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

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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 dead, the society of the living regularly recreates itself” (Hertz qtd. in Searle 66).

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 epiphal 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 collective, through symbolic manipulation places the life of an individual within a much broader, sometimes cosmic, interpretative framework” (Seale 29), which may assist in 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” ephemerally, 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 out of oblivion.” In his view, neglect of writings by First World War embattled 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 pathetic, 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 such a significant role; readers formed forums through shared reading and actual or anticipated mourning, and some women commemorated 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—multiplied and—with the living 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 in the interest of a more 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 voice or displace or seek the pleasure of being or the country’s gain.”

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 construction 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 a form of the 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 community. Sometimes it signifies absence and disconnection.

Clive Sewell argues that “social and cultural life involves turning away from the inevitabilty 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).

Christian Riegl 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" (xvii). Derrida's work of mourning entails imaginative revival of those who 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 forgives 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 irreparably lost, and within that paradoxical tension lies a central tenet of all writerly endeavours 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 conceives (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 living, 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' 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 poem 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 words in absentia but as words as 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 disintegrated archaeological artefacts, inform on the past (57). However, such a theory depends on what Rousseau and Porter refer to as an "association of ideas" between mind and body (vii), wherein painful or perversely unexplainable "reminiscences" are converted into symptoms, or "mnemic symbols," which is to envisage the body as penetrable text.

But while memory return unbidden and in such a conscious discourse that the 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'Fadzen's, intersubjective knowledge subsists between embodied and disembodied subjects, creating an imagined community of sensation.

Adams' 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 stanza depicts 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 implication is that the dead must be reckoned with, deserve better, and will not rest unless the living pay their moral dues.

The disillusionment and tone 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

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.

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