

# The Arts of Memory and the Poetics of Remembering



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Edited by

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# INTRODUCTION

## ABBES MAAZAOUI

No feature of the mind is as important as memory. It touches all aspects of our lives and makes us who we are. As Peter Vishton affirms, it is "one of the most important things that we have. Without it, we can exist perfectly well in the moment; but we cease to exist in a temporally extended fashion when the past and the future are ripped away."<sup>1</sup> It is no surprise that research on memory is vast and continues to expand in a variety of fields and directions. Undoubtedly, the evolution of mass media, the advances in technology and information sharing, the post-colonial desire of minorities to promote their own memories, the traumatic events of World War I and II, the struggle for decolonization and independence, the mass killings of civilians in neo-imperialistic wars, the advance in neurology and the widespread attention gained by diseases like Alzheimer's, all this has concurred to make memory a topic of predilection for scholars of all stripes.

The purpose of this introduction is not to review this vast and multidisciplinary scholarship. Rather, using Pierre Nora's definition of memory as a guide—"Memory is more a frame than a content, a process

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Vishton, *Scientific Secrets for Powerful Memory DVD* (Chantilly: The Teaching Company, 2012). Cf. the recent example of Demetri Kofinas who lost his memory due to a brain tumor, then recovered it. Kofinas writes: "I would be on a train, in a cab, or even on a plane and forget where I was going. I would show up to appointments on the wrong day, or just not show up at all . . . Unable to remember, I was also unable to keep track of time. Minutes passed like seconds, and hours spent alone produced gaps unnoticed by me, that grew like chasms in a slow motion earthquake . . . I was no longer just forgetful, unfocused, and depressed; I was living moment to moment with no grounding in the past, no understanding of the future, and no temporal awareness whatsoever." Demetri Kofinas, "A Tumor Stole Every Memory I had. This is What Happened When it all Came Back." <http://qz.com/511920/a-tumor-stole-every-memory-i-had-this-is-what-happened-when-it-all-came-back/>. (Web: October 5, 2015).

always in action, a set of strategies"<sup>2</sup>—it intends to point out a few categories and strategies that highlight both the unity of memory as a concept and the variety of its interventions at the human level (i.e., its mental, artistic, cultural, social, and political dimensions).

## Interconnecting

One of the most important characteristics of memory is its ability to establish connections. Nowadays scientists like to talk about the plasticity of the brain. This attribute can be extended to memory. Far from static or immutable, memory is porous and in constant flux, as it is actively engaged in a network of continuous negotiations, connections and interactions between the past, the present and the future. Vital deductive and inductive reasoning, which helps make sense of the world in our daily life, is impossible without such memory connections. In that regard, memory is not just about the past; it is equally, if not more so, about the present and the future and how they all interconnect with each other. As Sigmund Freud explains, memories work retrospectively, anticipatorily or simultaneously as the remembered event.<sup>3</sup> This fluid omnipresence is easy to recognize in everyday life. For instance, present actions, images or sensations can trigger the memory of past events by association, contrast or even for no reason at all. By establishing a connection with the past, the present is bound to alter it and subject it to the influence of the senses, emotions, and suggestions of the present moment.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, euphoric memories of the past can positively brighten the present. So too, past lies, obsessions, subconscious thoughts and traumatic experiences have the power to haunt and disrupt the present and the future. This plasticity is what makes memory a powerful force in our life.

It is also what makes it unpredictable. Applying the law of conservation of mass, which states that nothing is lost, to mental and psychological life, Freud believes that "nothing which has once been formed can perish—that everything is somehow preserved and that in

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<sup>2</sup> "La mémoire . . . est un cadre plus qu'un contenu, un enjeu toujours disponible, un ensemble de stratégies." (My translation). Cf. Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux de Mémoire. Volume I* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1984-1992), 16.

<sup>3</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. Trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Penguin, 2003), 45-46

<sup>4</sup> Think about interrogations techniques used by law enforcement to obtain false and/or coerced confessions.

suitable circumstances . . . it can once more be brought to light.”<sup>5</sup> Theorizing Freud’s idea of “the suitable circumstances,” Marcel Proust establishes a distinction between “voluntary memory” and “involuntary memory.” While the first is rational and controllable but limited and unreliable, the second is all-encompassing but unpredictable. In *Remembrance of Things Past*, the narrator tells of few instances of such “suitable circumstances” or “involuntary memory”. For example, his childhood was fully and unexpectedly resurrected by the simple taste of a madeleine, which allowed him to remember the whole village of his childhood, with its people, sounds, lights and buildings:

So in that moment [after tasting the madeleine] all the flowers in our garden and in M. Swann’s park, and the water-lilies on the Vivonne and the good folk of the village and their little dwellings and the parish church and the whole of Combray and its surroundings, taking shape and solidity, sprang into being, town and gardens alike, from my cup of tea.<sup>6</sup>

Thanks to the miraculous taste<sup>7</sup>, it all sounds as if “the past is never dead. It’s not even past”, to borrow the words of Faulkner<sup>8</sup>. The past is fully made present, alive, and all is happening in the present.<sup>9</sup> For Pierre Nora, memory is indeed “a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present . . . [an] affective and magical [link]” in contrast to “history”, which he defines as “a representation of the past”.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1962), 17-19.

<sup>6</sup> Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past. Volume 1*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York: Vintage, 1982), 51.

<sup>7</sup> It is in similar terms that Demetri Kofinas who lost his memory due a brain tumor, writes about his recovery: “Memories felt more like revelations. They began to pour onto the neural highways of my brain like a torrential summer rain. . . A memory would announce itself, in an almost mystical resurrection of forgotten history.” Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011) e-book, 73. <https://books.google.com>.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. “Memory is a contemporary phenomenon, something that, while concerned with the past, happens in the present.” Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 3-4.

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,” *Representations* 26 (1989): 8-9. It must be noted that Nora’s “memory” corresponds to Proust’s “involuntary memory” while Nora’s “history” is similar to Proust’s “voluntary memory”: “because it is an intellectual and secular production, [history] calls for analysis and criticism.” Ibid.

## Editing

Notwithstanding this optimistic view, and even if we stumble into a magic experience like the madeleine of Proust's narrator, it is important to keep in mind that remembering is far more complex than a simple act of playback or replay. Unlike a recorder that stores and deploys at will a stable and identical content, our remembering of the past and the present is an act of re-presentation and re-framing that requires hard work. Remembering always entails reconstructing a story that unfolds in the form of a narrative, for without a narrative, there can be no remembrance. It did not take Proust's narrator long to realize anxiously that, like the *Memoirs* of Saint-Simon and *The Arabian Nights*, his memoirs of things past would need thousands of nights to complete.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, for the past to be narrated, i.e. re-created, it has to be re-imagined. Without imagination, there can be no narration. This is all the more true that unlike Proust's narrator, our remembering is most often fragmentary, unreliable and selective.<sup>12</sup> The more fragmented our memory is, the more dependent on our imagination we become. For all our remembering needs, it is our imagination that is bound to come to the rescue, fill in the gaps, infer the missing parts, and even manufacture an entire new story. "We all do this . . . all the time," says Vishton.<sup>13</sup> The unsettling truth about memory is that it is perceived as a recorder while it actually functions like a never-ending editing machine that is constantly subject to "the flexible, creative, powerful, inferential engine of our mind" and imagination.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu. Volume III*, éd. Clarac, Pierre and André Ferré (Paris: Gallimard Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1954), 1043.

<sup>12</sup> Except for the rare few who possess the *eidetic* memory of someone like Sheldon Cooper, the hero of the popular TV comedy, *The Big Bang Theory*.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., Chap 6. I am not referring here to fraudulent/contested memories by reporters such as Brian Williams, Bill O'Reilly, Jayson Blair, Judith Miller and Stephen Randall Glass; or by writers such as Misha Defonseca, Herman Rosenblat, Margaret Seltzer and Norma Khouri. Recall that most of these reporters and writers managed to tell/publish fake stories in the most established publishing houses; they invented people that didn't exist and created events that never happened; but more importantly, they got away with it for years and years.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

## Substituting

This plasticity has another side effect so to speak. It makes memory susceptible to deceptive strategies, such as displacement, substitution and superposition. According to Freud, in some instances, memory uses an event from the past as a substitute for, or a distraction from, another unacceptable and painful emotion that is pushed out of the mind by the mechanism of psychological repression.<sup>15</sup> This is true for individuals as well as for communities and nations. Miriam Hansen states for instance that “the popular American fascination with the Holocaust may function as a screen memory (Deckerinnerung) in the Freudian sense, covering up a traumatic event—another traumatic event—that cannot be approached directly,” such as slavery, the genocide of Indian Americans, and the Vietnam War.<sup>16</sup> Similar examples of memory substitution are found elsewhere. In France, the history of colonization and genocide particularly in Africa is often obscured and ignored in favor of a more upbeat interpretation of the past, with a focus on the expansion of French culture and civilization. It is quite revealing that, in an attempt to formalize denial and impose a form of superposition<sup>17</sup>, the French National Assembly even passed a law on colonialism in 2005, requiring high-schools to teach the “positive values” of colonialism to students. As Nancy Ali writes in this volume, the example of postwar France shows us that “collective memory can be subject to willed amnesia for the sake of present and future political objectives.”

Such misreadings of the past can perpetuate stereotypes, prejudices and racism, which often are the product of deeper and long lasting biases consciously or subconsciously articulated for political, social, cultural and mass media interests. They also underscore how national and international forces play a major role in promoting certain social and political versions of the past in lieu of others, or at their expense.<sup>18</sup> Because of the inherent re-framing of the past, it is not uncommon that every social group feels the need to “redefine its identity through the revitalization of its own history”

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<sup>15</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (New York: Penguin, 2003), 5-6.

<sup>16</sup> Miriam Hansen, “*Schindler's List* Is Not *Shoah*: The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory,” in *Critical Inquiry* (Winter 1996), 311.

<sup>17</sup> Re-writing history can go the other way: “The Algerian war of independence (1954–62), characterized at the time by the French government as a “public order operation,” was only recognized as a “war” in 1999 by the French National Assembly.” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French\\_law\\_on\\_colonialism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_law_on_colonialism).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *On Media Memory*, p. 10.

and its own account of the past.<sup>19</sup> For Michael Rothberg, if misused, this commendable proliferation can be the leading cause for perpetuating conflicts: "There can be no doubt that many manifestations of contemporary violence, including war and genocide, are in part the product of resentful memories and conflicting views of the past".<sup>20</sup>

## Deleting

A corollary strategy to replacing is deleting, which subsumes many forms such as removing, forgetting, and marginalizing. In his novel *La Pharaone*, Hédi Bouraoui uses the mystery of the missing (lost) nose of Hatshepsut's statue as a metaphor for modern Egypt and its commitment to censure and deny its own pharaonic and Christian pasts.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, in *Cap Nord*, Bouraoui denounces government policies in the Maghreb as they "spend their time" trying to

deny the native culture, Amazigh, a crucible in which were happily commingled for twenty-three centuries Arab inputs, Greek, Roman , Phoenician . . . in short, a language and culture that are the basis of our identity and our leaders are striving to let it die.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Nora, "Between Memory and History," 15.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 3. Well-known examples include the 1948 Palestine war, known in Hebrew as The War of Independence or Liberation and in Arabic as The *Nakba* or Catastrophe; and the 1947 partition of India. Cf. William Dalrymple: "Today, both India and Pakistan remain crippled by the narratives built around memories of the crimes of Partition, as politicians (particularly in India) and the military (particularly in Pakistan) continue to stoke the hatreds of 1947 for their own ends." William Dalrymple, "The Great Divide: The violent legacy of Indian Partition," *The New Yorker*, June 29, 2015. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/06/29/the-great-divide-books-dalrymple>.

<sup>21</sup> Hédi Bouraoui, *La Pharaone* (Tunis: Editions L'Or du Temps, 1998). For more details, see Abbes Maazaoui, "Archéogéographie et espaces palimpsestes chez Bouraoui," in *Hédi Bouraoui et l'écriture pluriculturelle*, Ed. Abderrahman Beggar. Special issue of *Revue du Centre d'Etudes des Littératures et des Arts d'Afrique du Nord (CELAAN)* XI, no. 1 & 2 (Spring 2013): 40-48.

<sup>22</sup> "Nous passons notre temps à nier la culture originelle, l'amazighité, creuset dans lequel se sont amalgamés pendant vingt-trois siècles et avec bonheur les apports arabe, grec, romain, phénicien . . . en un mot une langue et une culture qui sont à la base de notre identité et que nos dirigeants s'acharnent à laisser mourir." (My translation). Cf. Hédi Bouraoui, *Cap Nord* (Ottawa: Editions du Vermillon, 2008), 116.

Far from being the product of a memory defect, forgetfulness is here the result of a sustained effort to exclude the unwanted chapters of the past. As Charles Bonn writes, whenever dominant ideologies invoke history, they are bent on ignoring the part they cannot confiscate.<sup>23</sup>

This prefatory poetics of “memory in action”<sup>24</sup> is by no means comprehensive. Some of the memory strategies discussed above, along with other processes, will be explored in more detail in the essays of this volume. Nevertheless, this introduction should suffice to raise questions about some of the processes by which memory is represented, transmitted and circulated, as well as its role in shaping meanings, values, attitudes and identities.

## The Structure of the Volume

The articles of this collection are grouped into four sections that represent different perspectives on the poetics of memory. Drawing from a variety of fields and arts, they examine the strategies used to capture, recreate, transmit or reinterpret the past.

The first two essays speak to the processes involved in the formation and transmission of personal and collective memory. In his essay, Argha Banerjee examines the development, evolution and role of women's elegiac poetry in WWI in relation to a number of important themes: the move from public to private expression of grief and mourning, the experience of melancholy and depression, the sentiment of ambivalence toward a repressive patriarchy, and the “angst against the dominant patriarchal rhetoric of the war.” Peter Schulman analyzes the sudden re-emergence of the Brooklyn Dodgers as literary and historical icons and how “fictional reminiscences keep the vanished physical Ebbets Field alive intellectually and spiritually.” This collective longing, as expressed in fiction and in reality, is not however without ambivalence, for it stems as much, if not more, from the desire to perpetuate and re-live one's own past as from selfless nostalgia for the Dodgers.

The second section continues this discussion while focusing specifically on the representation of trauma, in reality and in fiction. Netty

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<sup>23</sup> Charles Bonn, *Problématiques spatiales du roman algérien*. Alger: Entreprise Nationale du Livre, 1986), 33.

<sup>24</sup> An international conference, titled “Memory in Action: Remembering the Past, Negotiating the Present, and Imagining the Future” was held at Lincoln University on March 28, 2015. The conference was coordinated by Abbes Maazaoui and sponsored by The College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania.

Mattar examines the ambivalence of photography and its relation to the notion of trauma, as experience, as historical fact and as representation. Using works from two different genres, W.G. Sebald's *The Emigrants* (1993) and Alain Resnais' *Muriel, or, The Time of Return* (1963), she shows how archival images (historical photograph or film) function as sites of tension where contradictory meanings co-exist. Photographing the pain of others is also the subject of Lynn Hilditch's article on Lee Miller, an American-born war photographer, who has incorporated her artistic skills to effectively frame the horrors of war. Using the Surrealist practice of fragmentation, Miller was able to make her photographs preserve a moment-in-time (the photograph as evidence and document) but also evoke its horrors (the photograph as an object of art that moves people to action). Erkin Kırıyman demonstrates how Virginia Woolf incorporates the traumatic model into the structure of *Mrs Dalloway* by establishing parallelisms between the traumatic mind of the survivor and the fragmented narrative strategies of the novel: disconnection between the past and the present, flashbacks, interruptions, remembering as repetition and acting out, death drive and distorted memory. Woolf's "narrative of trauma becomes the trauma of the narrative."

The third section analyzes various conceptions of memory in specific texts as well as their impact on what is remembered and what is not. Alejandro Santaflorientina analyzes Amin Maalouf's *Origines* and his strategy in writing a family memoir. Adopting a genealogical approach to memory and identity, the author of *Origines* reconstructs his own identity and establishes a timeless dialogue between the past and the present through the use of family archives, oral testimonies and visual sources. Bryan Mead examines the work of Flannery O'Connor whose fiction, unlike Maalouf's cultural memory, seeks a memory of divine origin. Mead contrasts the conception of memory in O'Connor's *Wise Blood* and the filmic version of the same novel by John Huston. He attributes their differing interpretations to their aesthetic construction of memory: while the text favors a metaphysical reading of memory, the film emphasizes the physical characteristics of the past.

Giving credence to Nora's statement that "the task of remembering makes everyone his own historian,"<sup>25</sup> the last section that closes this anthology deals with the role of the reader not only as a consumer, but also as an interpreter and a witness. Nancy Ali shows how collective memory has gained its place as a strong mobilizing force in society, and how, inspired by the example of the Shoah, many survivors of different

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<sup>25</sup> Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History", 15.



collective atrocities around the world (colonization, genocide, racism, etc.) decided to revisit dominant History and tell their own stories. The formation of memory is shown to be a process where the task of remembering becomes everyone's business. This revitalization should allow cultures on opposite sides of memorial narratives, such as the Israelis and Palestinians, to learn about each other's perspective, reach mutual understanding and "advance towards a common future". Cheryl Renée Gooch reaffirms the role of the archivist in re-shaping the past and the present, as she examines archives about Lincoln University's founding. While emphasizing the importance of historical record itself, she revisits certain forgotten and/or marginalized historical facts that challenge the dominant narrative and the existing knowledge structure. She concludes that in order to assess accurately the present and the future of Lincoln University, one must re-consider its legacy and negotiate the "contradictory ideals" of its founding vision. Exploring the lessons that may be learned from reading survivors Nazi camp testimonies, Ariane Santerre explains how the reader today should quickly come to the conclusion that "verbal violence can easily ... pave the way to physical violence." To learn from history and avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, the reader must constantly keep such lessons alive and play the role of a mediator and a messenger.

*The Poetics of Remembering* therefore follows a particular scheme—from a discussion of the rhetorical devices and strategies used by witnesses to capture and/or recreate the past, in particular the experience of traumatic and unspeakable events, to a series of textual analyses that attempt to account for diverse approaches to memory, to an examination of the role of the reader as having the final say on whether to repeat history or learn from it. The essays, each in its own way, show how memory works in a variety of art forms including poetry, novels, film, photography, essays and memoirs, and make evident its power to establish both predictable patterns and unforeseen connections between what is disparate in space and time.

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**PART ONE:**

**CONSTRUCTING PERSONAL  
AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY**



# MEMORY AND REMEMBRANCE: WOMEN'S ELEGIES OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR (1914-18)

ARGHA BANERJEE

During the four year span of the First World War, British women wrote and published hundreds of slim volumes of compilations of elegies commemorating their personal grief. These svelte volumes of elegies have been by and large neglected by scholars and critics. In tune with Judith Kazantis's observation in *Scars Upon My Heart*, we as readers of trench poetry are deeply acquainted with images of male trauma, shell shock, death and putrefaction in verse but we are oblivious "of what that agony and its millions of deaths meant to the millions of English women who had to endure them—to learn to survive survival."<sup>1</sup> Not only these elegies are cathartic, they also serve as significant signposts of contemporary socio-cultural politics. Most of these elegiac lyrics explore a wide gamut of associated poetic strategies, exploring religion, pastoral or chivalric motifs while pursuing the primary task of negotiating grief, remembering and commemorating the deceased combatants. As these elegies testify, women's poetry during the years of the Great War served as a significant cultural space for mourning, remembrance and commemoration of the deceased near ones. In *Culture and Society*, Raymond Williams asserts that "an essential hypothesis in the development of the idea of culture is that the art of a period is closely and necessarily related to the generally prevalent 'way of life', and further that, in consequence, aesthetic, moral and social judgements are closely interrelated."<sup>2</sup> Women's elegies too are rooted in the larger culture of the early twentieth century. Various socio-political circumstances paved the way for the emergence of poetry as one of the alternative cultural expressions of grief, memory and commemoration during the First World War.

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine Reilly, ed. *Scars Upon My Heart: Women's Poetry and Verse of the First World War* (London: Virago Press, 1981), xv.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1960), 130.

In an interesting article written in 1899, on the brink of the new century, Joseph Jacobs observed that "perhaps the most distinctive note of the modern spirit is the practical disappearance of the thought of death . . . Death is disappearing from our thoughts".<sup>3</sup> A decade or so later, the onset of the Great War suddenly intensified the general public awareness of death, as Sigmund Freud noted: "It is evident that war is bound to sweep away this conventional treatment of death. Death will no longer be denied, we are forced to believe in it. People really die, and no longer one by one, but many, often tens of thousands in a single day."<sup>4</sup> In spite of this heightened awareness of death during the war years, the colossal range of violence, lack of dignity in death and endless casualties built a sort of resistance to the mourning process. In May 1915, the *New Statesman* observed:

One of the most noticeable results of the war has been the general diminution of the fear of death . . . We are sure that in hundreds of thousands of cases men and women regard death with less fear today than they regarded some little fleeting pain in tooth or chest or stomach only ten months ago.<sup>5</sup>

Along with the large-scale casualties, neglect of corpses and lack of funeral rites were evinced in innumerable cases of death during the war.<sup>6</sup> Grieving women lamented in verse the dearth of funeral rites following the demise of their near ones at the Front. Alexandra Grantham articulated her anguish following her son Hugo's death in the war in 1915:

Thy broken eyes, dearest one, I could not close,  
 Away too far, irresponsible to strange skies,  
 Gaze upwards fixed in motionless repose,  
 Thy broken eyes.  
 I could not tend thy body as it lies  
 Dead, not fold thy stricken hands, nor wipe from those  
 Sweet lips the blood, which for God's pity cries.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph Jacob, "The Dying of Death" in *The Fortnightly Review*, 66, (1899), 264.

<sup>4</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Standard edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), vol. xiv, 291.

<sup>5</sup> *The New Statesman* (London: May 1915), 126.

<sup>6</sup> For more details see Joanna Bourke's *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (London: Reaktion, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> Alexandra Ethelreda Grantham, *Mater Dolorosa* (London: William Hanemann, 1915), 38.

In many cases bodies of dead combatants could not be recovered. Of the four deaths that the poet Vera Brittain mourns in her elegies, her friend Geoffrey Thurlow's body could not be traced following his death. Quite naturally, beyond the surface stoicism, the situation was one of desperate anguish and helplessness for most victims of grief.

In Victorian society it was customary for a widow to wear mourning dress for about two and a half years following the death of her husband. This social trend continued into the early half of the twentieth century. However, by 1914 the rules of mourning were not as strictly adhered to as during the Victorian period. In fact, with the commencement of the war, there was a growing demand for the traditional mourning garb to be discarded. As David Cannadine observes in his essay on war and mourning in Britain:

Death had become so ubiquitous and tragic, and grief so widespread and overwhelming, that even those remaining Victorian rituals . . . were now recognized as being inadequate, superfluous and irrelevant. What point was there in donning widow's weeds when the husband probably lay mutilated, unidentified and unburied on the fields of Flanders? What comfort could crepe or black-edged notepaper bring in the face of bereavement at once so harrowing, so unnatural and so widespread?<sup>8</sup>

Under the circumstances, women were even encouraged to abstain from making a public display of grief, as it was widely believed that such a show might lower the morale of the soldiers on leave. Judith Lytton's "The Soldier" articulates the mood of the hour: "Weaken him not with grief; with useless tears / Show not the bitter anguish of thy soul, / Lest he should lose the least of his control, / Lest he should hesitate with nameless fears . . . ."<sup>9</sup> It was also generally assumed that as the soldiers had sacrificed themselves for a "Holy War", so the expression of grief was inadmissible under such conditions. As *The Times* reported in August 1914:

The stricken must determine for themselves how they may best meet their own longing to honour their cherished dead, but as the wishes entertained in the highest quarters rightly count for very much in matters of convention, we feel sure that a few words of timely approbation uttered

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<sup>8</sup> David Cannadine, "War and Death, Grief and Mourning in Modern Britain," in *Mirrors of Mortality: Studies in the Social History of Death*, ed. Joachim Whaley (London: Europa Publications Ltd, 1981), 218.

<sup>9</sup> Published in *The Observer*, March 10, 1918. *Birmingham Archives*, Scrapbooks, vol. 2, 433.

from them would bring success to a movement that seems to us in many ways worthy and becoming the chastened grief of English hearts.<sup>10</sup>

Thus women's right to express their legitimate grief came to be subjected to the whims and fancies of the patriarchal state. They were expected to be proud of the sacrifices of their lovers, husbands, brothers and sons for the nation and not to mourn personal losses in public. In an untitled poem, Iris Tree voiced her anger against such interference of the state:

No more!—And we, the mourners, dare not wear  
The black that folds our heart in secrecy of pain,  
But must don purple and bright standards bear,  
Vermilion of our honour, a bloody train.  
We dare not weep who must be brave in battle.<sup>11</sup>

Regretting such restrictions on formal displays of grief, the poem moves on further to lament: "Of all who died in darkness far away / Nothing is left of them but LOVE, who triumphs now, / His arms held crosswise to the budding day, / The passion-red roses clustering his brow".<sup>12</sup> Denial of display of grief invigorated the social trend to explore alternative private avenues for venting sorrow. It also initiated a process of social repression of grief, which was to further culminate in the later decades. As the social anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer observed:

. . . giving way to grief is stigmatized as morbid, unhealthy, demoralizing very much the same terms are used to reprobate mourning as were used to reprobate sex . . . mourning is treated as if it were a weakness, a self-indulgence, a reprehensible bad habit instead of a psychological necessity . . . one mourns in private as one undresses or relieves oneself in private, so as not to offend others.<sup>13</sup>

Denial of sorrow in public also contributed to the emergence of poetry as one of the alternative forms of expression of private grief for women. It served as a psychological anodyne for thousands of mourning women

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<sup>10</sup> As cited in J. Lerner, "Changes in Attitude towards Death: The Widow in Great Britain in the Early Twentieth Century," in *Bereavement: Its Psychological Aspects*, ed. Bernard Schoenberg et al. (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1975), 101.

<sup>11</sup> Reilly, *Scars Upon My Heart*, 115.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Geoffrey Gorer. *Death, Grief and Mourning* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), 128.



during the war. As Jeffrey Lerner observes: “The first public expressions about death and the war were poems. Poetry was the traditional medium for discussing death, so it is hardly unusual to find it employed . . . .”<sup>14</sup> Hundreds of slim volumes of verse written and published by women poets during the war testify to the unprecedented nature of the grief that British women suffered. As this extract from Mary Boyle’s sonnet sequence shows, poetic space served the twin purpose of both displaying and commemorating private grief:

Since you loved words, 'tis words I bring to you  
Woven in garlands to adorn your brow,  
Wreathed sonnets are the gifts I bring you now,  
Prismatic words, glowing in crimson blue.<sup>15</sup>

Besides commemoration of personal sorrow, most of these elegies belong to the sub-genre of family elegies, which circuitously chronicles the social position of women as hapless victims of the war. The sudden demise of male relatives in the war forced female survivors to redefine their own images of family life. Some of the poems implicitly protest against the institutionalized male-centeredness of the family, affirming the stereotypically gendered nature of women’s citizenship during the war. Beyond their apparent simplicity in form and content, these elegies provide fascinating insight into the psychology of women’s grief of the war generation.

Unlike earlier elegists, women poets of the First World War often dealt with several successive personal losses at multiple levels, condensed within a brief span of time.<sup>16</sup> Frequently the psychological distress was so paramount that the victim had no other alternative but to surrender to the extreme compulsion of seeking secret refuge in writing verse, often amidst difficult circumstances.<sup>17</sup> Classical examples in this context are Vera Brittain’s war elegies, which were mostly written during her period of

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<sup>14</sup> Jeffrey Lerner, “Changes in Attitudes Toward Death: The Widow in Great Britain in the Early Twentieth Century,” in *Bereavement: Its Psychological Aspects*, ed. Bernard Schoenberg et al. (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1975), 93.

<sup>15</sup> Mary Elizabeth Boyle, *Aftermath* (Cambridge: W Heffer & Sons, 1916), unpaginated.

<sup>16</sup> Earlier elegists usually explored a single primary loss with consolation being ultimately assured in verse in tune with the conventional elegiac tradition.

<sup>17</sup> As Vera Brittain explains in *Testament of Youth*, “all at once the impulse to put what I felt into verse—a new impulse which had recently begun to fascinate and torment me—sprang up with overwhelming compulsion” (267- 68).

active service as a V.A.D. in various military hospitals in London, Malta and France. In her elegies, Brittain mourns the deaths of four men very close to her: her fiancé Roland Leighton,<sup>18</sup> her friends Victor Richardson<sup>19</sup> and Geoffrey Thurlow,<sup>20</sup> and her younger brother Edward.<sup>21</sup> In psychological terms, such a closely paced sequence of losses can have a paralytic effect on the mourning psyche. As Brittain herself stated: "Pain beyond a certain point merely makes you lifeless, and apathetic to everything but itself".<sup>22</sup>

Explaining the effect of successive deaths on the mourner, Freud observes in *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death*:

A number of simultaneous deaths strikes us as something extremely terrible . . . The complement to this cultural and conventional attitude towards death is provided by our complete collapse when death has struck down someone whom we love—a parent or a partner in marriage, a brother or sister, a child or a close friend. Our hopes, our desires and our pleasures lie in the grave with him, we will not fill the lost one's place. We behave as if we were a kind of Asra, who die when those they love die.<sup>23</sup>

It is this sense of excruciating void that most women elegists seek to redress in verse. Such a poetic redressal had to negotiate with grief in its myriad forms. In their analysis of grief, psychologists Colin Murray Parkes and Robert Weiss classify grief into three broad categories: unanticipated grief, conflicted grief and chronic grief.<sup>24</sup> Given the prospect

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<sup>18</sup> Lieutenant Roland Aubrey Leighton, 7th Worcesters, died of wounds near Hebuterne, December 23, 1915, buried at Louvencourt.

<sup>19</sup> Lieutenant Victor Richardson, MC. 9th King's Royal Rifle Corps, blinded at Vimy Ridge, April 9, 1917, died of wounds in 2nd London General Hospital, June 9, 1917.

<sup>20</sup> Lieutenant Geoffrey Robert Youngman Thurlow, 10th Sherwood Foresters, killed in action at Monchy-le-Preux, April 23, 1917.

<sup>21</sup> Captain Edward Harold Brittain, MC, 11<sup>th</sup> Sherwood Foresters, killed in action leading his company to the counter-attack in the Austrian offensive on the Italian front, June 15, 1918; buried at Granezza, Lusiana.

<sup>22</sup> Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900-1925* (London: Gollancz, 1935), 193.

<sup>23</sup> Freud, *Standard Edition*, vol. xiv, 290.

<sup>24</sup> "Unanticipated grief occurs after a sudden, unexpected, and untimely loss and is so disruptive that uncomplicated recovery can no longer be expected . . . Conflicted grief arises after the loss of extremely troubled, ambivalent relationships . . . The conflicted grief reaction pattern eventually becomes marked by severe grief . . . and continued yearning and pining for the deceased associated with a persistent need for and sense of connection to the lost one . . . Chronic grief

of a looming protracted war, women's grief during the war cannot be labelled as an 'unanticipated' one. As their poems testify, the prospect of threatening death inevitably contributed to a deep sense of anxiety for most of the writers. In this context, I specifically use the word 'anxiety' as compared to 'fright' or 'fear'.<sup>25</sup> As Freud points out in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in contrast to fear or fright, "anxiety described a particular state of expecting the danger or preparing for it, even though it may be an unknown one".<sup>26</sup> Such chronic anxiety-ridden states are well testified in various poems written by Vera Brittain, May Cannan, Mary Boyle, Eleanor Farjeon, Marian Allen, Isabel Clarke and several other poets who went on to lose family members in the war.<sup>27</sup> Quite frequently temporary separation or farewell from loved ones eventually turned out to be a long lasting and permanent one. Eleanor Farjeon's poetic record of an anxious moment of parting from Edward Thomas, in "Now That You Too", represents the wider cultural anxiety of the period:

Last sight of all it may be with these eyes,  
Last touch, last hearing, since eyes, hands, and ears,  
Even serving love, are our mortalities,  
And cling to what they own in mortal fears: –  
But oh, let end what will, I hold you fast  
By immortal love, which has no first or last.<sup>28</sup>

Eileen Newton's "Last Leave" echoes similar sentiments of resignation to fate: "So even so, our earthly fires must die; / Yet, in our hearts, love's

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is most often associated with a highly and anxiously dependent relationship upon the deceased, as defined by 'inability to function adequately in the roles of ordinary life without the presence, emotional support, or actual help of the partner.'" Therese A Rando, *Treatment of Complicated Mourning* (Illinois: Research Press, 1993), 116-18.

<sup>25</sup> "Fear requires a definite object of which to be afraid. Fright, however, is the name we give to the state a person gets into when he has run into danger without being prepared for it; it emphasizes the factor of surprise." Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1971), 6.

<sup>26</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1971), 6.

<sup>27</sup> Like Brittain, May Cannan lost her fiancé Major Bevil Quiller Couch shortly after her engagement with barely less than two weeks to go for demobilization. David, Mary Boyle's brother was one of the earliest victims of the war, being killed at La Cateau on 26 August 1914.

<sup>28</sup> Eleanor Farjeon, *Sonnets and Poems* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1918), 49.

flames shall leap and glow / When this dear night, with all it means to me,  
/ Is but a memory!"<sup>29</sup> Vera Brittain's "St Pancras Station, August 1915" describes an analogous poignant mood of separation between lovers: "One long, sweet kiss pressed close upon my lips, / One moment's rest on your swift-beating heart, / And all was over, for the hour had come / For us to part?"<sup>30</sup>

Beyond this wider anxiety and apprehension, the elegies often give way to complicated mourning and chronic grief. Psychoanalytic theories abound as regards melancholic mourning, distinguishing it from the normal task of grieving. As Freud asserts, "in the mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty, in melancholia it is the ego itself."<sup>31</sup> According to him, it is the trait of "disturbance of self-regard" that separates melancholia from mourning:

The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment. This picture becomes a little more intelligible when we consider that, with one exception, the same traits are met with mourning. The disturbance of self-regard is absent in mourning; but otherwise the features are the same.<sup>32</sup>

The process of grieving is characterized by "inhibition and circumscription of the ego", an "expression of an exclusive devotion to mourning" for the dead.<sup>33</sup> Julia Kristeva distinguishes melancholy as "the institutional symptomatology of inhibition and asymbolia that becomes established now and then or chronically in a person, alternating more often than not with the so-called manic phase of exaltation."<sup>34</sup> The process of psychological recovery for the victims of grief is a gradual and time consuming one, as past memories flock to resist acceptance of the present reality. It is through recurrent and 'countless struggles' that the bereaved is finally reconciled with the loss. Close perusals of women's elegies written

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<sup>29</sup> Eileen Newton, *Lamps in the Valley: A Book of Verse* (London: Elkin Mathews & Marrot, 1927), 12.

<sup>30</sup> Vera Brittain, *Verses of a V.A.D. with Poems of the War and After* (London: IWM Reprint, 1995), 16.

<sup>31</sup> Freud, *The Standard Edition*, vol. xiv, 246.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 244.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 9.

during and just after the war reveal this ongoing struggle for reconciliation. Mary Boyle's sequence of thirty sonnets commemorating her brother David or Alexandra Grantham's sequence of elegies for her dead son Hugo Frederick, testifies to such 'countless struggles' being carried out in verse in order to be reconciled with the grief and loss. As Grantham states in her dedication:

I could place no fragrant flowers on thy grave,  
Thou loveliest of flowers the great God gave  
Into my keeping twenty golden years ago . . .  
What is there left that I  
Can do, but from the bitter tears I cry,  
Gather a funeral wreath of broken song,  
That sweet remembrance of thy life so young,  
So rich in promise of surpassing worth,  
Fade not, but linger yet a while on earth.<sup>35</sup>

The complex psychodynamics of mourning during wartime are distinct and separate from those of ordinary circumstances of peace. Freud affirms: "The war neuroses, in so far as they are distinguished from the ordinary neuroses of peace time by special characteristic, are to be regarded as traumatic neuroses whose occurrence has been made possible or has been promoted by a conflict in the ego"<sup>36</sup>. During mourning the "old ego" protects itself by taking flight into "traumatic neurosis" it defends itself against the new ego which it sees as threatening its life. Women's elegies, combating grief, serve as effective tools or combat strategies to defend the old self against the new ego which struggles to emerge from the deep loss inflicted by the deaths of near ones. Such a defiance is explicit in Brittain's "The New Stoicism", where the poetic voice insists on persisting with its task of mourning: "I fling defiance in the cold world's face, / And strive to grow impervious to scorn; / For should I once reveal how much I mourn / The vanished joy no time shall bring, nor space. . . ."<sup>37</sup> Brittain's defiance is also echoed by Mary Boyle in her elegiac sonnet XXVIII commemorating her dead brother David: "I know, / The desert journeying cannot always last, / And pain must somewhere reach finality."<sup>38</sup>

When Vera Brittain was writing her autobiography, she thought the exercise in itself would aid in purging her mind of the Great War and its

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<sup>35</sup> Grantham, 7.

<sup>36</sup> Freud, *The Standard Edition*, vol. xvii, 209.

<sup>37</sup> Brittain, *Verses of a V.A.D.*, 64.

<sup>38</sup> Mary Elizabeth Boyle, *Aftermath* (Cambridge: W Heffer & Sons, 1916), unpaginated.

memories. She even wrote to her husband: "now it's all laid down on paper and I shall never, perhaps, write of it again".<sup>39</sup> Ironically, she had not escaped from grief: only a few weeks later writing about her visit to Edward's grave she admitted, "I was ashamed to find myself ignominiously weeping."<sup>40</sup> Brittain's or Cannan's poems testify to the process of complicated unending grief. As Catherine Sanders points out in *Grief: The Mourning After*, such a situation arises out of sorrow that is prolonged and an unresolved one.<sup>41</sup> Women's elegies often serve as a medium of clinging to the earlier pre-war situation, in an extreme reluctance to give it up. Even years following the death of her lover, Brittain continues her earlier conversation in "After Three Years": "What though no spring shall ever now renew / The April in my eyes, the wayward will / That could not live through all I have lived through? / I think you love me just the same, if you / Can see me still."<sup>42</sup> Marian Allen's "The Wind on the Downs" perceives the presence of the 'khaki figure' long after her lover's death:

Because they tell me, dear, that you are dead,  
Because I can no longer see your face.  
You have not died, it is not true, instead  
You seek adventure in some other place . . .  
Here still I see your khaki figure pass,  
And when I leave the meadow, almost wait  
That you would open first the wooden gate.<sup>43</sup>

To elegize in modern literary tradition is to pave the way for a protracted psychological struggle in verse, and on occasions, to deliberately indulge in the private task of mourning. As Jane Dareing's untitled elegy pleads: "Leave me, leave me, let me weep, / Let tears drown my woe—/ Perchance then sleep, /—Sweet sleep! —/ Will cover me with darkness for a while / Until I wake to weariness once more—/ Let it be so."<sup>44</sup> Prolonged mourning

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<sup>39</sup> Vera Brittain, *Testament of Experience* (London: Gollancz, 1957, rpt. Virago, 1979), 80.

<sup>40</sup> Brittain, *Testament of Experience*, 81.

<sup>41</sup> "Bereavement may have begun in what appeared to be a normal course, but somewhere along the way the individual became stuck or was fixated in one phase or another and was unable to move on to resolution". Catherine Sanders, *Grief: The Mourning After* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1989), 111.

<sup>42</sup> Vera Brittain, *Verses of a V.A.D.*, 58.

<sup>43</sup> Reilly, *Scars Upon My Heart*, 1-2.

<sup>44</sup> Jane Dareing, *Maid, Mother and Widow: Poems of Peace and War* (London: Arthur Stockwell, 1918), 10.