2012

Writing, Remembering and Embodiment: Australian Literary Responses to the First World War

Ffion Murphy
Edith Cowan University

Richard Nile

M/C Journal, Vol 15, No 4 (2012)

Writing, Remembering and Embodiment: Australian Literary Responses to the First World War

Ffion Murphy, Richard Nile

Abstract

This paper is part of a larger project exploring Australian literary responses to the Great War of 1914-1918. It draws on theories of embodiment, mourning, ritual and the recuperative potential of writing, together with a brief discussion of selected exemplars, to suggest that literary works of the period contain and lay bare a suite of creative, corporeal and social impulses, including resurrection, placation or stilling of ghosts, and formation of an empathic and duty-bound community.

In *Negotiating with the Dead*, Margaret Atwood hypothesises that "*all* writing of the narrative kind, and perhaps all writing, is motivated, deep down, by a fear of and a fascination with mortality—by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead" (156). She asks an attendant question: "why should it be writing, over and above any other art or medium," that functions this way? It is not only that writing acquires the appearance of permanence, by surviving "its own performance," but also that some arts are transient, like dance, while others, like painting and sculpture and music, do "not survive as *voice*." For Atwood, writing is a "score for voice," and what the voice does mostly is tell stories, whether in prose or poetry: "Something unfurls, something reveals itself" (158).

Writing, by this view, conjures, materialises or embodies the absent or dead, or is at least laden with this potential. Of course, as Katherine Sutherland observes, "representation is always the purview of the living, even when the order it constructs contains the dead" (202). She argues that all writing about death "might be regarded as epitaph or memorial; such writing is likely to contain the signs of ritual but also of ambiguity and forgetting" (204). Arguably writing can be regarded as participation in a ritual that "affirms membership of the collectivity, and through symbolic manipulation places the life of an individual within a much broader, sometimes cosmic, interpretive framework" (Seale 29), which may assist healing in relation to loss, even if some non-therapeutic purposes, such as restoration of social and political order, also lie behind both rites and writing.

In a critical orthodoxy dating back to the 1920s, it has become accepted wisdom that the Australian literary response to the war was essentially nationalistic, "big-noting" ephemera, and thus of little worth (see Gerster and Caesar, for example). Consequently, as Bruce Clunies Ross points out, most Australian literary output of the period has "dropped into oblivion." In his view, neglect of writings by First World War combatants is not due to its quality, "for this is not the only, or even the essential, condition" for consideration; rather, it is attributable to a "disjunction between the ideals enshrined in the Anzac legend and the experiences recorded or depicted" (170). The silence, we argue, also encompasses literary responses by non-combatants, many of whom were women, though limited space precludes consideration here of their particular contributions.

Although poetry and fiction by those of middling or little literary reputation is not normally subject to critical scrutiny, it is patently not the case that there is no body of literature from the war period worthy of scholarly consideration, or that most works are merely patriotic, jingoistic, sentimental and in service of recruitment, even though these elements are certainly present. Our different proposition is that the "lost literatures" deserve attention for various reasons, including the ways they embody conflicting aims and emotions, as well as overt negotiations with the dead, during a period of unprecedented anguish. This is borne out by our substantial collection of creative writing provoked by the war, much of which was published by newspapers, magazines and journals.

As Joy Damousi points out in *The Labour of Loss*, newspapers were the primary form of communication during the war, and never before or since have they dominated to such a degree; readers formed collective support groups through shared reading and actual or anticipated mourning, and some women commiserated with each other in person and in letters after reading casualty lists and death notices (21).

The war produced the largest body count in the history of humanity to that time, including 60,000 Australians: none was returned to Australia for burial. They were placed in makeshift graves close to where they died, where possible marked by wooden crosses. At the end of the war, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) was charged with the responsibility of exhuming and reinterring bodily remains in immaculately curated cemeteries across Europe, at Gallipoli and in the Middle East, as if the peace demanded it. As many as one third of the customary headstones were inscribed with "known unto God," the euphemism for bodies that could not be identified. The CWGC received numerous requests from families for the crosses, which might embody their loved one and link his sacrificial death with resurrection and immortality. For allegedly logistical reasons, however, all crosses were destroyed on site.

Benedict Anderson suggested the importance to nationalism of the print media, which enables private reading of ephemera to generate a sense of communion with thousands or millions of anonymous people understood to be doing likewise. Furthermore, Judith Herman demonstrates in *Trauma and Recovery* that sharing traumatic experience with others is a "precondition for the restitution of a sense of a meaningful world" (70). Need of community and restitution extends to the dead. The practices of burying the dead together and of returning the dead to their homeland when they die abroad speak to this need, for "in establishing a society of the dead, the society of the living regularly recreates itself" (Hertz qtd. in Searle 66).

For Australians, the society of the dead existed elsewhere, in unfamiliar terrain, accentuating the absence inherent in all death. The society of the dead and missing—and thus of the living and wounded—was created and recreated throughout the war via available means, including literature. Writers of war-related poems and fiction helped create and sustain imagined communities. Dominant use of conventional, sometimes archaic, literary forms, devices, language and imagery indicates desire for broadly accessible and purposeful communication; much writing invokes shared grief, resolve, gratitude, and sympathy. Yet, in many stories and poems, there is also ambivalence in relation to sacrifice and the community of the dead.

Speaking in the voice of the other is a fundamental task of the creative writer, and the ultimate other, the dead, gaze upon and speak to or about the living in a number of poems. For example, they might vocalise displeasure and plead for reinforcements, as, for example, in Ella M'Fadyen's poem "The Wardens," published in the *Sydney Mail* in 1918, which includes the lines: "Can't you hear them calling in the night-time's lonely spaces [...] Can't you see them passing [...] Those that strove full strongly, and have laid their lives away?" The speaker hears and conveys the pleading of those who have given their breath in order to make explicit the reader's responsibility to both the dead and the Allied cause: "'Thus and thus we battled, we were faithful in endeavour;/Still it lies unfinished—will ye make the deed in vain?'"

M'Fadyen focusses on soldierly sacrifice and "drafts that never came," whereas a poem entitled "Your Country's Call," published in the same paper in 1915 by "An Australian Mother, Shirley, Queensland," refers to maternal sacrifice and the joys and difficulties of birthing and raising her son only to find the country's claims on him outweigh her own. She grapples with patriotism and resistance: "he must go/forth./Where? Why? Don't think. Just smother/up the pain./Give him up quickly, for his country's gain."

The War Precautions Act of October 1914 made it "illegal to publish any material likely to discourage recruiting or undermine the Allied effort" (Damousi 21), which undoubtedly meant that, to achieve publication, critical, depressing or negative views would need to be repressed or cast as inducement to enlist, though evidently many writers also sought to convince themselves as well as others that the cause was noble and the cost redeemable. "Your Country's Call" concludes uncertainly, "Give him up proudly./You have done your share./There may be recompense—somewhere."

Sociologist Clive Seal argues that "social and cultural life involves turning away from the inevitability of death, which is contained in the fact of our embodiment, and towards life" (1). He contends that "grief for embodiment" is pervasive and perpetual and "extends beyond the obvious manifestations of loss by the dying and bereaved, to incorporate the rituals of everyday interaction" (200), and he goes so far as to suggest that if we recognise that our bodies "give to us both our lives and our deaths" then we can understand that "social and cultural life can, in the last analysis, be understood as a human construction in the face of death" (210).

To deal with the grief that comes with "realisation of embodiment," Searle finds that we engage in various "resurrective practices designed to transform an orientation towards death into one that points towards life" (8). He includes narrative reconstruction as well as funeral lament and everyday conversation as rituals associated with maintenance of the social bond, which is "the most crucial human motive" (Scheff qtd. in Searle 30). Although Seale does not discuss the acts of writing or of reading specifically, his argument can be extended, we believe, to include both as important resurrective practices that contain desire for self-repair and reorientation as well as for inclusion in and creation of an empathic moral community, though this does not imply that such desires can ever be satisfied. In "Reading," Virginia Woolf reminds that "somewhere, everywhere, now hidden, now apparent in whatever is written down is the form of a human being" (28-29), but her very reminder assumes that this knowledge of embodiment tends to be forgotten or repressed. Writing, by its aura of permanence and resurrective potential, points towards life and connection, even as it signifies absence and disconnection.

Christian Riegel explains that the "literary work of mourning," whether poetry, fiction or nonfiction, often has both a psychic and social function, "partaking of the processes of mourning while simultaneously being a product for public reception." Such a text is indicative of ways that societies shape and control responses to death, making it "an inherently socio-historical construct" (xviii). Jacques Derrida's passionate and uneasy enactment of this labour in *The Work of Mourning* suggests that writing often responds to the death of a known person or their oeuvre, where each death changes and reduces the world, so that the world as one knew it "sinks

into an abyss" (115).

Of course, writing also wrestles with anonymous, large-scale loss which is similarly capable of shattering our sense of "ontological security" (Riegel xx). Sandra Gilbert proposes that some traumatic events cause "death's door" to swing "so publicly and dramatically open that we can't look away" (xxii). Derrida's work of mourning entails imaginative revival of those he has lost and is a struggle with representation and fidelity, whereas critical silence in respect of the body of literature of the First World War might imply repeated turning from "grief for embodiment" towards myths of immortality and indebtedness. Commemorating the war dead might be regarded as a resurrective practice that forges and fortifies communities of the living, while addressing the imagined demands of those who die for their nation.

Riegel observes that in its multiplicity of motivations and functions, the literary work of mourning is always "an attempt to make present that which is irrefutably lost, and within that paradoxical tension lies a central tenet of all writerly endeavour that deals with the representation of death" (xix). The literary work of mourning must remain incomplete: it is "always a limiting attempt at revival and at representation," because words inevitably "fail to replace a lost one." Even so, they can assist in the attempt to "work through and understand" loss (xix). But the reader or mourner is caught in a strange situation, for he or she inevitably scrutinises words not the body, a corpus not a corpse, and while this is a form of evasion it is also the only possibility open to us. Even so, Derrida might say that it is "as if, by reading, by observing the signs on the drawn sheet of paper, [readers are] trying to forget, repress, deny, or conjure away death—and the anxiety before death." But he also concedes (after Sarah Kofman), that this process might involve "a cunning affirmation of life, its irrepressible movement to *survive*, to *live on*" (176), which supports Seale's contention in relation to resurrective practices generally.

Atwood points out that the dead have always made demands on the living, but, because there is a risk in negotiating with the dead, there needs to be good reason or reward for doing so. Our reading of war literature written by noncombatants suggests that in many instances writers seek to appease the unsettled dead whose death was meant to mean something for the future: the living owe the dead a debt that can only be paid by changing the way they live. The living, in other words, must not only remember the fallen, but also heed them by their conduct. It becomes the poet's task to remind people of this, that is, to turn them from death towards life.

Arthur H Adams's 1918 poem "When the Anzac Dead Came Home," published in the *Bulletin*, is based on this premise: the souls of the dead— the "failed" and "fallen" —drift uncertainly over their homeland, observing the world to which they cannot return, with its "cheerful throng," "fair women swathed in fripperies," and "sweet girls" that cling "round windows like bees on honeycomb." One soul recognises a soldier, Steve, from his former battalion, a mate who kept his life but lost his arm and, after hovering for a while, again "wafts far"; his homecoming creates a "strange" stabbing pain, an ache in his pal's "old scar."

In this uncanny scene, irreconcilable and traumatic knowledge expresses itself somatically. The poet conveys the viewpoint of the dead Anzac rather than the returned one. The living soldier, whose body is a site of partial loss, does not explicitly conjure or mourn his dead friend but, rather, is a living extension of his loss. In fact, the empathic connection construed by the poet is not figured as spectral orchestration or as mindful on the part of man or community; rather, it occurs *despite* bodily death or everyday living and forgetting; it persists as hysterical pain or embodied knowledge.

Freud and Breuer's influential *Studies on Hysteria*, published in 1895, raised the issue of mind/body relations, given its theory that the hysteric's body expresses psychic trauma that she or he may not recollect: repressed "memories of aetiological significance" result in "morbid symptoms" (56). They posited that experience leaves traces which, like disinterred archaeological artefacts, inform on the past (57). However, such a theory depends on what Rousseau and Porter refer to as an "almost mystical collaboration between mind and body" (vii), wherein painful or perverse or unspeakable "reminiscences" are converted into symptoms, or "mnemic symbols," which is to envisage the body as penetrable text.

But how can memory return unbidden and in such effective disguise that the conscious mind does not recognise it as memory? How can the body express pain without one remembering or acknowledging its origin? Do these kinds of questions suggest that the Cartesian mind/body split has continued valency despite the challenge that hysteria itself presents to such a theory? Is it possible, rather, that the body itself remembers—and not just its own replete form, as suggested by those who feel the presence of a limb after its removal—but the suffering body of "the other"? In Adam's poem, as in M'Fadyen's, intersubjective knowledge subsists between embodied and disembodied subjects, creating an imagined community of sensation.

Adams's poem envisions mourning as embodied knowledge that allows one man to experience another's pain—or soul—as both "old" and "strange" in the midst of living. He suggests that the dead gaze at us even as they are present "in us" (Derrida). Derrida reminds that ghosts occupy an ambiguous space, "neither life nor death, but the haunting of the one by the other" (41). Human mutability, the possibility of exchanging places in a kind of Socratic cycle of life and death, is posited by Adams, whose next stanzas depict the souls of the war dead reclaiming Australia and displacing the thankless living: blown to land, they murmur to each other, "'Tis we who are the living: this continent is dead." A significant imputation is that the dead must be reckoned with, deserve better, and will not rest unless the living pay their moral dues.

The disillusioned tone and intent of this 1918 poem contrasts with a poem Adams published in the *Bulletin* in 1915 entitled "The Trojan War," which suggests even "Great Agamemnon" would "lift his hand" to honour "plain Private Bill," the heroic, fallen Anzac who ventured forth to save "Some Mother-Helen sad at home. Some obscure Helen on a farm." The act of war is envisaged as an act of birthing the nation, anticipating the Anzac legend, but simultaneously as its epitaph: "Upon the ancient Dardanelles New peoples write—in blood—their name." Such a poem arguably invokes, though in ambiguous form, what Derrida (after Lyotard) refers to as the "beautiful death," which is an attempt to lift death up, make it meaningful, and thereby foreclose or limit mourning, so that what threatens disorder and despair might instead reassure and restore "the body politic," providing "explicit models of virtue" (Nass 82-83) that guarantee its defence and survival.

Adams' later poem, in constructing Steve as "a living fellow-ghost" of the dead Anzac, casts stern judgement on the society that fails to notice what has been lost even as it profits by it. Ideological and propagandist language is also denounced: "Big word-warriors still played the Party game;/They nobly planned campaigns of words, and deemed/their speeches deeds,/And fought fierce offensives for strange old creeds."

This complaint recalls Ezra Pound's lines in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* about the dead who "walked eye-deep in hell/believing in old men's lies, then unbelieving/came home, home to a lie/home to many deceits,/home to old lies and new infamy;/usury age-old and age-thick/and liars in public places," and it would seem that this is the kind of disillusion and bitterness that Clunies Ross considers to be "incompatible with the Anzac tradition" (178) and thus ignored. The Anzac tradition, though quieted for a time, possibly due to the 1930s Depression, Second World War, Vietnam War and other disabling events has, since the 1980s, been greatly revived, with Anzac Day commemorations in Australia and at Gallipoli growing exponentially, possibly making maintenance of this sacrificial national mythology, or beautiful death, among Australia's most capacious and costly creative industries. As we approach the centenary of the war and of Gallipoli, this industry will only increase.

Elaine Scarry proposes that the imagination invents mechanisms for "transforming the condition of absence into presence" (163). It does not escape us that in turning towards lost literatures we are ourselves engaging in a form of resurrective practice and that this paper, like other forms of social and cultural practice, might be understood as one more human construction motivated by grief for embodiment.

Note: An archive and annotated bibliography of the "Lost Literatures of the First World War," which comprises over 2,000 items, is expected to be published online in 2015.

References

Adams, Arthur H. "When the Anzac Dead Came Home." *Bulletin* 21 Mar. 1918.

---. "The Trojan War." *Bulletin* 20 May 1915.

An Australian Mother. "Your Country's Call." *Sydney Mail* 19 May 1915.

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. 2nded. London: Verso, 1991.

Atwood, Margaret. *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*. New York: Random House, 2002.

Caesar, Adrian. "National Myths of Manhood: Anzac and Others." *The Oxford Literary History of Australia*. Eds. Bruce Bennett and Jennifer Strauss. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1998. 147-168.

Clunies Ross, Bruce. "Silent Heroes." *War: Australia's Creative Response*. Eds. Anna Rutherford and James Wieland. West Yorkshire: Dangaroo Press, 1997. 169-181.

Damousi, Joy. *The Labour of Loss: Mourning, Memory and Wartime Bereavement in Australia*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999.

Derrida, Jacques. *The Work of Mourning*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

Freud, Sigmund, and Joseph Breuer. *Studies on Hysteria*. Pelican Freud Library. Vol. 3. Trans. and eds. James Strachey, Alix Strachey, and Angela Richards. London: Penguin, 1988.

Gerster, Robin. *Big Noting: The Heroic Theme in Australian War Writing*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1992.

Gilbert, Sandra M. *Death's Door: Modern Dying and the Ways We Grieve*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2006.

Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: Basic Books, 1992.

M'Fayden, Ella. "The Wardens." *Sydney Mail* 17 Apr. 1918.

Naas, Michael. "History's Remains: Of Memory, Mourning, and the Event." *Research in Phenomenology* 33 (2003): 76-96.

Pound, Ezra. "Hugh Selwyn Mauberly." iv. 1920. 19 June 2012.
‹http://www.archive.org/stream/hughselwynmauber00pounrich/hughselwynmauber00pounrich_djvu.txt›.

Riegal, Christian, ed. *Response to Death: The Literary Work of Mourning*. Edmonton, Alberta: University of Alberta Press, 2005.

Rousseau, G.S., and Roy Porter. "Introduction: The Destinies of Hysteria." *Hysteria beyond Freud*. Ed. Sander L. Gilman, Helen King, Roy Porter, G.S. Rousseau, and Elaine Showalter. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.

Seale, Clive. *Constructing Death: The Sociology of Dying and Bereavement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Sutherland, Katherine. "Land of Their Graves: Maternity, Mourning and Nation in Janet Frame, Sara Suleri, and Arundhati Roy." Riegel 201-16.

Woolf, Virginia. *Collected Essays Volume 2*. London: Hogarth, 1966. 28-29.