

The Trauma of Violence in war Poetry

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Abstract

This paper deals with transmitting the experience of trauma of violence happened in the battle fields during the WWI through War Poetry. Poets' reactions towards the war can be traced back into three stages; firstly, admiring blood-shedding and encouraging citizens to be involved into such fields, besides their attack against those who stands against the war. Secondly, and exactly after the poets' experience of the war, they try to prevent the other deceived civilians from joining the war. Thus, anti-war poetry is a new genre which presents the horrible atmosphere of the soldiers' savage conditions physically, psychologically and mentally. Thirdly, poets' attempts to heal the trauma through poetry, nature and finally by accepting the death peacefully, being an inevitable power which restricts the one's fate.

Key words: trauma, violence, war poetry.

صدمة العنف في شعر الحرب

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المستخلص

يتناول هذا البحث نقل تجربة صدمة العنف التي حدثت في ساحات القتال خلال الحرب العالمية الأولى من خلال الشعر. يمكن أن يتلخص رد فعل الشعراء اتجاه الحرب بثلاث مراحل كالأتي: أولاً, إعجابهم بإرهاق الدم وتشجيع الناس على الانضمام لساحاتها فضلاً عن مهاجمة أولئك الذين وقفوا ضدهم. ثانياً, وبعد التجربة القاسية للحرب, هؤلاء الشعراء حاولوا أن يمنعوا المدنيين المضللين الآخرين من الالتحاق بالحرب. الشعر ضد الحرب هو عبارة عن نوع جديد من الشعر الذي يعرض الأجواء المرعبة للظروف الوحشية التي عاشها الجنود من جميع الجوانب الفيزيائية و النفسية و العقلية. ثالثاً, محاولات الشعراء من أجل الشفاء من هذه الصدمة عن طريق الشعر والطبيعة وأخيراً قبول الموت بهدوء لكونه القوة الحتمية التي تقيد المصير.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الصدمة, العنف, شعر الحرب.

War poetry was the new poetic genre which was delivered from the womb of the technological revolution of the twentieth century since scientists have developed new and fatal guns which altered the balance of powers declaring the destructive world War I (1914-1918). Millions of soldiers were recruited all over the world in order to share the experience of the war, among those soldiers were the poets who pictured the horrible scenes of the battle fields and transmitted them to the civilians who didn't know the reality of the war because they had been deceived by the patriotic thoughts of the ability to achieve victory easily by the new technological guns.

Thus, during the war and before it patriotism was the slogan in some poets and poetess' poetry. Jessie Pope (1868-1941) was the most prominent one who encourages the old and the young to join the war:

Who's for the trench
Are you, my laddie?
Who 'll follow French?
Will you, my laddie?
Who's going out to win? (Pope," The
Call,"l. 1-6)

Stimulating people's inner powers and encouraging them to show off was one of the strategies the poets followed to make their poetry more effective and appreciated.

In fact, many poets haven't been satisfied by the manners of life at that time. They thought that the war was the best means to cleanse the bad reality of life. Robert Brooke (1887-1915) in his poem "Peace" thanks God for this war: "To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping, / Glad from a world grown old and cold and weary;" (Brooke, "Peace," l. 4-5) so, for him the war is a must since the only enemy will be the death and decay. Even more, this death will be the soldier's gate into the glory of immortality that the martyr will enjoy " a white unbroken glory, a gathered radiance, / A width, a shining peace, under the night." (Brooke, "The Dead," l. 13-14)

Furthermore, other poets started to attack those civilians who didn't join the trenches of the war and prefer to stay home; Siegfried Sassoon (1886 - 1967) does so in his poem "Plighters" which Michael Thorpe describes as " fierce, contemptuous pieces, moments of hate" (Thorpe, 1967, p. 22) for those civilians whose luxurious life is presented in the first stanza, those people, in contrast to soldiers, can attend the places of joy and fun, drinking and watching whores; " The House is crammed: tier beyond tier they grin / And cackle at the Show, while prancing ranks / Of harlots shrill the chorus, drunk with din (Sassoon, "Plighters," l. 1-3). The dual image is presented in the 2nd stanza with the lurching of one of the war tanks:

I'd like to see a Tank come down the stalls,
Lurching to rag- time tunes, or "Home, sweet Home,"
And there'd be no more jokes in Music-halls
To mock the riddled corpses round Bapaume. (l. 5-8)

The poet hopes to attack savagely those civilians who are sitting on the stalls by a tank in order to end their joy and to be corpses just like those soldiers in the battle fields. A kind of the poet's sadism is clear here.

However, other poets stood in an in-between position concerning their attitudes towards the war; neither they were satisfied by the current conditions of life nor the war fields were their choice. They were too confused to join the trenches. Wilfred Owen's (1893-1918) letters to his mother show that he was affected by the war and its news, yet he couldn't join the front lines because his "own life all the more precious and more dear in the presence of this deflowering of Europe." (Hipp, 2002, p. 25-26) At last, in 1916 Owen became a lieutenant in France and a chapter of his suffering began.

After poets' involvement in the war, anti-war poetry begins to appear in order to warn civilians and stop blood-shedding. Thus the main purpose of this poetic genre was to transmit the trauma of violence to those who don't realize the real atmosphere of the war and blame those who encouraged it. This trauma is fully expressed physically and psychologically.

The physical facet has two dimensions; the first one deals with the soldier's body and senses and the second facet is the geographical description of the battle field. Owen wrote "Dulce et Decorum Est" which ironically means "it is sweet and fitting to die for one's country" to be a response to the patriotic Romanic poem "3.2" by Horace (Olive, & Xavier, 2016, p.26). Owen tries to put the reader in a place where no oxygen is provided, accordingly, the war is a place which isn't suitable to be found since the most necessary thing of life isn't available;

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!- an ecstasy of fumbling

Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,

But someone still was yelling out and stumbling

And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime.-

Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,

As under a green sea, I saw him drowning (Owen, "Dulce et Decorum Est," 1.9-14)

Because of the gas attack, the soldiers ordered to put the gas helmet to avoid suffocation caused by the poisoned gas, but one of them couldn't put it in time because his sense of hearing is damaged as a result of the war fatigue and at last the soldier died. In fact, not only hearing senses are excluded, the witness's sight also losses its function to react and save the soldier's life. Even more, those who are secured from death come home back with bodily organs or parts lost and

most of them became disable. Instead of blaming himself because he encouraged the war in his pervious poems Sassoon attacks the English Church: " The Bishop tells us: "when the boys come back / They will not be the same;"(Sassoon, "They," l. 1-2) the Bishop deceives the young that they will fight those who "anti- Christ", therefore, their battle will be different and they will be saved. Unfortunately, the physical facet of the trauma can be illustrated by the image of those naïve boys who tell the Bishop, after coming back from the war that:

'We' re none of us the same!' the boys reply.

'For George lost both his legs; and Bill's stone blind;

'Poor Jim's shot through the lungs and like to die;

'And Bert's gone syphilitic: (l. 7-10)

Concerning the geographical facet of the trauma, the gloomy atmosphere of the battle field is contrasted with that of peace in Sassoon's "The Troop":

They march from safety, and the bird-sung joy

Of grass-green thickets, to the land where all

Is ruin, and nothing blossoms but the sky

That hastens over them where they endure

Sad, smoking, flat horizons, reeking woods,

And foundered trench-lines volleying (Sassoon,"The Troops," l. 12-17)

Thus the inevitable enemy and the invisible one nothing but the weather. Here, again Sassoon's narcissism is presented since he blames anything and everyone except himself about the destruction of the war. In Owen's "The Sentry" the poet expresses the idea of "the weather is a greater enemy than German forces... the rain and cold cannot be kept out" (Welland, 1978, p.67). In that hellish area and because of the heavy shells and excessive deaths "the smell of men / who'd lived there years, and left their curse in the den, / if not their corpses." (Owen, "The Sentry," l. 8-10) Thus the dirt, mud and corpses filled the war trenches.

Above the unsecure ground and trenches the sky rains shells and full of death which makes the soldiers dig into the ground to find a shelter and escape from death. Unfortunately, the matter wasn't good enough that most of those tunnels became the soldier's graves; " I thought of all that worked dark pits / of war, and died / digging the rock where Death reposes" (Owen, "Miners," l. 21-23) because most of those soldiers were forced to hide explosive guns with them underground and the result of that was the death either because of suffocation or by a great explosion. The famous tunnel explosion happened in the Battle of

Messines in 1917 that " 455 tons of explosive placed in 21 tunnels" caused a great explosion and "10,000" soldiers killed as a result (Jackson, 2011).

All these miserable conditions didn't only deform the soldiers' physical body, but affected the psychological aspect of their personalities. Most of those soldiers felt homesick to the their families and houses; Francis Ledwidge (1887-1917) in his letter to his friend expresses that he " always homesick. I hear the roads calling, and the hills, and the rivers wondering where [I]am. It is terrible to always be homesick" (Curtayne, 1998, p. 170). Psychological alienation was alongside homesick although the soldiers were many groups and thought to be unified because of their dilemma! As an example, in Owen's description of the suffocated soldier in "Dulce et Decorum Est" he mentions the word "ecstasy" which means " standing outside of oneself; the transformation from being a participant into an observer (Kendall, 2007, p. 84). Thus, the loss of identity and the lack of communication became the astonishing phenomena which affected the WWI soldiers who became "poorer in communicable experience" to talk about the reality of war (p. 73)

Furthermore, the soldiers' unconscious brain part affected even their dreams; Owen every time dreams about the suffocated soldier: "In all my dreams before my helpless sight, / He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning."(Owen, "Dulce et Decorum Est," l. 15-16) Also, in his "Strange Meeting" the poet hopes to escape from the battlefield by sleeping, but his dreams forces him to face his enemies in the Hell.

Thus, all those physical and psychological calamities led to soldiers' disability and madness have been called (shell shock) and most of the soldier poets were cured in Edinburgh's Craiglockhart Hospital. However, the hospital also became the suitable place to escape from the war that most of the soldiers acted as if they were patients, one of them was Robert Graves (1895-1985) who declared that he couldn't join war again because:

The fear of gas obsessed me: any unusual smell,
even a sudden strong scent of flowers in a garden,
was enough to send me trembling. and I couldn't
face the sound of heavy shelling now; the noise
of a car back-firing would send me flat on my
face, or running for cover (Graves, 1960, p. 219- 220).

In the same hospital, Graves met his friend Sassoon. After the killing of his friend, Sassoon rebelled against the political system and began to attack it in his poems the matter which forced Graves to accuse him to have been affected by

the shell shock in order to rescue him from a court martial (p. 214-216) There, Sassoon became a friend of Owen who came there also. Sassoon helped Owen to be recovered from his psychic problem by encouraging him to write poems as a kind of free-association. Daniel Hipp in his article " 'By Degrees Regain Cool Peaceful Air in Wonder': Wilfred Owen's War Poetry as Psychological Therapy" suggests that Owen was recovered by means of "self-revelation" and "self-healing" of writing poetry (Hipp, 2002, p. 27).

Not only poetry was a means of the traumatic healing, nature and its elements belittled Francis Ledwidge's trauma and that is clear in his "A Soldier's Grave". He uses flowers as symbols of peace and unity with nature after the soldier's death when it will not be the invisible enemy but the kind mother that embraces the dead soldiers.

Thus, the best means to heal the trauma of violence was by accepting the death in spite of fearing it because it will be the peaceful way to escape the war. Edward Thomas (1878-1917) asserts that the death is a must and he should accept it: " To go into the unknown / I must enter, and leave, alone, / I know now how." (Thomas, "In Memoriam (Ester1915)," 1.22-24).

Lastly, the message of war poetry of transmitting the trauma was done by the announcement of the end of the war in 1918, yet its consequences were fatal, leaving the lost generation with their absurd aims, mental and physical deformation. The new gun used in the war destroyed human immune system and a new series of viruses have been developed, caused what called Spanish Flu Pandemic (1918- 1920) and more than seventeen millions persons were killed by it.

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