

Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and the Great War Discourse on "Shell-Shock"

by

Thomas C. Schilling

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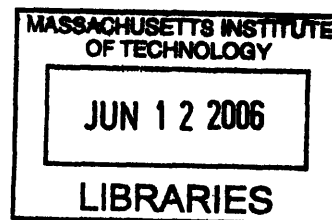
Shankar Raman
Associate Professor of Literature
Thesis Supervisor

Certified by.....

Stephen Tapscott
Professor of Literature
Thesis Supervisor

Accepted by.....

James Buzard
Chairman, Literature Department



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Tom Schilling, 2006.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations have been used in the texts and notes of this thesis to cite works that are referred to regularly. All citations in the thesis will be in the form of (abbreviation, page number).

CP: Lewis, C. Day, ed. *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen* (New York: New Directions, 1963).

ER: *Report of the War Office Committee Enquiry into "Shell-Shock,"* Cmd. 1734 (London 1922).

ST: Sternlicht, Sanford. *Siegfried Sassoon* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993).

TB: Bogacz, Ted. "War Neuroses and Cultural Change in England, 1914-22: The Work of the War Office Committee on the Enquiry into 'Shell-Shock.'" (*Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 24, No. 2, Studies on War (Apr., 1989), 227-256.

WP: Hart-Davis, Rupert, ed. *The War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon* (London: Faber & Faber, 1983).

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Psychoanalysis and the Southborough Report
or
Medical Epistemology and the Social Discourse on Shell-Shock

The infantrymen of the Great War experienced the unimaginable. Soldiers in the trenches internalized images of confusion and gore, and returned to a society unwilling and often unable to comprehend their sacrifices. For nearly 65,000 of these soldiers, their experiences on the front brought on hysteria, mental breakdown, muteness, paralysis, and other bizarre physical maladies (*ER*, 189). The medical description of the mental conditions that precipitated so many of these symptoms underwent a dramatic evolution as more and more cases were reported. These conditions were first collected under the terse assignation of “shell-shock,” linking the range of maladies to the psychological influence of heavy artillery as well as referring tacitly to ontological theories of physical lesions in cerebral tissue.¹ Such diagnostic projections were assisted by patients who, upon solicitation, readily supplied anecdotal evidence of mortar blasts.² As the war progressed, however, the appearance of cases not directly linked to close-proximity explosions prompted the search for a non-physical term; “neuroses” was put into use, and an epistemological link to madness was established. Finally, in the search for a more

¹ Clark, Michael J. “The Rejection of Psychological Approaches to Mental Disorder in Late Nineteenth-Century British Psychiatry,” in *Madhouses, Mad-Doctors, and Madmen: The Social History of Psychiatry in the Victorian Era*, ed. Andrew Scull (Philadelphia, 1981), 276

² Dr. Lewis Yealland and Dr. Collier make constant reference to cerebral trauma in cases of neurasthenia described in medical notes and case histories throughout the last quarter of 1915 and the first half of 1916, but after this period, anecdotes regarding the onset of the symptoms of neurasthenia begin to vary dramatically. One must assume that this shift was not merely a change in the experience of the patients admitted under the care of these doctors during this time, but the result of a shift in medical perception. (University College London Neurological Hospital Archives, accessed Jan. 2006)

scientific label, physicians decided upon “neurasthenia,” a psychiatric condition linked to exhaustion and memory loss.³

These three terms – shell-shock, neurasthenia, and neuroses – were used interchangeably in public, political, and military discourse throughout the war, but most of the physicians who worked in Great Britain’s mental wards were less careless. Each term bore a distinct epistemological weight: shell-shock clearly implied both physical causality and temporariness, neurasthenia referred to a specific mental condition, and neuroses hinted at a psychological disease “entity.”⁴ Every subsequent war since the medical “discovery” of shell-shock has occasioned another evolution in terminology,⁵ and each new term has since fought to position its particular insight alongside an epistemological backlog that accrued new facets more often than it changed form in totality. Disassembling such networks of discourse thus requires historicizing conflicting definitions. The theories of psychoanalysis put forth by Sigmund Freud loomed large for many of the figures in these debates, both as an inspiration for cerebral therapeutics and as a challenge to the conventionalism and psychological materialism of the pre-war medical establishment. In subtly adapting Freud’s insights, however, the practitioners of post-Freudian psychoanalysis pushed the official discourse on shell-shock in a different direction, leading to a more sophisticated understanding that was less accepting of paradigmatic and ideological identifications of Britishness with courage, character, and mental fortitude.

³ The term neurasthenia was invented by Dr. G.M. Beard in 1868 and used by numerous psychoanalysts, including Freud, for several decades preceding the war. (*The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, Sixth Edition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).)

⁴ For a more detailed study of medical terminology and scientific epistemology, see Ludwig Fleck’s *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact* (trans. Thaddeus J. Trenn, Robert K. Merton, and Frederick Bradley, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

⁵ Talbott, J. “Soldiers, Psychiatrists, and Combat Trauma.” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Winter, 1997), 437-454.

Throughout the war and for years following the Armistice, neurasthenia was socially stigmatized; those diagnosed as neurasthenics were accused of malingering and suspected of prior lunacy. Consequently, in the beginning months of the war, the first physicians to encounter neurasthenia either directly returned these patients to the front or accused them of cowardice in the face of danger. In their attempts to alter public and medical perception of the condition, psychoanalysts like Dr. W.H.R. Rivers of Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh had to argue for their theories in an acutely antagonistic cultural climate. They had to overcome the pre-war “materialistic trend of modern scientific medicine” (*ER*, 127) and face professional and political opposition from the established community of practitioners “trained in the somatic theories of mental illness which were a mainstay of medical education before the war” (*TB*, 238).

Ursula Link-Heer briefly discusses the emergence of psychoanalysis as a respected medical and academic discipline, citing its establishment as the point at which hysteria “lost its old characteristics as a disease of the nervous system.”⁶ Perhaps the second most formidable hurdle between psychoanalysis and the respect of traditional physicians was the gendered perception of hysteria; Link-Heer provides a number of quotations from nineteenth century medical literature on hysterical diseases to demonstrate the language at the root of these ideas. “It is because women feel so alive that they fall prey to hysteria in such a fatal way,” Pierre Briquet writes in 1858.⁷

The earliest practitioners of psychoanalysis, however, performed extensive studies on male hysterics. The reports of these studies resulted in some startlingly modern insights. Victorian era doctors did not recognize male hysteria as such because they

⁶ Link-Heer, Ursula. “‘Male Hysteria’: a Discourse Analysis.” *Cultural Critique*, No. 15 (Spring, 1990), 191-220.

⁷ Briquet, Pierre. *Traité clinique et thérapeutique de l’hystérie*, (Paris: Ballère, 1859) 50.

simply refused to believe it was possible. “We delete above all that which is not a part of our preconceptions,” writes Jean Martin Charcot in 1887.⁸ With the advent of psychoanalysis, theories of hysteria were mobilized to describe a wide range of heretofore “deviant” personality types, including that of the male artisan.

Freudian theories often provoked outright hostility amongst doctors, politicians, and the public at large; the effects of the repressiveness of Victorian cultural history were everywhere still apparent in British society throughout the Great War. The frank discussion of sexual topics was particularly taboo. The already-suspect political voice of the psychoanalyst tried, then, to make itself heard amidst a classist, racist, and sexist public discourse saturated with centuries of anti-Irish and anti-Semitic prejudice, this time mobilized to indict these groups of hysteric and neurotic susceptibility. Ted Bogacz provides perhaps the best assessment of the uncomfortable reality of this misunderstood mental condition in the social context of post-war Great Britain. “Shell-shock was a legal, medical, and moral, halfway house in a society used to a clear division between the mad and the sane” (*TB*, 229).

This conflictual relationship between newer and older theories is writ large in the important and influential report of the War Office committee enquiry into “shell-shock” (1922), the so-called “Southborough Report.” At the behest of Lord Southborough, the War Office finally took it upon themselves to sort through the conflicting dialogues regarding the nature, treatment, and public perception of shell-shock, creating a committee of enquiry comprised of fifteen men from various branches of the British government, “eleven (of whom) were medically trained and six (of whom) were members

⁸Charcot, Jean Martin. *Leçons du mardi à la Salpêtrière. Policliniques 1887-88* (Paris: Bureau du Progrès medical, 1892), 79.

of the armed services" (*TB*, 237). The committee met forty-one times over two years to interview fifty-nine doctors, politicians, soldiers, and officers all connected in some way to cases of traumatic neurosis. Although the sensibilities of these interviewees were hardly represented by the members of the overwhelmingly conservative committee, the few practitioners of psychoanalysis interviewed exerted a subtle but important influence on the enquiry's final report.

Several psychoanalysts, including Dr. Rivers, were invited to bring their insights into direct contact with public policy by addressing the War Office committee of enquiry in the years between 1920 and 1922. Rivers' testimony included an explication of his theory of repression not unlike his famous address given to the Royal Society of Medicine in 1917.⁹ His insistence on the potentially traumatic effects of stress, helplessness, repressed fear, and perhaps most importantly, the social repression of the open discussion of these topics, helped to counter conservative opinions like that of Lord Gort, who never failed to see shell-shock "as a form of disgrace to the soldier" (*ER*, 50).

By sampling opinions from such a wide range of professionals associated with the war, the Southborough Report hoped to assemble a comprehensive picture of the popular discourse surrounding traumatic neurosis. In addition to this socio-historical polling project, the report was commissioned to address two problems facing the War Office: one concerned its responsibilities for the past, and the other addressed its responsibilities for the future. "There was widespread fear after the Armistice that among the 3000 soldiers convicted by courts-martial of cowardice, desertion or other crimes (of whom 346 were executed) there were a considerable number who had been suffering from war-induced

⁹ Rivers, W.H.R. "On the Repression of War Experience," delivered before the Section of Psychiatry, Royal Society of Medicine (Dec. 4th, 1917).

mental illness and thus had been unjustly sentenced" (*TB*, 228). The response to these fears posed an indirect challenge to military values: in effect, it asked the clinical question of how a more developed and aware evolved medical perspective might challenge a past in which capital punishment had been meted out for non-violent crimes of "moral behavior." The War Office committee was not alone in its struggle for a more comprehensive definition of criminal responsibility. French penal reforms proposed in 1907 were already attempting to broaden the scope of expert testimony to include psychoanalytical frames of reference, and in 1924, a widely-publicized murder trial involving a female hysteric as a defendant with no criminal motive challenged the legal protection of the insane, as well as the juridical definition of mental stability. Legally speaking, the emergence of professional psychoanalysts was creating a "'crisis' in public and judicial confidence in expert medical testimony."¹⁰

The second task of the War Office committee concerned the difficult and pressing question of pensions. Although the matter of disability pensions was not to be conclusively decided by the proceedings of the enquiry board, the members of Parliament who were set to vote on the future of post-war pension appropriations looked to the findings of the Southborough Report to undermine the categorization of shell-shock as a disease and relieve the government of any financial responsibility to those wards who suffered from it.¹¹ By examining the collected opinions of medical experts, Parliament

¹⁰ Dean, C. "Law and Sacrifice: Bataille, Lacan, and the Critique of the Subject." *Representations*, No. 13 (Winter, 1986), 44. Although it makes specific reference to WWI shell-shock as an antecedent to later judicial crises, Dean's paper is an analysis of violence and criminality in general and the ways in which they relate to Lacanian psychoanalysis and traumatic neurosis as a constitution of a "mutilated subjectivity." The essay makes implicit references to Lacan's topological theories in its discussion of the breakdown of the Cartesian concept of subjectivity, repeatedly invoking Freud and Derrida's favorite image of Medusa's decapitated head.

¹¹ Jones, Edgar; Ian Palmer, Simon Wessely. "War pensions (1900-1945): changing models of psychological understanding," *British Journal of Psychiatry* (2002) 180: 374-379.

hoped to determine whether sufferers of shell-shock and their families deserved the same financial compensation as those who had suffered physical injuries. The cruelty and inequality of these proposed policy amendments was assailed by a number of critics including Virginia Woolf, whose brother's experience with neurasthenia led her to include a shell-shocked character in her novel, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925).

Following these assessments of responsibility, the task of the committee was both to "explain" shell-shock to the people of Great Britain – a heretofore unsympathetic public already accustomed to conflating mental affliction with cowardice and other behaviors antithetical to "manliness." As a final goal, the committee sought to normalize treatments of shell-shock and to reconcile officially psychoanalysis and somatic therapies once and for all. Perhaps of all of the goals addressed by the committee, the normalization of medical practice was the most-poorly achieved: the final report advocated nearly all of the techniques already in practice. By displaying them side-by-side, however, the committee helped to disengage medical perception from its roots in Victorian social discourse. The Southborough Report destabilized "the fusion of medical diagnosis and social prejudice which had taken place during the previous century and a half"¹² and repositioned traumatic neurosis in evolving medical fields, newly aware of their own contradictions.

Given the fact that the overwhelming majority of shell-shock victims were infantryman, many doctors were quick to take a sociological stance in their explanations. Even the terms "neurasthenia" and "hysteria" implied that the condition arose "out of

¹² Mosse, George L. "Shell-Shock as a Social Disease." *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 35, No. 1, Special Issue: Shell-Shock (Jan., 2000), 101.

psychological vulnerability,"¹³ allowing the localization of the condition in the thoroughly-studied domain of abnormal psychology. Popular discourse cited a variety of traditional stereotypes as potential roots of mental instability (ethnic groups like the Irish and the Jews were accused of "being especially prone to hysteria"¹⁴). The lower classes in general were roundly declared to be more susceptible to traumatic neuroses. These generalizations hearkened back to long histories of various prejudices, but contemporaneous events helped to keep them in the spotlight during and immediately after the war. Employment discrimination against neurasthenics in Scotland led to widespread labor unrest, and pensioners looking for work throughout Great Britain were discouraged by high levels of unemployment. Even those unable to return to the workforce were met with outright hostility from "pensioning officers (who) never relaxed their attempt to prove that mentally ill men were liars and malingerers."¹⁵

The comparatively huge percentage of Irish soldiers seeking post-war pensions for traumatic neuroses led officials in the British War Office simultaneously to offer conflicting racist explanations and sociological accusations. For instance, the Commissioner of Medical Services for South Ireland believed that many veterans were taking advantage of the "special political conditions" that led to rewarding the families of post-war "lunatics," but he also believed that the large number of claimants was the result of "a definite Neurasthenic temperament which is prevalent among the South Irish." In the same conference that saw South Ireland's commissioner deliver these arguments, a

¹³ Winter, Jay. "Shell-Shock and the Cultural History of the Great War." *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 35, No. 1, Special Issue: Shell-Shock (Jan., 2000), 9.

¹⁴ Mosse, 103.

¹⁵ Bourke, Joana. "Effeminacy, Ethnicity, and the End of Trauma: The Sufferings of Shell-Shocked Men in Great Britain and Ireland, 1914-39." *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 35, No. 1, Special Issue: Shell-Shock (Jan., 2000), 63.

British pension authority made the claim that “it was ‘indisputable’ that recruitment practice in Ireland was more lax and that subsequently ‘large numbers’ of men recruited in Ireland were physically unfit, mentally defective, and subject to a wide range of nervous disorders” (Bourke, 61).

Unsurprisingly, British officers were not particularly sympathetic to Irish cases. Irish soldiers at the front, particularly those from the notoriously “mentally defective” south of Ireland, were instantly suspected of cowardice and/or neurasthenia. Parliament officials were similarly hostile, reworking legislation to place the financial burden of pension payment and the operation of psychiatric hospitals on the economically depressed Irish government. As a result, waitlists for psychiatric treatment could be anywhere from “eighteen months to two years, and then only allowing ... a short course of treatment in each case” (Bourke, 67). The official response to violent outbursts – a normal part of paranoia, nightmares, and daytime hallucinations – was perhaps the cruelest of the British hospital policies regarding Irish neurasthenics. Upon the first incidence of violence, authorities would transfer the patient to an asylum, thus revoking his family’s pension and his right to go home. (Bourke, 67)

In addition to racial stereotyping, popular opinion assailed vaguely defined, socially-suspect dispositions like effeminacy and artistic sensibility as warning signs of neurasthenic susceptibility. As Ted Bogacz put it, “every pre-war English prejudice was mobilized to explain those crack-ups at the front” (*TB*, 249). Among the much-maligned characters to make Bogacz’s list were “imaginative city dwellers” (*ER*, 72) and “artistic types” (*ER*, 26), reaffirming the notion that rustic, Victorian conceptions of manliness were at the root of many of these stereotypes. Joanna Bourke, another contemporary

Great War historian, sums up these popular sentiments against what was seen as cowardice and pacifism by again separating the victims of shell-shock from the standard stock of soldiers on the front. “(It) was widely accepted that the ‘abnormal’ men were those who were repelled by wartime violence. These men had to be cured: that is, they had to rediscover their ‘natural,’ masculine bellicosity” (Bourke, 59). Bourke illustrates her point with references to John T. MacCurdy’s textbook, *War Neuroses* (1918). In his analysis of a young soldier, MacCurdy found foreshadowing evidence in the man’s “virtuous” childhood, citing his shyness with girls and dislike for seeing animals killed as a “tendency towards abnormality in his make-up.”¹⁶

While many of the psychoanalysts summoned for the War Office enquiry already took issue with MacCurdy’s notions of “virtue” and “natural bellicosity,” they nonetheless remained conservative in their suggestions regarding more controversial theories. Nearly all of them sought to distance themselves from Sigmund Freud, as his “obsession” with theories of sexual complexes vilified him amongst members of the traditional medical community. Conscious of the political positioning exercised by these psychoanalysts, later historians critiqued their personal affiliations with Freudian theories of trauma, grouping many of these psychotherapists together as

“the sort who diluted and domesticated Freud’s discoveries concerning the importance of psychosexual conflict and the unconscious, by focusing on trauma and the ego’s capacity for adaptation – as if the appeal to notions of ‘reality’ and ‘adaptation’ did not risk begging some of the most critical questions in psychoanalysis.”¹⁷

¹⁶ MacCurdy, John T. *War Neuroses* (Cambridge, 1918), 7-8.

¹⁷ Leys, Ruth. “Death Masks: Kardiner and Ferenczi on Psychic Trauma.” *Representations*, No. 53 (Winter, 1996). 46.

Although these “domestications” and disavowals were probably wise in light of the older medical community’s propensity for stereotyping and generalization, psychoanalysts and practitioners of the “new medicine” actually had little to learn from Freud on subjects specifically related to combat trauma. Freud himself admitted to having “made no analysis of a case of warshock,”¹⁸ and American psychoanalysts like Abram Kardiner “criticized Freud’s libido theory for failing to explain traumatic neuroses.”¹⁹ As a politicizing figure, however, Freud’s influence was profoundly felt even in his absence. In this sense, the Southborough Report represents not a negation, but a displacement of Freudian thought, and the beginnings of a political internalization of psychoanalytical theory.

Even as a political document, the Southborough Report provides perhaps the most complete single picture available today of the sociopolitical context in which psychoanalysis was performed during the Great War. The very existence of the report is a testament to Britain’s cultural shift during the decade that preceded its composition. “Indeed, it is signal evidence of the revolution in attitudes toward mental illness in the half decade since 1914 that in the debate that followed Lord Southborough’s statement no one contradicted the existence or seriousness of shell-shock, as would likely have been the case in the first few years of the war” (*TB*, 228). The statement referred to is a speech given by Lord Southborough in 1920 to the House of Lords, a speech in which he pleaded with the assembled body to give greater “sympathy and care” to victims of shell-shock, not “to forget the roll of insanity, suicide, death” or “to bury (their) recollections of the horrible disorder, and to keep on the surface nothing but the cherished memory of

¹⁸ Freud, Sigmund. Letter to Ernest Jones (1919).

¹⁹ Leys, 46.

those who were the victims of this malignity.”²⁰ Even before the report was finished, Lord Southborough’s speeches helped begin the reversal of the discursive repressiveness that had rendered the open discussion of mental diseases taboo.

Dr. W.H.R. Rivers addressed many of these social attitudes directly in his own testimony, and the effects of his presentation are clearly registered in the overall conclusions of the Southborough Report. Rivers focused on stress as the source of these “mental wounds,” citing the long periods of time spent “passive and helpless” as “particularly disastrous to the psyches of men in the worst periods of danger, since one’s natural tendency in a moment of peril was... ‘manipulative’ activity.” Breaking away from many of his fellow psychoanalysts, Rivers often used explicitly Freudian terminology, decrying the “repression of terrifying experiences” as “utterly wrong” in the circumstances and called upon soldiers to “unburden” themselves to therapists “in order to be cured” (*TB*, 239). This approach to understanding and treating traumatic neuroses did not fail to make an impression upon the members of an otherwise overwhelmingly traditional committee. By undermining prejudiced discourses and subordinating the notions of constitutional defects like hysteria and neuroses to the general concept of psychic trauma, Rivers swayed the committee to conclude that “any type of individual might suffer from one or another form of neurosis if exposed for a sufficient length of time to the conditions of modern warfare.” The report also directly contradicted many currents in the public discourse, noting “that it is extremely difficult to say beforehand what type of man is most likely to break down” (*ER*, 92).

Despite Rivers’ testimony, however, the committee did “not recommend psycho-analysis in the Freudian sense” as a normal therapeutic treatment (*ER*, 192). The success

²⁰ Hansard, *House of Lords*, 5th series, 39, 1095.

of Rivers' "talking cures" and passive, therapeutic methods convinced the committee to offer a multi-part and at times contradictory set of suggested treatments. Rest, which was "essential in all cases," was to be combined with work and physical activity, and the very same military doctors that were to be trained in basic psychology were instructed to employ "every method of persuasion and suggestion" necessary to return possible neurasthenics to the front, including coercive treatments like "electrical stimulation (and) forcible movements" (ER, 134). This reaffirmation of pre-war methods stood in contradiction to the basic principles of psychoanalysis, but psychiatric approaches gradually began to displace physical treatments throughout the medical establishment, due in large part to the sheer ambivalence of the report. The committee's findings on cowardice, though similarly ambivalent, issued a direct blow against the concept of objective morality and behavior when it stated that "seeming cowardice might be beyond the individual's control" (ER, 140). In probing sources of stress, memories of inhumane living conditions, traumatic shock, and the hidden, psychical responses to the violence and fear of combat, Dr. W.H.R. Rivers and the other psychoanalysts who treated neurasthenics during and after the Great War had to constantly recognize aspects of battle that were so rarely part of any official political discourse.

The complex intertwining of political and fiduciary concerns, inherited prejudices, and emergent scientific discourses becomes evident in what is otherwise a nuanced and compassionate rendering of the human subject at the heart of these issues: Virginia Woolf's treatment and use of the shell-shocked veteran Septimus Smith in her novel, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). Smith's flashbacks are narrated to great effect from a first-person perspective in a disorienting, stream-of-consciousness style of prose. The

predominant sentiment projected through this rendering as well as through the portrayal of Smith's wife, Lucrezia, is one of profoundest sympathy, and the baffled public reactions to Smith's rants in Regent's Park feel callous in their antipathy. As a feminist cry against militarism, Lucrezia Smith's plight as the foreign-born wife of a traumatized man is particularly poignant. In this, *Mrs Dalloway* also serves as a convincing counterpoise to some of the more virulent misogynist verse produced by Siegfried Sassoon and other war poets, a point this thesis later argues.

Despite the skill and manifest sympathy with which Woolf treats shell-shock, however, Woolf's motivations for the inclusion of this character in her novel turn out to be more complexly related to the topical.²¹ In 1922, Parliament was to vote upon a pension appropriations bill that would have greatly reduced or even done away with entirely the disability compensation paid to veterans suffering from traumatic neurosis. These proceedings occurred at approximately the same time as the War Office enquiry, and the prevailing attitude in Parliament towards neurasthenics was still chiefly guided by Sir John Collie, the director of the Ministry of Pensions in the years immediately following the war and the author of numerous books on malingering.²² For the legislators who ignored the findings of the ongoing enquiry, issues of sympathy and support were not complex questions of medical perception and social understanding. Outside of the committee drafting the Southborough Report, the responsibility for pensions paid to mental casualties was reduced to purely economic determinants, and it was this unsympathetic calculus that Woolf chose to attack in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

²¹ Bell, Quentin. *Virginia Woolf: A Biography* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.: New York, 1972), 107.

²² Leese, Peter. "Problems Returning Home: British Psychological Casualties of the Great War." *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Dec. 1997), 1055-1067.

Despite the supportive attitude her text projects towards the victims of such a calculus, Woolf's depiction of shell-shock is nevertheless heavily shaped by epistemological assumptions that she never entirely confronts. Woolf's protest, furthermore, also vilifies a fairly anachronistic version of the rest cure.²³ Her decision to cast this particular method of psychotherapeutic treatment was no doubt influenced by Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892). The motivations for Gilman's story were profoundly personal: a severe case of post-partum depression led to Gilman's personal experience with the mentally and emotionally destabilizing rest cure in a regimen of therapy administered by Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell himself. As with the character in "The Yellow Wallpaper," Gilman was forbidden to write, draw or paint, told instead to live "as domestic a life as possible."²⁴ By fictionalizing her own struggle against male domination via scientific professionalism, rationalism, and authoritarianism, Gilman established trends and topics that would be utilized by feminist writers for decades.²⁵ Virginia Woolf also suffered in the hands of a rest-cure therapist, and her bitter feelings towards callous male psychotherapists are clearly conveyed in the text of *Mrs. Dalloway*.²⁶

While Woolf's discreet homage to Gilman rightly makes a literary and feminist alliance with her predecessor, the satire of that experience remains historically

²³ Although it was still sometimes prescribed as part of a regimen of psychotherapeutic treatments, and indeed most psychiatric wards enforced extended sleeping hours for most of their patients, the "rest cure" as developed by Silas Weir Mitchell was largely replaced by elements of the "work cure" (involving exercise and light manual labor) and psychotherapy by the beginning of the First World War. The histories of these treatments are given comparative treatment in Ernest Jones's *Treatment of the Neuroses: Psychotherapy from Rest Cure to Psychoanalysis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963).

²⁴ Meyering, Sheryl L., ed. *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: The Woman and Her Work* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989).

²⁵ Virginia Woolf recognizes this debt more directly in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), in which she states that female writers must be allowed intellectual freedom, as well as the space and means to support themselves independently.

²⁶ Bell, 107-109.

discontinuous. By fixing upon the therapists' utter lack of understanding, Woolf's depiction of Smith's treatment comes dangerously close to outright anachronism.

(Lucrezia) was close to (Septimus) now, could see him staring at the sky, muttering, clasping his hands. Yet Dr. Holmes said that there was nothing wrong with him. What then had happened – why had he gone, then, why, when she sat by him, did he start, frown at her, move away, and point at her hand, take her hand, look at it terrified?²⁷

The refusal to recognize shell-shock was well on its way to becoming an historical artifact in the medical community by 1925, since by the time of Lord Southborough's call for an enquiry into shell-shock in 1920, "there could scarcely have been a member of the House of Lords who had not heard of someone breaking down as a result of the war" (*TB*, 227-228). Most of the medical profession had certainly caught up by the time Woolf wrote *Mrs. Dalloway*, and while not all branches of psychotherapy were quite so philosophically liberal as psychoanalysis, there were probably very few doctors in Great Britain during the nineteen twenties who would have looked upon a case of traumatic neuroses and seen "nothing wrong." In reading *Mrs. Dalloway*, one must question the "realism" of the depiction of Dr. Holmes. By modeling Dr. Holmes on her own physician, Woolf in effect shapes her political act using symbols from her own biography. She chose a historically static opponent for the subject of her protest, a decision that while allowing her to make bold, declarative statements, obviated a subtler, perhaps more realistic effect that different targets might have made possible.

A similar charge, if differently directed, might be made against the work of Siegfried Sassoon. Although Woolf drew simultaneously from her own experience with psychiatry as well as from her brother's memories of the war, she lacked the first-hand

²⁷ Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York: Harcourt, 1925), 67.

experience with frontline combat shared by Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. This fundamental difference of perspective may not appear to have much bearing on Woolf's ability to articulate her frustration with insensitive legislators from the setting of post-war London, but it sets her apart from other writers who were also members of the military community. The quality of life on the home-front bore little resemblance to the conditions experienced by Owen and Sassoon: frequent encounters with death and gore served to set soldiers apart from even the most furious of British protestors. Even so, writers on both sides often sought to demonize the figures they saw as being responsible for the atrocities of the war. Sassoon's war poems repeatedly established emblematic ideas only to knock them down again, creating precious few heroes against his scores of war-propagating villains. This thesis argues that while poets like Owen and Sassoon were undoubtedly shaped by the epistemological backgrounds of the military and of British society, much of their verse rails against the violence such systems of knowledge do to the individual's response to war.

Woolf lacked sufficient experience within the military community for one to expect her to have the exact same frustrations as Sassoon – or the same sort of personal bonds with her peers as those that developed between soldiers. The story of Septimus Smith is indeed a plea for compassion and understanding, yet it lacks the recognition of war's cathartic violence that made Owen's brand of pity possible. It also partly simplifies the traumatized subject by casting Septimus's case in tones of tragedy: by characterizing Dr. Holmes as wholly unresponsive and unyielding in his therapeutic technique, Woolf implies that the opening of any dialogue whatsoever would cure Septimus entirely. Such a hopeful fantasy certainly recognizes the possible benefits of

psychoanalysis and open discussion, but it also ignores the possibility that language may no longer be able to reach the shell-shocked man. Owen dealt directly with the fears that such possibilities produced by developing a poetic idea of mercy and human compassion completely antithetical to the rhetoric and shared assumptions of his military speech community. He had to instill in his readers a basic mistrust of conventional poetic language: jargon muscled out poesy, and half-rhyme destroyed the consonance of sound and of sense.

Readers cannot always relate to the speakers in Owen's poems, though quite often, one still must engage the subject of his poems through cruel jokes, slang, and challenging poetic form. One device in particular – half-rhyme – conveys a reticence, an inability to satisfyingly engage readers by refusing to assuage their ears at the end of each line. The function half-rhyme serves in Owen's poems mirrors the problems posed by the difficult language psychoanalysts often used in their treatments. Both the poets and their therapists employed indecorous language to undermine conventional linguistic patterns and express functional meaning – although Dr. W.H.R. Rivers practiced a directness of speech quite uncharacteristic of Owen's poetics. As an anthropologist, Dr. Rivers no doubt saw healthy discursive relationships as fundamental to functioning societies, but during the Great War, the functions of British society suffered heavily. Owen's poems explore this diseased state using poetic techniques which implied suspicion and ambivalence, thus reminding one to read past the words on the page and attempt to sort through the social and military conflicts that shaped the production of each poem.

A far more direct sense of antagonism and mistrust permeate Siegfried Sassoon's war poems, and although the poet was not nearly as overtly sympathetic as Virginia Woolf to the plight of the neurasthenic throughout much of the war, the shifts in Sassoon's understanding of shell-shock reflected shifts felt throughout society as a whole. At first appearing to Sassoon as pathetic cowardice, the condition of neurasthenia evolved into an ambiguous and undecidable yet profoundly unreachable state.

Wilfred Owen actually occupied this state himself. In his poetry, he explored the social stigmas shell-shock lays bare, including the dissociation and falsity embodied by the practice of decorum of polite conversation, as well as the validation of decorum seen in the female perception of male attractiveness. His poetry also explores the ways in which a "dehumanizing" condition like neurasthenia can allow its sufferers a paradoxically destabilizing look at what is typically considered "human," and how a soldier in an "unreachable," shell-shocked state might in fact be more capable of disassembling rhetoric and epistemology in the search for a meaningful logic to war and death.

In finding himself in a truly pitiful state and probing the foundations of his human connections to the soldiers around him, Wilfred Owen opened up the possibility for pity and mercy – a pity for the casualties of past wrongs, and a mercy to quell anger and prevent future problems. The psychoanalysts who addressed the War Office committee of enquiry effected a similar breach through the confines of traditional, militaristic dialogue. By recognizing "unofficial realities" and encouraging their patients to abandon repressive, prejudiced popular discourses on shell-shock, on the war, and on madness in general, these doctors began to rediscover some of the roots of "the individual's control"

– not in the public schools or ancient universities where virtue and will-power were consummated in the heroic charge of the cavalry, but in the unconscious: the final bastion of safety in a world of bombs and barbed wire.

Siegfried Sassoon versus the "Average Englishman"
or
Psychical Confrontation and the Dynamics of Protest Poetry

["The Hero"] does not refer to anyone I have known. But it is pathetically true. And of course the 'average Englishman' will hate it.

-Siegfried Sassoon, in postscript to "The Hero" (WP, 49)

Biographers and literary scholars have often acclaimed Sassoon's profound importance to the development of twentieth-century poetry:

The most widely read of the soldier-poets of World War I, he broke with the romantic pictorialization of war as a series of dashing cavalry charges, as in Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade"... In Sassoon's insistence on producing images of battle that attempted to shock the British public out of its jingoistic victory lust, he forged a poetry of suffering, pain, and truth that is, surprisingly, a progestational part of modernism (ST, 112).

By matching the rhymed couplets and plain form of pre-Modern, Georgian poetic structure with scathing political messages, Sassoon's "juxtapositional binaries" (ST, 112) made his work accessible to formalists and other conservative critics as well as appealing to readers seeking more challenging verse. He laid claim to the symbols and rhetoric of British nationalism only to distort them into grotesque caricatures of British values, and he parodied the cruelty and complacency of military executives in order to provoke outrage from members of all levels of society.

Indeed, antagonism directed at a range of targets pervades the war poems of Siegfried Sassoon. Generals, politicians, civilians, maligners, profiteers, and even women in general are vilified in Sassoon's verse, and the contemporary conception of "war poetry" as satirical is largely a product of such works. But the focus on bitter disillusionment and physical violence that characterizes the critical response of many to

Sassoon's work tends to obfuscate the nature of confrontation as it is addressed in Sassoon's poems. The pure violence of physical confrontation that Tennyson, Rupert Brooke, and in his earliest poems, Siegfried Sassoon exalted and yearned for was severely frustrated by the brute reality of the Great War, in particular by the military tactics and mechanical advancements that resulted in trench warfare. In order to understand the military aspect of the forty-four month stalemate that constituted the battle on the Western Front, the historian Gerard De Groot suggests that "one should start from the premise that the war's progress was determined not by men but by machines."²⁸

Although the influence of new weapons technologies undeniably shaped the course of the war, it was as much a systemic lack of communication that rendered men powerless. Interaction between soldiers and their officers was severely distorted by the class-based structure of military hierarchy and by the seeming implacability of the British parliament and War Office. Furthermore, the rational, psychological confrontation with these first two issues (the mechanical reality of war and the lack of verbal communication) as well as with the myriad moral paradoxes of wartime experience was an engagement few soldiers were prepared for. Tens of thousands of cases of traumatic neuroses developed as a result. Each of these venues of confrontation is hugely important to Sassoon's war poetry, and they find a common locus in the poet's own experience in his letter to parliament – "A Soldier's Declaration" – and his subsequent hospitalization for an invented case of neurasthenia at the Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh, Scotland.²⁹ Assuming the position of the neurasthenic did not help Sassoon

²⁸ De Groot, Gerard J. *The First World War* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 23.

²⁹ Although recent authors of historical fiction, such as Pat Barker, the author of *Regeneration*, have attempted to cast doubt upon Sassoon's mental condition upon entering Craiglockhart War Hospital ostensibly as a "neurasthenic," earlier biographers including Sanford Sternlicht have cited written correspondences

find the solution he was looking for, but it refocused his search for truth amidst the chaos and frustration of a brutal war.

Poems like “The General” and “Counter-Attack” gave formal voice to discontent and helped pioneer forms of literary protest, but the attitude Sassoon’s poems betray towards neurasthenia and other war-related mental diseases is a more complicated matter. As a fox hunting, independently wealthy gentleman, Sassoon exemplified many of the long-established ideas of propriety and “Englishness” that jarred with the politics implicit in Freudian psychoanalysis – the frank and open discussion of trauma, and the social ambiguity that resulted from the blurring of distinctions between sane and insane. As a poet, he was imbued with a subjective sensitivity that should perhaps have made him more sympathetic to the plight of the neurasthenic. As a repressed homosexual, (*ST*, 68) conventional psychiatrists would have declared him susceptible to trauma and psychological dissociation (*ER*, 26). As an outspoken protestor, however, Sassoon made use of the “halfway house” between madness and sanity to articulate a critique and yet evade punishment for his attack on British Parliamentary policy. Contemporary re-imaginings of World War I often seek to cast doubt on the differences between the war experiences of the committed neurasthenic and the unflinching ‘average soldier,’ but close analysis of the poems and letters of Siegfried Sassoon and other poets at work during the Great War show the perception of these distinctions to be remarkably clear, even in the eyes of apparently would-be supporters like Sassoon.

This directness of observation is particularly important for several reasons.

Understanding how the poets viewed sanity, madness, and the myriad forms of traumatic

between Sassoon and his friend Robert Graves as definitive evidence that the poet’s case of shell-shock was clearly “made up.” (*ST*, 100)

neuroses can bring contemporary readers far closer to the original intent of poems composed during the war. And if we as contemporary readers are to utilize these newly interpreted works as lenses through which to view the sociological conditions that shaped them, we can better hope to relocate the discourse of shell-shock within its appropriate contexts. Once the fighting in France brought Sassoon's experiments with sentimental Georgian verse to a halt, the poet effectively stopped producing "art for art's sake." What remains to be determined is the extent to which explicit motivations for protest and outcry were modified to accommodate the inherent stereotypes of the dominant culture. Who exactly was the "average Englishman" Sassoon was writing for – or against?

If taken as the sum total of statistical averages of opinions and prejudices regarding the war, Sassoon's "average Englishman" shared a number of misconceptions with the poet himself. In later poems and protests, Sassoon even lists some of these misinformed beliefs explicitly. One such misunderstanding concerned the general tactics used by the British War Office to govern operations on the Western Front. Contrary to popular imagination, the war in France was never a war of attrition. Gerard De Groot presents this as a simple failure of understanding, a need to lay blame somewhere for an astoundingly high death toll.

For most people the Great War brings to mind muddy trenches, demoralizing stalemate and the 'strategy of attrition.' The advance of the dead was more successful than that of the living; cemeteries occupy more ground than was won in battle... Because the war seems incomprehensible, acceptance of the losses has been difficult. This lack of understanding has encouraged the easy judgment that the commanders of the war must have been stubborn incompetents... Little happened, but millions died. Too often, amateur analysts have tried to cast the war in a different scenario based upon an imagined solution to trench deadlock. The responsible student of the war should avoid such fantasies (DeGroot, 23).

Contemporary war historians do not have a particularly difficult time in seeing this more complex interpretation of the politics and strategy of World War I, but so much of the disaffected literature that surrounds the event focuses on the idea of attrition and meaningless battle that many established literary scholars cannot separate the emotional perception of the war from the more realistic, less scandalous version historians now recognize.

The intensely critical poems published in *Counter-Attack* (1918) were informed not only by vignettes from Sassoon's personal combat experience, but by a post-Somme discourse of near-nihilistic despair. "Directness is paramount... abstraction and allegory are nearly totally banished. *Counter-Attack* rails against the institutions of the establishment: the church, the state, the army, and the general staff" (*ST*, 44). But these strident tones did not appear in his verse overnight. Sassoon's opinions undergo a number of radical changes during the war. A few early poems, like "The Redeemer" even express excitement and patriotism in the vein of Rupert Brooke's familiar and oft-quoted lines: "If I should die, think only this of me: / That there's some corner of a foreign field / That is forever England" ('The Soldier,' ll.1-3).

Foreshadowing a propensity for blasphemy and sacrilegious metaphor that Sassoon would develop in his later work, "The Redeemer" deploys the soldier as a Christ-figure, an exemplar of good-natured British courage and selflessness.

No thorny crown, only a woollen cap
 He wore – an English soldier, white and strong,
 Who loved his time like any chap,
 Good days of work and sport and homely song;
 Now he has learned that the nights are long,
 And dawn a watching of the windowed sky.
 But to the end, unjudging, he'll endure

Horror and pain, not discontent to die
That Lancaster on Lune may stand secure (*WP* 16, ll.19-27).

To readers familiar with Sassoon's later work, such a stanza would ring shockingly false and perhaps simply sarcastic. Conventional points of praise like the soldier's physical strength and work ethic are presented alongside more uncomfortable "virtues" like whiteness in the speaker's depiction of the Christ-like soldier, the "simple chap" who does his work in "clay-sucked boots" "when peaceful folk in beds lay snug asleep" (ll.3). According to the notes that accompany the poem, "The Redeemer" was Sassoon's "first front-line poem," a fact which helps to explain the speaker's sheer awe at the feats accomplished by his fellow "unjudging," enduring soldiers. The distance between the soldiers and civilians is established immediately, however. The stoicism that pervades the first three stanzas of the poem conveys a sense of pride in the speaker's ability to protect the "peaceful folk," but the clear identification with the grimy work of the front-line soldier opens the possibility for future frustration with home front complacency. The need to communicate across this social divide quickly became one of Sassoon's most difficult tasks.

As with many of the war's greatest satirists and protestors, however, the historical moment that catalyzed Sassoon's mounting disillusionment into poetic acrimony was the wholesale slaughter of British troops at the Battle of the Somme. Despite the dramatic differences in message and tone, "The Redeemer" – like many of Sassoon's and even Wilfred Owen's later, more despairing poems – makes use of the dismal symbolic virtues of mud. As the poem draws to a close and the flares and cannon-fire that lit the nighttime scene flicker out, the speaker hears a fellow soldier fling "his burden in the muck, /

Mumbling, 'O Christ almighty, now I'm stuck!'" (ll.35-36). Most likely uttered by the same valiant Christ-figure whose struggle with the mud brought hope and pride into the heart of the speaker, this statement undercuts somewhat the somber tone of the second stanza. Most importantly, it also reminds both the speaker and the reader of the poem that the truth of idealistic allegories must be found in both the subjects and their corresponding obstacles. The battle against mud and filth could produce no valorous deeds, but only exhaustion and frustration. Sassoon's later poems and some of Wilfred Owen's earlier poems, such as "The Sentry," more clearly express the disgust produced by such pitiful and dehumanizing struggle. And while the evolution of Owen's wartime psychology gradually transcends the themes of this slow struggle towards a metaphysical appreciation of natural processes, Sassoon's verse continues to lament his inability to confront his tormentors in a satisfying way by ending with the would-be hero all alone and in the dark, struggling to walk through the mud.

Sassoon's continuing insistence on physical – as opposed to metaphysical – acts of confrontation greatly complicates his attitude towards traumatic neuroses. Because the physical symptoms (paralysis, muteness, hysteria) of psychological trauma often resulted in or from failed physical confrontations, the poet made the mistake of much of the public and simply addressed the two failures as one. Another early poem, "The Hero," typifies Sassoon's understanding of shell-shock in the years before his stay at Craiglockhart. Although Jack, the subject of the poem, is not explicitly described as suffering from a mental disorder, Sassoon scholars cite "The Hero" as the first appearance of the neurasthenic in the poet's verse.³⁰

³⁰ "Jack is pitied because he suffered terrible mental anguish and died horribly, yet the reader also joins the persona (of the colonel) in some feelings of contempt for his poor showing as a soldier when his comrades

He thought how "Jack," cold-footed, useless swine,
 Had panicked down the trench that night the mine
 Went up at Wicked Corner; how he'd tried
 To get sent home, and how, at last, he'd died,
 Blown to small bits. And no one seemed to care
 Except that lonely woman with white hair (*WP* 49, ll.13-18).

The postscript to the poem, part of which is given in the epigraph to this chapter, softens somewhat Sassoon's harsh conflation of neurasthenia and cowardice by citing the "average Englishman" as the intended opponent. The structure of the poem, with two stanzas used to describe the mother's deluded pride and only the final stanza used for the message bearing officer's silent, callous appraisal exemplifies the regard of the other men in the trenches: nobody cares about Jack while he's alive, and in death their only remembrance is one of shame.

"The Hero" introduces the reader to a network of complicated confrontations. The mother may indeed feel enraged at the British government for killing her son, but decorum prevents her from lashing out at the officer who delivers the news of her son's death. The officer, too, may wish to express disdain for the dead soldier, or perhaps he would have preferred to have given the mother a more honest account of the events that led to her son's death. Again, decorum forbids such wanton speech, and the Brother Officer simply tells "the poor old dear some gallant lies / That she would nourish all her days, no doubt" (ll.8-9).

Perhaps the most tragic of the distorted confrontations mentioned in the poem is the depiction of the soldier's frantic and indecorous final days; after panicking "down the trench that night the mine / Went up at Wicked Corner... he'd tried / To get sent home"

needed him. Early in his combat infantry experience Sassoon typically had little understanding of male hysteria" (*ST*, 41).

(ll.14-16). By treating trauma, fear and the shame so callously in the Brother Officer's after-thoughts, Sassoon inadvertently undermines the notion of military stoicism by portraying it as thoroughly inhuman and even cruel. And while the poem serves as compelling commentary to "the average Englishman" on the moral traits of the Brother Officer, an actual judgment on Jack is rendered ambiguous by Sassoon's ambivalence towards the acts of cowardice engendered through trauma.

Had Sassoon desired to make an affinity for Jack more direct and obvious in "The Hero," the poem might have served as a compelling conversation piece in the War Office enquiry designed to assess the validity of trying men for cowardice. The report of the committee made significant social progress by simply acknowledging the undecidability of trauma and shielding mentally disabled soldiers from harsh, poorly-constructed laws. Even so, opinions like that of the Brother Officer in "The Hero" were ubiquitous throughout the army: cowardice was pathetic and inexcusable, regardless of circumstances. To interpret the poem as an emblem of sympathetic understanding would be especially challenging given the sentimental and misinformed perspective ascribed to Jack's mother. The interpretation of the poem was originally left in the hands of English soldiers and civilians, many of whom might have cruelly followed the Brother Officer's example in their own experience before a satirist like Sassoon decided to come along to "shove it in their faces" (*ST*, 32).

The pathetic figure of the grieving mother in "The Hero," moreover feeds into another of Sassoon's enduring objects of satire: women. In this, he follows a misogynist line of thought that is explored in several of his other poems composed at Craiglockhart, most notably "Glory of Women."

You love us when we're heroes, home on leave,
 Or wounded in a mentionable place.
 You worship declarations; you believe
 That chivalry redeems the war's disgrace (*WP* 100, ll.1-4).

Of course, the bitterness that pervades these lines from "Glory of Women" exemplifies virulent anti-militarism as well as a serious mistrust of social conventions, most notably in the reference to the decorum practiced during the discussion (or non-discussion) of injuries and battlefield experiences. One assumes that "mentionable places" exclude any part of the body connected to sex, but applying the rules of Georgian decorum to psychological wounds would certainly rule out the discussion of shell-shock and mental "wounds" as well. Whether or not Sassoon intended to directly involve himself in psychiatric controversies, the reference to these faux-pas of civilized discourse directly invokes the anti-Freudian social climate of Great Britain in the years preceding the First World War.

But in "Glory of Women" Sassoon also attacks the "delight" and thrill with which women greet "tales of dirt and danger." (ll.6) Crowns, laurels, decorations and other physical manifestations of military honors are "worshipped" and deposited atop the "shells" that men become upon returning home from battle. Clearly Sassoon resents the manner in which women objectify their soldiers and commodify wartime experiences, but no mention is given to the contexts of communication that bring about such behavior in women.

In a sense, the speaker in "Glory of Women" is confused by the use of and embittered by the need for intermediary objects within post-combat discourses – conventional symbols and gestures relied upon by wives and lovers to re-establish

dialogues with their newly-returned (and often severely alienated) husbands. He has been disillusioned by these symbols of military heroism, and he is alienated by their continued use by the women around him. He is disgusted and horrified by the female fascination with war but this disgust is at least partly hypocritical, as the image and idea of the military was undoubtedly exciting to him, too, at some point in the past, as indeed it was to all enlistees before the actual fighting began. He resents the places where women infuse meaning into their own wartime experiences, yet he fails to suggest any more appropriate objects. “You can’t believe that British troops ‘retire’” (ll.9), he goes on, implying that women become so enamored with their own symbolic roles as military wives that they refuse to give them up. While the life of the military wife might be a satisfying symbolic role for some women, Sassoon fails to address the real women, whose husbands and lovers had left for the front: the men were displaced for months at a time, and with every week spent in the trenches, their disconnection from civil society grew more profound.

Women, whether mothers, lovers, or passers-by, fall far outside of the closed discourse community of the Great War infantryman. The selection of female lovers as targets in “The Glory of Women” typifies soldierly antagonism against selfish, emotional responses to combat, perhaps for no other reason than the sheer danger that unpredictable emotionality could pose to one’s fellow soldiers. The tone of reminiscence used by the speaker in “The Hero” is a clear example of this. Throughout the medical profession, hysteria was regarded as a uniquely female affliction until the late 19th century, when the early Freudians began finding hundreds of male hysterics in Germany (although the statistics regarding these early “findings” were heavily influenced by the projection of

new, half-developed causative theories onto mysterious psychological symptoms).³¹ The attention given to the field of psychoanalysis in the years leading up to the First World War destroyed the objective certainty with which earlier doctors and psychotherapists attached gender distinctions and used gendered language to describe mental disorders, but epistemological renderings of these conditions continued to insist that traumatic neuroses had a female character.³²

Sassoon's sexual affiliation and the details of his personal relationships seem to provide evidence of general mistrust of conventional male-female unions. In many ways, Sandra Gilbert's feminist readings of Great War poetry generalize Sassoon's blatant misogyny and unique take on the institution of marriage, at times projecting his antagonism and "snarling reproach" onto the works of other, less explicitly hostile poets like Wilfred Owen.³³ Sassoon's war poetry fastidiously avoids direct reference to the topic of homosexual love, but in contrast to Owen and his poem "Greater Love," Sassoon addresses conventional marriage in wholly negative terms.³⁴

Although his portrayals of kinship and gender distinctions are often streamlined to suit the purpose of his protests, the story of Sassoon's personal life bespeaks a string of unconventional arrangements due to his father's estrangement from his own family and his early abandonment of Siegfried and his siblings (*ST*, 3-4). The close relationship that

³¹ McGrath, William. *Freud's Discovery of Psychoanalysis: The Politics of Hysteria* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).

³² Elaine Showalter's book *The Female Malady* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985) addresses the place of gendered characterizations of mental diseases and gendered language in the medical profession, particularly in the 19th century, in the place of British and American literature. Like Gilbert and Gubar, Showalter makes continual reference to Sassoon and Owen's works and to the influence of shell-shock and psychoanalysis on prose and poetry.

³³ I will address Gilbert's discussion of misogyny as it applies to Wilfred Owen's poetry (particularly the poem "The Disabled") in the third chapter of this thesis. Gilbert, Sandra M. & Susan Gubar. *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century – Volume 2: Sexchanges* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 260.

³⁴ Najarian, James. "'Greater Love': Wilfred Owen, Keats, and a Tradition of Desire." *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (Spring, 2001), 34.

Siegfried developed with his mother, however, is at odds with the mean-spirited stance he often took against the “ignorant” mothers on the home front, women to whom, the poet often implies, the lives of their sons mean little compared to the glory of England. The grieving mother in “The Hero” is one such example of Sassoon’s caustic nationalism. “‘We mothers are so proud / Of our dead soldiers’” (“The Hero,” ll.5-6). Here and elsewhere in his poems that deal with female responses to the war, Sassoon is attacking the projection of an imaginary creation: the idyllic brave soldier whose family ties have transcended the familiar and attached the young man to all of Britain. The Brother Officer’s “gallant lies” present an image of irreducibility, of unambiguous moral fortitude that the mother needed in her grief.

Moreover, while Sassoon is original in so forcefully attacking the equivocal nostalgia for the dead soldier, he also played a part in its literary creation in his earlier poems such as “The Redeemer.” By participating in conflicting halves of the evolving discourse on Great War heroism, Sassoon helped to define the emblematic infantryman in both positive and negative terms. After the Somme, he realized that such a character could not exist in a mechanized, politically divisive war, and he immediately set about criticizing all of the aspects of military and social life that continued to exalt this empty archetype.

Sassoon’s “Glory of Women” is far too short to address the subtleties of gendered subjectivity, and by changing a few words and phrases, the poem could be used to rail against anyone close to a soldier at war who failed to share the same set of horrifying memories and experiences with everyone at the front. In “A Last Word,” Sassoon directs similar invectives against military veterans.

What have you done in the Great War, old man?
 Four years' home-service, twenty miles from home,
 Drawing a Major's pay. You've helped recruiting;
 Drilled men for battle; won your spurs with pride;
 Sat on court-martials; judged and sentenced soldiers;
 And some of them have died to keep you smug (*WP* 139, ll.36-41).

The poem clearly fits well with other “anti-establishment” pieces in *Counter-Attack*, but it also mirrors many of the misogynist complaints found in “Glory of Women.” In both instances, the object attacked is a passive character, an indirect facilitator of conquest and the struggle for glory. The real issue in “A Last Word,” however concerns the speaker’s feelings of guilt and responsibility for the war.

If I'd refused to fight, if I had done
 Two years hard labour, four years on the rack,
 Instead of serving on the Western Front,
 You'd meet me with contempt (ll.27-30).

Sassoon's disdain for military pride is again evident here, but as the speaker explains of the early stages of the war, “all my motives were confused” (ll.17), and he allowed his fear but also his own pride to compel him into military service. The speaker recognizes his own culpability early on, but continues to press the officer for his enabling role and his moral responsibility for the conflict as a whole.

I'm careful when I talk to you – quite careful;
 I'm feeling slightly awkward: that's because
 I can't speak easily about the War (ll.48-50).

The above passage seems to imply that even in confronting the officer so violently, the speaker is still searching for an outlet for his memories of the war. The

officers doing “home-service” “drawing Major’s pay” represent the very authority figures that Sassoon and others wanted so desperately to assail, and in finding one such officer after the war and deriding the man’s ineffectuality, the speaker seems to be doing just that. “You must understand / I’ve got the laugh of you; I’ve got you beat, / Although I’m too well-bred to rub it in” (ll.57-59). Yet in rubbing it in for the previous eight stanzas, the speaker proves a very different point indeed. His own guilt, though barely mentioned in the beginning, is sublimated into that part of the war that he “can’t speak easily about,” and he continually attacks the officer in the hopes of pinning some of the guilt on the man who enabled his participation in the war. By continually refocusing issues of responsibility onto those peripheral to the conflict itself, the speaker obviates the discussion of but cannot resolve his feelings about his own responsibility for the war.

In “A Last Word,” Sassoon attempts to critique military tradition from within the establishment itself. The poem comes begins to interrogate the vague sources of militaristic language and thought by making ample use of military jargon and continually referring to British military hierarchy. Many of these emblematic ideas so readily attacked by Sassoon are reinforced by the rules of social decorum, and in reading both this poem and “Glory of Women,” one gradually becomes aware that the roots of the military notions of violence and heroism entwine all parts of British society.

The similarly harsh treatment of mothers, lovers, neurasthenics and cowardly soldiers betrays a paradoxical push for solidarity amongst soldiers and the isolation of veterans from the prying eyes of civil society. Unable to speak directly to or even identify his real tormentors, Sassoon’s resentment diffuses itself throughout the entire spectrum of English society. Eric Leed identifies this separation of identities in the

beginning of his study of the psychological aspects of war experience, *No Man's Land* (1979).

One of the most significant responses to the feeling of psychic and social estrangement from civilian life was the ritualization and memorialization of the war experience in veterans' groups that celebrated in songs and toasts to dead comrades the distinctiveness of their common identity."³⁵

The speaker in "The Last Word" simultaneously reacts against this glamorization – bristling as the old general compliments his military cross – while also taking his place in the social structure of disaffected veterans through the shared war experience.

In July of 1916, Sassoon was still leading his men in France when the infamous Somme offensive began. A prolonged medical leave occasioned by an attack of acute gastroenteritis began several weeks later – still during the initial stages of the battle – and left him in England until early 1917. During this period, Sassoon's constant reflections on death and uncertainty and the unending stream of bad news from the Somme finally instilled the ideals of protest and anti-militarism that characterized so much of the poet's later verse. He attests to this evolution in *Siegfried's Journey 1916-1920* (1946), one of his many autobiographical works.

I could no longer indulge in fine feelings about being a hero, for although my period of active service had given me confidence in myself as a front-line officer I was ceasing to believe in the war itself."³⁶

"Lamentations," written during the summer of 1917, reflects a bewildered sympathy completely opposite to the attitude expressed in "The Hero." Whereas the

³⁵ Leed, Eric J. *No Man's Land: Combat & Identity in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 3.

³⁶ Sassoon, Siegfried. *Siegfried's Journey 1916-1920* (New York: Viking, 1946), 58.

earlier poem treated perceived cowardice and the dereliction of duty with much of the same heavy judgment used by the British public, "Lamentations" recognizes the psychological novelty of trauma, if only to treat it as a separate, hopeless case. The speaker's attitude, too, has shifted markedly away from the Brother Officer's disgust to the "puzzled, patient face" (*WP* 86, ll.3) of a sergeant, a commanding officer paralyzed at the sight of a hysterical soldier.

Until the final ten words, the poem offers no analysis, no judgment of the sobbing man. It merely presents a starkly tragic yet uncomfortable image of a traumatized man sobbing in "rampant grief;" (ll.7) "he howled and beat his chest... all because his brother had gone west" (ll.5-6). The speaker even withholds comment when the man "raved at the bleeding war" (ll.7), though the observation no doubt informs the speaker's final statement. Although the pity is the chief tone of the majority of the poem, the focus on the victim as a suffering man shifts to a focus on the victim as a failed soldier in the final lines, leaving the end of the poem resounding with the conflict between duty and mercy. The final sentence dramatically disconnects the speaker and the weeping man.

In my belief
Such men have lost all patriotic feeling (ll.9-10).

The remark is surprising and even a little funny, but no other evidence is given elsewhere in the poem to suggest that the speaker would be critical of such a hopeless political stance. "Lamentations" is the closest Sassoon comes to directly identifying with the shell-shocked soldier, but as in the case of Wilfred Owen's "The Chances," the poem serves more as a singular, startling image than as an invocation of neurasthenia as a general medical condition produced by the war. The disillusionment felt by this broken

soldier could be painted on the face of any of Sassoon's subjects, but the raving, "rampant grief" of "Lamentations" makes the emotional weight of trauma impossible to ignore. The simple image of a man crying has evolved from a pathetic stereotype of cowardliness to something far more complex and unapproachable, and while the speaker's attitude towards neurasthenia remains somewhat ambiguous in the poem, the officer grants both physical and emotional space to the grieving soldier: "A sergeant watched him; it was no good trying / To stop it" (ll.4-5). The merciful gaze of Wilfred Owen's poetry is now taken up as bafflement and pity, and meaningful, even sympathetic, confrontation with the crying soldier is forestalled by confusion. Both the sergeant and the speaker are unable to recognize his manliness or engage him in his grief, and soldierly solidarity breaks down.

The affection and camaraderie that Sassoon's poetry demonstrates for fellow soldiers is inescapably obvious, but in the events that followed the publication of his letter of protest, he effectively abandoned his own troops. For this reason, his often exploitative use of neurasthenia as an emblematic idea is best seen not in his poetry, but in the events of his own life. On July 15th, 1917, Sassoon wrote "A Soldier's Declaration" and sent it directly to Parliament. The following is the full text of Sassoon's letter.

I am making this statement as an act of willful defiance of military authority, because I believe that the War is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it. I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers. I believe this War, upon which I entered as a war of defense and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest. I believe that the purposes for which I and my fellow-soldiers entered upon this War should have been so clearly stated as to have made it impossible for them to be changed without our knowledge, and that, has this been done, the objects which actuated us would now be attainable by negotiation.

I have seen and endured the sufferings of the troops, and I can no longer be a party to prolonging those sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust.

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

On behalf of those who are suffering now, I make this protest against the deception which is being practiced 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 realise (*ST*, 10).

In sending his letter to Parliament, Sassoon finally earned a chance to address the audience that he so often tried to confront in his verse. The blatant nature of the declaration alarmed more than a few of Sassoon's close friends, and Robert Graves, a fellow poet and Royal Welsh³⁷ Fusilier, had the sense to call in political favors and concoct a story of neurasthenia to protect Sassoon from reprisal. Graves' testimony in front of the Medical Board of the War Office effectively robbed Sassoon of his desired confrontation. Although it isn't clear how complicit he was in Graves' efforts, Sassoon made no attempts to schedule a second meeting with the Medical Board. The task was not easy for Graves, who himself identified with Sassoon's statement but thought sending a letter to Parliament was a pointless risk. "The irony of having to argue to these mad old men that Siegfried was not sane!"³⁸ In sending Sassoon to Craiglockhart to "recover" from a made-up case of neurasthenia, Graves helped to exempt his friend from punishment for his near-treasonous declaration.

By avoiding cross-examination, Sassoon once again relegated his protests to fictional targets and his resentment failed to produce any direct effect upon the people

³⁷ The antiquated spelling "Welch" was originally used to designate the division as Wales's oldest military unit. At the time of the First World War, the spelling had been updated to "Welsh," but in the years following the war the older spelling was re-established (personal correspondence, Catherine Walker, Napier University "War Poets Collection"). This subtle distinction is occasionally used to spot fake World War One memorabilia.

³⁸ Graves, Robert. *Good-bye to All That* (New York: Doubleday, 1957), 325.

and institutions that he claimed to be writing against. At the end of his stay at Craiglockhart, Sassoon's examination by Dr. W.H.R. Rivers provided a fictional parallel to the encounter that Sassoon professed to want so badly to experience. The evidence given to support his return to service was just as superfluous as the story that sent him to the hospital, and the psychologist's verdict simply righted what had been deferred and distorted from the outset: "patient cured, fit to return to service."

How could such a vocal protestor simply return to combat after complaining so bitterly about the pointlessness of the war? Many of the soldiers at Craiglockhart, including Wilfred Owen, wanted nothing more than to pass their board examinations and return to the companies that had no doubt called them cowards upon their initial departure. Numerous biographers of Owen and Sassoon have attributed this curious fact to the officers' personal feelings of duty to their men, a sense of purpose far removed from the War Office rhetoric and civic nationalism that dominated war rhetoric. The suppression of personal politics embodied in this act of returning to the front serves as a retreat from political discourse. Sassoon's view of traumatic discourse also shifted during his convalescence, and his newfound realizations of the paradoxical position filled by neurasthenics can be seen in his later poetry. One such poem, "Repression of War Experience," draws its name from an address delivered by Dr. Rivers to the War Office board of enquiry.

No, no, not that,- it's bad to think of war,
 When thoughts you've gagged all day come back to scare you;
 And it's been proved that soldiers don't go mad
 Unless they lose control of ugly thoughts
 That drive them out to jabber among the trees (*WP* 84, ll. 4-8)

Essentially a poetic restatement of Rivers' central thesis in his book, *Instinct and the Unconscious* (1920), Sassoon's speaker implicitly demands the right to discuss his troubling wartime experience, to work through troubling images with a receptive partner and to somehow place these events of traumatic disconnection into the rest of his life-narrative. This poem serves as perhaps the most subtle plea for confrontation in Sassoon's entire oeuvre.

The final stanzas make reference to the traditional, authoritarian tormentors, but the argument has been refocused from a shrill, polemical call for governmental restructuring into a subdued remonstrance against the aloofness of the War Office bureaucracy.

There must be crowds of ghosts among the trees,-
 Not people killed in battle – they're in France –
 But horrible shapes in shrouds – old men who died
 Slow, natural deaths – old men with ugly souls,
 Who wore their bodies out with nasty sins (ll. 30-34).

As the reference to the real combatants reminds us, the physical opponents from the fighting in France will have faded in significance once the war finished. The other barriers to confrontation, however, – the psychical barriers of traumatic dissociation and memory repression and the discursive barrier of political non-representation and unaccountability – will remain to be resolved. The poem is an invocation for political inclusiveness, for community-wide confrontation with the images and barbarism of battle and the civic machinery of militarism and national pride. The traditional forums of civilized conversation must be widened to accommodate the discussion of aggression, violence, controversy, and the human conscience in much the same way that the

traditional form of Georgian verse was drastically altered to accommodate Sassoon's tones and messages.

As is the case with the antagonists in all of Sassoon's calls for confrontation, the perceived opponents in "Repression of War Experience" are abstract and in many ways fictional. Political protest and debate was acknowledged and addressed throughout the war, and the language of psychoanalysis was well on its way to establishing a lexicon of subjectivity within the realm of everyday speech. But the liberalization of debate was by no means uniform or even consistently progressive, and the etymology of psychiatric designations often intersected with and reinvigorated derelict medical terms, complicating matters of psychological understanding.

The shift of tone between "The Redeemer" and Sassoon's post-Somme poems show a poet in the process of becoming profoundly (dis)affected by the brutal conditions of war. His frontline experiences separated him from Virginia Woolf and indeed from many of his readers, making him an inextricable part of the military system he criticized so harshly. His loyalty to his fellow soldiers was clearly shown by his desire to return to combat after denouncing the War Office and taking asylum, and this camaraderie informs all of his poems. Sassoon's verse represents the individual's experience in war by focusing on the many types of social interactions one experiences in a military setting, distorting this focus to cast doubt upon the effectiveness of the language used in each relationship. For all his hesitation and ambiguity, Sassoon helped to establish as a goal the direct confrontation of the language of trauma, making political accountability and psychological empathy paramount virtues in civil discourse. As a poetic protestor, Sassoon is simultaneously inside and outside this discourse, creating an (often

contradictory) literary language of inclusiveness and understanding, even as he directed it toward critique.

"The Poetry is in the pity"
or
Wilfred Owen and the Merciless Language of War

*The quality of mercy is not strained.
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath (4.1.190-192).³⁹*

Soldier poets like Wilfred Owen often had to express the emotional aspects of their war experiences through a language restricted by stifling conventions and unsympathetic ideologies. The characters in William Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* encounter similar problems, albeit in a time and place far removed from the Western Front of the First World War. The epigraph to this chapter is taken from the courtroom scene of the play wherein Portia, disguised as a man, is adjudicating in the trial between Shylock, the Jewish merchant, and Antonio, her lover's lover.⁴⁰ Ostensibly, the Jew is unacquainted with Christian mercy and thus unable to interpret his contract with grace and forgiveness. The military speech community that formed Wilfred Owen's linguistic and ideological backdrop during the last and most productive years of his career is similarly dismissive of the idea of mercy, despite the frequent appearance of Biblical allusions in British military propaganda.⁴¹ In this chapter, I will explore some of the

³⁹ Shakespeare, William. *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. Barbara Mowat and Paul Werstine, (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992) 1.2.27-28

⁴⁰ The implication of a homosexual relationship between Antonio and Bassanio complicates the emotional weight of the courtroom scene. In *Between Men* (1985), Eve K. Sedgwick develops a theory of homosocial triangulation through an unknowing female figure to avoid, among other things, suspicions of homosexuality. Women do not often appear in Owen's verse, however, and any serious attempts at triangulation would probably require the use of the poet's mother as the female figure. (Sedgwick, Eve K. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, New York City: Columbia University Press, 1985).

⁴¹ Bartov, Omer, and Phyllis Mack, eds. *In God's Name: Genocide and Religion in the Twentieth Century* (New York : Berghahn Books, 2001).

more difficult and controversial ideas that Wilfred Owen wished to express in his verse alongside the military and social contexts that often served to complicate these expressions. As we know from the preface to his *Poems* (1920), Wilfred Owen was chiefly concerned with “the pity of war.” Understanding how Owen used the conflicted and often problematic idea of mercy in his verse is crucial for examining Owen’s poetic articulation of suppressed feelings and hidden thoughts.

Pacifists were among the first to recognize the deficiencies in military language. The love of man articulated in the Sermon on the Mount was appropriated by many opponents of the First World War almost from the outset of fighting in France in 1914. In the years following the carnage at the Somme, the plight of Matthew was increasingly invoked by those who saw a jarring discordance between the ostensibly Christian motives of the British War Office and the tremendous waste of human lives brought on by stubborn military tactics. Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, the two most famous poets of the second half of the First World War, met at Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh, Scotland, during overlapping periods of convalescence. Both men were officers, both men were humanitarians, and despite their tendency to infuse much of their poetry with words of direct, political protest, both men returned to the front to again take up their posts as military officers. I have already explored the role of the shell-shocked soldier in Sassoon’s verse, as well as his own exploitation of the disease’s ambiguous social status, but, as I have argued, Sassoon ultimately forecloses the traumatized perspective – it is this perspective that Wilfred Owen explores in great and subtle detail.

I would like to present the psychological reaction to trauma within this particular historical picture, for Owen and his contemporaries, as a four-stage process: injury,

therapy, reintegration, and reconstitution. In the case of many shell-shocked soldiers, the second and third steps were administered to simultaneously, and no allowance was given for the completion of the fourth. These often-damaging rehabilitation schemes were the result of a courage-obsessed military, a paradigmatic ideological framework that, at the beginning of the war, went so far as to forbid marching soldiers from breaking formation under fire.⁴² As this detail shows, commanding officers were often ill-equipped to help themselves and their troops handle the psychological problems posed by mechanized firepower. The mental casualties that resulted from these unsympathetic interactions numbered well into the millions. I wish to bring the historical picture produced in the previous chapter to bear on the therapeutic relationships between psychoanalysts and their patients, as well as on the production of poetry. Again, the concept of “mercy” is paramount; such fine feeling had no place in battle, but the survival of Owen’s humanity depended upon it.

In spite of the explicit and implicit reactions against military discourse that populate Owen’s poems, the style, jargon, and affect of his fellow French and British soldiers formed the linguistic backdrop of his early adulthood.

The language of the army... supplies a repertoire of imagery, including human types; a body of texts (such as regulations, ritual phrases, slang); a set of speech genres such as the combat anecdote, the giving of orders, the soldier’s grumble; a stylistic propensity for functional, spare, and sometimes violent diction; an ideological field, where issues include questions of loyalty, duty, and responsibility – for any speech-community has a system of authority and of values.⁴³

⁴² De Groot, G. *The First World War*, (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

⁴³ Kerr, Douglas. “Brothers in Arms: Family Language in Wilfred Owen.” *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, Vol. 43, No. 172 (Nov., 1992), 518.

As Douglas Kerr demonstrates, Owen's very ability to articulate his thoughts in speech and in writing were heavily influenced by his participation in the army. Any one of the subjects listed above – the combat anecdote, for instance – could warrant entire books of critical analysis. But my purpose is not to examine and detail the ways in which Owen's participation in the military speech-community fashioned his poems, but to demonstrate that the language and ideologies that formed this context were largely antithetical to the poet's purpose in his work.⁴⁴ Kerr himself is not so much concerned with the violence and authoritarianism of military language as with the personal and emotional contradictions posed by Owen's simultaneous participation in two radically different speech-communities: the military community embodied in his conversations with other soldiers, and the family community sustained by his letters to his mother, Susan Owen. "Owen's work is an episode in social history, in which the communities (and the speech) of family and of army meet, mingle, and modify each other" (Kerr, 534).

The psychological atmosphere of the military, particularly during combat, has always produced more than its fair share of mental disorders, given the intense stresses of regimentation, humiliation and danger. For this reason, psychologists have long studied military speech and lifestyle in their formation of causative theories for mental diseases.⁴⁵

The first psychoanalysts to encounter shell-shock likened its symptoms to a wide variety

⁴⁴ Although he is primarily concerned with the works of Owen and Sassoon, Paul Norgate's essay "Wilfred Owen and the Soldier Poets" (*The Review of English Studies*, New Series, Vol. 40, No. 160 (Nov., 1989), 516-530) provides a helpful comparative analysis of the ways in which military language and ideals influenced poets throughout the war, beginning with the patriotic ecstasy of Rupert Brooke to the rancor and mistrust of Siegfried Sassoon. Surprisingly, Sassoon and his contemporaries – most famous in the later years of the war – made ampler use of the jargon and speech patterns of the trenches than the earlier, ostensibly "pro-military" poets. This trend is most attributable to the rise of Modernist techniques during the waning years of Georgian formalism, but Norgate's juxtaposition of the many distinct styles used throughout the war foregoes such reductive analysis. *Poetry of the Great War: An Anthology* (St. Martin's Press: New York, 1986), a compilation edited by Dominic Hibberd – perhaps Wilfred Owen's most esteemed biographer – and John Onions provides another comparative analysis.

⁴⁵ Dunham, H. Warren. "War and Mental Disorder: Some Sociological Considerations," *Social Forces*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (Dec., 1943), 137-142.

of hysterical and nervous disorders suffered by civilians, noting that higher occurrences of these cases were encountered in professions characterized by excessive danger or helplessness in the face of a mechanical threat, such as those faced by machinists and some factory workers.⁴⁶

To the extent that they were instrumental in refocusing the social perception of nervous disorders and undermining the authority of military suspicions of malingering and cowardice, psychoanalysts like Dr. W.H.R. Rivers were extremely sympathetic to the social and professional problems faced by neurasthenic soldiers.⁴⁷ But again, one cannot simply map the qualities of mercy onto the clinical sympathy Dr. Rivers demonstrated towards his patients. Dr. Rivers and the other doctors at Craiglockhart War Hospital – not all of whom were psychoanalysts – were all military officers. For them to concern themselves with politics and pacifism in their treatments would not only be profoundly unprofessional, but would also complicate their intended tasks. These therapists were responsible for assessing the mental fortitude of their patients and rehabilitating them for continued military service; despite offering a reprieve from combat, hospitals like Craiglockhart were inextricably bound to military ideology. The fact that Craiglockhart catered specifically to officers (as opposed to the giant wards for shell-shocked conscripts and enlisted soldiers in London) made no difference as far as this fundamental purpose was concerned.

⁴⁶Rivers, W.H.R. "An address on the repression of war experience," (Delivered before the Section of Psychiatry, Royal Society of Medicine, on Dec. 4th, 1917). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, problematized the stigma of female hysteria in similar terms, likening the position of women in male-dominated Western societies (particularly Victorian England) to the conditions of the sort of helpless, high-stress environments cited in the original theories on shell-shock and nervous hysteria in general. (Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, New Haven : Yale University Press, 1979).

⁴⁷ Cf. footnote 57: "neurasthenia" in the lexicon of psychotherapy.

The relationship between the military and hospital structures of authority is important in that it shapes our understanding of the goal of most wartime psychiatric therapy. The process of recovery, however, does not take place solely within the hospital, and it is the re-formation of the poetic self within the stages of recovery that I am chiefly concerned with. Trauma begins as an injury, a violent break in the narrative of the self.⁴⁸ Recovery from traumatic neuroses involves two dominant stages: therapy and social reintegration. Both of these processes consist in often uncomfortable and disorienting experiences with language through forced interactions with new speech-communities – the mental ward, the psychoanalyst’s office, and the army, where everything’s supposed to be “back to normal.”

Therapeutic methods in use during the First World War ranged from the sympathetic Freudian “talking cure” to the highly-vilified “faradaic treatments” (e.g. the application of electrical shocks to non-functioning limbs, or in the case of muteness, to the tongue and the back of the throat). Despite representing dramatically varying degrees of physical comfort and intimations of personal trust between the doctor and the patient, the linguistic experience of the dialogue inherent in both methods represent dramatic departures from both the rough, violent speech of the military and whatever speech a soldier may have encountered at home.

As I posited earlier, the beginning and end of the traumatic process can be seen as injury and subjective reconstitution. By that framing, these stages take place solely within the realm of psychological interiority – outside any speech-community. Trauma occurs in the most visceral and alienating places in combat, forming a fold of searing

⁴⁸ Dean, C. “Law and Sacrifice: Bataille, Lacan, and the Critique of the Subject.” *Representations*, No. 13 (Winter, 1986), 44.

images and sensory experiences. The process of subjective reconstitution is then a slow, silent, and personal evaluation of intellectual interpretations received in the often uncomfortable forums of psychiatric and public discourse. While these two realms certainly mediate Wilfred Owen's ability to perceive events, assign meanings, and describe his thoughts, the language of Owen's poetics is in many ways far better suited to the exploration of war and mercy than even the most overtly sympathetic political rhetoric or psychiatric counsel.

"A Terre (Being the philosophy of many Soldiers)" is one of the few poems written by Owen during the war in which the speaker himself suffers from neuroses.

Sit on the bed. I'm blind, and three parts shell.
 Be careful; can't shake hands now; never shall.
 Both arms have mutinied against me,-brutes.
 My fingers fidget like ten idle brats (*CP* 64, ll.1-4).

The division of the body ("three parts shell") marks the brutality of mechanization and of regimentation. The body is poked and prodded, dissected and transfigured throughout the poem; by reducing his flesh to atoms and then building something whole, Owen seems to search for a hidden layer of non-physical meaning.

Dead men may envy living mites in cheese,
 Or good germs even. Microbes have their joys,
 And subdivide, and never come to death (ll.40-42).

In other places, metaphors of birth and renewal are grotesquely juxtaposed with military sayings:

Shelly would be stunned:
 The dullest Tommy hugs that fancy creed now.

'Pushing up daisies' is their creed, you know (ll.45-47).

As the first quote demonstrates, the speaker would like to see the paralysis of his limbs as an annoyance, not a source of shame, but his helplessness and lack of control make him quick to ponder the absurd, unintelligible circumstances of his condition. This skepticism becomes heretical when it turns upon the speaker's surroundings, where "legs" and lilac-shoots seem equally pointless.

Wilfred Owen makes ample use of pararhyme throughout "A Terre," and indeed in many of his other poems. The constant use of such carefully orchestrated "half-rhymes" (shell/shall, brutes/brats) already belies a mistrust of language. The discordance of the scheme is a half-muted critique of the form of post-Georgian verse; Sassoon used his rhymed couplets and succinct meter as veritable sheep's clothing to make his invectives aesthetically palatable. Wilfred Owen is decidedly of the early Modernist school of poets, or at least an inspiration to the group. In casting "A Terre" in half-rhyme, Owen conveys the frustration of a neurasthenic soldier still trying to act tough.

In much the same way that the speaker in the poem must continually redirect his mental anguish into language, the wounds of the body stand in for the wounds of the soul throughout much of the poem. Alternating between rough, soldierly clichés, terse observations, and artful, morbid musings, the speaker provides a litany of offences that the war has raged upon his body, from ripping his "glorious ribbons... from (his) own back / In scarlet shreds" (ll.9-10) to turning him into the "load" of the "muckman" (ll.35). Like the paralysis of his limbs, the sheer filth of the war is simultaneously awful and fascinating to the speaker of the poem. The foul, colloquial language of the military provided a near-constant discomfort to Wilfred Owen in his first few months at the front,

and his letters to his mother repeatedly cry out against the crudeness of his fellow soldiers.

Owen soon appropriates this language in "A Terre," however, in much the same way that his poetry slowly elevates the mud and filth of the trenches from a frustrating encumbrance to the symbolic lens for divine epiphany in "Apologia Pro Poemate Meo" ("I, too, saw God through the mud,-/ The mud that cracked on cheeks when wretches smiled." (CP 39, ll.1-2)). In "A Terre," the speaker's conflicted relationship with the natural forces that bring both the spring rain and flowers and fills his "mummy-case" (ll.27) (perhaps an allusion to the shell-hole in which Owen suffered his own traumatic breakdown) with mud parallels the discordance of his diction. The confidence he exhibits to the other soldiers at the outset wanes from the first embarrassed reminiscence – "A short life and a merry one, my buck!" (ll.11) – to the point where the speaker, like each of his comrades, recognizes that his actual feelings may be "best left at home with friends" (ll.60).

These embarrassed feelings constitute the "soul" Owen finds his fellow soldiers incapable of growing (until "turned to fronds" (ll.59), of course). The entire poem sends these searching, angry complaints nowhere – the speaker never leaves his bed. The end of "A Terre" evokes the fairly traditional idea of a deathless spirit ("Carry my crying spirit till it's weaned / To do without what blood remained these wounds" (ll.64-65).), but the physical lack of an audience and the hostility shown to linguistic convention through the use of half-rhyme evoke a sense of hopeless frustration not unlike traumatic dissociation.

The expression of Owen's particular brand of dissatisfaction was not readily satisfied by traditional forms of protests. Simple pacifism is often cited as a chief inspiration for poets critical of war, but as Owen's biography attests, non-participation in the fighting was no more a cure to his desire for mercy than the physical diversions he undertook at Craiglockhart under Dr. A.J. Brock.⁴⁹ Even so, the conscientious objection Owen encountered in Sassoon formed only a part of a complicated relationship with duty and honor. The influence for many of the conflicting pacifist sentiments that color depictions of Owen's private life is typically assigned to Laurent Tailhade, a French intellectual and anarchist with whom Owen had many conversations throughout the war. Other biographers attribute Owen's anti-militarism to the poet's experience reading Henri Barbusse's *Le Feu* (1916), "a starkly realistic novel about how the war and militaristic nations victimized soldiers" (*ST*, 44). Still more scholars contend that Owen's flirtations with pacifist politics were inspired by Christian scripture.⁵⁰ Thought not a practicing

⁴⁹ It must be said that the sort of psychoanalytic treatments that Pat Barker portrays throughout *Regeneration* would not have been available to Owen during his time at Craiglockhart. It is known that Siegfried Sassoon was under the charge of Dr. W.H.R. Rivers, and Barker does her best to "realistically" reconstruct conversations that might have taken place between the two. As Sassoon effectively used the hospital as political asylum, his conversations with Rivers would presumably have slipped outside the traditional bounds of psychoanalysis. Owen, on the other hand, was under the charge of Dr. A.J. Brock, a strong proponent of the "work cure." For Owen and for the rest of Brock's patients, this regimen of treatment would have entailed plenty of exercise and work outside, such as gardening and landscaping. Such treatments were designed both to take the patient's mind off of their troubling memories and to stave off the psychological and physical dangers of prolonged inactivity. The work cure, versions of which are still widely prescribed by contemporary psychotherapists, was a direct reaction to the "rest cure" made infamous by Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1899). Ernest Jones's comparative study of the different styles of psychotherapeutic treatments in use during the First World War helps to plot the influence of psychoanalytic discourse on other, more physical methods of treatment. (Jones, Ernest. *Treatment of the Neuroses: Psychotherapy from Rest Cure to Psychoanalysis*, New York: Schocken Books, 1963). Jones's study prefigures the work of later psychologists to whom the "mind" and the "brain" were identical concepts.

⁵⁰ The saliency of the claims linking Owen's ideological development to Laurent Tailhade has been challenged by Malcolm Pittock, who assembled a few pieces of circumstantial evidence to back up his assertion that the poet derived his theories of pacifism from an overtly Christian source: the preface to a collection of Tolstoy's short stories. (Pittock, Malcolm. "Wilfred Owen, Tailhade, Tolstoy, and Pacifism." *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, Vol. 49, No. 194 (May, 1998), 154-166). The motivations

Christian, Owen might very well have bristled at Tailhade's insults against the Church and 'Le stupide Jésus' (Pittock, 157). Citing Christian doctrine as motivation for any of Owen's beliefs is tricky, though, since he could invoke passages regarding vengeance as readily as verses preaching non-violent resistance (Pittock, 158).

By presenting the mercy and longing of Owen's verse as products of suppressed homosexuality, James Najarian returns this all-important matter of poetic emotionality to the realm of forbidden language and suppressed subjectivity. Najarian eschews the Tailhade debate by ignoring pacifism and Christian influence completely.

Owen does not denigrate normative heterosexuality, but argues that same-sex love has the potential to be "greater" because it cannot be co-opted into conventional roles and dissipated into conventional poetic gestures. Owen reduces heterosexuality to "kindness" because it has the potential to become so rapidly pedestrian.⁵¹

Like Sassoon (during the war, at least), Owen does not deal with topics of homosexuality explicitly in his verse. This choice probably arose from Owen's knowledge of the punishment and castigation that Oscar Wilde received as a result of his openness as much as from the generally repressive, homophobic cultural climate of early twentieth century Great Britain.⁵² Even subtle allusions to the outcast poet were enough to arouse the attention of critics and the suspicion of authorities. Like A.E. Housman, Owen also relied on classical traditions for his artful depictions of male physicality, but the incorporation of similarly styled verses into contemporaneous military rhetoric created

behind Pittock's scholarship are not particularly clear, but his piece serves to juxtapose the competing anti-war voices that Owen was exposed to.

⁵¹ Najarian, James. "'Greater Love': Wilfred Owen, Keats, and a Tradition of Desire." *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (Spring, 2001), 34.

⁵² Rayside, David M. "Homophobia, Class and Party in England," *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Mar., 1992), 121-149.

some tension between the depictions of Housman and Owen and the de-sexed, Christian-inspired exhortations to manliness and brotherly love used by the army.

These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and [that] your joy might be full. This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you (John 15.11-14).⁵³

Even the New Commandment, recast in Owen's "Greater Love," found its way into military speech. The ambiguity produced by Owen's seeming use of the military idea of heroism helped to protect the poet's reputation during his short lifetime, but literary critics of subsequent decades were quick to find more personal influences for his verse. "The praise of the male body and the mere implication of Wilde help to place the poem ("Greater Love") in its homoerotic context" (Najarian, 33).

The subject of Owen's sexuality to his poetry is often overlooked, especially since, as this chapter has repeatedly argued, the role of suppressed discourse is fundamentally important to the production of his poems. To supplement his analysis of Owen's poetry, Najarian draws inferences from Owen's posthumously published letters, and even in these the poet is by no means openly gay.

Christ is literally in no man's land. There men often hear His voice: Great love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life – for a friend.
Is it spoken in English only and French?
I do not believe so.
Thus you see how pure Christianity will not fit in with pure patriotism
(Najarian, 34).

⁵³ The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1952).

As his letter demonstrates, the poet's ideological motives were sophisticated and often in contradiction. That Owen could access a substitutional bevy of symbols and prose for the articulation of his protest is important, too. The above letter was written to the poet's "devoutly Evangelical" mother, thus positioning it in a dialogue of immense importance to his subjective constitution. Numerous biographers, particularly Dominic Hibberd and Douglas Kerr, have cited Susan Owen as a primary influence on Wilfred's emotional and artistic development, although problems regarding his family's knowledge of and feelings about his homosexuality are addressed less often.⁵⁴ As the letter shows, Owen sought a dialogue in which to articulate the turmoil he felt in his position as an officer at the front, at a paradoxical three-way node of military valor, Christian compassion, and homoerotic sympathy.

The central thesis of Najarian's paper does not concern itself with Owen's religious conflicts, however. The essay is chiefly concerned with how a suppressed discourse like that motivated by hidden homosexuality maps onto the style of doomed romance explored most successfully in the poems of John Keats. Comparisons between Owen's war poetry and the work of John Keats began almost immediately after the war, and critical interpretations in recent decades have returned to this Romantic in search of plausible topics for comparative analysis.⁵⁵ To Najarian, Keats's frustrated love for Fanny Brawne provides counterpoise for Owen's repressed homosexuality. For lack of the means by which to articulate his thoughts to the object of his affection, Keats poured

⁵⁴ Kerr, 518-534.

⁵⁵ Hipp, Daniel. "'By Degrees Regain[ing] Cool Peaceful Air in Wonder': Wilfred Owen's War Poetry as Psychological Therapy." *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*. Vol. 35, No. 1 (Spring, 2002), pp. 25-49.

his feelings into his verse, and the longing reflected therein serves as unmistakable evidence of suppressed affection.

I saw pale kings, and princes too,
 Pale warriors, death pale were they all;
 They cried – “La belle dame sans merci
 Hath thee in thrall!”

I saw their starv'd lips in the gloam
 With horrid warning gaped wide,
 And I awoke and found me here
 On the cold hill's side.

And this is why I sojourn here,
 Alone and palely loitering,
 Though the sedge is wither'd from the lake,
 And no birds sing (“La Belle Dame sans Merci,” ll.37-48).⁵⁶

Certainly a supernatural love object evokes ideas of unattainability, but it is the continued fascination, the persistent longing for the unattainable that links the knight in “La Belle Dame sans Merci” to Wilfred Owen most compellingly. “O, what can ail thee, knight-at-arms, / So haggard and so woe-begone?” (ll.5-6) asks the speaker. A soldier like Owen, the knight is disconnected from civil society from the outset, and is left dismally lonely when he is abandoned by his ethereal mistress. Also like Owen and other neurasthenics, the knight sees death in his nightmares; “pale kings, and princes too” try to communicate La Belle Dame’s machinations to the knight in much the same way that friends and foes of shell-shocked soldiers populate the dreams of neurasthenics and prevent their successful subjective reconstitution.

The effect of the nightmare in “La Belle Dame sans Merci” drains the knight’s hope of ever loving at all, and it serves as a model for the purpose of Wilfred Owen’s

⁵⁶ Keats, John. “La Belle Dame sans Merci: A Ballad,” from *The Poetical Works and Other Writings of John Keats*, ed. H.B. Forman (London : Reeves & Turner, 1889).

poetry in a number of ways. First, the dark fantasy of encountering and being overwhelmed by a phantasmagorical would-be love object finds its counterpart in Owen's poem "Strange Meeting."

"Strange friend," I said, "There is no cause to mourn."
 "None," said that other, "save the undone years,
 The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours
 Was my life also" (*CP* 35, ll.14-17).

Like the knight in Keats' "La Belle Dame sans Merci," the first speaker in "Strange Meeting" originally sees the afterlife as bliss, as a reprieve from worldly despair. Again like Keats' knight, though, this soldier soon learns that the escape from temporality brings with it the death of new hope and the persistence of memory. "Whatever hope is yours / Was my life also," the second speaker explains in the beginning of his speech. The second speaker sought to undo all war, to accomplish Owen's goal of warning all humans of "the truth untold / The pity of war, the pity war distilled" (ll.24-25). This notion of "pity" is at once illegible through military ideology, yet unattainable without it, for it is the absurd violence of the war that reaffirms the second speaker's desire for peace and compassionate understanding. His death on the previous day at the hands of the first speaker has ruined the prospects of this mission, though, and "Now men will go content with what we spoiled, / Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled" (ll.26-27).

To interpret this goal, "the wildest beauty in all the world" (ll.18) as a homosexual relationship between the two speakers is not implausible, although a more conservative reading could still link the beauty that is world-wide humanitarian mercy with that beauty which haunts Keats' knight. Both beauties are withheld by supernatural forces, and yet the impossibility of these goals makes them all the more alluring. "Courage was mine,

and I had mystery / Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery" (ll.30-31), explains the second speaker, ignoring the premature conclusion to his life's quest in explaining his virtues to his assailant.

When much blood had clogged up their chariot-wheels,
I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,
Even with truths that lie too deep for taint (ll.34-36).

The truths of Owen's sympathy for this slain opponent remain untainted by the harsh military language of other poems; indeed the juxtaposition of truth and taint serves as a helpful model for much of the poet's relationship to feeling and language, respectively. Like the second speaker, Owen wishes for the meaning of his poems – the pity of war – to insidiously ingratiate themselves in the minds of his readers, making "Foreheads of men (bleed) where no wounds (are)" (ll.39). Whether or not the second speaker has transmitted this message to his assailant remains unclear at the end of the poem, and the reader is left to pity not only the death of the second speaker, but the death of pity in the world.

Themes of despair appear constantly throughout Owen's poems, and any simplistic analysis of "Dulce et Decorum Est" or "Anthem for Doomed Youth" would no doubt fixate on these emotional tones and messages. But the particular longing expressed by the speaker in "Strange Meeting" is at once horrified and resigned, nostalgic yet full of disgust and self-loathing. Of course, caution is necessary here: the psychiatric notes and medical records pertaining to Owen's time at Craiglockhart have not survived to allow scholars to determine whether or not the subject of this poem was birthed in a specific

nightmare, so readers must remain wary of substituting Owen's personal history into the back-stories of the characters in this or other poems.

Nevertheless, the anti-military, not-entirely-Christian theme of humanitarian mercy comes across quite clearly, in spite of the fact that the original speaker in the poem only manages to get out the eight words quoted above before the soldier he meets takes over and speaks until the end of the poem. Further speech is silenced by the dead soldier's final words, a line of peace and resignation perhaps unparalleled in all of Owen's poetry: "Let us sleep now...." (ll.44). Even in the afterlife, Owen's dialogue of mercy – as voiced through a living soldier in hell – is cut short by hopelessness, and the conflicts so central to the poet's very purpose in his poetry is utterly frustrated, transformed from the giving of life into the lamentation of death. I am speaking, of course, of the transition from mercy to pity, and as the poet himself says:

This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak
about them.
Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might,
majesty, dominion, or power, except War.
Above all I am not concerned with Poetry.
My subject is War, and the pity of War.
The Poetry is in the pity (*CP* 31).

These lines, included in the preface to Owen's posthumously published *Poems* (1920), reflect the strains of protest and anti-militarism picked up from Sassoon. But if pity is the reaction to a foregone conclusion, then the transition from the desire for mercy reflected in Owen's letters to the pity that fills his poems must take place outside the printed page, and certainly outside the realm of military life or psychiatric therapy. Without using the usual tools of the literary historicist (biographic analysis and historical contextualization,

both of which I have employed often herein), one cannot say what exactly motivated Wilfred Owen to compose poetry. The poems themselves offer clues, but in a body of work that rarely mentions shell-shock explicitly, even these meanings must be sifted through an interlocking net of language tricks and speech communities. If merciful sentiments are forbidden in the military, confused by the church, and hidden in unconventional sexual relationships, the reader must probe not only the language of Owen's poetics, but also the language of his letters, the language of his peers, and the language of contemporaneous psychiatric discourse in order to find the desire for mercy that impels Wilfred Owen to write.

As James Najarian's essay demonstrates, much critical attention has been paid to the influence of Wilfred Owen's "mistrust" of conventional sexual relationships on the language of his poetics, and for this reason, the role that gender plays in Owen's portrayal of shell-shock is not unimportant. Indeed, questions of gender are unavoidable in epistemological discussions of Great War traumatic neuroses. Pacifism and mercy were both derided as weak and womanly in public and military discourse, and the innate constitutional predisposition to neurasthenia⁵⁷ was often assigned only to women or to

⁵⁷ The use of the words "constitutional" and "neurasthenia" in this case are not intended to be technically accurate in terms of the twenty-first century understanding of psychobiological disorders, but instead to represent the outdated and often misleading terminology used by war-era British civilians to discuss the etiology of traumatic disorders. Neurasthenia, a now-defunct medical term coined by G.M. Beard in 1869, was originally used to describe the physical symptoms of what is now generally known as exhaustion, but it grew in usage to the point where, by the early twentieth century, it was readily applied to nearly every psychological disorder. (Chernow, Barbara. *The Columbia Encyclopedia* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1993].) Even amongst psychotherapists working during the war, the terminology used to describe what was first known as "shell-shock" changed quickly and dramatically as cases became more common. In my study of the case notes of Dr. Lewis Yealland (University College London Neurological Hospital Archives, accessed Jan. 2006), I discovered that between late 1915 and early 1916, Yealland and several other doctors on staff at the National Hospital in Queen's Square, London began by using the term "shell-shock" only to switch to "neuroses" or "neurosis," finally settling on "neurasthenia" in the spring of 1916.

men of “artistic character.”⁵⁸ The works of Sandra Gilbert play a major role in the contemporary discourse analysis of hysterical diseases, and Gilbert’s research into traumatic neurosis is devoted to the gender issues implied by historical characterizations. The issue of shell-shock is not of primary interest in her books, but the social issues that neurasthenia brought to attention are addressed in great detail. The acknowledgement of hysteria-like symptoms in male soldiers and officers forced both the public as well as members of the medical profession to reconsider their understanding of the “female malady” (to borrow a term from Elaine Showalter, another literary scholar concerned with the epistemology of hysteria), and, as Gilbert would have us believe, of broad, gender-based characterizations of emotional and mental conditions in general.

In her discussion of the First World War, Gilbert focuses on the social changes brought into the lives of British women during the fighting, changes like drastically increased earning power and the long-awaited birth of a political voice. When measured against the harrowing changes to the quality of life of soldiers engaged in trench warfare, female “positive” gains further complicated old gender antagonisms, at times resulting in a confusing misogyny towards female nurses and women on the home front. The war somehow produced an “apotheosis of femininity” while simultaneously engendering misogyny amongst male soldiers and intellectuals. Gilbert references contemporaneous works by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and others that addressed the idea of a female utopia brought about by the death of all men. The psychological reasons behind the libidinal effects of so much death and destruction are similarly discussed, as are the implications of homoeroticism in the writings of Wilfred Owen and other male poets.

⁵⁸ Mosse, George L. “Shell-Shock as a Social Disease.” *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 35, No. 1, Special Issue: Shell-Shock (Jan., 2000), 101-108.

Where the liberating sisterhood experienced by women was mostly untainted by hostility to men – where it was in fact frequently associated with admiration for male soldiers or identification with male heroism – the combatants' comradeship seems as often to have been energized by a disgust for the feminine as it was by a desire for the masculine. The war between the front and the home front, that is, issued in an inextricable tangle of (male) misogyny and (male) homosexuality, so that Owen, say, reproaches female "Love" while praising beautiful 'lads.'⁵⁹

Insights like these and other hostile comments throughout feminist criticism of the war poets seem to stand in stark contrast to any idea mercy, but Gilbert's analysis selectively ignores a number of important features of Owen's poetry. For example, the latent misogyny in "Disabled" is by no means a reaction to female empowerment, but a sign of more personal fear; an aftershock of damaged pride.

To-night he noticed how the women's eyes
Passed from him to the strong men that were whole (*CP* 68, ll. 43-44).

The speaker in the poem is an amputee attempting to readjust to civilian life, and comparisons between this fictionalized situation and the poet's own fears of coming back from the front with a "disabled" mind are plain to see. Subtle antagonism appears at points in the poem, but many of these instances could easily be explained as yet more evidence of Owen's discrete homosexuality. "Gathering sleep" "mothers" "voices of boys" (ll.4,6) away from the speaker in "Disabled," but the poem does not speak out against mothers. When "girls'... subtle hands" "touch him like some queer disease" (ll.11-12), we are to feel the revulsion of all civil society. With the men at war, though, civil society has become largely a female domain.

⁵⁹ Gilbert, S. "Soldier's Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women, and the Great War." *Signs*, Vol. 8, No. 3, Women and Violence (Spring, 1983), 443.

Other poems, like "Greater Love," come closer to embodying Gilbert's model ("Red lips are not so red / As the stained stones kissed by English dead" (CP 41, ll.1-2).), but to imply that Owen's mistrust of conventional sexual relationships informs his entire opinion on the female sex would be to ignore his mother's influence entirely. The words he used in his letters to Susan Owen and the sheer bulk of their correspondence demonstrate that he valued his relationship with her perhaps over all others. Quite simply, if Owen could be said to be reacting against anything female, it was merely an effect of his discomfort with heterosexual relationships, and not a judgment on the female sex.

Wilfred Owen's feelings regarding conventional sexuality mirror the uncomfortable place of neurasthenia in the public discourse. In a similar manner, the place of early Modernist poetry amongst the rigid and plain conventions of Georgian verse embodied the social tension provoked by shell-shock. D.S.R. Welland was one of the first to assess the significance of Wilfred Owen's pararhyme (called "half-rhyme" at the time Welland was writing), and he was quick to attribute the proto-modernist tone produced by the technique to the tumultuousness sociopolitical scene of early twentieth-century Great Britain.⁶⁰

Many of the poems written about the manifestations of traumatic neurosis internalize and project the horror and shame felt by the public at large while grappling with the ambiguity trauma. The role of first-hand soldierly experience in the representation of war realities, "some refracted...through the prisms of powerful literary

⁶⁰ Welland, D.S.R. "Half-Rhyme in Wilfred Owen: Its Derivation and Use." *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Jul., 1950), 226-241.

sensibilities,"⁶¹ gave credibility and painful detail to narratives of political discontent and emotional accounts of frontline frustration, sadness and terror, but the issue of traumatic breakdown was often obscured by the a systemic lack of sympathetic language in the speech communities of the soldier poets. This is not to say that the scathing protest poems of Siegfried Sassoon were readily welcomed by his peers and public, but that the personal issues at stake in a frank discussion of psychological afflictions were in many ways much more challenging than the directed satire and simple rancor that Sassoon often brought into in his verse.

Owen flirts with overtly political topics in some of the poems he composed while at Craiglockhart, but he transcends Sassoon's polemics in his later work, particularly in "Strange Meeting." Very often the poet will hide his chief preoccupations in more physical analogues, as was the case with the amputee in "Disabled." The direct and obvious language of Owen's political poetics gives a serious reader a chance to catch his breath between the more difficult poems. However, Owen clearly entertained fears of insanity and the difficulties of attempting to reintegrate himself into society.

The business of trying to tease out what exactly these fears meant to him is rather difficult, as little of Wilfred Owen's poetry deals with traumatic neurosis explicitly.⁶²

⁶¹ Talbott, J. "Soldiers, Psychiatrists, and Combat Trauma." *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Winter, 1997), 453.

⁶² A similar, albeit far more dramatic trend of non-recognition is to be found in areas of contemporaneous French literature. Annette Becker ("The Avant-Garde, Madness, and the Great War." *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 35, No. 1, Special Issue: Shell-Shock (Jan., 2000), 101-108) provides a quick history of the War's influence on the birth of the surrealist movement in art and literature, using the discontinuities and anti-intelligible qualities of shell-shock to characterize the intent of some of the movement's chief works. Although the surrealists "never discuss the specific forms of 'madness' produced by the war" (72), their very refusal to deal with the war in their art became for them away of "deleting the war" (73) and its historical importance. This idea sounds startlingly similar to the sort of repression that psychoanalysts dealing with traumatic neurosis fought to undo, but the execution of Dadaist and Surrealist projects produced an art community so flippant towards institutional and traditional authorities that questions of social reintegration usually addressed in psychiatric discourse were in many ways obviated entirely. André Breton's experiments with automatic writing attest to this conscientious abstinence from

Although the circumstances of his convalescence (including his daily contact with Sassoon, exposure to the “war poets,” and job editing the hospital poetry journal) are consistently perceived to be instrumental in Owen’s development as a poet, he seemed to derive more shame than creative energy from his own neuroses.⁶³ He treats the event that led to his breakdown – several days trapped in a shell hole and covered with the body parts of a fellow soldier – with characteristic flippancy and snobbishness in his letter to his mother dated the 2nd of May, 1917: the disorder, he asserts, was the result of “living so long by the *disiecta membra* of a friend” (CP 22). Following the habit of many of the speakers in his poems, Owen uses crude humor as a defense mechanism, denigrating the physical body to assert his own mastery over it. Yet the humor in the letter, as in the poem, only serves as misdirection, and a telling one, too; the superficial language of the crude joke denotes a placid emotional response, but hides feelings of pure trauma.

The shell-shocked characters that occasionally populate his verse are typically portrayed as ghouls or zombies, and the poetic meaning remains in the perception of the speaker – a gaze more often horrified than merciful. In “The Chances,” one of Owen’s cockney-voiced poems, a young soldier is struck by an accidental epiphany, and the stark sadness of his insight stands in glaring relief to the crude puns that crowd the rest of the poem.

But poor young Jim, 'e's livin' an' 'e's not;
 'E reckoned 'e'd five chances, an' 'e 'ad;
 'E's wounded, killed, and pris'ner, all the lot,
 The bloody lot all rolled in one. Jim's mad (CP 71, ll.15-18).

social discourse, although his letters and autobiographic writings about his experiences as a nurse on the Western Front express an enthusiasm for Freudian methods. “Though the affirmation of the creative energy of madness in the poetic and artistic worlds remained constant, the specific contribution of shell-shock was not consciously affirmed... (separating) surrealism as a profoundly French movement” (80).

⁶³ Talbott, 437-454.

“Five chances” refer to the possible fates the soldiers might encounter after “going over the top” and out into no-man’s land: one soldier dies instantly, “blown to chops” (ll.9), another becomes a double amputee after he “was ’urt, like, losin’ both ’is props” (ll.10), and another becomes a prisoner after he “’Ad the misfortoon to be took be Fritz” (ll.12). The fourth chance refers to the speaker, who “wasn’t scratched, praise God Almighty. (Though next time please I’ll thank ’im for a blighty)” (ll.13-14), and the fifth, as we know, refers to Jim: “the blood lot all rolled in one” (ll.18). Perhaps this paradoxical image of a dead, wounded, physically unharmed prisoner of war best represents both the army’s regard for the neurasthenic; though seemingly healthy, the shell-shocked soldier is unreachable, undeniably changed, and ultimately useless to his fellow soldiers.

The speaker does not address “poor young Jim” during this poem, nor does Jim get a chance to engage anyone else. In this poem and in others in Owen’s published works where sufferers of neurasthenia actually make their way into verse, normal conversations are forbidden with implicit understandings of social stigma, military skepticism, or simple psychological dissociation.

While Wilfred Owen formulated his pleas for mercy in the solitude of his verse, humanitarian mercy must have an object, a “place beneath” upon which it may “droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven.” As a result of the discontinuities between the speech communities of the home front and the Western Front, Owen suffered through his neuroses as a silent outcast. But none of the ideologies that formed the English cultural context of the Great War were wholly sympathetic to shell-shock. In the poetry of Wilfred Owen, we gradually discern these barriers to language and thought, and the

“profound, dull tunnel(s)” (“Strange Meeting,” *CP* 35, ll.2) through which to reconstitute mutilated subjectivities and re-establish merciful discursive relationships. Such regeneration cannot begin merely with poetics of pity and laments of despair, but must be shared with others, fellow soldiers “With the piteous recognition in fixed eyes, / Lifting distressed hands as if to bless.” (*CP* 35, ll.78) In “Strange Meeting,” Wilfred strives towards mercy on the printed page, and stumbles upon forgiveness in hell. Again, the preface to Owen’s collected poems reminds the reader of what hope might be gleaned from the despair of war.

The Poetry is in the pity
 Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the next. All a poet can do today is warn (*CP* 39).

Through poems like “Strange Meeting” and “A Terre (Being the Philosophy of Many Soldiers),” Wilfred Owen manipulates language to show us its limits. He lampoons the erosion of the human body to eulogize mental breakdown and social alienation. He never asks for forgiveness from the man he’s slain, since the formulation of such an absurd request would make forgiveness impossible. The characters in Wilfred Owen’s poems often understand things that cannot be said aloud; the violence of military speech could never hope to convey such fine feeling as one finds between the lines of Owen’s harshest poems. Owen’s poems take the dialogical possibilities opened up by the protest poems of Siegfried Sassoon to plead for mercy, for a pity inspired by war that the language of the military forbids him to articulate.

Epilogue

Internally, I narrate my own life. I use language to interpret my thoughts, and to render psychologically the sights and sounds of the world around me. Although the language most often spoken by the voice in my mind is English, the ubiquity of this language in the place where I live does not mean that I can always successfully articulate my internal narrative to those around me. For this reason, I have long been interested in the subject of how the self speaks itself, and in particular with the epistemological constructions of psychopathological states. Hypochondria are not unknown to me; internalized psychological narratives and conditions inform me, and this often manifests itself in somatic ways. One cannot merely isolate and study a specific mental “disorder” or psychopathological state within a given historical context without paying equal attention to the social and professional discourses in which these disorders are explained.

In reading dozens upon dozens of secondary analyses of traumatic neuroses and its casualties, I consistently noticed that scholars could often do no better in their descriptions of traumatic subjectivity than to oppose it diametrically to a subjectivity narrated via discourse – a tragic identification of alienation and otherness without a convincing mediation. I cannot promise to improve upon such a schema, but I must observe that subjects partly constituted outside of discursive relationships (as indeed the subject formed in trauma must be), must invent a psychological system for the internalization of knowledge radically disconnected from any social dialogue. This may

appear self-evident or perhaps tautological in that the social consists of an agglomeration of discursive relationships, but in stating this I mean to suggest the immensity of the extra-social domain from which such internalizing systems might draw their forms of logic. The positive affirmation that madness represents boundless possibilities – a sense of mental freedom that mocks the ideas of “liberty” and “freedom of expression” propagated in democratic societies – seems to me naively insensitive to the sheer loneliness, confusion, and fear that constitutes the daily experience of many who suffer from mental disorders. Even so, this study has made it clear to me that destabilized perspectives, such as those afforded by psychopathological “halfway houses” like shell-shock, often make possible the most profound insights into these restrictive systems of language.

This thesis is essentially a study of the use of language by the very people whom language failed. Language supports prejudice; language allows for conflicting medical explanations; language facilitates the exploration of troubling memories, but its rules of use often forbid such articulations. In the case of mental disorders, the human compulsion to repeat even produces real physical symptoms from simple verbal cues. However, language also serves a socially useful end; England’s rhetoric served as an schema through which many soldiers subjugated and normalized their internal narratives of their personal combat experience, ultimately to return successfully and satisfyingly into civil society.

For the neurasthenics of the First World War, this edifice crumbled. Siegfried Sassoon’s poetry represents one response to an Englishman’s crisis of confidence: bitterness, mistrust, and a profound disrespect for authority and power. These complaints

often serve to undermine structures of control, yet they can never resolve the issue of responsibility – inasmuch as the declaration of war represents a rhetorical displacement of national intent, invective protests often merely eschew choice and agency to displace guilt outside the individual to points within civil and military discourse.

Wilfred Owen's poems probe the contradictions inherent in any direct response to such a crisis: one cannot ask for mercy without acceding to cowardice, nor critique structures of war-making and discipline without simultaneously occupying a spot within such structures. Owen's critiques subvert Biblical interpretations, military jargon, and the very notion of rhymed verse to produce an image of the individual in war that is unknowable through conventional points of inquiry, yet profoundly emotional and forever in despair.

Although I did not directly address her work in this thesis, much of my initial research was prompted by Pat Barker's *Regeneration* novel trilogy. The meeting of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, the psychoanalysis-via-anthropology insights of Dr. W.H.R. Rivers, and the pitched ideological battle between psychiatry and somatic therapists conditioned my early responses to primary documents. Only in my study of Dr. Rivers' specific theoretical diversions from the works of Dr. Freud did I begin to depart from the historical picture developed in these novels. Anything I might write about them at this point in time would inevitably concentrate on Barker's misrepresentation of Dr. Rivers' theoretical writings and the difficulty inherent in fictionalizing a dated ideological struggle without projecting contemporary sensibilities. Even so, her depiction of Sassoon's conflicted pride informed the central argument of my

chapter on the poet; her portrayal of Owen's frustration and awkwardness is embedded in my very notion of trauma.

Pat Barker engagingly explores the many uses of language that both provide the setting and allow for the proper functioning of Craiglockhart War Hospital. The dialogue of the patient and psychoanalyst, the friendly exchange between soldiers, the tumultuous interior narrative of the traumatized subject, and the poet's struggle with the lessons of war experience each receive attention in Barker's prose. It was through these novels that I began to see how the limitations of language – particularly in its socially-restricted forms – directly affected both the psychoanalyst's and the soldier's experience with trauma. By taking a closer look at the works of Owen and Sasson, the writings and speeches of Dr. Rivers, and various historical documents, I hoped to probe these limitations, and come closer to understanding how the application of language could have made it so very difficult for the shell-shocked to communicate with the outside world – and vice-versa.

It is my fascination with these paradoxes of language that has compelled me to devote so much time and energy to reading and writing about these poets. It is my abiding interest in psychopathology and internal narrativity that has made shell-shock such an irresistible topic. I cannot hope to have satisfyingly explained these paradoxes that have brought me and so many others to this period of history, but I hope that in reading this thesis, others will pause and reflect upon how they "know" madness, and perhaps on how they accord authority amongst competing voices within tumultuous discourses.