countryside” is the final two lines of the first stanza, which read “And he, exploring fifty feet below / The rosy gloom of battle overhead.”¹ The battle is described in a romantic fashion here, through the colour of “rosy”. Later Sassoon describes “Dawn’s ghost that filtered down a shafted stair.”² Both these instances have a dichotomy between the romantic vision of the surface (i.e. rosy and dawn) and a darker, more eerie description (i.e. gloom and ghost). This furthers the ambiguity about the need to return to the surface. While the tunnel has “unwholesome air” and is a “stinking place”, the battle, which is only heard as a “muffled sound”, is a romantic ideal for the narrator and a place where he feels he *must* return. And though he unloads hell behind him as he ascends the stair, he is, in a sense, still returning to hell when he reaches the surface.

While the rhyming scheme is haphazard, there is fairly consistent iambic pentameter, with the exception of a few key passages. Sassoon employs the use of trochees at the beginning of lines constantly in this poem. The pattern of “stressed / unstressed” goes against iambic pentameter verse (unstressed / stressed) and therefore breaks the rhythm and affects the reading of the poem out loud. The poem begins with a trochee: “Groping along the tunnel, step by step,”.

¹ Sassoon, Siegfried, “The Rear-Guard.” *Counter-Attack, and Other Poems*, (London, 1918), 14

² *Ibid.*, 15

Immediately the poem is rhythmically off-kilter, as is the soldier who is unable to see anything clearly in this tunnel. Later in line 8: “Tripping, he grabbed the wall; saw some one lie”. In this instance, the line itself is tripping, due to the trochee, and is mirroring the movement of the soldier. Finally, in line 14: “Savage, he kicked a soft unanswering heap,”. Once again, Sassoon uses a trochee at the beginning of the line to break the clearly defined “unstressed / stressed” pattern. All three of these instances add fervor for the first syllable of each line, and as a result place stress on the word: “Groping”, “Tripping”, “Savage”. All three words are violent and desperate and harsh. The rhythmic feel of the word therefore reflects the meaning behind the word, and how it is understood in the context of this poem.

Rhythmically, Sassoon plays with dactyls in the third stanza to great effect:

Terribly glaring up, whose eyes yet wore
 Agony dying hard ten days before;
 And fists of fingers clutched a blackening wound.

“Terribly” and “Agony” are both dactyls, which means rhythmically they are “stressed / unstressed / unstressed”. They are therefore triplet rhythms, which work against the strict two syllable rhythms that encompass iambic pentameter.³ These two dactyls occur in the climax of the entire poem, when the soldier looks upon the decaying corpse. When read aloud the first dactyl adds a harshness to the phrase, along with the stressed syllable on “up”, which leads the reader to pause of a split second. But then the line briefly returns to regular iambic pentameter. In the second dactyl the stressed syllable is on the harsh word “hard”, and the line again returns back to regular iambic pentameter. These two lines illustrate the odd juggling act between the

³ Another instance of triplet-like rhymes occurs when the soldier speaks to the corpse, saying, “I’m looking for headquarters.” In this case, there are hidden dactyls following the first syllable of this line: “**l**ooking for **h**ead**q**uarters”.

dark/twisted and the idyllic. They resemble flashes of a terrible memory that bleeds into a sweet serene verse once more, but only briefly.

The ending of this stanza features a rhyme that hasn't been present before ("wound"). The image of the body therefore never has a sense of rhythmic finality to it. And this rhyme of "wound" bleeds into the next stanza in the form of a slant rhyme, and repeats in "found", "underground" and "sound". The image of the wound is therefore ever present, and reflects a form of repeated trauma. Through this slant rhyme, there is a clear inability to cease returning to a past event and specifically a terrifying image. As previously mentioned, the poem's circular form also harkens to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and the sense of endless repetition.

All the observations I have made so far have been based off of the published version of "The Rear-Guard". When turning to the other two handwritten manuscripts, we can see instances of doubt in Sassoon's mind as to how to describe this traumatic event. Equally, when analyzing small changes he made between the three versions, we see a change of heart on the revisiting of this horrible episode, and a need to describe it in a different, and sometimes less graphic, manner.

We begin with a particularly heartbreaking section of the original notebook manuscript (Figure 4). In this section of the poem, Sassoon is describing the body. Here we see multiple words that he crossed out to describe the wound. In the final publication of the poem, these lines read as follows:

Terribly glaring up, whose eyes yet wore
Agony dying hard ten days before;
And fists of fingers clutched a blackening wound.⁴

It is important to remember that as Sassoon *first* wrote this poem in the notebook, he was already forced to relive this apparent real-life event. We can see in his handwriting, and the violent

⁴ Sassoon, Siegfried, "The Rear-Guard." Counter-Attack, and Other Poems, (London, 1918), 15

scrawling out of words, that he was having difficulty finding the words to describe the body. The passage (using only the words he didn't cross out), reads as follows (I have bolded the phrases that did not make it into the final publication):

Horribly glaring up, whose eyes **still** wore
The agony that died ten days before,
Whose bloody fingers clutched a **hideous** wound.⁵

I will also include these same three lines from the second handwritten manuscript (again, I have bolded the phrases that did not make it into the final publication):

Horribly glaring up; **and the** eyes yet wore
 Agony dying hard ten days before;
 And **twisted** fingers clutched a blackening wound.⁶

There are interesting changes of words and phrases present here. The change from “still” to “yet” stands out because “still” implies a feeling of an imprint from that initial moment of death. “Yet” sounds more formal in this instance, and demonstrates removal from the moment. It is as if Sassoon is editing the original response to sound more distant. The description of the fingers changes drastically between the three versions of the poem. In the notebook version, Sassoon describes the fingers as “bloody”, and specifically writes “whose”, placing the description of the fingers in union with the physical body. In the second handwritten edition, Sassoon changes “whose” to “and”, and swaps out “bloody” for “twisted”. While implying more discomfort, “twisted” does not have the same violent imagery as bloody. In making this edit, it appears that Sassoon is editing *his own memory* of the instance. In this case, he changes the image of bloody

⁵ Sassoon, Siegfried. *Journal, 11 Apr. 1917- 2 June 1917*, MS Add.9852/1/10, University of Cambridge, 16r

⁶ “The Rear-Guard,” by Sassoon, Siegfried (1886-1967). The Berg Collection, New York Public Library / The Siegfried Sassoon Literary Estate via *First World War Poetry Digital Archive*.

fingers to twisted fingers. Finally, in the published edition of the poem, Sassoon keeps “and” at the beginning of the line, but instead writes “fists of fingers”. This imagery is puzzling, and far more abstract than previous versions of the phrase. “Fists of fingers” paints a distorted and troubling image in the reader’s mind of multiple fists (and multiple hands) clenched in agony. The dead man takes on the role of many men, perhaps hundreds of men, dead and buried underground. This description feels like a political jab at the war itself, and the senseless loss of life. This political commentary is not present in this particular section of both prior manuscripts of the poem. They are far more focused on this particular moment and this particular man.

The versions of this section I have typed out are the ones that Sassoon didn’t cross out. We must return back to the notebook sketch of the poem to see how he came to describe the soldier as having a “hideous wound”. Looking closely at the manuscript, and attempting to read his scrawled script, we see the ghosts of former words. At the end of the line ‘Whose bloody fingers clutched a’, we see possible descriptions of what Sassoon, in reality, saw. This requires a bit of literary reconstruction, but I would guess that Sassoon initially wrote “gaping neck”. He could have then crossed out gaping, and wrote “mangled” above the crossed out word. I would guess he wrote “side” when he wrote “mangled” to create the horrifying image of a “mangled side”. But then he proceeded to write “chest” and “breast” as other possible options. All this work done, and he scrapped the entire thing and ended up writing, quite cleanly, “hideous wound”.

Examining these prior choices for what is arguably the defining image of this poem, we can see the act of reliving the initial event. The process of writing these many different, scattered, versions of the wound was an act of remembrance. A truly horrible act of remembrance. And we can feel Sassoon’s pain as he struggles for recall, or describe correctly,

the soldier's wounded corpse. What's more is that the options go from graphic (i.e. "gaping neck") to a more malign and less bloody image (i.e. "hideous wound"). Sassoon is actively censoring his own memory.

It is important to look at these poems from an aesthetic, surface level, perspective. Sassoon's brief act of personal censorship can extend to the publication history of this poem, mapped out by these three specific manuscripts. The notebook is ugly, features scrawled, almost unintelligible script, has entire sections crossed out, is scattershot, and at many points loses the rhyming nature of the poem all-together. But the notebook represents the first known act of *remembering* this scarring moment that we can physically see. In this way, the aesthetic look represents Sassoon's own memory, and his struggle to regurgitate the imagery.

The second manuscript, possibly dated a day after the notebook sketch, is handwritten but controlled. While the notebook sketch was at times out of order, and scattered about three separate pages, this version is written clearly and legibly on one page. It is also titled. Sassoon even adds notes to the poem. After the word "tunnel" in the first line, he adds a note: "underground trench which goes for miles". In the upper left-hand corner, Sassoon writes "Here's a story from Hindenberg's Trench", placing this poem in direct conversation with a specific, and recent, event in World War I. After the line "(for days he'd had no sleep)", Sassoon included a note "3 hours in 6 days!". Finally, at the bottom of the page, Sassoon writes, "We were trying to take Fontaine-lez-Croisilles, (failed again yesterday, apparently)". What these additions to the text do is place Sassoon in this exact moment. Sassoon is the rear-guard from the poem, and he did see the dead corpse in the tunnel. This manuscript is a timestamp that proves this poem is not describing an imaginary event, but a horrific reality. I would also like to point out the structural difference in this specific version of the poem. Following the climactic image

of the dead body, Sassoon places four plus signs between that stanza and the subsequent one. These plus marks are not present in the notebook sketch, or in the published poem. This particular version of the poem basically took the notebook sketch, and edited it down into a legible and compact work. In doing so, Sassoon felt the need to place a definitive break between the corpse and the ascent back up into the battle. This break forces the reader (and Sassoon himself) to *linger* on the corpse. It also represents a possible passage of time. In the published version of the poem there is no break between stanzas, and supposedly Sassoon saw the body and just continued walking. But, the break suggests that he stayed looking at the body for a longer period of time. Perhaps he mourned the body. This break is another edit that Sassoon made to his memory.

Looking at the published work, it is surprisingly clean and ordered. The discordant jumble of works (scrawled and at times crossed out) from the notebook have been typeset and printed in a published book. The poem looks somehow shorter, and more refined. Though the horrific event is still present in the writing, it is at odds with the perfect and spotless medium in which it is printed. I argue that looking at these three versions of the poem side-by-side, we see a progression of normalization. The initial shock becomes an ordered memory. But even though on the surface this is true, underneath in the psyche the memory is still haunting. In the published text, the notebook scrawls still exist, just under the surface.

William Butler Yeats wrote in his preface to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936) about his “distaste for certain poems written in the midst of the great war.”⁷ He wrote that many

⁷ Yeats, William Butler. *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892-1935*. (Oxford University Press, Bombay Calcutta Madras, 1955), xxxiv

of these poems felt bound “to plead the suffering of their men.”⁸ His argument is that “passive suffering is not a theme for poetry”, and that if a war is necessary, “it is best to forget its suffering as we do the discomfort of fever.”⁹ I argue strongly against this perspective. “The Rear-Guard” is not pleading suffering for the soldier. It is a realistic and stark account of a seemingly quiet moment during war. It depicts a man, at his wits end, yelling at an answering corpse, kicking it savagely, realizing that the soldier is dead, and returning to war. If anything, Sassoon in the poem is acting in a passive manner. He willingly returns to the war to rid himself of the hellish environment of the tunnel. But that by no means makes passive suffering an unnecessary theme in poetry. Through his passive nature, the reader sees what the constant trauma can do to soldier’s minds. They become cold. “The Rear-Guard” never tells us Sassoon’s reaction to the body. We never hear if he is frightened, traumatized, sickened. Instead, we just see him return to the horrors of war. This passivity is heartbreaking.

As demonstrated through this analysis, analyzing these three manuscripts of Sassoon’s “The Rear-Guard” illuminates the literary decisions Sassoon made when reliving this trauma. The end result is a seemingly pristine published poem, which at the same time contains the darker remnants of the original scrawled and candid notebook sketch.

⁸ Ibid., xxxiv

⁹ Ibid., xxxv

Dimly glaring up, with ~~glimmering~~ ^{glimmering} eyes
 And that ~~in~~ ⁱⁿ ~~corruption~~ ^{corruption} ~~could not last~~
 The ~~ghost~~ ^{ghost} of agony that died ten days before.
 He staggered onward till he ~~to~~ ^{to} ~~found~~ ^{found} saw
 Soling, ~~trays~~ ^{trays} filtering down ~~the~~ ^{the} clammy,
 shagged stair,
 And darkness climbing ~~up~~ ^{up} to ~~meet~~ ^{meet} the
 twilight ~~day~~ ^{day} air,
 April. 22.

Groping along the tunnel in the gloom
 He winked his torch ~~with~~ ^{with} whitening glare,
 And bumped his ~~head~~ ^{head} sniffing the hateful air.
 Tins, boxes, bottles, shapes too vague to know,
 And once, the ~~foam~~ ^{foam} leached waters from a bed;
 And he, exploring, fifty feet ~~below~~ ^{below}
~~What a scene a~~
~~But those~~ ^{But those} ~~red~~ ^{red} ~~beamed~~ ^{beamed} the bottle overhead.
 The rosy dusk of battle overhead.

Here's
 a story from
 Hindenburg's front

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(8 underground trench which goes for miles.)
 The Rear-Guard.
 Groping along the tunnel step by step
 He winked his prying torch with patching glare
 From side to side, and sniffed the unwholesome air.
 Tins, bottles, boxes, shapes too vague to know -
 A mirror smashed, the mattress from a bed:
 And he, exploring, - fifty feet below
 The rosy gloom of battle overhead.
 Tripping, he grabbed the wall; saw someone lie
 Humped at his feet, half-hidden by a rug;
 And stooped to give the sleeper's arm a tug -
 "I'm looking for head-quarters." No reply, - -
 "God blast your neck," (for days he'd had no sleep);
 "Get up and guide me through this stinking place."
 Then, with a savage kick at the silent heap,
 He bleated his beam across a livid face
 Horribly glaring up; and the eyes yet wore
 Agony dying hard ten days before;
 And trusted fingers clutched a blackening wound.
 Alone, he staggered on until he found
 Dawn's ghost, that filtered down a shafted stair
 To the dazed, muttering creatures underground
 Who hear the boom of shells in muffled sound.
 Then, with the sweat of horror in his hair,
 He climbed through darkness to the twilight air,
 Unloading hell behind him, step by step.

April 23rd

(3 hours in 6 days!)

We were trying to take Fontaine-lez-Croisilles, (failed
 again yesterday, apparently).

Figure 1: Sassoon, Siegfried. *Journal*, 11 Apr. 1917- 2 June 1917, MS Add.9852/1/10, University of Cambridge, 15r

Figure 2: "The Rear-Guard," by Sassoon, Siegfried (1886-1967). The Berg Collection, New York Public Library / The Siegfried Sassoon Literary Estate via *First World War Poetry Digital Archive*.

THE REAR-GUARD

And flashed his beam across the livid face
 Terribly glaring up, whose eyes yet wore
 Agony dying hard ten days before;
 And fists of fingers clutched a blackening wound.

THE REAR-GUARD
 (Hindenburg Line, April 1917.)

GROPING along the tunnel, step by step,
 He winked his prying torch with patching glare
 From side to side, and sniffed the unwholesome air.

Tins, boxes, bottles, shapes too vague to know,
 A mirror smashed, the mattress from a bed;
 And he, exploring fifty feet below
 The rosy gloom of battle overhead.

Tripping, he grabbed the wall; saw some one lie
 Humped at his feet, half-hidden by a rug,
 And stooped to give the sleeper's arm a tug.
 "I'm looking for headquarters." No reply.
 "God blast your neck!" (For days he'd had no
 sleep.)
 "Get up and guide me through this stinking place."
 Savage, he kicked a soft, unanswering heap,

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Figure 3: Sassoon, Siegfried, "The Rear-Guard." *Counter-Attack, and Other Poems*, (London, 1918) pp. 14-15.

Horribly glaring up, ^{whose} ~~with~~ eyes ^{still} ~~that~~ were
 The agony that died ten days before
 and bloody fingers clutched a ^{mangled side} ~~gaping~~ ~~side~~
~~side~~ hideous wound - ~~of~~ ~~dead~~
 He ~~stalled~~ on ~~found~~ ~~in~~ ~~the~~ ~~dark~~

Figure 4: (Detail) Sassoon, Siegfried. *Journal, 11 Apr. 1917- 2 June 1917*, MS
 Add.9852/1/10, University of Cambridge, 16r