



Veterans' self-expression in poetry

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ABSTRACT

Research shows the positive effects of creative self-expression and, specifically, poetry therapy for Veterans, including Veterans experiencing posttraumatic stress disorder. Studies also state the need for more research in the area. This article suggests the benefit of research studying not only what Veterans say about their experiences with poetry but also what Veterans say in their poetry — and how they say it. The author analyzes a poem that takes as its topic what it means to express military experience in a poem. “Here, Bullet,” the title poem of Brian Turner’s collection of poetry about his time as an American infantry team leader in Iraq, features a speaker who creates the “here” of the poem as an alternative space to the “here” of the endangered body. This is a “here” that readers, including the re-reading poet, might visit, encountering difficult experiences within the confines of the poem that they can also leave. This article’s implications are that Veterans’ poetry, when treated as art, can tell people something about what poetry writing and reading offer Veterans. The fullest picture of what poetry means for and does for Veterans would include close analysis of the poetry itself.

Key words: arts therapy, Brian Turner, creative self-expression, lyric speaker, poetry therapy, PTSD, trauma, soldier-poet, Veteran, war poetry

RÉSUMÉ

Les recherches démontrent les effets positifs de l’expression créative et, notamment, de la thérapie par la poésie chez les vétéran(e)s, y compris ceux et celles qui souffrent d’états de stress post-traumatique (ÉSPT). Les études démontrent également la nécessité de réaliser plus de recherches dans ce secteur. Cet article suggère les bienfaits de ces recherches, non seulement de ce que les vétéran(e)s racontent *au sujet* de leurs expériences à travers la poésie, mais également de ce qu’ils racontent *dans* leurs poèmes et *de la manière* dont ils le racontent. L’auteur a analysé un poème qui aborde ce que signifie l’expression de l’expérience militaire dans un poème. *Here, Bullet*, tiré du recueil éponyme de Brian Turner sur son affectation comme chef de patrouille de l’infanterie américaine pendant l’occupation de l’Irak, décrit un narrateur qui crée le « ici » du poème pour s’échapper dans un autre lieu que le « ici » du corps en péril. C’est ce « ici » que le lecteur ou la lectrice (y compris le poète qui relit ses textes) peut visiter, pour vivre des expériences difficiles dans les limites du poème, mais aussi décider de quitter. D’après cet article, lorsqu’elle est considérée comme de l’art, la poésie des vétéran(e)s révèle quelque chose sur ce que sa rédaction et sa lecture peuvent leur apporter. Le portrait complet de ce que la poésie signifie et de ce qu’elle apporte aux vétéran(e)s exigerait une analyse approfondie des poèmes eux-mêmes.

Mots-clés : art-thérapie, Brian Turner, ÉSPT, expression créative, narrateur lyrique, poésie de guerre, poètes-soldats, traitement par la poésie, traumatisme, vétéran(e), vétérans

LAY SUMMARY

Research shows that Veterans benefit from writing poetry for therapeutic purposes. This article suggests the need for future research that considers the effects of the artistic choices that Veterans make when using poetry to engage their experiences. The author focuses on one Veteran’s poem about what it means to write poetry as a Veteran. Brian Turner’s “Here, Bullet” comes from his poetry collection about his time as an American infantry team leader in Iraq. This poem centres on a soldier whose body is in danger in a conflict setting. The poem becomes an alternative space to his body, a space in which he can work with his experiences. Treating Veterans’ poetry as art can help people working with Veterans in therapeutic settings learn more about what value Veterans find in reading and writing poetry.

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INTRODUCTION

Can Veterans benefit from poetry? *The Journal of Poetry Therapy* publishes peer-reviewed interdisciplinary research focused on therapeutic creative written expression. Among this journal's articles, which focus on the value of various uses of writing, are those demonstrating this value for Veterans, including subjects such as poetry writing for Veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD),¹ therapeutic journaling for Veterans in a court-based program,² expressive arts (including poetry) for student Veterans,³ and therapeutic implications of the metaphors Veterans use in interviews to describe experiences of PTSD.⁴ More broadly, studies show art therapy to be "qualitatively and quantitatively beneficial" for Veterans and military members.⁵(p.96)

Veterans' accounts of their experiences in poetry workshops offer additional insight. To take one recent project as an illustration, the Veterans' Poetry Workshop at Oxford Brookes University (supported by Blesma, the Limbless Veterans; the New York University Veterans Writing Workshop; and the William Joiner Institute for the Study of War and Social Consequences) recently published *"My Teeth Don't Chew on Shrapnel": An Anthology of Poetry by Military Veterans*.⁶ This open-access e-book came out of workshops that took place in 2019 and 2020, alongside interviews with participants (British and American Veterans). As an example, in one of these interviews, Jamie Broadie, Veteran of the U.S. Army National Guard, stated that she found that writing about her trauma "helps to process it and bring it out from just holding it in my body, which can really exacerbate stress ... getting it out onto the page allows and encourages other people to do the same, I think."⁶(p.47)

What does it mean for Veterans to bring trauma out from the body and onto the page? Both processing it for herself and communicating it to others, Broadie said. Her poem "My Body Is," included in the anthology, tells the reader more. After experiencing sexual assault in a military situation, the poem's speaker tries to reclaim her body: "I wrap my hand around my wrist."⁶(p.49, line 34) Grabbing the wrist is not a tender gesture; it calls up the image of a handcuff. Yet outside of the body's closed loop, the poem ends on an assertion, bookended by words indicating possession: "My body is mine."⁶(p.50, line 38)

Thus, in addition to what Veterans say about poetry, studies focused on poetry and Veteran health might analyze what Veterans say in poetry — and how they say it. Researchers writing about creative self-expression

for Veterans call for further studies.^{2, 5, 7} The value of attending, in such future research, to Veterans' poems as poems — as artistic creations demanding nuanced interpretation — can be suggested. Studies of art therapy typically focus on what Veterans say about their experiences with creative expression, and attention to the creative expression itself is attention to the "content of the artwork."⁵(p.88) But how Veterans say what they say is important: Patrick S. Foley's focus, as a social work researcher, on Veterans' use of metaphors to describe the experiences of PTSD indicates the need to attend to such choices of expression.⁴ Foley studies interviews; for art, such attention is imperative. This article adds to existing research by highlighting the knowledge that comes out of the poetry itself.

In what follows, a Veteran-poet is introduced to examine a poem chosen for extended analysis because it is about expressing military experience in a poem. If a poem is read only for content, readers ignore the fact that the writer has chosen to express that content in, specifically, a poem — that is, it is treated as regular communication rather than art. The "speaker" is the "I" in a poem, the one whose perspective a poem is from. No matter how similar they are, the speaker is never exactly the poet because writing oneself into a poem involves a process of enhanced selection and presentation, a process of creative decision making.

APPROACHING CREATIVE SELF-EXPRESSION WITH BRIAN TURNER

Brian Turner's *Here, Bullet*⁸ is a collection of poems about his time as an American infantry team leader in Iraq, and Turner continues to explore his time in Iraq in *Phantom Noise*⁹ and *My Life as a Foreign Country: A Memoir*.¹⁰ Although this article focuses on the title poem of his earliest book, Turner shows interest in what poetry offers for communicating about traumatic experience across these publications and in his public comments.

In a talk "about PTSD (posttraumatic stress disorder) and some of the traumas I'm carrying," Turner explained that, for him, creative writing produces:

vehicles to meditate and to discover things about the world. I'm not trying to preach when I sit down to write about this stuff. I try to write what is discovery for me and also what is maybe worthwhile to share with someone else.¹¹

Turner's poetry does not preach about what he is already carrying but instead functions as a vehicle that brings

him to discovery about the world. Attention to such discovery counters an impulse in the discourse around trauma in creative expression to foreground evidentiary testimony (the bare facts of experience) to the exclusion of authorial agency (the ability to choose how to engage and tell those facts).¹² War literature scholar Jeff Sychterz corrects such a potential misunderstanding in relation to the concept of haunting that saturates Turner's work:

It would be wrong for us to assume ... a Wilfred-Owen-like passive victimization, as if the poet suffers in some totalizing way from his wartime experiences and "the poetry is in the pity" (Owen 535). The ghosts in Turner's poetry do not, or at least do not simply, point to the kind of traumatic melancholy identified in trauma studies, "in which one is haunted or possessed by the past and performatively caught up in the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes — scenes in which the past returns and the future is blocked or fatalistically caught up in a melancholic feedback loop" (LaCapra 21).^{13(p.7)}

Sychterz explains that Turner's poetry "registers the war's effects through a number of tropes" such as "bullets or shrapnel embedded in his body or as ghosts that haunt the poet."^{13(p.2)} Turner makes creative choices about expressing haunting. While representing the war's effects, "Turner's ghosts also represent the play of imagination."^{13(p.11)} Haunting, for Turner, stands in at once for traumatic experiences and the creative engagement of those experiences, the lack of control and the reassertion of control.

"HERE, BULLET"

The speaker in "Here, Bullet" responds to the inescapable potential for bodily harm in conflict situations with a poem that offers a form of control. In "Here, Bullet," the speaker invites the bullet "here," to his own "bone and gristle and flesh":^{8(p.13, line 2)} the danger he faces is the bullet's desire to arrive "here," at his body. The bullet might find him anywhere because "here" is wherever his body is, and his body is always somewhere. However, *here*, a word the short poem repeats eight times, is deictic — that is, its meaning is entirely contextual — "here" is where you say it from. The second half of the poem offers the poem itself as an alternative "here" to the speaker's body:

... here, Bullet,
here is where I complete the word you bring
hissing through the air, here is where I moan

the barrel's cold esophagus, triggering
my tongue's explosives for the rifling I have
inside of me, each twist of the round
spun deeper, because here, Bullet,
here is where the world ends, every time.^{8(p.13, lines 9–16)}

Yes, the speaker's death would complete the word, but so, too, does this poem. The poem ends instead of the body. The poem's last line is "where the world ends,"⁸ followed by the empty space of the blank margin. The speaker replaces the potential end of being with the controllable end of making, the end of a "here" he created.

However, the speaker "complete[s] the word" the bullet brings with his "tongue's explosives for the rifling [he has] / inside of [him]," suggesting that his power of creation is a power defined by violence.^{8(p.10, lines 13–14)} This is the sort of moment in a poem that could lead readers to understand the poet to be delivering unmediated trauma, to understand the rifling inside Turner to explode through the poem. But although the speaker's "tongue's explosives" are beyond his control, Turner, the poet, has crafted this poem: to whatever degree of consciousness and control words as bullets arose in the poem, Turner kept them there in the revision process. The speaker is an element of language, a feature of the poem — not a reflection of Turner like he would get in a mirror or his shadow, a consequence of himself outside of his creative power. This creative power produces an imagined space for visiting difficult experiences.

In an interview, Turner expresses his idea of imagination as a "here" readers can visit:

I believe the imagination is a real space, or series of interconnected and adjacent landscapes. It is inhabited by the past — a past that is haunted by the present. We are the spirits that visit the past, through the conduit of memory and dream. The opposite is true, too. Language is one of the transports that carries us between worlds.¹⁴

Haunt means "to frequent or be much about (a place)," and it also refers to "unseen or immaterial visitants," of which the concept of ghosts is a sub-meaning.¹⁵ Although Turner imagines — across his creative writing and public comments — war to turn him into a ghost and to produce ghosts that haunt him, this comment suggests that imagination also turns readers — and the poet as potential re-reader — into ghosts, the unseen visitants to the "here" of the poem, the place where haunting means exercising creative control.

The speaker finds control inside a poem as an alternate “here,” a space that Turner could visit as a reader haunting his past, but a space also open to other readers. In the same interview, Turner suggests what is at stake in using language as a transport:

One of the questions I have for myself is this: How do I integrate my wartime and military experiences into the rest of my life so that I can lead a full and healthy life, and, if possible, be useful for others along the way?¹⁴

The language transports readers — others for whom he might be useful — into the imagined “here,” not into Turner’s memories, but into his poem, designed as a space for haunting. Readers are not transported into the speaker’s position, into the “tongue’s explosives.” Rather, they are the unseen visitants who haunt the poem, voluntarily visiting a “here” that closes at the margin and offers itself to their active reading.

For Turner, the way to integrate past experiences with present and future ones is to imagine those experiences in a form that allows one to haunt them. Language is one possible transport between the real space of here, in the physical and mental body, and the also-real space of the imagined “here.” If the imagination is a “series of interconnected and adjacent landscapes” that are “inhabited by the past” and “haunted by the present,”¹⁴ then the imagination connects past experiences and present ones by allowing one to visit the past with some control. Because Turner uses written language for this visit, others can retrace his steps: the poem’s imaginative “here” is available beyond the poet to other readers.

CONCLUSION

“Here, Bullet” suggests that imagination — here, in the form of creative writing and the active reading it demands — provides a space to work with and express experiences. In this poem, the speaker creates the “here” of the poem as an alternative space to the “here” of the endangered body. This is a “here” that readers, including the re-reading poet, might visit, encountering difficult experiences within the confines of the poem that they can also leave. This poem thus comments on the use of poetry for Veterans, and future poetry therapy studies might include interpretive attention to Veterans’ poems — possibly through interdisciplinary collaboration. The fullest picture of what poetry means

for, and does for, Veterans would include close analysis of the poetry itself.

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