

*Mark Dollar*

## **Ghost Imagery in the War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon**

**A** Toronto newspaper once called Siegfried Sassoon, who was on a speaking tour of Canada in 1945, “an avenging angel through whom the voice of slaughtered youth was speaking” (qtd. in Sassoon, *Siegfried's Journey* 297). Indeed, Sassoon did still speak on behalf of his peers who fought and died in the First World War, even though twenty-seven years had passed since the war ended. His ardent pacifism during the war led him to denounce England's continued involvement in a conflict he deemed unjust, and he saw those killed in battle as sacrificed unjustly. Their ghosts seem to have haunted Sassoon and caused him to regret mightily the cause of their deaths. In “Prelude: The Troops,” Sassoon imagines a horde of dead soldiers trudging off into eternity:

O my brave brown companions, when your souls  
Flock silently away, and the eyeless dead  
Shame the wild beast of battle on the ridge,  
Death will stand grieving in that field of war  
Since your unvanquished hardihood is spent.  
And through some mooned Valhalla there will pass  
Battalions and battalions scarred from hell.  
(*Collected Poems* 67)

Sassoon conceives of these ghosts as scarred, eyeless figures deformed by the hell of battle; they are supernatural figures of the macabre whom he pities for the loss of their youth. Ghosts appear frequently as images in his work on the war, and they tend to play three roles in the course of his poetry. Sassoon transforms his ghosts from heroic others to pathetic others and finally into peers, provoking in him such emotions as admiration, pity, and empathy. The ghosts remind him of the war and make him feel guilty for having survived, prodding him to seek justification for their deaths. They remind him also of the importance of living worthily, ultimately becoming comforting friends.

Sassoon did not expect the war to have such haunting effects when he arrived in France during November of 1915. Just before entering the trenches, he met

Robert Graves in the “C” Company mess of the First Battalion, Royal Welch Fusiliers. When Graves showed him a few pieces of his own war poetry, Sassoon objected to their harsh and realistic view of trench warfare; he thought he was familiar with the true face of war after four months of home training. Much of the poetry Sassoon wrote before he went into the trenches suggests that he was naïve about the war, that he thought dying in battle could actually benefit the soldier. In “Absolution,” he writes:

War is our scourge; yet war has made us wise,  
And, fighting for our freedom, we are free. . . .  
There was an hour when we were loth to part  
From life we longed to share no less than others.  
Now, having claimed this heritage of heart,  
What need we more, my comrades and my brothers?  
(*Collected Poems* 11)

Sassoon initially felt a great camaraderie with soldiers, many of whom were his subordinates, and understood death as a mystical force that could provide an ultimate brotherhood. In his prose *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (1928), Sassoon’s alter ego, George Sherston, feels very brave upon his arrival at boot camp in July of 1915, and he is completely credulous of war propaganda painting the enemy as evil incarnate (221) and portraying the English dead as “gloriously happy” in the afterlife (364). Of fighting, he finds “nothing imaginatively abhorrent in the notion,” and he feels “very much a man dedicated to death” (220). His dedication is to visiting death upon the enemy, not to dwelling on its inevitability at the Front. These impressions are formed, however, before Sherston experiences the Front for himself. Sassoon’s own ideals changed as the war came to a stalemate, and he was forced down into the trenches.

By the early months of 1916, Sassoon began, he says, to write his first “genuine” trench poems (*Siegfried’s Journey* 25). Dying in battle became not a heroic act but a senseless waste to him. He became a staunch anti-war poet, concerned with giving an impersonal, authentic (“genuine”) description of conditions at the Front in order to inform readers back in England of the less-than-honorable slaughter and to strip the euphemistic language away from the generals and propagandists perpetuating the war. In his war poems, he tried to record his surroundings with detachment and create a whole new genre of poetry based on flat objectivity (26). Bernard Bergonzi claims that Sassoon’s poetry thus took on “a deliberate simplicity and hard outline that recalls the impact of good poster art” (97), of blunt anti-war propaganda.

This poetry after 1916 generally tends to juxtapose the soldier’s daily boredom and discomforts with the madness of battle. Many of his poems rely upon

banal images like barbed wire (“Trench Duty”), “crumps and lice and lack of rum” (“Suicide in the Trenches”), “sodden bags of chalk,” and “mounds of glimmering sand-bags, bleached with rain” (“A Working Party”) to counter any idea of the battlefield as a glorious place. Indeed, “A Working Party” is set during routine trench maintenance and begins with a crude detail: “Three hours ago he blundered up the trench, / Sliding and poisoning, groping with his boots.” The tedium of work, though, is not to be taken for granted in the trench, as the poem ends:

He pushed another bag along the top,  
Craning his body outward; then a flare  
Gave one white glimpse of No Man’s Land and wire;  
And as he dropped his head the instant split  
His startled life with lead, and all went out.  
(*Collected Poems* 20)

“A Working Party” relies on irony, the great disjunction between what one expects at the beginning of the work and what one gets by the end, to shock its reader. Yet both parts are presented in unsentimental detail, making use of the familiar, unremarkable objects of a trench; the poem’s realism suggests that such tragedies occur all the time for men at the Front. Dying at the Front, then, is less heroic and transcendent than it is an absurd mistake. The drill sergeant in Sassoon’s “Conscripts,” for instance, asks his idealistic young charges “‘Magic? What’s magic got to do with you? / There’s no such thing! Blood’s red, and skies are blue,’” to disabuse them of the notion that war is anything but real and ruthless (*Collected Poems* 31). To this day, most scholars focus on the hard, political-charged realism of Sassoon’s work.

While realism is a powerful method of protest in war poems, it nonetheless has its limitations for Sassoon. Jon Silkin argues that Sassoon is preeminently a visual poet; he first submits his intellect and his politics to the emotional force of whatever he perceives. After forming an impression of an experience, he attaches to it a didactic message or posits a social significance (167). Some memories, though, seem too horrible, too personal, for him to move past their emotional force. In much of his work, Sassoon revisits horrific war memories to contemplate their bizarre appeal, saying “Moments like those are unreproducible when I look back and try to recover their living texture. One’s mind eliminates boredom and physical discomfort, retaining an incomplete impression of a strange, intense, and unique experience” (“Infantry Officer” 311).

The boring and uncomfortable realities hold less interest for Sassoon when they divert him from the task of understanding a traumatic personal experience. For instance, when Sherston comes across a group of mangled soldiers in *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930), he remarks that, to him, unlike perhaps

to others who saw only its immediate irony or misfortune, the experience was particularly moving:

I was doubtful whether they were asleep or dead, for the attitudes of many were like death, grotesque and distorted. But this is nothing new to write about, you will say; just a weary company, squeezing past dead or drowsing men while it sloshes and stumbles to a front-line trench. Nevertheless that night relief had its significance for me, though in human experience it had been multiplied a millionfold. (432)

He remarks on the scene's power to him personally and suggests that its macabre qualities will always haunt him. The scene is fantastic to him and thus is meaningful, more so than to others who see it merely as harsh reality. The dead had the power to visit him in this fashion.

In his poem "Sick Leave," for example, he is visited by ghosts even when he is safe and away from the Front:

When I'm asleep, dreaming and lulled and warm,—  
They come, the homeless ones, the noiseless dead.  
While the dim charging breakers of the storm  
Bellow and drone and rumble overhead,  
Out of the gloom they gather about my bed.  
(*Collected Poems* 85)

Many of Sassoon's otherworldly images emanated from such visions occurring after sleepless hours in grief and fear; these "mysterious visualizations," he says, come with "inventive spontaneity over which one has no seeming control" (*Siegfried's Journey* 105). Nonetheless, these spectral visions tempted Sassoon with a "delusive sense of power to put them into words," to understand these memories by describing them in poetic language (105). He mediates his discomfort by casting some of his memories as grotesques. He notes in *Siegfried's Journey* (1945) that "somehow the workings of my mind brought me a comprehensive memory of war experience in its intense and essential humanity" (80). This comprehensive memory often takes the form of ghosts.

Ghosts would become the chief image of death in Sassoon's poetry both during and after the war. As supernatural figures of death, Sassoon's ghosts embody his subjective feelings about the war. For Sassoon, as for many other artists from the Great War, returning ghosts served as powerful reminders of a cataclysmic experience, giving a not-so-physical presence to the "war-hauntedness" which

afflicted so many veterans. The return of the dead was a popular theme in post-war Europe for veterans and civilians alike; traditional conceptions of the supernatural once again found their way into artistic consciousness and served as progenitors of bereavement and memory (Winter 223). Such a preoccupation was obvious in European cinema, poetry, fine art, and in popular culture as well.<sup>1</sup> That life continued post-mortem, that soldiers killed tragically could rise up in testament to life, was an important idea in much of the poetry written during and after the war (221). Those who were most grief-stricken over the loss of loved ones often participated in séances where the deceased were summoned to make an account of how they died (since such information was usually restricted by government censors) and how they were getting on in eternity.<sup>2</sup>

Sassoon himself, though, seems not to have engaged in such communal hysteria. In fact, he once threatened Graves with a libel suit when Graves recounted in his memoirs a visit to Sassoon's mother. Graves supposedly awakened in the night and heard Theresa Sassoon using spiritualist means to communicate with her dead son, Hamo (Graves 232). Siegfried judged his mother's behavior as pathetic and insane (Moeyes 172). However, Sassoon clearly saw nothing outlandish in his own belief in ghosts. He was disinclined to go looking for the dead, since so often they would come to him; he reports in *Siegfried's Journey* that, at least during the war, "I was a believer in the power of spiritual presences" (81). Whether Sassoon believed in ghosts as having any thing other than a purely metaphoric character is immaterial, for, with Sassoon, the grotesque is a special figuration that takes on its existence in his writing. Wolfgang Kayser argues that ghosts function within the grotesque literary tradition as manifestations of insanity, as the link between the artist and the estranged world (184). Sassoon's ghosts are only subtly estranged from the world of the living, which, for many in the Great War, was a world turned on end. His ghosts walk the terrain of recognizable landscapes, yet they are removed from normal time, often maimed, and seem purposeful in their wanderings.

In Sassoon's poetry, one sees ghosts playing different roles at different times, whether they are terrifying accusers during the war or beneficent friends in the years after. Ghosts remind him of his duty to his fellow soldiers, and they evoke emotions in him that belie the passionless detachment he so worked to attain in his descriptions of the war. For instance, in his entry for May 27, 1916, Sassoon laments the loss of one of his men; the boy died after a shell explodes, but, says Sassoon, "when I go out on patrols his ghost will surely be with me; he'll catch his breath and grip his bomb just as he used to" (*Diaries 1915-1918* 68). The spectral presence of dead comrades (Hamo Sassoon was one) also pushes him to action, for, as he writes in "To My Brother,"

Your lot is with the ghosts of soldiers dead,  
And I am in the field where men must fight.  
But in the gloom I see your laurell'd head  
And through your victory I shall win the light.  
(*Collected Poems* 11)

Sassoon still holds in this poem to the promise of reward so palpable in "Absolution," but he recounts in his diaries how he became truly enraged at the Germans for killing his brother. Indeed, he was often called "Mad Jack" for his zeal in going over parapets. The war became personal to him. Sassoon could neither release his anger nor the memory of his beloved dead, for such memory "is the inevitable effect," he says, "of death on the living, when the living have loved the dead" (*Diaries 1920-1922* 163). Very simply, lost comrades during the war were not truly lost to him, only transformed into a different sort of soldier. Yet, in their transformation, Sassoon's ghosts are separate from him. Their heroism comes in their demise, while he is left to fight on. At this point in his work, ghosts were different from him because they died, heroically, in battle.

At some stage, though, presumably when Sassoon was beginning to write "genuine" trench poems, the ghosts he envisioned became less heroic than pathetic. In Sassoon's eerie work "Enemies," he describes a deceased comrade standing alone on the battlefield of Armageddon. Soon he is joined by other ghosts:

... suddenly there thronged  
Round him the hulking Germans that I shot  
When for his death my brooding rage was hot.  
He stared at them, half-wondering; and then  
They told him how I'd killed them for his sake—  
Those patient, stupid, sullen ghosts of men . . . .  
(*Collected Poems* 26)

The German ghosts blame the narrator for their slaughter, and his friend is left speechless to apologize for their deaths. The narrator, presumably Sassoon himself, stands alone as a living man, and he must listen to their litany of complaints. His friend does not answer but merely smiles, and somehow the Germans understand. The dead Germans are more tragic victims than foes, and the narrator's comrade seems to join them in their pained questioning of his friend. The ghosts in "Enemies" bear a resemblance to those in "Sick Leave," who stand around Sassoon to "whisper" to his heart the question "Why are you here with all your watches ended? / From Ypres to Frise we sought you in the Line" (85). They are pathetic because no answer could justify their deaths or bring them back to life, but they also accuse Sassoon for not dying with them, as if he has betrayed them.

The ghosts who accuse Sassoon do so largely in protest of his survival. While convalescing in a hospital (the 4<sup>th</sup> London) in April of 1917, Sassoon imagines a host of dead soldiers creeping across his floor. They are grotesque in their markedly livid faces, in their decomposing flesh which falls from their bones. Sassoon's ghosts are not magical; they do not fly about, move furniture, or cast spells. The only natural law they seem to flout is that of the impossibility of re-animation. They are rather frozen, often in the moment just after death (hence their often mutilated features), as if they were not dead but merely free to leave the war. The ghosts who come to him in the hospital glare at him in silence, but

They are not here to scare me; they look at me reproachfully, because I am so lucky, with my safe wound, and the warm kindly immunity of the hospital is what they longed for when they shivered and waited for the attack to begin, or the brutal bombardment to cease. (*Diaries 1915-1918* 161-62)

That Sassoon marks in them a reproachful glare suggests his own sense of guilt about ordering men to their deaths and for having survived the war, despite his early mad forays into No Man's Land. As an officer who sent men into battle, Sassoon feels some complicity in their deaths. But they and he were obeying orders; the men followed Sassoon's and he followed his superiors'. By 1917, Sassoon fully distrusted the military authorities over him, writing in "A Soldier's Declaration" that the war had become less about defense and liberation than aggression and conquest: "I can no longer be a party," he says, "to prolong these sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust . . . . On behalf of those who are suffering now I make this protest against the deception which is being practised on them" (qtd. in Graves 260). His own guilt lessens as he protests the war and seeks justice for his men.

At some times then, Sassoon feels great affinity for his ghosts, as if they are fellow sufferers from the plague of war. The ghosts stand with him to accuse the powers that be of perpetuating the war, and they become an inspiration to the prophetic figure Sassoon envisioned himself, the avenging angel. This sense of vengeance is strongest in the poem "On Passing the New Menin Gate." As he strolls through a newly opened war cemetery in 1928, Sassoon resurrects the dead with the power of his memory, saying

Who will remember, passing through this Gate,  
The unheroic Dead who fed the guns?  
Who shall absolve the foulness of their fate,—

Those doomed, conscripted, unvictorious ones?

...

Well might the Dead who struggled in the slime  
Rise and deride this sepulchre of crime.

(*Collected Poems* 188)

Sassoon sees it as his duty to remember their sacrifice and justify it, to make it meaningful by refusing to let a new generation forget them. The souls who return to him attired in the gear of war serve as a focal point for his memory and his duty: "It seemed," he says, "that my companions of the Somme and Arras battles were around me; helmeted faces returned and receded in vision. . . . These were the dead, to whom life had been desirable, and whose sacrifice must be justified unless the war were to go down in history as yet another Moloch of murdered youth" (*Siegfried's Journey* 80). Even in death, they are his companions, but justifying their deaths politically, by simply protesting the war, did not satisfy Sassoon. He still lived on and with his own traumas.

Ultimately, Sassoon finds himself merely a substantial ghost, like the dead in his inexorable isolation from a more desirable world. To Sassoon, the more desirable world is one in which he is able to ride free on his horse, hunting foxes rather than men, and to live in peace as a gentleman-poet. In poems like "I Stood With the Dead" ("I stood with the Dead . . . They were dead; they were dead; / My heart and my head beat a march of dismay" [*Collected Poems* 103]) his dismay over the war causes him rather to identify with ghosts. His sense of duty to them prevents Sassoon from engaging fully in the world of the living.

While stationed in Egypt in April of 1918, Sassoon imagined a concert party—women and men singing and dancing, oblivious to the horrors of the war. The scene becomes the focus of his poem "The Concert Party." He reckons the party-goers mere puppets, masked fakeries who unwittingly entertain those who are truly real: a squad of deceased soldiers. They are pitiful in their separation from the lovelier world of the living; Sassoon describes them thusly:

This wall of faces risen out of the night,  
These eyes that keep their memories of places  
So long beyond their sight.

(*Collected Poems* 100)

His diary entry at the time he wrote the poem gives finer details about these ghosts:

In front [of the party-goers] there are half-lit ruddy faces and glittering eyes, and behind they grow more dusky

and indistinct—ghosts, souls of the dead—the doomed—till on the edge high above the rest one sees silhouetted forms motionless, intent—those who were killed three years ago—and beyond them, across the glimmering levels of sand, legions of others come stealing in—till the crowd is limitless; all the dead have come to hear the concert party in this half-lit oasis of Time. (*Diaries 1915-1918* 235)

By the end of the poem, Sassoon has identified himself among the visiting dead, saying “We hear them, drink them; till the concert’s done,” but soon the ghosts separate from him: “Silent, I watch the shadowy mass of soldiers stand. / Silent, they drift away, over the glimmering sand” (*Collected Poems* 100). He has been left alone, neither a ghost nor a reveler. The bile raised in his throat upon contemplating the concert party indicates that, in essence, he identifies more with the soldier ghosts, though they are insubstantial, timeless, and imagined, than with the living civilians: “It is too much,” he says, “I cannot bear it; I must get up and go away. For I too am a ghost, one of the doomed” (*Diaries 1915-1918* 235).

Sassoon implies with such thoughts that he found himself isolated by his war life. He considered himself separated from people back home because of the fundamental disjunction in their experiences. Even upon his return to England, though he became a celebrated writer, he could not escape the public’s perception of him as a war poet. So too, of course, did he feel the sort of political isolation brought about by his unpopular declaration of 1917 and his resulting incarceration in Craiglockhart hospital. He also recognized the fundamental disparity between himself as an officer and his own living soldiers. Though Sassoon’s sense of connection with working-class men at the Front was remarkably solid, more so than at any other time in his life (Moeyes 68), he nonetheless acted as an observer, detached from the wistful hopes and frailties of other men. He only realizes a spiritual connection with them once they have died, when they come to him as ghosts.

In 1922, he would describe the living and the dead as equally inscrutable. However, he can at least hear the voices of the dead because they have “a sort of silver quality,” or rather, a quality that is remarkable and priceless to him. How so? Because they are products of his own making, wrought like silver out of his imagination. Thus the dead, Sassoon says, “are more real than the living, because they are complete” (*Diaries 1920-1922* 231). This completeness—in essence the cessation of uncertainty—Sassoon found in his ghosts would become a quality he hoped to achieve as he became an old man. Many of his later years were spent in contemplation of the afterlife, and such speculation eventually led him

to convert to Roman Catholicism in 1957. In 1953, he would write that he was “ ‘a fly buzzing against the window pane of ‘reality’ beyond which there is the world of the spiritual and the supernatural’ ” (qtd. in Moeyes 236). The only ones who can penetrate such a barrier are his ghosts, who finally come to him as *memento mori*. Sherston recalls that dead soldiers were like “mangled effigies” who warned the living of a fruitless existence (“Infantry Officer” 435). These ghosts, like Sassoon’s memories and hopes, are summoned and crafted by the power of his mind.

Upon remembrance of the dead, Sassoon understands the power of memory in summoning their presence. They are alive continually, and they prod him to live a life set apart. In his diary entry of July 7, 1922, Sassoon determines that “Death is merely a reminder, to the living, of their duty toward life. It is a stimulus,” he says, “which should urge them to fight on in that immortal war in which the spirit of man must be victorious over his grosser elements” (*Diaries 1920-1922* 191). Perhaps this is how the soldiers who died so unheroically in the Great War are finally justified for Sassoon: they assist him in justifying his own life, in giving him a sense of purpose in the aftermath of his own trauma.

In 1919, just a year after the war ended, Sassoon published a collection of poems called *Picture-Show*. The poems deal with the war largely on a spiritual level, as they were to be his proof to the literati that he could write poetry without gory or highly politicized references to the Front. The collection generated a mixed reception, however; he was seen by some to have lost the passion in his harshly realistic work. But the passion remains in the intimacy with his memories of the men who died around him. The title of the collection is a nod to the burgeoning popularity of the cinema, the then-silent medium which captured the “silver quality” of speechless forms on its silver screen. The screen serves as a metaphor for his recollection of the most powerful experiences he had in the war, for it too features silent apparitions. In “Wraiths,” a work from *Picture-Show*, Sassoon serves as an apologist for the dead who haunt the living:

Strangely they seek a place  
In love’s night-memored hall;  
Peering from face to face,  
Until some heart shall call  
And keep them, for a breath,  
Half-mortal . . . (*Hark to the rain!*) . . .  
They are dead . . . (*O hear how death  
Gropes on the shutter’d pane!*)  
(*Collected Poems* 112)

The ghosts merely seek someone to remember them lovingly. Sassoon's heart calls out to them over and over again, and it is the only way he knows how to deal with the disconcerting experiences of the war—he must remember them. He has not lost his passion about the senseless tragedy of the war; rather, he has focused that passion on the war's most tragic personae—the ghosts of the unjustly dead.

### Notes

1. Take, for example, Abel Gance's film *J'Accuse* (1919) and his remake of it (1937) that imagined the ghosts of dead soldiers rising from their graves to stop the spread of war. Also consider Irwin Shaw's remarkable play *Bury the Dead* (1936), in which dead American soldiers refuse to be buried because they died too young and for no real purpose.

2. Winter notes how even such a well-regarded figure as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle attended séances and was fascinated by "spirit photography" (a practice based on the idea that a camera can capture a ghostly spirit on film) after the death of his son, Kingsley, from wounds received at the Somme (58).

### Works Cited

- Bergonzi, Bernard. *Heroes' Twilight: A Study of the Literature of the Great War*. London: Constable, 1965.
- Graves, Robert. *Good-bye to All That*. New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1957.
- J'Accuse*. Dir. Abel Gance. Perf. Victor Francen, Jean-Max, Renee Devillers. Connoisseur, 1937.
- Kayser, Wolfgang. *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*. Trans. Ulrich Weisstein. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1963.
- Moeyes, Paul. *Siegfried Sassoon: Scorched Glory*. New York: St. Martin's, 1997.
- Sassoon, Siegfried. *Collected Poems: 1908-1956*. London: Faber and Faber, 1984.
- . *Diaries 1914-1918*. Ed. Rupert Hart-Davis. London: Faber and Faber, 1983.
- . *Diaries 1920-1922*. Ed. Rupert Hart-Davis. London: Faber and Faber, 1981.
- . "Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man." *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston*. London: Faber and Faber, 1986. 1-282.
- . "Memoirs of an Infantry Officer." *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston*. London: Faber and Faber, 1986. 285-514.
- . *Siegfried's Journey*. New York: Viking, 1946.
- Shaw, Irwin. *Bury the Dead*. New York: Random House, 1936.
- Silkin, Jon. *Out of Battle: The Poetry of the Great War*. New York: Ark, 1987.
- Winter, Jay. *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995.

**Mark Dollar** holds a Ph.D. in British Literature from Purdue University and is an assistant professor at King College in Bristol, Tennessee. This essay comes from a book he is working on titled *The Grotesque War: British Poetry of World War I*.