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Wartime Attachments: essays on pain, care, retreat and treatment in the First World War.

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Wartime Attachments: An Introduction

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The Images

It is now routine in First World War scholarship to consider the politics of memorialization, a politics made most strange and interesting by the fact that the war was already being remembered before it was over.

Robert Laurence Binyon's famous English elegy 'For the Fallen' was written as early as September 1914, while the municipal task of envisaging a suitable monument to mourn the dead was deemed relevant from at least 1916. In March 1917 the decision was taken by the United Kingdom government to create a national commemorative museum.¹ Accompanying this strange tense of anticipatory remembrance was a novel appetite for commemorative matériel, with exhibits of soldiering paraphernalia and front line photography coming to prominence throughout the war period in a historically unprecedented manner. Not only did the First World War have to be represented *in the present*, to encourage recruitment and morale, it had to be represented *for the future*, to contain the terms of the human suffering it would most certainly be seen to have caused. The future, too, was subject to conscription.

Today, throughout this centenary period, and in an age of internet search engines, the legacy of such wartime futurism remains both a striking convenience (certainly for those of us organizing talks on the war) and historiographically significant, a single click giving access to a thousand unknown soldiers doing representative things in representative moods of despondency, camaraderie or stoic resolve. Is it possible to deny the pleasure we take in these images, the consolation of having them available on-line, even as we might be suspicious of their invariant mood and meaning, and the sense that they have been used to construct an inflexible cultural memory?

Certainly the most prevalent 'lions led by donkeys' analysis of the war with its poignant argument that millions of working class men from around the

world were sent to their deaths according to the nefarious motives of imperialism – and according to the incompetent commands of gentlemen generals – was lent credence by photojournalism detailing the insalubrious minutiae of life in the wards and trenches (and this in the face of those photographs common ideological origin, often as propaganda). But just as with the famous war poetry and memoirs of Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, Edward Blunden and Frederic Manning, among others, ostensibly anti-military, and in some instances frankly pacifistic works could still be co-opted into a reductive field of representation: the war was bad; the generals were unaccountable; the men suffered terribly. Once-shocking photographs of trench warfare have abraded over time until reduced to the state of cliché: *brave Tommy in the trench*. Many such images have become today, as Roland Barthes reminds us is the case with every stereotype, necrotic artifacts.² Indeed, they are somehow without sense, because what we feel for them is already so contained and pre-meditated. No matter from which political perspective we treat the war – Irish, British, Northern Irish, North African, American, Turkish, German, Indian, French, French Canadian etc. – we are confronted with overlapping image economies, and the same persistent problem of representational field.

It may be objected that the First World War did actually happen, countless people were killed, and physical suffering took place; consequently, it is not enough to consider the war as a problem of its representation. Yet we can grant that the physical body too – the material substratum of personal suffering – has its own troubling ideological structure of remembrance. As Jeffrey Reznick has pointed out, in May 1918, again before the war had ended, the 'Inter-Allied exhibition on the After Care of Disabled Men' opened in Westminster Central Hall in London. This exhibit aimed 'to publicise national rehabilitation programmes for soldiers who had lost a limb, or had been maimed in some other way'.³ The emphasis most obviously, was on new forms of prosthesis. Here we have the soldier's damaged body, literally re-membered, and, at the same time, spectacularly metaphorised (in advance) as a cultural site of remembrance. If the physical body was put on display, it was so in order to demonstrate the remedial possibilities of medical science, and its particular suffering was very quickly transformed into an icon of cultural revival. The soldier's visible wound outlived his body, in other words, as a symbol of cultural heroism – and from his enigmatic, though usually dolorous face, as he lay suffering in the hospital bed attended by nurses, transpired the *Pietà* of modern times.

Attachments

If I insist on the issue of representational difficulty, and what seems like a residual cultural pathology when it comes to wartime remembrance, it is because this podcast series is a minor attempt to address the space between large scale economic and geopolitical histories on the one hand, and personal memoirs and correspondences, on the other. I use the term 'attachment', optimistically, as a way to register and think about the complex differences between grand historical narratives and the all-too-human immediacies of personal experience. Attachment is a mediatory term, pointing to the intimate relations that emerged throughout the war period, among soldiers, between soldiers and caregivers, as well as those associations that were filtered through charitable and state institutions, including the family.

We might expect that literature would best occupy this variegated space of attachment, between memoir and grand historical narrative. Certainly Paul Fussell's literary study *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975) has done as much as any single book to mark the war out as not only a rupture in modern culture, but as the singular rupture which gave expression to *modernity* as we now know it. According to Fussell, the invention of the machine gun transformed how wars were fought, and the existence of a newly literate rank and file transformed how they were represented – with the theatrical, the homoerotic and the ironic remaining the most distinctive of Great War tropes.⁴ Fussell's work has been contested and supplemented, however, notably in recent times by Jay Winter, Santanu Das and Kate McLoughlin, all of whom have questioned his depiction of the Great War as qualitatively different from other wars.⁵ In this light there has emerged a suspicion that, notwithstanding its impressive feat of scholarship, Fussell's work memorializes a crisis in the Edwardian world order which, from different cultural and class perspectives, was not a crisis at all, or, at least, not a crisis of the same measure. Just as the shattering disillusionment which energises the canonical texts of First World War literature depends on a foundation of privileged expectations, so Fussell's insistence that the wartime rupture *created* our modernity is in danger of spectacularly, and somewhat sentimentally, distracting from those ordinary social conditions the war was an effect of: including of colonial administration, mass culture, gendered politics and the everyday exploitation of labour. More recent work than Fussell's, including by those authors I've already mentioned, has diverged from the accepted narrative of Edwardian disillusionment, emphasizing, in its place, the women's war at home, the possibilities explored in nursing memoirs, and the world-imperial context.⁶

Fussell's book was groundbreaking for how it addressed the war's literary legacy, yet it was unable to make explicit the ways in which the task of representing wartime experience was continuous with the more general and ongoing task of representing non-middle class and non-male experiences.

Pleasures

It might seem a risk to venture the term 'pleasure' in such a context, and to use it to connect this present series of talks on the war; yet it seems to me that pleasure is key to the representational difficulties which the following essays, each in their different way, articulate. Pleasure is often what is subtracted from accounts of the war: it is merely exploitation, runs one conventional reading; it is an ideological trap leading straight to mass slaughter; the poor soldiers could *only* have been duped by their pleasures.

Creating a caste of exemplary victims is its own kind of mistake, however, as the philosopher and cultural theorist Jacques Rancière demonstrates in his studies of the French nineteenth century, including his essay 'Good Times or Pleasure at the Barriers' and his larger work, *Nights of Labour: the Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-century France*. Vigorously, and with reference to workers' letters, journals, and pamphlets, Rancière disputes a binary characterization of the working class, as enmeshed in their poverty *or* dignified by work. Such a reduction omits consideration of what is unruly, mischievous, and borderline in working class experience, he writes, pointing out that interconnections between circuits of work and circuits of leisure have meant that a decisive separation between working class and bourgeois habit and order has always been problematically simplistic.⁷ Critical of what we think we already know historically about the working class and its collective resistances, Rancière recovers a 'working class which was more mobile, less attached to its tools and less sunk in its own poverty and drunkenness than the various traditions usually represent it.'⁸ His suspicion is that the conventional image of the worker denies him and her their pleasures within a mixed, not always coherent, but rather aleatory and changing cultural space – as well as the right to non-representative (non-ideological) experience. This is bound to be relevant to the image of the First World War soldier and the exploited wartime worker, in which cases the historiographical investment in their states of immiseration – where the trench is the only functioning metaphor – is so widespread and morally coherent that we may wonder if it is motivated by a historian's sadism. Certainly the link between

moral sentiment and the image of the exploited soldier, made repetitious through acts of remembrance, operates perniciously at the level of representation because of how it narrows and confirms what would better be broadened, diversified and critiqued.

The Essays

Consequently, as well as to the political allegiances which enlisted, maimed and killed so many soldiers, I use the term 'wartime attachments' to refer to the diverse gratifications and pleasures of wartime experience – eating, drinking, resting, fantasizing, escaping – which were ideological yes; but which also, it must be allowed, subsisted below the ideological current and in different ways challenged it. Accordingly, the first two talks in this series deal with psychoanalysis and psychological treatments for trauma or war neuroses which Sigmund Freud famously extrapolated in his essay 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' from 'pleasures which could not be felt as such.'⁹

Julie Walsh in her paper '1914: Psychoanalysis and the Narcissistic Wound' points out that not only did Freud borrow vocabulary and topological imagery from the war, but he spent the war period constructing his most complicated theory of subjectivity, based on the play of narcissistic identification, object attachment and the ability to mourn – all tropes which were closely allied to the pathologies of wartime, such as the splitting logic of 'us' and 'them', and melancholic repetition. Julie focuses on Freud's metapsychology, and the interaction between mental structure and historical event, providing in-depth readings of two key texts 'On Narcissism: an introduction' (1914) and 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1915).

Brendan Kelly's talk is more locally and empirically focused on the treatment of shellshock in Dublin's Richmond War Hospital. He details the experimental nature of this treatment, its relation to social habits, the introduction of talking cures – as well as cure by coffee – and its political exploitation through propaganda. Here we shall have the opportunity to consider once more the problematic relation between medical science and visual culture.

Sara Haslam's talk deals with the topic of alcohol as addiction, solace, vice, medicine, and standard military issue for combatants during the war. Focusing, in particular, on the work of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), and the temperance movement which underlay that work, Sara shows how alcohol consumption became a site of ideological conflict and recalcitrant

habit formation among soldiers. For while abstinence was condoned, and often rewarded with forms of institutional care and consolation, the pleasure of alcohol remained a sign of men refusing to be immiserated to the condition of their historical function.

Rachel Duffet's talk on the habits of food consumption describes in complementary detail how food packages worked as love tokens, expressions of solidarity among men, and gave to soldiers the opportunity to ritualise and dignify their eating in ways they deemed respectable. In those documentary cases Rachel examines, the emotional links to family and home provided by certain foods exemplified the nostalgia of the soldier for England. On the one hand, this practice remained a disavowal of the ration and the functional calculations of wartime provision – here the ideology of family is distracting the soldier's agency from state-based decision making regarding welfare. On the other hand, however, it persistently allied appetite and subjectivity in ways that were active, mischievous and potentially non-virtuous. The existence of food packages and army chefs in positions of privilege framed an array of individual temptations, specifically for pilfering; and if pilfering could not be ruled out, even where the lines of a son's letter home insisted on the clichés of patriotic sharing and solidarity, then it posed a useful affront to the hypocrisies of collective remembrance.

The fifth talk by Andrew Frayn engages D.H. Lawrence's poetry collection 'Bay' (1918). As Andrew demonstrates, Lawrence was an unusual case: a non-combatant who disdained the pieties of pacifism as much as he did those of elegizing the glorious dead, both of which outlooks he saw as indicating a kind of representational necrosis. Boldly and vividly, Lawrence's language connects images of modern warfare with those of the natural world, while summoning the thrills of bodily affect. The author casts the war, finally, not as an external event to be solemnly remembered, but (similarly to Freud) as a structure of mind, a set of cultural pathologies, which it remains our only active duty to transform.

¹ See the following UCD article on First World War photography: (ref <http://www.ucd.ie/photoconflict/histories/wwiphotography/>). Geoff Dyer's remarks on the cultural remembrance of the war, in particular on the Somme are witty and to the point; 'The war, it began to seem, had been fought in order that it might be remembered, that it might live up to its memory,' he writes. Geoff Dyer, *The Missing of the Somme* (London: Phoenix Press, 1994) p, 15.

² Roland Barthes, 'Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers' in *A Roland Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag (London: Vintage, 1993) pp, 378-403: 387.

³ Jeffrey S. Reznick, 'Prostheses and Propaganda: Materiality and the Human Body in the Great War,' in *Matters of Conflict: Material Culture, Memory and the First World War*, ed. Nicholas J. Sauders (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004) pp, 51-61: 51.

⁴ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 1975).

⁵ Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Santanu Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Kate McLoughlin, 'The Great War and Modern Memory Revisited,' in *A Eulogy for Nigger and other essays* (London: Notting Hill Editions, 2015) pp, 114-147.

⁶ Examples include: Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (London: Reaktion, 1996); Claire M. Tylee, *The Great War and Women's Consciousness* (Iowa: The University of Iowa Press, 1990); Michael Roper, *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009); Sarah Cole, *Modernism, Male Friendship and First World War Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Peter Englund, *The Beauty and the Sorrow: An Intimate History of the First World War* (London: Vintage, 2011); Margaret Higonnet, *Nurses at the Front: Writing the Wounds of the Great War* (Lebanon, NH: North Eastern University Press, 2001) and Santanu Das (ed), *Race, Empire and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁷ Jacques Rancière, 'Good Times or Pleasures at the Barriers', in *Voices of the People: the social life of 'la Sociale' at the end of the Second Empire*, ed. Adrian Rifkin and Roger Thomas; trans. John Moore (London: Routledge, 1988) pp, 45-95: 47.

⁸ Jacques Rancière, *The Nights of Labour: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-century France*, trans. John Drury (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).

⁹ Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' in *SE, Volume XVIII (1920-1922): Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works* (London: Penguin) pp, 1-64: 11.