

SIEGFRIED SASSOON: THE NON-COMMITAL SATIRIST

by 613-8301

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B. S., Weber State College, 1971

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A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

Manhattan, Kansas

1973

Approved by:



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### Siegfried Sassoon: The Non-Committal Satirist

Siegfried Sassoon, the poet, claims critical evaluation among twentieth century British literary men chiefly on the basis of his World War I poetry. To all but a small dedicated following, the fact that he continued to write poetry until his death in 1967 may come as a surprise. Joseph Cohen in "The Three Roles of Siegfried Sassoon" says that "it is indeed remarkable that Sassoon's poetic achievement during the Great War is now forgotten, and even more remarkable that Sassoon, who has published his poems in every decade of this century, is largely unknown by the present generation and ignored by its critics."<sup>1</sup> Perhaps readers generally are more familiar with Siegfried Sassoon as a prose writer. The Memoirs of George Sherston and Siegfried's Journey have probably attracted more readers in the last two decades than his poetry.

It is with Sassoon the poet explicated by Sassoon the autobiographer that this paper is concerned. Peter Levi in "Sassoon at Eighty" states: "His poetry divides roughly into three periods: the early rustic awakening with the astonishing new dimensions of his war poetry; a satiric period which was linguistically interesting for the combination of casual bite with an admirably fibrous Hardy-esque verbal texture; and a ruminative and metaphysical period, a late autumnal flowering. The first period led directly into the second, but the position from which the peacetime satires

<sup>1</sup>Joseph Cohen, "The Three Roles of Siegfried Sassoon," Tulane Studies in English, 7 (1957), p. 169.

opened fire was neither as strong as Pope's nor as deeply entrenched as Hardy's; and the satire foundered."<sup>2</sup> I propose to analyze the satire of the first two periods of Sassoon's poetry, specifically contrasting the tone of the war poetry with that of the post-war political poems. By using a biographical focus, I intend to demonstrate that the poetry of social statement in the 1920's more accurately represents the natural temperament and poetic commitment of Siegfried Sassoon than the most biting commentary of his war poetry. The denunciatory satire of Sassoon's war poetry was out of character not only with the tone of detachment from reality of his prewar efforts but also with the ruminative poetry written during the remainder of his long, productive career. Assessing his war poetry after a passage of some twenty-five years, Sassoon reflects that "I could now safely admit that army life had persistently interfered with my ruminative and quiet-loving mentality. I may even have been aware that most of my satiric verses were to some extent prompted by internal exasperation."<sup>3</sup> I believe this statement accurately reflects the origin of the bitterly satiric war poems.

Siegfried Sassoon was by temperament and desire a "ruminative and quiet-loving" man, and this characterization reflects the tone and natural commitment of his prewar and post-war poetry. Born in 1886, Sassoon was the son of a wealthy Anglo-Jewish gentleman and Theresa Thornycroft, a painter of some reputation and niece of the noted English sculptor, Hamo Thornycroft. A cultured Englishwoman, Mrs. Sassoon determined early that

<sup>2</sup>Peter Levi, "Sassoon at Eighty," The Poetry Review, 57 (Autumn 1966), p. 172.

<sup>3</sup>Siegfried Sassoon, Siegfried's Journey (London: Purnell and Sons Ltd., 1945), p. 74.

her second son should become a poet, and to the achievement of this end she quite effectively walled him off from distracting influences in the outside world in an existence of her own devising at the ancestral home, Weirleigh. Delicate health in his boyhood kept him from being sent away to school with his brothers, thus completing the set of circumstances that shaped the reflective temperament and self-containing character of Sassoon. He matured very slowly in an untroubled, unhurried atmosphere of books, summer cricket matches, and winter hunting expeditions. C. E. Maguire in "Harmony Unheard: The Poetry of Siegfried Sassoon" describes him: "Although he always wanted to be a poet, he spent almost three decades of his life happily untouched by, or cautiously evading, intellectual influences. His school career was undistinguished, his university course cut short . . . . Hunting was for him a poetic apprenticeship akin to Wordsworth's early communing with nature. It combined adventure, beauty, comradeship. He was not coming to conclusions about people or events, but saturating his senses with the feel of things. He was not exactly becoming mature, either mentally or emotionally; his reaction to the war proves this."<sup>4</sup>

He began dabbling with poetry in his teens and by 1910 had published privately some pamphlets of verse. Edmund Blunden characterizes this early poetry: "No poet of twentieth-century England, to be sure, was originally more romantic and floral than young Siegfried Sassoon from Kent. Up to 1914, Mr. Sassoon was known, it seems, more in the hunting-field and on the cricket-ground than in the literary world. There he was

<sup>4</sup>C. E. Maguire, "Harmony Unheard: The Poetry of Siegfried Sassoon," Renaissance, 11, No. 3 (Spring 1959), p. 116.



a gentle amateur, who now and then published a graceful composition...."<sup>5</sup> Sassoon remembers his theory of writing poetry at this time: "Perfection, I felt, could only be achieved through a distillation of imagination which was strangely and exquisitely remote from everyday experience."<sup>6</sup> An old family friend, reading his poetry of that period, advised him "to put some solid thought into [his] poems" because "she felt I ought to be writing in a more physical way" (Weald of Youth, p. 29). Sassoon continues: "I had hoped that she would be more encouraging, for the sonnets had been written in a fine frenzy of aureate unreality, and I had copied them out again with gloating satisfaction" (Weald of Youth, p. 29). He could write with exquisite remoteness about his feelings of death in 1908:

Then, if some bird should pipe, or breezes stir the glade,  
Thinking them for the while my voice, so let them seem  
A fading message from the misty shores of dream,  
Or wheresoever, following Death, my feet have strayed.  
("An Old French Poet," p. 53)<sup>7</sup>

He recalls his early poetic efforts: "I am reminded of the magnanimously uncomprehending emotion which accompanied the putting of those words on paper--words that then seemed as though no-one else had ever used them before. . . . While in the act of composing those lines I probably thought I was saying my final word about life" (Weald of Youth, p. 36).

Michael Thorpe says that in these early poems "feeling is clouded

<sup>5</sup>Edmund Blunden, "War Poets, 1914-1918," Writers and Their Work, ed. Bonamy Dobree, No. 100, p. 25.

<sup>6</sup>Siegfried Sassoon, The Weald of Youth (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1949), p. 28.

<sup>7</sup>In this paper the references to Sassoon's poetry cited are from Siegfried Sassoon, Collected Poems, 1908-1956 (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1961). (Hereafter cited by poem titles and page numbers.)

and dissipated by the proliferation of a Pre-Raphaelite-Swinburnian diction which had already reached its ultimate dilution in Dowson and Johnson. All the fin de siècle epithets are there: dim, glimmering, strange, lovely, darkling, sweet, secret, ecstatic, beautiful, ethereal, celestial."<sup>8</sup> He cites "October" as one such inferior example:

Now do ye dream of Spring when greening shaws  
Confer with the shrewd breezes, and of slopes  
Flower-kirtled, and of April, virgin guest;  
Days that ye love, despite their windy flaws,  
Since they are woven with all joys and hopes  
Whereof ye nevermore shall be possessed. (p. 52)

Sassoon was astonishingly immature and had never yet been challenged to recognize the existence of a world containing numerous realities foreign to his own knowledge of life and beyond his imagination. He expressed, however, a vague longing for some tragic experience to happen to him, as well as a desire for a more definite statement in his poetry:

I've listened: and all the sounds I heard  
Were music,--wind, and stream, and bird.  
With youth who sang from hill to hill  
I've listened: my heart is hungry still.

I've looked: the morning world was green;  
Bright roofs and towers of town I've seen;  
And stars, wheeling through wingless night.  
I've looked: and my soul yet longs for light.

I've thought: but in my sense survives  
Only the impulse of those lives  
That were my making. Hear me say  
'I've thought!'--and darkness hides my day.  
("Alone," p. 61)

Thorpe sums up the content and poetic commitment of Sassoon's early output by stating that "these poems reveal the poverty of choice with which he was faced: from a critical viewpoint they are chiefly valuable as a

<sup>8</sup>Michael Thorpe, Siegfried Sassoon (Netherlands: Univ. Pers Lieden, 1966), p. 4.

measure of the extraordinary change wrought in Sassoon's writing by his War experience" (Siegfried Sassoon, p. 5).

On a gloomy December evening in 1912, Sassoon was whiling away boredom by rereading John Masefield's poem, The Everlasting Mercy. He began writing a few lines of parody to amuse himself. The lines he wrote were entitled The Daffodil Murderer, and the result of them was Sassoon's first concrete experience of writing with any conscious feeling of commitment. He recalls: "I felt that in the last twenty-four hours I had found a new pair of poetic legs, and the fact that they had been graciously presented to me by John Masefield made no difference to my sense of self-satisfaction" (Weald of Youth, p. 126). The poem was published anonymously in The Antidote and in a private edition under the pseudonym of Saul Kane. Vivian de Sola Pinto states: "The Daffodil Murderer is not only a remarkably clever imitation of Masefield's style, but a moving and original poem, superior in some ways to Masefield's. It is significant, too, because it shows that even before the war Sassoon had a sense of the hollowness of the gentlemanly paradise in which he spent his youth, and a deep sympathy for the common man who was excluded from that paradise."<sup>9</sup> Thorpe concurs: "What is characteristic of Sassoon, as the War poems were to show more powerfully, is his capacity to feel for the suffering victim; The Daffodil Murderer has, in parts, the power to move--and this says much. It does not show the stirrings of a social conscience to complain, in Saul Kane's mouth, that some people are better and many worse off than they deserve to be" (Siegfried Sassoon, p. 13).

<sup>9</sup>Vivian de Sola Pinto, "Crisis in English Poetry, 1880-1940," English Literature, ed. Basil Willey, 3rd ed. (London: Hutchinson Univ. Library, 1958), p. 143.

Edmund Gosse sent a copy of this parody to Edward Marsh, who at that time was editing a collection of the Georgian poets. Marsh read a selection of Sassoon's poetry in 1913 and offered him this criticism: "It seems a necessity now to write either with one's eye on an object or with one's mind at grips with a more or less definite idea. Quite a slight one will suffice!" (Weald of Youth, p. 138). One of the poems Marsh praised as containing thought was:

Old English songs, you bring to me  
 A simple sweetness somewhat kin  
 To birds that through the mystery  
 Of earliest morn make tuneful din,  
 While hamlet steeples sleepily  
 At cock-crow chime out three and four,  
 Till maids get up betime and go  
 With faces like the red sun low  
 Clattering about the dairy floor.  
 ("Morning-Land," p. 54)

Thorpe considers that most of Sassoon's better prewar poetry dates from this constructive criticism by Marsh; he began writing more critically, "refining his style and expressing his feelings more clearly" (Siegfried Sassoon, pp. 6-7). "The Old Huntsman," written in 1915 before Sassoon went to France, Thorpe considers "his other most accomplished early poem" (Siegfried Sassoon, p. 13). It is a blank-verse monologue by an old huntsman recalling happy moments and bitter memories of his past. The poem is a blend of Sassoon's imagined perceptions of an aged huntsman and his own personal feelings:

And morn was at the window; and I was glad  
 To be alive because I heard the cry  
 Of hounds like church-bells chiming on a Sunday.  
 Ay, that's the song I'd wish to hear in Heaven! (pp. 6-7)

This world's a funny place to live in. Soon  
 I'll need to change my country; but I know  
 'Tis little enough I've understood my life,  
 And a power of sights I've missed, and foreign marvels. (p. 9)

I never broke  
 Out of my blundering self into the world,  
 But let it all go past me, like a man  
 Half asleep in a land that's full of wars. (p. 10)

Thorpe says: "Both the strengths and the weaknesses of Sassoon's early life are crystallized in 'The Old Huntsman'; when he wrote, Sassoon was highly conscious of the latter. Its greatest strength, his sense of kinship with nature, was to remain, to be rediscovered to the full in his retrospective prose: for the present, as a poet, he was handicapped by a half-awareness, at best, of humanity" (Siegfried Sassoon, p. 14). Looking back on this period in his life, Sassoon recalls: "Then I remembered that night, early in 1914, when I had been up in this room experiencing an emotional crisis in which I had felt that my life was being wasted on sport and minor poetry, and had imagined myself devoting my future to humanitarian services and nobly prophetic writings" (Siegfried's Journey, p. 53).

With a feeling of commitment to a new phase of his life, Sassoon enlisted in the Home Guard in August, 1914, when England entered the Great War. His previously sheltered existence in no way prepared him to cope with the dehumanizing experiences he encountered in the trench warfare on the Western Front. At last his vague desire for tragic experience and his search for poetic commitment were to be fulfilled. He recalls: "Never before had I known how much I had to lose. Never before had I looked at the living world with any degree of intensity. It seemed almost as if I had been waiting for this thing to happen, although my own part in it was so obscure and submissive."<sup>10</sup> This contact with

<sup>10</sup>Siegfried Sassoon, The Memoirs of George Sherston, Memoirs of A Fox-Hunting Man (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., Inc., 1937), p. 291.

brutal reality forced him into achieving a maturity impossible in his idyllic prewar existence and tormented him into writing poetry characterized by bitterness and sardonic humor that was foreign to his nature, the intensity of which he never reached again. Thorpe says of Sassoon's war poetry: "In showing the dreadfulness of the War, in its surface aspects, he preceded Owen and surpassed him and all English poets who had previously written of war. His satires have, quantitatively, greater 'bite' than those of his fellow war-poets and a sheer brutality of utterance that matches the reality. No English satirist since Byron had had such power of invective--though he lacks even Byron's constructiveness. He relieved the pressure of his emotion by speaking the brutality, over and over again" (Siegfried Sassoon, p. 26).

Cohen divides Sassoon's poetry into three groups, each reflecting a definite poetic "role" that Sassoon adopted at various stages of his literary career. He sees the war poetry as a phase of "the angry prophet." "Sassoon's enthusiasm for his role of angry prophet is amply recorded in his prose accounts of his war experiences, The Memoirs of George Sherston and Siegfried's Journey 1916-1920; but the intensity with which he responded to the role and developed it during the war years and afterward is revealed only in his poems [which convey] the raw unchecked emotions themselves" ("The Three Roles of Siegfried Sassoon," p. 170). However, Sassoon did not immediately reach this level of satire. He absorbed experiences slowly; only gradually did his prewar idealism give way to harsher realities. He reminisces: " . . . the War was inevitable and justifiable. Courage remained a virtue. And that exploitation of courage, if I may be allowed to say a thing so obvious, was the essential

tragedy of the War, which, as everyone now agrees, was a crime against humanity" (Fox-Hunting Man, p. 305).

At the beginning of his Army career, Sassoon could say that "there was something almost idyllic about those early weeks of the War" (Fox-Hunting Man, p. 291). Much of the early British World War I poetry was written as a religious justification of the Cause, romanticizing war, praising patriotism, and glorifying chivalrous sacrifice of life. The poems of Rupert Brooke serve to illustrate this concept:

Blow out, you bugles, over the rich Dead!  
 There's none of these so lonely and poor of old,  
 But, dying, has made us rarer gifts than gold.  
 These laid the world away; poured out the red  
 Sweet wine of youth; gave up the years to be  
 Of work and joy, and that unhopèd serene,  
 That men call age; and those who would have been,  
 Their sons, they gave, their immortality.  
 (Sonnet III, "The Dead")

If I should die, think only this of me:  
 That there's some corner of a foreign field  
 That is for ever England. There shall be  
 In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;  
 A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,  
 Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,  
 A body of England's, breathing English air,  
 Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.  
 (Sonnet V, "The Soldier")<sup>11</sup>

Sassoon's early war poetry, like that of some contemporaries in 1915, begins in an aura of idealism, the spirit of Happy Warriorism. He recalls: "While learning to be a second-lieutenant I was unable to write anything at all, with the exception of a short poem called 'Absolution', manifestly influenced by Rupert Brooke's famous sonnet-sequence. The significance of my too nobly worded lines was that they expressed the

<sup>11</sup>Rupert Brooke, The Collected Poems (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1942), p. 148 and p. 150.



typical self-glorifying feelings of a young man about to go to the Front for the first time" (Siegfried's Journey, p. 17):

Horror of wounds and anger at the foe,  
And loss of things desired; all these must pass.  
We are the happy legion, for we know  
Time's but a golden wind that shakes the grass.

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?  
("Absolution," p. 11)

The poem "France," like the preceding one, was the type the poet said "found favour with middle-aged reviewers":

And they are fortunate, who fight  
For gleaming landscapes swept and shafted  
And crowned by cloud pavilions white;  
Hearing such harmonies as might  
Only from Heaven be downward wafted--  
Voices of victory and delight. (p. 13)

Even after the death of his brother, Hamo, in action in Gallipoli in 1915, he could still write idealistically "To My Brother":

Give me your hand, my brother, search my face;  
Look in these eyes lest I should think of shame;  
For we have made an end of all things base.  
We are returning by the road we came.

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. (pp. 11-12)

From the time Sassoon first went to France in early spring of 1915, he kept a journal of his experiences. He notes: "All squalid, abject, and inglorious elements in war should be remembered" (Fox-Hunting Man, p. 318). He recorded and absorbed the shocking scenes of men dehumanized in the trenches which became his angry anti-war poems. He recalls: "This gradual process began, in the first months of 1916, with a few



genuine trench poems, dictated by my resolve to record my surroundings, and usually based on the notes I was making whenever I could do so with detachment. These poems aimed at impersonal description of front-line conditions, and could at least claim to be the first things of their kind. The only one which anticipated my later successes in condensed satire was 'Good Friday Morning', a jaunty scrap of doggerel versified from a rough note in my diary" (Siegfried's Journey, p. 17):

Deep in water I splashed my way  
Up the trench to our bogged front line.  
Rain had fallen the whole damned night.  
O Jesus, send me a wound to-day,  
And I'll believe in Your bread and wine,  
And get my bloody old sins washed white! (p. 24)

He remembers: "Without knowing why, I remembered that it was Easter Sunday. Standing in that dismal ditch, I could find no consolation in the thought that Christ was risen. I splashed back to the dug-out to call the others up for 'stand-to'" (Fox-Hunting Man, p. 376). Poetry came from entries in his journal, such as " . . . the rockets soared beyond the ridge and the machine-guns rattled out their mirthless laughter":

Through darkness curves a spume of falling flares  
That flood the field with shallow, blanching light.  
The huddled sentry stares  
On gloom at war with white,  
And white receding slow, submerged in gloom.  
Guns into mimic thunder burst and boom,  
And mirthless laughter rakes the whistling night.  
The sentry keeps his watch where no one stirs  
But the brown rats, the nimble scavengers.  
("Golgotha," pp. 14-15)

After nearly a year in France, Sassoon recalls his feelings: "I have said that spring arrived late in 1916, and that up in the trenches opposite Mametz, it seemed as though winter would last forever. I also

stated that as for me, I had more or less made up my mind to die because in the circumstances there didn't seem anything else to be done" (Memoirs of George Sherston, Memoirs of An Infantry Officer, p. 9). He was sent to an Army School for a refresher course, where a major lectured the war-weary veterans on the subject, "The Spirit of the Bayonet." Sassoon recalls: "He spoke with homicidal eloquence, keeping the game alive with genial and well-judged jokes. . . . Afterwards I went up the hill to my favorite sanctuary, a wood of hazels and beeches. . . . But the lecturer's voice still battered on my brain. 'The bullet and the bayonet are brother and sister.' 'If you don't kill him, he'll kill you.' . . . 'Don't waste good steel. Six inches are enough. What's the use of a foot of steel sticking out at the back of a man's neck? Three inches will do for him: when he coughs, go and look for another'" (Infantry Officer, pp. 15-16). The result of this experience was a poem:

To these I turn, in these I trust--  
 Brother Lead and Sister Steel.  
 To his blind power I make appeal,  
 I guard her beauty clean from rust.

He spins and burns and loves the air,  
 And splits a skull to win my praise;  
 But up the nobly marching days  
 She glitters naked, cold and fair.

Sweet Sister, grant your soldier this:  
 That in good fury he may feel  
 The body where he sets his heel  
 Quail from your downward darting kiss.  
 ("The Kiss," pp. 15-16)

Robert Graves, in his autobiography, Good-Bye to All That, says: "His poem ["The Kiss"] was originally written seriously, inspired by Col. Campbell, V. C.'s bloodthirsty 'Spirit of the Bayonet' address at an army school. Later he offered it as a satire; and it is a poem that

comes off whichever way you read it."<sup>12</sup>

Sassoon records an incident that took place on a bombing raid underneath the German trenches: "Other wounded men were crawling back. Among them was a gray-haired lance-corporal, who had one of his feet almost blown off; I half carried him in and when he was sitting on the fire-step he said, 'Thank God Almighty for this; I've been waiting eighteen months for it and now I can go home'" (Infantry Officer, p. 36). The poet may have recalled the wounded soldier and his words when he wrote "The One-Legged Man":

And he'd come home again to find it more  
Desireable than ever it was before.  
How right it seemed that he should reach the span  
Of comfortable years allowed to man!  
Splendid to eat and sleep and choose a wife,  
Safe with his wound, a citizen of life.  
He hobbled blithely through the garden gate,  
And thought: 'Thank God they had to amputate!' (pp. 25-26)

From an observation such as: "No; one couldn't reckon the effect of the war on people by weeks and months. I'd noticed that boys under twenty stood it worst, especially when the weather was bad. Mud and boredom and discomfort seemed to take all the guts out of them" (Infantry Officer, p. 44), the poet created this poignant tribute to the weak young ones that the war victimized:

I knew a simple soldier boy  
Who grinned at life in empty joy,  
Slept soundly through the lonesome dark,  
And whistled early with the lark.

In winter trenches, cowed and glum,  
With crumps and lice and lack of rum,  
He put a bullet through his brain.  
No one spoke of him again.  
("Suicide in the Trenches," p. 78)

<sup>12</sup>Robert Graves, Good-Bye to All that, An Autobiography (London: Jonathan Cape, 1929), p. 339.

Sassoon's compassion for the common soldiers is reflected in such a comment as: "Visualizing that forlorn crowd of khaki figures under the twilight of the trees, I can believe that I saw then, for the first time, how blindly War destroys its victims" (Infantry Officer, p. 94). He wrote poems expressing his admiration for these uncomplaining, even cheerful victims being sacrificed by the War Office:

Soldiers are dreamers; when the guns begin  
They think of firelit homes, clean beds and wives.

I see them in foul dug-outs, gnawed by rats,  
And in the ruined trenches, lashed with rain,  
Dreaming of things they did with balls and bats,  
And mocked by hopeless longing to regain  
Bank-holidays, and picture shows, and spats,  
And going to the office in the train.  
("Dreamers," p. 72)

And then he thought: to-morrow night we trudge  
Up to the trenches, and my boots are rotten.  
Five miles of stodgy clay and freezing sludge,  
And everything but wretchedness forgotten.  
To-night he's in the pink; but soon he'll die.  
And still the war goes on--he don't know why.  
("In the Pink," p. 18)

Pinto cites "In the Pink," commenting that "Sassoon was at his best when he combined this pity for the ordeal of the common soldier with a savage irony directed against the stupidity and vulgarity of the people who shut their eyes to the horror of the war" (Crisis in English Poetry, p. 144).

Special targets of the poet's wrath were the newspaper correspondents and the tone of the news dispatches reported to the people at home. "A London editor driving along the road in a Staff car would have remarked that the spirit of the troops was amazing. And so it was. But somehow the newspaper men always kept the horrifying realities of the War out of their articles, for it was unpatriotic to be bitter, and the

dead were assumed to be gloriously happy" (Infantry Officer, p. 117).

He wrote this poem as an answer:

"The effect of our bombardment was terrific. One man told me he had never seen so many dead before."--War Correspondent"

'He'd never seen so many dead before.'  
 They sprawled in yellow daylight while he swore  
 And gasped and lugged his everlasting load  
 Of bombs along what once had been a road.  
 'How peaceful are the dead.'  
 Who put that silly gag in some one's head?  
 'He'd never seen so many dead before.'  
 The lilting words danced up and down his brain,  
 While corpses jumped and capered in the rain.  
 No, no; he wouldn't count them any more . . .  
 The dead have done with pain:  
 They've choked; they can't come back to life again.  
 ("The Effect," p. 73)

In August of 1916, Sassoon contracted a severe gastric fever and was sent back to a hospital in England. He describes a mortally wounded soldier in the ward: "Everyone in the ward seemed to be asleep except the boy whose bed had screens around it. . . . Once I had caught a glimpse of his white face and miserable eyes. . . . His voice went on, in the low, rapid, even tone of delirium. Sometimes I could catch what he said, troubled and unhappy and complaining. Someone called Dicky was on his mind, and he kept on crying out to Dicky. 'Don't go out, Dicky; they snipe like hell!' And then, 'Curse the Wood . . . Dicky, you fool, don't go out!' . . . All the horror of the Somme attacks was in that raving; all the darkness and the dreadful daylight. . . . Next morning the screens had vanished; the bed was empty, and ready for someone else" (Infantry Officer, p. 120). From that experience came the poem:

His wet white face and miserable eyes  
 Brought nurses to him more than groans and sighs:  
  
 The ward grew dark; but he was still complaining  
 And calling out for 'Dickie'. 'Curse the Wood!

'It's time to go. O Christ, and what's the good?  
'We'll never take it, and it's always raining.'

I wondered where he'd been; then heard him shout,  
'They snipe like hell! O Dickie, don't go out' . . .  
I fell asleep . . . Next morning he was dead;  
And some Slight Wound lay smiling on the bed.  
("Died of Wounds," p. 28)

He was working on the war poetry which would be published in The Old Huntsman and Other Poems. The first few of Sassoon's graphic and grim war poems had appeared in print by this time and provoked shock and outrage. Edmund Gosse called them "'savage, disconcerting silhouettes drawn roughly against a lurid background'" and chastised the poet because "'such sentiments must tend to relax the effort of the struggle'" (Siegfried's Journey, p. 28). Sassoon explains: "And one must remember that in 1916 very few candid comments on the war had appeared in print, and that many people were genuinely shocked and startled by what I wrote (Siegfried's Journey, pp. 28-29). The style and tone of this "angry prophet" phase of his war poetry apparently took the poet also by surprise. Sassoon recalls: "For me, the unexpected quality of these few pieces were that they revealed a hitherto unpredictable talent for satirical epigram. Nothing I had written before 1916 showed any symptom of this development. It was as if I had suddenly found myself to be an expert boxer without having undergone any training. I have never been able to ascertain that my method was modelled on any other writer, though the influence of Hardy's Satires of Circumstance is faintly perceptible in a few of the longer poems. I merely chanced on the device of composing two or three harsh, peremptory, and colloquial stanzas with a knock-out blow in the last line" (Siegfried's Journey, p. 29).

Recuperating at camp before returning to the Western Front, Sassoon

shared quarters with Robert Graves, and the two often discussed their feelings toward the war. Pinto gives a historic insight into the great division of attitudes toward the war which had occurred by 1916: "The Nation at Home still believed in the patriotic myth of a beautiful, heroic war against diabolic enemies. The Nation Overseas was in touch with the realities of life and death, and was completely disillusioned with regard to the heroic nature of the struggle" (Crisis in English Poetry, p. 142). Sassoon recalls: "My attitude (which had not always been easy to sustain) was that I wanted the War to be an impressive experience--terrible, but not horrible enough to interfere with my heroic emotions" (Infantry Officer, p. 148). This ambivalence caused Graves to remark: "The fact was that the direction of Sassoon's unconquerable idealism changed with his environment; he varied between happy warrior and bitter pacifist" (Good-Bye to All That, p. 339). The feelings of disgust at the civilian view of the war is reflected by this incident: "The Hippodrome show, however, provided me with a bit of material for satire. A couple of days before my departure from the Depot for final leave, I wrote the afterwards well-known lines called Blighters, in which I asserted that I'd like to see a tank come down the stalls at a music-hall performance where--in my opinion--the jingoism of the jokes and songs appeared to 'rock the riddled corpses around Bapaume'" (Siegfried's Journey, p. 45). He wrote this poem:

The House is crammed: tier beyond tier they grin  
And cackle at the Show, while prancing ranks  
Of harlots shrill the chorus, drunk with din;  
'We're sure the Kaiser loves our dear old Tanks!'

I'd like to see a Tank come down the stalls,  
Lurching to rag-time tunes, or 'Home, sweet Home',



And there'd be no more jokes in Music-halls  
 To mock the riddled corpses round Bapaume.  
 ("Blighters," p. 21)

Sassoon returned to active duty in France in February of 1917. Of his personal feelings he recalls: "Naturally, I did my best to be strongminded about it. In this I had one compelling mental objective to support me. This was the need to obtain further material for war poems. My strength of mind thus consisted mainly in a ferocious and defiant resolve to tell the truth about the War in every possible way. For that purpose the more I could see of it the better my opportunities would be for discharging sardonic epigrams at those on 'the Home Front' whose behaviour was arousing my resentment" (Siegfried's Journey, p. 40). At Base Camp in France, he happened onto the following scene: "A man, naked to the waist, was kneeling in the middle of the floor, clutching at his chest and weeping uncontrollably. The Guard were standing around with embarrassed looks, and the Sergeant was beside him, patient and un pitying. While he was leading me to the blanket store I asked him what was wrong. 'Why, sir, the man's been under detention for assaulting the military police, and now 'e's just 'ad news of his brother being killed. Seems to take it to 'eart more than most would'" (Infantry Officer, p. 163). This experience became:

I found him in the guard-room at the Base.  
 From the blind darkness I had heard his crying  
 And blundered in. With puzzled, patient face  
 A sergeant watched him; it was no good trying  
 To stop it; for he howled and beat his chest.  
 And all because his brother had gone west,  
 Raved at the bleeding war; his rampant grief  
 Moaned, shouted, sobbed, and choked, while he was kneeling  
 Half-naked on the floor. In my belief  
 Such men have lost all patriotic feeling.  
 ("Lamentations," p. 76)



The Spring Offensive failed to accomplish the long-promised breakthrough which would end the war. Sassoon describes the aftermath of a battle in which he commanded his troops: "Concrete strong-posts were smashed and tilted sideways; everywhere the chalky soil was pocked and pitted with huge shell-holes; and wherever we looked the mangled effigies of the dead were our memento mori. Shell-twisted and dismembered, the Germans maintained the violent attitudes in which they had died. The British had mostly been killed by bullets or bombs, so they looked more resigned. But I can remember a pair of hands (nationality unknown) which protruded from the soaked ashen soil like the roots of a tree turned upside down; one hand seemed to be pointing at the sky with an accusing gesture. Each time I passed that place the protest of those fingers became more expressive of an appeal to God in defiance of those who made the War. . . . Floating on the surface of the flooded trench was the mask of a human face which had detached itself from the skull" (Infantry Officer, pp. 214-215). Scenes of horror such as those became the poem:

The place was rotten with dead; green clumsy legs  
High-booted, sprawled and grovelled along the saps  
And trunks, face downward, in the sucking mud,  
Wallowed like trodden sand-bags loosely filled;  
And naked sodden buttocks, mats of hair,  
Bulged, clotted heads slept in the plastering slime.  
And then the rain began,--the jolly old rain!  
("Counter-Attack," p. 68)

Sassoon was wounded in late spring by a sniper's bullet and once again invalided back to an English hospital. He records the depth of his own personal disintegration: "More than once I wasn't sure whether I was awake or asleep; the ward was half shadow and half sinking fire-light, and the beds were quiet with huddled sleepers. Shapes of mutilated

soldiers came crawling across the floor; the floor seemed to be littered with fragments of mangled flesh. Faces glared upward; hands clutched at neck or belly; a livid grinning face with bristly mustache peered at me above the edge of my bed; his hands clawed at the sheets" (Infantry Officer, p. 240).

Recovering from the wound, Sassoon recalls: "While in France, my anti-war ideas had been in abeyance. Out there one had been too busy to ask the reason why. One couldn't be 'above the battle' while engaged in it, and I had sometimes been able to resort to the emotional 'happy warrior' attitude which was so helpful in sustaining one's fortitude. My discontents were now simmering rebelliously and had acquired an added momentum. I went up to London resolved to write something more definitely antagonistic than satiric epigrams in The Cambridge Magazine...." (Siegfried's Journey, p. 48). He determined, in addition to writing more shocking war poetry, to make a statement against the continuation of the war, hoping by doing so to unite civilians into pressuring the political and military elements to negotiate an end to the conflict. In July, 1917, he sent his Commander at Litherland a statement outlining his position: "I am making this statement as an act of wilful 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 that this War, upon which I entered as a war of defense and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest. . . . I have seen and endured the sufferings of the troops, and I can no longer be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust" (Infantry Officer, pp. 297-298). Believing what he did to be in the best

interests of his friend, Robert Graves convinced Sassoon's superior officers that the poet was suffering from shell shock and not responsible for his actions. He then tricked Sassoon into agreeing to an appearance before an Army medical board, which speedily found him to be suffering from neurasthenia and ordered him to Craiglockhart Hospital (for mental cases) in Edinburgh. Sassoon felt both disappointment and relief that his statement was not taken seriously by the Army or the civilians. He recalls: "Of course the weak point about my 'protest' had been that it was evoked by personal feeling. It was an emotional idea based on my war experience and stimulated by the acquisition of points of view which I accepted uncritically. My intellect was not an ice-cold one. It was, so to speak, suffering from trench fever" (The Memoirs of George Sherston, Sherston's Progress, pp. 10-11).

During this period of hospitalization, Sassoon worked on the "definitely antagonistic" satiric war poetry which he published as Counter-Attack. And this bitterest satire Sassoon aimed against the complacent politicians, bumbling generals, and blindly patriotic home-folks who remained impervious to the suffering of the common soldier in the trenches. Neville Braybrooke in "Rebel of Another Generation" says: "One of the chief forms Sassoon's rebellion took was a battle against the 'establishment'--although it is as difficult to be precise about this phrase as it is to be precise about the reasons for the present cult of 'looking back in anger'."<sup>13</sup> He states that the poet related "the Established Church of England with the War Office in Whitehall.

<sup>13</sup>Neville Braybrooke, "Rebel of Another Generation," The Commonwealth, 67, No. 17 (Jan. 24, 1958), p. 429.

State patriotism was a religious matter" ("Rebel of Another Generation," p. 429). Sassoon poured his personal disillusionment with religion and idealism and his hatred for the callous, inept generals into poems like:

The Bishop tells us: 'When the boys come back  
'They will not be the same; for they'll have fought  
'In a just cause: they lead the last attack  
'On Anti-Christ; their comrades' blood has bought  
'New right to breed an honourable race,  
'They have challenged Death and dared him face to face.'

'We're none of us the same!' the boys reply.  
'For George lost both his legs; and Bill's stone blind;  
'Poor Jim's shot through the lungs and like to die;  
'And Bert's gone syphilitic: you'll not find  
'A chap who's served that hasn't found some change.'  
And the Bishop said: 'The ways of God are strange!'  
("They," pp. 23-24)

If I were fierce, and bald, and short of breath,  
I'd live with scarlet Majors at the Base,  
And speed glum heroes up the line to death.  
You'd see me with my puffy petulant face,  
Guzzling and gulping in the best hotel,  
Reading the Roll of Honour. 'Poor young chap,'  
I'd say--'I used to know his father well;  
Yes, we've lost heavily in this last scrap.'  
And when the war is done and youth stone dead,  
I'd toddle safely home and die--in bed.  
("Base Details," p. 75)

'Good-morning; good-morning!' the General said  
When we met him last week on our way to the line.  
Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of 'em dead,  
And we're cursing his staff for incompetent swine.  
'He's a cheery old card,' grunted Harry to Jack  
As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack.

But he did for them both by his plan of attack.  
("The General," p. 75)

Cohen characterizes the war poetry of this period as containing "the requisites of the prophet. Sassoon appears as the enemy of ignorance, complacency, hypocrisy, and sin, the advocate of the poor and oppressed, the leader in social reform" ("The Three Roles of Siegfried Sassoon," p. 171). Citing the "devastating effect" of "Base Details," Pinto

comments that the "best poetry is to be found in these powerful little satires [filled with] passionate sincerity and honesty, but . . . purely destructive" (Crisis in English Poetry, p. 145). Sassoon shocked the smug homefolks by holding up a mirror to their idyllic conceptions of war and glorious self-sacrifice:

Snug at the club two fathers sat,  
Gross, goggle-eyed, and full of chat.  
One of them said: 'My eldest lad  
Writes cheery letters from Bagdad.  
But Arthur's getting all the fun  
At Arras with his nine-inch gun.'

'Yes,' wheezed the other, 'that's the luck!  
My boy's quite broken-hearted, stuck  
In England training all this year.  
Still, if there's truth in what we hear,  
The Huns intend to ask for more  
Before they bolt across the Rhine.'  
I watched them toddle through the door--  
Those impotent old friends of mine.  
("The Fathers," pp. 74-75)

Does it matter?--losing your legs?...  
For people will always be kind,  
And you need not show that you mind

Does it matter?--losing your sight?...  
There's such splendid work for the blind;  
And people will always be kind,

Do they matter?--those dreams from the pit?...  
You can drink and forget and be glad,  
And people won't say that you're mad;  
For they'll know you've fought for your country  
And no one will worry a bit.  
("Does It Matter?", pp. 76-77)

You love us when we're heroes, home on leave,  
Or wounded in a mentionable place.  
You worship decorations; you believe  
That chivalry redeems the war's disgrace.  
You make us shells. You listen with delight,  
By tales of dirt and danger fondly thrilled.  
You crown our distant ardours while we fight,  
And mourn our laurelled memories when we're killed.  
("Glory of Women," p. 79)

Harvey Darton comments on "the deadly acid of contemptuous hatred that is in these poems," calling the poetry "personal" but explaining that "his rage is not for his own soul...."<sup>14</sup>

Sassoon's "internal exasperation" finally erupted into his most critically acclaimed war poetry published early in 1918 in a small volume he called Counter-Attack. Tragic experience altered his temperament; anger totally committed him to reveal the horror of war and its disintegrating effects on human beings. Thorpe comments: "The intensity of hatred evinced in Sassoon's satires is, as a revelation of its disintegrating effect upon personality, a salutary indictment of the War and of war itself" (Siegfried Sassoon, p. 25). At last he was writing physically, as he had been advised to do in 1910. From his experiences in the trenches, Cohen says that "Sassoon abstracted the futility, despair, loneliness and mockery of the war, and with fury thrust it into the faces of his unsuspecting countrymen, safe and snug in England" ("The Three Roles of Siegfried Sassoon," p. 171). Counter-Attack unleashed a storm of criticism, some dealing with the literary aspects of the poetry and the remainder questioning the personal patriotism of the poet. Darton called the volume "the most authentic and at the same time most highly concentrated of all war-books" (From Surtees to Sassoon, p. 105), and Edmund Blunden said Counter-Attack "was an individual's endeavour, under a conviction that things were going from bad to worse, to pull the line of civilization together."<sup>15</sup> John M. Murry, in a

<sup>14</sup>F. J. Harvey Darton, From Surtees to Sassoon (London: Morley & Mitchell, Kennerley Jr., 1931), pp. 100-101.

<sup>15</sup>Edmund Blunden, The Mind's Eye (London: Jonathan Cape, 1934), p. 267.

review that originally appeared in The Nation July 13, 1918, characterized the outrage and shock created by the poetry: "When a man is in torment and cries aloud, his cry is incoherent. It has neither weight nor meaning of its own and it should somehow stop or be stopped . . . for it is ugly and painful, and it rasps at the cords of nature. Mr. Sassoon's verses--they are not poetry--are such a cry."<sup>16</sup>

Sassoon's personal ambivalence about his duty as a soldier continued while he was at Craiglockhart. He recalls the struggle within to make peace with himself: "But when I was alone--that was where the difficulty began. What was it--that semisuicidal instinct which haunted me whenever I thought about going back to the Line? Did I really feel an insidious craving to be killed, or am I only imagining it now? Was it 'spiritual pride,' or was it just war-weariness and repressed exasperation?" (Sherston's Progress, p. 77). Sassoon, deciding that he must return to active duty, convinced another medical board of his mental fitness. He was sent first to Egypt; then in May, 1918, Sassoon found himself once again in the trenches on the Western Front. His war experiences ended on July 13, 1918, when he suffered a bullet wound in the head and returned to convalesce in an English hospital. The depth of personal horror left by the accumulated war experiences can be perceived in a private poem sent to Robert Graves in a letter:

I'd timed my death in action to the minute--  
 (The Nation with my deathly verses in it)--  
 The day told off--13--(the month July)--  
 The picture planned--O Threshold of the dark!

<sup>16</sup>John M. Murry, "Mr. Sassoon's War Verses," The Evolution of An Intellectual (1920; rpt. Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, Inc., 1967), p. 70.



And then, the quivering songster failed to die  
Because the bloody bullet missed its mark.

No visitors allowed  
Since friends arrived in crowd . . . .  
Jabber--Gesture--Jabber--Gesture--Nerves went fut and failed  
. . . . .  
Caused complications and set my brain a-hop;  
Sleeplessexasperucide, O Jesu make it stop!  
. . . . .  
And I fished in that steady grey stream and  
Decided that I, After all am no longer  
The worm that refuses to die.

And I'm

I'll and afraid to go back to them because those  
Five-nines are so damned awful.  
When you think of them all bursting and you're  
Lying on your bed, With the books you loved and  
Longed for on the table; and your head, All  
Crammed with village verses about daffodils and geese  
. . . . O Jesu make it cease . . . .  
(quoted from Good-Bye to All That, pp. 341-343)

But for the first time since his enlistment in 1914, he felt relieved of the obligation to return to active duty in the war. He recalls: "Better still, I was out of the war, and could now write my poems without wondering whether I should be dead and done with before anybody read them!" (Siegfried's Journey, p. 69). He felt he still had much to say on the subject of war, but in the remainder of his war poetry, the tone began to change. He explains this change: "I was developing a more controlled and objective attitude towards the War. To remind people of its realities was still my main purpose, but I now preferred to depict it impersonally, and to be as much 'above the battle' as I could" (Siegfried's Journey, p. 71). Poems like these quoted below demonstrate the new mellowness of tone:

Men fought like brutes; and hideous things were done;  
And you have nourished hatred, harsh and blind.  
But in that Golgotha perhaps you'll find  
The mothers of the men who killed your son.  
("Reconciliation," p. 99)



Have you forgotten yet?....

For the world's events have rumbled on since those gagged  
days,

Like traffic checked while at the crossing of city-ways:  
And the haunted gap in your mind has filled with thoughts  
that flow

Like clouds in the lit heaven of life; and you're a man  
reprieved to go,

Taking your peaceful share of Time, with joy to spare.

But the past is just the same--and War's a bloody game...

Have you forgotten yet?....

Look down, and swear by the slain of the War that you'll  
never forget.

("Aftermath," pp. 118-119)

Thorpe comments on these last war poems: "Away from the concrete and visible reality, and dealing with necessary though not moving themes, he relapses disappointingly into dullness and rhetoric" (Siegfried Sassoon, p. 35). I believe that Sassoon, removed from the shock of graphic realism of the war in the trenches and removed from the fear of his own death, lost the biting intensity of his sarcasm by regaining his naturally urbane, humorous, and non-committal temperament, assuming his preferred role in life as a detached observer rather than active participant. Maguire comments on the irony that the war poems should be the ones most remembered because they depict "a brief and uncharacteristic interlude" of a poet who "was merely a sensitive, kindly young man, who had led an incredibly sheltered life (partly through his own laziness) and who, when forced to see and share the 'beastliness' of life, reacted violently against it" ("Harmony Unheard: The Poetry of Siegfried Sassoon," p. 117). This conclusion can be illustrated by comparing the tone of satire in the war poetry with that of his poems of social comment written in the 1920's.

This poetry of social satire, collected from two previous volumes and published in 1926 as Satirical Poems, grew out of Sassoon's involve-

ment with the Labour Party politics and a sympathy for the Socialist movement. Sassoon recorded only a few of his early impressions and experiences that grew out of his tepid espousement of the Socialist cause in Siegfried's Journey, which ended with the year 1920. Therefore, direct correlation between the experiences recorded in prose and the resultant poetry of his social satires cannot be as complete as was possible with the war poetry.

Like many other returning veterans of his education and social class, Sassoon had no specific profession to re-enter when World War I was over. He drifted, quite by accident, into politics. Because of his prominence as a war poet and a publicly avowed pacifist, Sassoon was requested by Max Ploughman, fellow war poet and pacifist, to speak in the campaign of Phillip Snowden, an anti-war M.P. who was standing for re-election at Blackburn. Sassoon reluctantly agreed to make a few speeches. Once again, the lacerated idealist was in for a new kind of experience that his sheltered prewar life had failed to prepare him for: his first look at slums and the living conditions of a large segment of his fellow citizens. He reflects upon his first sights at Blackburn: "In so far as Blackburn, Burnley, and Accrington were concerned, there seemed no prospect of a better world until they had been demolished and rebuilt. I had been spouting about freedom of thought, emancipation from social and industrial injustice, and the need for a clean Peace. But what use was a clean Peace to people whose bodies were condemned to such dirty conditions?" (Siegfried's Journey, pp. 114-115). From this experience, Sassoon convinced himself that he had become deeply committed to the Socialist movement. Characteristically, however, he had returned to his prewar stance of detachment; and in

spite of sympathetic feelings for the working class, he lacked the personal involvement that the war had provided to provoke a total commitment to the cause of Socialism. At the end of 1918, Sassoon recalls a visit from Dr. Rivers, his psychiatrist from Craiglockhart: "He laughed when I told him that, within twenty-four hours of returning from Blackburn as an ardent Socialist, I had been hob-nobbing with Lady Randolph at an evening party, and a couple of days later had lunched with the Asquiths. 'You'll have to decide which party you really belong to!' he remarked . . ." (Siegfried's Journey, p. 118). This insight into Sassoon's ambivalence toward the Socialist movement is confirmed by this recollection: "Wearing corduroy trousers and a bright red tie, I went about exploiting my Labour Movement personality and my reputation as an anti-war poet. Now and again I reverted to riding-breeches and a loud check cap, a form of dress which caused me to be more my authentic self than I realized. For the fox-hunting man was irrepressible, and the superficially adopted Socialism--though generous in impulse and intention--required more than corduroy to conceal its inadequate repertoire" (Siegfried's Journey, p. 135). Basically Sassoon belonged to the class of the landed gentry and possessed neither the understanding of the problems of the lower classes nor the whole-hearted commitment to the Socialist cause, which might have enabled him to write more vehement social satire about the inequities he observed.

With a vague desire to "lend a hand to the Labour Movement," Sassoon returned to Oxford in February of 1919 to take some instruction in political science and economics. He recalls: "I foresaw undistracted mornings, spent at my writing-table by the window, which looked across the gardens of Merton toward Christ Church meadows.

There I should absorb constructive information about Capital and Labour and how to create social equality for all. At night I should read poetry or emerge to be invigorated by the progressive ideas of brilliant young dons and undergraduates" (Siegfried's Journey, pp. 134-135). He had completed his circle back to the ruminative temperament and vague desire for a pleasant but unintense commitment. He went to Glasgow that month to observe and report on rioting there for The Nation, and was conducted through a slum area: "I had thought of slums as wretched and ramshackle, but had imagined them mitigated by some sort of Dickensian homeliness. These courts and alleys were cliff-like and cavernous, chilling me to the bone. The few unfortunates who scowled at us from doorways looked outlawed and brutalized. Here the thought of comfort never came, and there was a dank smell of destitution. Cold as the stones we trod was the bleak inhumanity of those terrible tenements. Appalled, and more than willing to ask why such things should be, I felt thankful to get back into the thriving city streets. I had no wish to enter the Cowcaddens again" (Siegfried's Journey, p. 133). Such an experience was moving to Sassoon, but an idealistic compassion for the lower classes existing in squalid living accommodations and sub-human working conditions had not the element of personal torture to compel bitter satire from him. He wrote "The Case for the Miners" in almost an apologetic tone, and the savagery and bite of the war poetry were gone:

Something goes wrong with my synthetic brain  
 When I defend the Strikers and explain  
 My reasons for not blackguarding the Miners.  
 'What do you know?' exclaim my fellow-diners  
 (Peeling their plovers' eggs or lifting glasses  
 Of mellowed Château Rentier from the table),  
 'What do you know about the working classes?'

I strive to hold my own; but I'm unable  
 To state the case succinctly. Indistinctly  
 I mumble about World-Emancipation,  
 Standards of Living, Nationalization  
 Of Industry; until they get me tangled  
 In superficial details; goad me on  
 To unconvincing vagueness. When we've wrangled  
 From soup to savoury, my temper's gone.  
 ("The Case for the Miners," p. 137)

Stanley Jackson comments: "Siegfried's war anger had dissolved into the bitterness of peace. His satire, directed at the privilege and philistinism of the 'twenties, proved that the sullen eagle's talons were far from blunted, but the slim volumes of verse were privately printed and read only by friends and others who cherished the earlier poems. His convictions remained as impassioned and confused as ever."<sup>17</sup>

In March, 1919, Sassoon accepted the literary editorship of the Herald, which was to become the daily Labour newspaper. It appeared that Sassoon had found another source of material for his poetic commitment. In April he wrote the poem, "Everyone Sang":

Everyone's voice was suddenly lifted;  
 And beauty came like the setting sun:  
 My heart was shaken with tears; and horror  
 Drifted away... O, but Everyone  
 Was a bird; and the song was wordless; the singing  
                     will never be done. (p. 124)

He explains: "The singing that would 'never be done' was the Social Revolution which I believed to be at hand. In what form that Revolution would arrive I cannot now remember foreseeing--possibly because its form was invisible to me. No doubt I anticipated that there would be some comparatively harmless rioting, but on the whole I merely thought of it as the sunlight of Liberty spreading across the landscape

<sup>17</sup>Stanley Jackson, The Sassoons (London: Heinemann, 1968), p. 239.

. . . Most of my arguments in favour of it were denunciations of the Rich, supported by extremely imperfect acquaintance with the Poor" (Siegfried's Journey, pp. 141-142). He describes the tone of the new poetry he will write: "It was a pattern for a series of descriptive pieces in which I assumed a laconic, legato tone of voice, and endeavoured to be mellow, sophisticated, and mildly sardonic" (Siegfried's Journey, p. 167).

So the poetry of Satirical Poems assumed a tone of satire that mildly chides and humorously reproves the aristocrats for their opulent life styles and determined blindness to the needs of the lower classes:

Refortified by exercise and air,  
I, jogging home astride my chestnut mare,  
Grow half-humane, and question the propriety  
Of Foxes Torn to Bits in Smart Society.

. . . . .  
I wonder if these Nimrods really are  
Crassly unconscious that their Reynardism  
Is (dare I say it?) an anachronism.

. . . . .  
My friends the Fernie-Goldflakes think me mad.  
'Extinct! The idea's preposterous! It's rotten  
With every sort of Socialistic fad!  
("Reynardism Revisited," pp. 139-140)

But who are these that round the central road  
Patrol superb in yellow-wheeled barouches?  
What social magic keeps each carriage-load  
Exempt from Lenin's Communistic Douches?  
("Observations in Hyde Park," p. 141)

'Why should a miner earn six pounds a week?  
Leisure! They'd only spend it in a bar!  
Standard of life! You'll never teach them Greek,  
Or make them more contented than they are!  
("The Case for the Miners," p. 137)

Sassoon presents the sometimes incongruous vignette of the tepidly committed Socialist arguing his cause among his affluent friends in their drawingrooms or private clubs. They regard his message with at best,

disdain, and at worst, antagonism. Such are the scenes he presents in these poems:

The luncheon over, Lady Lucre's set  
 Loll'd on her lawn and lacked an epithet  
 Sufficiently severe for such a creature....  
'Such dreadful taste!' 'A positive blasphemer!'  
'He actually referred to our Redeemer  
As the world's greatest Socialistic teacher!'  
 ("Breach of Decorum," pp. 135-136)

The band concedes them Tosca with their tea.  
 Bored and expensive babble clogs the air.  
 Between two smooth white columns I can see  
 Gold and vermillion tulips....Ambushed there  
 I criticize the ambulant outer-covers  
 That, costume-conscious, enter and withdraw  
 And in them all my satirist-self discovers  
 Prosperity that lives below the law....  
 (You ask what law I mean....Well, my impression  
 Is that these folk are poisoned by possession.)  
 ("The Grand Hotel," pp. 134-135)

Maguire comments: "In his satiric poems, where one might expect to find him passing intellectual judgments on specific abuses, we find him instead airing grouches over limited irritations, and this makes them seem petty, though amusing" ("Harmony Unheard: The Poetry of Siegfried Sassoon," p. 119). Thorpe questions the reason "for this modification--or, so far as satire goes, weakening--of tone" and comes to the conclusion that Sassoon's lack of strong feeling "lies rather in the altered nature of his subject-matter and in the softening of his attitude toward it" (Siegfried Sassoon, p. 51). The satire of such war poems as "They" and "The General" castigating religious and military figures is directed by Sassoon in the 1920's at their counterparts, but now in a mild, merely petulant tone. Frank Swinnerton explains by recalling Sassoon's hatred for the war and his desire "to attack everybody who had been comfortably ready to sacrifice the young in a late



encounter" because he believes "that anybody over forty years of age was inescapably a hypocrite and a profiteer."<sup>18</sup> Thus he depicts politicians and religious figures in this manner:

I can imagine you among 'the guns,'  
 Urbanely peppering partridge, grouse, or pheasant--  
 Guest of those infinitely privileged ones  
 Whose lives are padded, petrified, and pleasant.  
 I visualize you feeding off gold plate  
 And gossiping on grave affairs of State.  
 ("On Reading the War Diary of a Defunct Ambassador,"  
 pp. 129-130)

For, though the Government has gone vermillion  
 And, as a whole, is weak in Greek and Latin,  
 The fogies harboured by the august Pavilion  
 Sit strangely similar to those who sat in  
 That edifice when first the Dean went pious,--  
 For possible preferment sacrificed  
 His hedonistic and patrician bias,  
 And offered his complacency to Christ.  
 ("The Blues at Lord's," p. 138)

He comments on economics:

Hark, hark, the Mark in the Money Market sings!  
 And sweet Swiss francs in Bernese Banks  
 Yodel to Mammon a million thanks  
 For swift and profitable flight on funded wings.  
 To Mammon's face of many facets,  
 'Firm in tone' they raise their song;  
 'Fluctuant Bonds and Frozen Assets  
 Unto us no more belong.'  
 ("Mammoniac Ode," p. 166)

Thorpe's critical appraisal of Satirical Poems is that Sassoon does not "wholly succeed in cutting down one of the grosser targets the rampant materialism of his time offered. He has set himself a moral task, but his heart is plainly not in it. The one-sided, destructive method of the true satirist no longer comes to him naturally; he tries to goad himself into it, with the result that he often becomes

<sup>18</sup>Frank Swinnerton, The Georgian Literary Scene (London: Hutchinson, 1969), p. 259.



wordy or petulant. He now lacks the satirist's overweening self-confidence. The extreme emotions--hatred, contempt, disgust--that animate satire are rarely evident: in their place there are disapproval, annoyance and irritation" (Siegfried Sassoon, p. 53). As an opposing critical opinion, Edmund Blunden takes a different view of the intent of the social satires and the satirist: "Flogging the town, in the style of Juvenal or Charles Churchill, demands a degree of ferocity and a self-certainty which he would not claim" (The Mind's Eye, p. 272). I see Blunden's assessment of Sassoon's poetic purpose and temperament as the more logical one. Given the background of Sassoon, a wealthy, classically educated gentleman living in a leisurely and unpressured atmosphere, these qualities of reserve, gentle humor, and mild non-commitment constitute the man himself. The tone of the poetry in Satirical Poems reflects this temperament and Sassoon's response to a vexing situation he encountered which offended his sense of justice. Thorpe says of these poems: "This was the new voice: urbane, ironic, controlled--and this is what Sassoon was aiming at" (Siegfried Sassoon, p. 48). The war poetry of Counter-Attack, on the other hand, reflects the poet's response to a horrifying personal experience which threatened his very life and goaded him into a sardonic expression not characteristic of a "fox-hunting man." In those poems, Sassoon had become a satirist in spite of himself.

Sassoon abandoned Socialism and satire to become in his last poetic phase the "ruminative" poet. Thorpe offers a logical explanation that accounts for Sassoon's abandonment of doctrinaire Socialism: "Sassoon's temperament craved for quick results; his fragile idealism needed men to be better than they were. His Socialism was at first a

generous impulse, but later was to falter for the lack of a clear objective and eventually to weaken in face of bitter realities" (Siegfried Sassoon, p. 167). Sassoon, the lacerated idealist, failed to commit himself to the Socialist goals with a sufficient personal dedication to call forth the same bitter satire that the war experiences had. In his lecture "On Poetry" given at the University of Bristol on March 16, 1939, the poet aptly supports my thesis when he states that "poetry is an essentially personal experience."<sup>19</sup> He adds: "'My own experience has taught me' is a phrase which I have hitherto avoided, but I am unlikely to suppress it much longer! Anyhow, I am obliged to admit that, if I am a poet at all, I have been most successful when uttering things directly" ("On Poetry," p. 19). And he ends the lecture by saying: "And that brings me back to my preference for whole-hearted poetry, for the urgent living voice, and the natural vocal cadence. . . . Is there anything for me to say after that? Nothing, except to give thanks for all those poets who have written not only with their hands but with their hearts" ("On Poetry," p. 26). The poetry of complete, violent commitment to his material arose only out of personal experiences in trench warfare. Darton describes this facet of Sassoon's poetry: "In his poems he speaks out to others, if they are willing to hear him, but with the tacit reservation that he is thinking aloud, not deliberately telling the hearer something he wishes to say. He took that direct action only when he was in the midst of tumult within and without. In the phrase of the Bible--and of the Society of Friends, whose attitude of mind resembles his in many odd ways--he writes as the spirit

<sup>19</sup>Siegfried Sassoon, "On Poetry," Arthur Skemp Memorial Lecturer, 1939 (Bristol: Univ. of Bristol, 1939), p. 6.

moves him, and only so. He is not readily moved, nor by light things" (From Surtees to Sassoon, pp. 110-111). Swinnerton summarizes the poet: "He was never one of the destructive wits who iconoclastically attacked traditional forms, never one of the intellectuals, but a simple lyric poet who had seen and hated war, and who wanted above all things to submit all his sensitiveness to the good tranquil things of life. He was simple; not a simpleton."<sup>20</sup> Sardonic humor, violent anger, and intense frustration are not the characteristics of a "ruminative and quiet-loving" man. The poet who wrote Counter-Attack is not the same one who wrote Satirical Poems. The personal experience of war and the fear of death, as well as the confrontation for the first time of the many harsh realities of life that dealt a mortal blow to his idealism and offended his sense of justice, combined to produce the satiric tone of Sassoon's war poetry. Once removed from the physical presence in the trenches and the threat of death, Sassoon resumed his natural temperament of urbanity, mild humor, and detachment. His imagination, never robust, required violent external stimuli to produce poetry of vigor and commitment. When Sassoon was removed from contact with the sensational subject matter offered by the War, his poetry became pallid and again succumbed to his "poverty of choice." He characterizes himself perfectly in this poem from his later "ruminative" period:

I am that man who with a luminous look  
Sits up at night to write a ruminant book.

I am that man who with a furrowing frown  
Thinks harshly of the world--and corks it down.

<sup>20</sup>Frank Swinnerton, Figures in the Foreground (London: Hutchinson & Co., Ltd., 1963), pp. 210-211.

I am that man who loves to ride alone  
When landscapes wear his mind's autumnal tone.

I am that man who, having lived his day,  
Looks once on life and goes his wordless way.  
("Brevities," p. 231)

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SIEGFRIED SASSOON: THE NON-COMMITAL SATIRIST

by

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B.S., Weber State College, 1971

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

1973



## SIEGFRIED SASOON: THE NON-COMMITAL SATIRIST

Siegfried Sassoon, the poet, claims critical recognition in the twentieth century mainly for his war poetry. It is ironic that this phase of his poetry is most remembered, as it is actually not representative of the poetic commitment or temperament of Sassoon.

Sassoon described himself as a "ruminative and quiet-loving" man, and these characteristics of temperament were established in his boyhood and youth by a combination of family circumstances and his own choice. His most notable prewar poetic efforts were a parody of John Masefield's poem, The Everlasting Mercy, which Sassoon entitled The Daffodil Murderer, and a monologue, The Old Huntsman. He was searching for some tragic experience that would provide definite poetic commitment and subject matter.

His enlistment in the Home Guard in August of 1914 was to provide the graphic shock to his imagination that enabled him to write his grim and satirical war poetry. He kept journals of his experiences in the trench warfare on the Western Front which became the material for his prose works, The Memoirs of George Sherston and Siegfried's Journey, as well as the raw material for the war poetry. Many excerpts from his prose autobiographies are quoted along with the poems he wrote of those experiences to demonstrate how the war affected him personally and provided him with the material and the tone for his great poetic outburst.

After his last bullet wound, he was invalided out of the service. Removed from the personal fear of death and the graphic shocks of battle on his imagination, Sassoon's final war poetry became much milder in tone, almost pallid and rhetorical.

After the war, Sassoon drifted by accident into Labour politics and for a time believed himself to be an ardent Socialist. He visited several slums and was horrified to find that a large segment of his fellow citizens lived in such conditions. In March of 1919, he accepted the literary editorship of the Herald, which was to become the daily Labour organ. He wrote poems concerned with a social revolution, but basically Sassoon was a wealthy, sheltered gentleman whose sense of justice and fairness had been offended. He was not personally committed to the Socialist cause to the same degree he had been involved in the war. His satires mildly reprove the rich for their determined blindness to the plight of the working classes but lack the devastating tone of scorn found in the anti-war poems.

The tone of these Satirical Poems reflects the natural poetic commitment and temperament of Sassoon. The poetry of complete, violent commitment arose only out of personal experiences in the battlefield. The fear of death and the harsh confrontations with realities of life that had dealt a mortal blow to Sassoon's idealism and sense of justice produced a satiric tone in the war poetry that never appeared again in his work. His imagination, never robust, required the graphic horrors of warfare and personal danger to function with vigor and commitment. Sardonic humor, violent anger, and intense frustration are not the characteristics of a "ruminative and quiet-loving" man. Once removed from the physical presence of war and the threat of death, Sassoon resumed his natural temperament of urbanity, mild humor, and detachment.