ATATÜRK ÜNİVERSİTESİ YAYINLARI
ATATURK UNIVERSITY PUBLICATIONS

Current Perspectives in Social Sciences

Research Article *Araştırma Makalesi* DOI: 10.5152/JSSI.2022.22274

Disillusionment and Silence in British Trench Poems: Voices from World War I

İngiliz Siper Şiirlerinde Hayal Kırıklığı ve Sessizlik: Birinci Dünya Savaşı'ndan Sesler

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ABSTRACT

British trench poets who had first-hand experiences in World War I (1914–1918) produced significant poetic works in terms of depicting the realities of battlefields throughout the clashes. Unlike the promises of heroism, valor, and adventure in the discourses of patriotism and manliness, the actual conditions of the Great War became the source of disillusionment with humanity, its potential for advancement, and the meaning of life. Therefore, this article aims to analyze the common notions in most of these soldier-poets' works and explicate these trench poets' challenges to the pro-war discourses by means of their shared sense of disillusionment and the manner of silence in the face of the atrocities of the battle conditions.

Keywords: British trench poetry, disillusionment, World War I, silence

ÖZ

Birinci Dünya Savaşı'nda (1914–1918) birinci elden deneyimler yaşayan İngiliz siper şairleri, çarpışmalar boyunca savaş alanlarının gerçeklerini tasvir etmesi açısından önemli manzum eserler ortaya koymuşlardır. Büyük Savaş'ın gerçek koşulları, vatanseverlik ve erkeklik söylemlerindeki kahramanlık, yiğitlik ve macera vaatlerinin kaynağı olmaktan ziyade insanlık, insanlığın ilerleme potansiyeli ve yaşamın anlamı ile ilgili hayal kırıklıklarının kaynağı olmuştur. Bu nedenle, bu makale, bu asker-şairlerin çoğu eserlerindeki ortak kavramları incelemeyi ve bu siper şairlerinin savaş koşullarının vahşeti karşısında büründükleri ortak hayal kırıklığı duygusu ve sessizlik tutumları yoluyla savaş yanlısı söylemlere meydan okumalarını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: İngiliz siper şiiri, Birinci Dünya Savaşı, hayal kırıklığı, sessizlik

Introduction

I am the enemy you killed, my friend.

I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned

Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.

I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.

Let us sleep now …

—(Owen, "Strange Meeting" 40–44)[1]

In the epigraphic lines of the poem "Strange Meeting" (1919) by Wilfred Edward Salter Owen (1893–1918), the dead soldier meets the enemy soldier/narrator, who killed him, in hell and invites him to the serenity of the infinite rest by stating "Let us sleep now." This last line of "Strange Meeting" recapitulates the warring people's feelings of hopelessness, sorrow, disillusionment, and destruction due to

Received/Geliş Tarihi: 27.07.2022
Accepted/Kabul Tarihi: 31.08.2023
Publication Date/Yayın Tarihi: 15.09.2023

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Cite this article as: Horzum, Ş. (2023). Disillusionment and silence in British trench poems: voices from the World War I. *Current Perspectives in Social Sciences*, 27(3), 264-269.

1 Two works in the Primary Sources section of Works Cited are consulted for all the poems included in this paper. For the sake of clarity, titles of poems are given in parenthetical references when necessary, because some poems by the same author were written in the same year. Also, line numbers of poems are given in parentheses.

World War I (1914–1918) in the first quarter of the twentieth century. As one of the most well-known names among British war poets, Owen reveals the bitter side of the Great War, with its ironic name, in his trench poetry. What Owen shared with other war poets in the different trenches are seen to be the images of the devastated battlefields, the blood-drenched earth, the indifference of nature to these sorrows, the rotten dead bodies in the fields, the soldiers' minds fallen to pieces, and the feelings of loneliness and desolateness. In the light of these imageries, this paper analyzes the realities of the battlefields of World War I, based on these shared elements shaping the hell-like atmosphere in the poetries of Charles Hamilton Sorley (1895–1915), Siegfried Loraine Sassoon (1886–1967), Wilfred Edward Salter Owen, and Isaac Rosenberg (1890–1918). In doing so, it concentrates on the senses of disillusionment and silent outcries felt by British trench poets who realistically reflected the true face of the war from their first-hand experience.

World War I instigated a network of more complex relations for future and more devastating clashes in its aftermath, although sloganized as "the war to end all wars" as in the title of *The War That Will End War* (1914) by H. G. Wells (1866–1946). It can be claimed that its trenches became the materialization of this network in the European theater, as seen in the maps depicting "a series of multiple parallel excavations" running for thousands of miles with thick wavy black lines (Fussell, 2013, p. 39). On the Western Front, to illustrate its extent, the French had approximately 6250 miles of trenches, and the English had around 6000 miles alone; the full measure of the trenches belonging to both the Allied and Central Powers arrived at a figure of about 25,000 miles which is "sufficient to circle the earth" (Fussell, 2013, pp. 39–40). That is the primary reason British trench poems connect in their shared themes of silence and disillusionment during their services in those pits. These long lines became homes to millions of young soldiers who had to fight for their countries and lives in mud, sickness, darkness, illnesses, and death. "The trench," the most potent metaphor of interconnectivity, "with its accompanying images of filth, shellfire, barbed wire, and so forth," James Campbell states, "is of course the dominant icon of the First World War. The trench lyric portrays these distressing conditions in an unromantic light, thus differentiating it from the more abstract and patriotic lyrics of the early war" (1999, p. 204). Hence, these gloomy places became the determining element for the creation of war poems written at the expense of the poets' lives and related to the ugly side of the war.

Disillusionment with the War Discourse

British trench poets, whose majority were unable to witness the end of the Great War due to their deaths, unconventionally illustrated their experiences in their vividly morbid works. Their poetries mostly attract scholars' and ordinary people's attention not because of their literary values but due to the realistic elements used in them. Illustrating the war from different perspectives, these poems discuss the withering values, ethics and emotions, the insignificance and elusiveness of human lives, and the intensity of violence and pain in which the world was as well as the problematization of the notions of patriotism, valor, and heroism. Calling attention to the devastating effects of the war on individuals, Simon Featherstone articulates that most of Owen's poems, for instance, are regarded as "an expression of humanitarian protest" (2013, p. 59). Dying just 1 week before the end of the war at the age of 25, Owen takes place at the head of the war poets who focus on the heart-wrenching humanitarian plight experienced in the trenches and battle zones rather than the political dimension of the war in his works (Featherstone, 2013, p. 53). His poem "Strange Meeting," quoted in the epigraph, begins with the words of a soldier who finds himself in "some profound dull tunnel" (2). He realizes that this narrow and dark tunnel has traces of the "titanic wars" (3), just like the trenches in which he was on the previous days. Only after catching the desperate and sorrowful eyes of groaning people does he come to understand that this tunnel in which he stands is actually hell. These lines deliberately challenge the religious and institutional discourses that promise an idyllic heaven to the soldiers who would be martyred after either volunteering or being forced to enlist in the army to obtain this otherworldly reward in exchange for their lives. In the first lines of this poem, the discourse of rewards to martyrs is put into question since the war is seen to be a matter of destruction, an issue of ceasing to exist, and a dissolution of all humane values and morals. "Foreheads of men have bled," states Owen, "where no wounds were" (39); that is, what was severely and profoundly wounded is not merely the bodies of soldiers at the fronts but also the souls and minds of both the surviving soldiers and the civilians. What strikes most in this place is that, despite being called hellish, the previously inimical soldiers could be equals and even friends there; their nationalities are no longer significant. As Jon Silkin aptly clarifies, the other world ruled by death is presented as the only space where these soldiers and civilians could live in peace without any religious, class, race, or nationality discrimination (1998, p. 238).

In realistic representations of the violence unleashed during World War I, British war poets widely use the metaphor of hell. By means of their first-hand experiences, they opposed the idealized concept of war and argued in their poems that war did not mean a heroic sacrifice but mere blood-shedding. The soldiers died in pain and anguish at the fronts, and the civilians survived on the edge of nonexistence. The ones who survived and returned home were not the same any longer due to physical and psychological traumas, their valiant efforts were not rewarded as promised before, and the people who had encouraged or forced them to enlist in the army either pitied or were indifferent to them. All these contradictory experiences and memories of pre-war and post-war conditions constituted the overwhelming disillusionment felt by the soldiers. As the dead enemy soldier in "Strange Meeting" grieves, "Courage was mine, and I had mystery; / Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery" (30–31), these valued qualities as courage and wisdom got wasted in the "pity of war" (25). Therefore, the sense of the worthlessness of young boys breeds the sense of disillusionment lived through by these boys in the trenches.

This sense of worthlessness is a natural concomitant of the day-by-day lost hope during the combats. Isaac Rosenberg's "Break of Day in Trenches" (1916) mentions the false metaphor of a new day bringing hope to humanity as it does not bring any hope to soldiers in trenches. Though hopelessness is equated with darkness and the imagery of hell in Owen's "Strange Meeting," daylight does not necessarily carry different and "bright" meanings for combatants. In the poem, a soldier picks up a poppy near his trench and sticks it behind his ear. Poppies identified with war and dead soldiers contain similar negative connotations just like daylight; they herald the approaching death due to the upcoming clashes during the day. Just then, he sees a "queer sardonic rat" (4) walking between two trenches, in

no man's land. A simple and insignificant rat is observed to wander in an area where no soldier can stand without being shot. As Jon Stallworthy explains, the pastoral tradition is reconsidered and reshaped in an anti-anthropocentric discourse in this poem: the human and the nonhuman swap roles, the soldier hides whereas the rat loosely moves, and the poppy is no longer a simple flower (2002, p. 166). The flower becomes the symbol of a falling and bleeding soldier.

The poem's speaker thinks that the rat inwardly laughs at the men's situation as it has an opportunity to live longer than those supposedly strong soldiers in the "torn fields of France" (18). John Peters examines this situation according to the hierarchical great chain of beings: the rat at the bottom of this hierarchy is at the position of being envied by the human at the top of the chain because the lowest has the ability to move at its will, but the highest is devoid of this rational and intentional act to move beyond the doomed pit (2009a, p. 61). Both the poppy and the soldier live for that moment; nevertheless, what entails one second later is vague. That is why human life is short, just like this delicate flower:

> Poppies whose roots are in men's veins
>
> Drop, and are ever dropping;
>
> But mine in my ear is safe –
>
> Just a little white with the dust. (23–26)

Under such circumstances of disillusionment with the meaning of life, human's resemblance to nonhuman animals can also be found in Owen's another poem, "Anthem for Doomed Youth" (1917). In Owen's "Anthem," soldiers "who die" due to the ruthlessness of "the monstrous anger of the guns" (1–2) resemble cattle in slaughterhouses. The disillusionment with the deeds of humanity is fed by the inhumane war conditions, which not only deprive these humans of their ontological values but also deny their culturally significant rituals at their demises. They are all destitute for their religious ceremonies and prayers. Instead of hymns sung after them, there are cries of weapons and bullets.

Isaac Rosenberg's "Dead Man's Dump" (1917) revolves around the terror of this onto-epistemological devastation. Numerous bodies of dead soldiers are scattered all around the battlefield; the scenery is like a garbage heap. Death prowls in this area as everyone has been accustomed to or numbed by its terror; all the feelings that could be present in humanity are gone for good. A patrolling vehicle moves over those bodies in order to check the barbed wires in the area:

> The wheels lurched over sprawled dead
>
> But pained them not, though their bones crunched,
>
> Their shut mouths made no moan.
>
> They lie there huddled, friend and foeman,
>
> Man born of man, and born of woman,
>
> And shells go crying over them
>
> From night till night and now. (7–13)

The once-shaped bodies are kneaded into formlessness through war machinery and the forced indifference by other soldiers who have to work and fight on the dead. Earth is first depicted as hungry to capture the living because it needs that decaying process of the dead in order to create new life forms: nature has already begun its cycles in its glory of total indifference. However, the earth is also seen to vomit an excessive amount of the dead on its surface. The only sense felt by the poet is a revolt against the senselessness of the environment. The sounds coming from crashed bones under wheels are the only sounds other than crying bullets or shells; the image of "brains splattered on" (54) does not evoke any humane sentiment in soldiers because these men have seen so many dead bodies that they have merely become hollow moving bodies at present. In an attempt to find a reason for this theatre of cruelty, the poet begins asking questions: "What fierce imaginings their dark souls lit?"; "Is their soul's sack / Emptied of God-ancestralled essences. / Who hurled them out? Who hurled?" (20, 24-26). According to Peters, Rosenberg not only criticizes human beings' responsibility for such casualties but also interrogates God's liability for "such tragedies to occur" (2009b, p. 115). The images of benevolent nature, which only serve as a soothing backdrop to humanity and of a divinity whose sole role is to save humankind, are absent in war poems since the romanticized and heroic effect is hardly felt in the carnage of the battlefields. Therefore, what is left for the living is a sum of heavy silence; the silence of the dead, silenced values and consciences, and silent brains and feelings.

Silence of the Living Dead

The theme of being buried/lapsing into silence in Rosenberg's "Dead Man's Dump" can be observed in other war poems of the same period. Evaluating the psychological states of a limited number of soldiers who survived the war, Santanu Das regards these soldiers' "silence" as the high point of their bitter experiences (2007, pp. 73–74). Death, as both a physical trauma and a psychological one, has been the ultimate outcome of wars. Siegfried Loraine Sassoon, one of the survivors despite his wounds, conspicuously presents this situation in "Everyone Sang" (1919), in which people celebrate the end of the war by chanting songs. In the poem, everyone begins to sing enthusiastically; then, the poet is filled with joy after hearing that song and feels as happy as free avians flying in the sky. However, the concomitant feeling of silent sorrow is soon felt by the veteran poet:

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. (6–10)

During the celebration of merry people, the poet instantly retreats into silence. Despite his desire, he cannot join this happy occasion since all the fear and tears are engraved in his mind. From then on, life for him resembles a quiet song without words.

As seen in "Dead Man's Dump" and "Everyone Sang," the sense of being deserted is accompanied by loneliness and insecurity felt by the survivors. Sassoon's "The Redeemer" (1915) is another example of the combination of the senses of fear and loneliness in the trenches. The poem realistically portrays a cold winter night in a trench. Soldiers are mired in swampy mud in the dark and fearful atmosphere of trenches, and they hardly move when bullets fly over their heads. Just like in Owen's "Strange Meeting," this place resembles a kind of hell. It opens with a stunning contrast of the trench folk and the residents at home:

When peaceful folk in beds lay snug asleep;

There, with much work to do before the light,

We lugged our clay-sucked boots as best we might

Along the trench; sometimes a bullet sang,

And droning shells burst with a hollow bang[.] (3–7)

People in safe places can peacefully spend their nights as they like whereas the soldiers in trenches are doomed to struggle to survive in the mire under challenging circumstances. An instant of light coming from a rocket fire disrupts the soldier's thoughts; he sees a silhouette and mistakes that for Jesus Christ:

. . . His eyes on mine

Stared from the woeful head that seemed a mask

Of mortal pain in Hell's unholy shine.

No thorny crown, only a woollen cap

He wore – an English soldier, white and strong[.] (16–20)

As seen above, the soldier also realizes that the figure belongs to another Englishman in the same trench he stands in. There is no savior there who could take them out of this hellish space. In their lifetimes, those British soldier-poets, as well as several other millions of soldiers, come to realize the disillusionment of the fact that the courage and sacrifice which they engendered with the idea of stoic masculinity were not equal to any reward which had been promised to them. Even if they survived, they would be haunted by traumatic memories of trenches.

The contrasting opening in "The Redeemer" reveals another source of disillusionment and silent outcries prevalent in most of the trench poets' works: the difference between the combatants and the ones who were safe in their warm and comfortable houses and fabricated unreal conditions or misrepresented the real ones in such battlefields. Even at the beginning of the war, such a differentiation emerged between "armchair poets" and "trench poets" (Roberts, 1999, p. 12). Out of sheer patriotism, armchair poets praised a soldier's self-sacrifice to the skies without any first-hand experience. "The combatants' resentment is," Campbell highlights, "the primary, privileged experience, while that of noncombatants is represented only as a foil to set off the bitter and legitimate irony of the front-line troops" (1999, p. 204). Sassoon criticizes upper echelons of the military, who gave orders in safe and distant headquarters, in his poem "The General" (1917), and mentions ironic situations of women who "worship decorations" (3) like medals and passed their days by "listen[ing] with delight" the "tales of dirt and danger" (5–6) at their homes in his another poem "Glory of Women" (1918). In another verse, "The Hero" (1917), Sassoon recalls a soldier who tries to run away from trenches and gets killed in the meantime. However, the mother who learns about her son's death is portrayed as "so proud" (6) with the assumption of his heroic death for the sake of his country. Ironically, the officer who brought that sad news to the mother cannot tell the truth. A cynical and irritated tone is prevalent in all three poems. Sassoon highlights the insignificance and meaninglessness of discourses like patriotism and heroism in front of the realities of the war.

In addition to the psychological traumas, physical wounds taken in the war are equally painful for survivors. Written at Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh in 1917, where Owen stayed for months while recovering from shell shock incurred on the battlefields (Kearns, 2009a, p. 127), "Disabled" is about the thoughts of a young man who lost his arms and legs during the battle. The poem summarizes the young disabled man's yearning for his past abilities to enjoy his life to the full, his success in football matches, and popularity among and charming charisma for women. However, "Now he will never feel again how slim / Girls' waists are, or how warm their subtle hands" because "All of them touch him like some queer disease" (11–13). His disappointment in his current situation rises with the gazes of other people who welcome him home as well because he is no longer the epitome of masculinity in his country, which was once so

proud of its men. The poem reveals that "Only a solemn man who brought him fruits / *Thanked* him; and then inquired about his soul" (38–39; italics in the original). These lines can be regarded as a reproach to the attitudes of the ones who remained on the home front and treated the survivors in ungrateful manners in the aftermath of the war. There is an institutional criticism in Owen's lines: "He asked to join [the army]. He didn't have to beg; / Smiling they wrote his lie: aged nineteen years" (28–29). The poet implicitly questions the validity of the recruiting system of the military before and during the war since a teenager could lie about his age and join the armed forces just for the sake of adventure and in order to prove his manliness (Kearns, 2009a, p. 127). This is the deep silence where both the dead and the living reside.

In their poetic depictions of the Great War, the trench poets' voices become the outcries of this silence felt during and after the clashes. "When You See Millions of the Mouthless Dead" (1915) by Charles Hamilton Sorley is also established on the same theme. Killed at the age of 20 at the Battle of Loos in France, Sorley is accepted as a forerunner of Sassoon and Owen because the brutality of the war in his poems is reflected without any sentimental effect (Saksena, 2009, p. 449). In the poem, Sorley demands no prayer and praise for the dead since the deceased ones are blind and deaf to all. Eulogies after the so-called martyrs and the idea of self-sacrifice become meaningless in the face of death, especially if someone has turned into a shapeless, burnt, and rotten corpse that cannot even be recognized by his relatives:

> Say only this, "They are dead." Then add thereto,
>
> "Yet many a better one has died before."
>
> Then, scanning all the o'ercrowded mass, should you
>
> Perceive one face that you loved heretofore,
>
> It is a spook. None wears the face you knew.
>
> Great death has made all his for evermore. (9–14)

What was promised prior to the war turned out to be false hopes for young men in quest of heroic glory and patriotic victory. Those false hopes relied primarily on the technological advancements of liberal humanist politics. Nevertheless, the uncalculated and unforeseen effects of industrialization were vividly and sardonically seen during World War I because it resulted in the traumatic minds and bodies of millions of people, be they at the fronts or homes. Das clarifies the effects of battlefield experiences in the trenches by stating that "[t]he trench experience was one of the most sustained and systematic shatterings of the human sensorium: it stripped man of the protective layers of civilization and thrust his naked, fragile body between the ravages of industrial modernity, on the one hand, and the chaos of formless matter, on the other" (2007, p. 74). In the verses of the soldier-poets, this formless matter is seen to refer to the racked and ruined, blood-drenched earth full of dead bodies both on the surface and inside.

Technological inventions and developments, intended for the betterment of human lives, became tools for immense destruction and massacre during the Great War. According to Das, the most traumatic side of the war in this modern age was "the triumph of material over men, the invisibility of the enemy and randomness of death" (2007, p. 75). Correspondingly, Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est" (1917) is related to the sense of disillusionment after sudden encounters with death, facing terror in a flash, and the contribution of technology to this havoc. Gas attacks were at the head of these technological precursors of death. As David Roberts explicates, the first drastic use of poisonous gases was against French–Algerian troops in Langemarck on April 22, 1915, by Germans, and they were widely used by the German (68,000 tons), the French (37,000 tons), and the British (26,000 tons). Gruesomely, these gases caused painful, agonizing deaths of the ones exposed to them (Roberts, 1999, pp. 258–259). Owen's poem depicts the horror caused by gas attacks, expresses the meaninglessness of false concepts, and voices the unheard disappointments.

In the poem, soldiers move forward in the darkness of the night on foot. After a sudden gas attack, they rush to wear their gas masks, but one of them is unable to make it in time. In a greenish gas cloud, "[a]s under a green sea," the poet sees "him drowning" (14). Blood comes from the soldier's lungs. For the surviving soldiers, this scene of violence does not belong only to that day but to their daily dreams. The success of this poem, for Charlotte Kearns, is related to the strong imagery employed by Owen (2009b, p. 139). After removing the dead body of the soldier, other soldiers continue their way. The poet seems to have lost his sense of sympathy, his humane sentiment since the soldier's spitting blood arises a mixture of feelings of disgust and pity in him:

> And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
>
> His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
>
> If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
>
> Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs
>
> Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
>
> Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues[.] (19–24)

In this battlefield, where people could only die in graphic ways, while Owen quotes the Roman poet Horace (65–8 BCE), "Dulce et Decorum est / Pro patria mori" (27–28), meaning that "It is sweet and right / to die for your country." The poet shouts the dishonesty of these words by declaring it as an "old lie" (27).

Conclusion

In conclusion, these war poems full of disillusionment and silent outcries express the onto-epistemological distresses as well as physical and psychological states of young men who thought to have lost their rights to live the amenities of life in the face of the terror they experienced in World War I. It is seen that all the values related to life and humanity were questioned time after time. These men spatially, mentally, and metaphorically lived in a liminal state where life and death actually did not have borders any longer. As summarized in Owen's other poem, "Apologia Pro Poemate Meo" (1917), the soldier-poets' reasons for writing poems lie in the question of what is wrong and right in and about war. Most of these feelings have a resemblance to "the mud that cracked on [soldiers'] cheeks when wretches [soldiers] smiled" (2). Since "death becomes absurd and life absurder" in trenches (6), killing somebody ceases to become a source of sadness and regret. The common point of the war is witnessed in its effect of unifying all the soldiers, regardless of their ethnic, national, and religious backgrounds, in their shared silence in and disillusionment with life.

Ethics Committe Approval: This paper does not necessitate any ethics board approval/permission because it does not fall into the category of observational and descriptive research (survey, interview, focus group research, measures/scales, data scanning, any quantitative and qualitative research done by data-mining through interviewing techniques, system-model development).

Peer-review: Externally peer-reviewed.

Declaration of Interests: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Funding: The author declared that this study has received no financial support.

Etik Komite Onayı: Bu çalışma; gözlemsel ve betimsel araştırma (anket, mülakat, odak grup çalışması, ölçek/skala çalışmaları, dosya taramaları, görüşme teknikleri kullanılarak katılımcılardan veri toplanmasını gerektiren nitel ya da nicel yaklaşımlarla yürütülen her türlü araştırma, sistem-model geliştirme çalışmaları) niteliğinde olmadığı için etik kurul onayı gerektirmemektedir.

Hakem Değerlendirmesi: Dış bağımsız.

Çıkar Çatışması: Yazar çıkar çatışması bildirmemiştir.

Finansal Destek: Yazar bu çalışma icin finansal destek almadığını beyan etmiştir.

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