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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 suggestion of new methodologies for First World War studies, that writing works of the period contained a suite of creative, corporal 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 epigraph or memorial; such writing is likely to contain the signs of ritual but also of ambition 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, 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 soldiers 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 volume of writing; readers formed networks 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 experiences with others is a "precondition for the restoration 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 social and cultural life 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 mourning—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 included 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 struggle still 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 as we batted, we were faithful in endeavour;’’’’Still it lies unfinished—will ye make the deed in vain?’’’ M’Fadyen focusses on solidlyer 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 patriotsm and resistance: "he must go forth. Where? Why? Don't think. Just sometho/upon 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 quickly. You have done your share. There may be recompense—somewhere."

Sociologist Clive Seale 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 "gift of embodiment" is pervasive and perpetual and "extends beyond the obvious manifestations of loss by the dying and bereaved, from the general rituals of everyday life" (200), and he goes so far as to suggest that if we recognise that our bodies "give 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 construction as well as funeral lament and everyday conversation as rituals associated with maintenance of the social bond, which is "the most crucial human construction" (Searff 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 remarks 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 tended to be forgotten or repressed. Writing, by its aura of permanence and resurrective potential, points towards life and community; in its absence, 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 voice" (200). 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." For Riegel, 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." 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." For Riegel, 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." 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." For Riegel, 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." 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." For Riegel, 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." 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."
within 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" (xxi). 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 most recent World War might imply repeated turning from "grief for embellishment" towards myths of immortality and indebtedness. Commemorating the war dead might be regarded as a resurrectionary 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 meanings and functions, the literary work of mourning is always "an attempt to make present that which is irretrievably 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 (xxi). 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 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 of these acts of memory and forgetting as " contribute a cunning affirmation of life, its irrepressible movement to survive, to live on" (176), which supports Seale's contention in relation to resurrectionary 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 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' 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 "waifs 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 of the part on 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 "ambiguous distinction 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 a way 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 Adams' poem, as in M'Seadon's, intersubjective knowledge subsists between embodied and dismembered 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 imputation is that the dead must be reckoned with, deserve better, and will not rest unless the living pay their moral due.


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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