



## **Image and Affect, Reason and Truth: The Great War Then and Now**

*Inaugural Lecture by Michèle Barrett, Professor of Modern Literary and Cultural Theory  
Queen Mary, University of London, 10<sup>th</sup> December 2001  
Introductions: Principal and Stuart Hall*

I will begin with the 'then and now' of my title. I intend to put forward a modern cultural analysis of an historical event, the first world war. It will not be a history, where we seek an interpretation of the past as near as can be got to the frame of reference prevailing then. Nor will it be an attempt to plunder such an event, solely for what in it is useful today, or speaks to us directly now. This lecture addresses both of these time frames - the past and the present - in an interpretative dialogue.

For some years, the 1914-18 war has been invested with an increasing rather than decreasing significance. The most telling aspect of this is the evaluative comparison with the second. The second world war, read in retrospect as a war that stopped the holocaust, emerges as the one twentieth-century war that was really justifiable. Looking back over the wars of the twentieth century, it is the one that meets Bertrand Russell's observation that '... a war cannot be justified by its causes, but only, if at all, by its effects'. Russell, of course, was a pacifist in the first world war, but not in the second.

The once-again-fashionable designation, the 'Great War' of my title, registers not only the scale of the death toll, and our sympathy for its victims, but also a comment on its moral bankruptcy. In the case of the first world war, the assumption by the victors, that the war had been justified, led directly to the attribution of "guilt" to Germany, and the punitive consequences we know so well. The false belief of the allies, that they had been 'morally' in the right, led to the next war.

## Image

The trenches of the western front have traditionally provided the dominant (visual) iconography and (literary) imagery of the war. A silhouetted line of single soldiers with tin hats is enough to signify 'the Great War'. The official photograph of the East Yorkshires is an example.

This image is now so familiar to us that it can be a surprise to learn just how contentious the representation of this 'Tommy' has been. In actuality film footage, such as makes up the documentary of the Battle of the Somme, was so emotive that the film was withdrawn from cinemas (though you can now buy the video in the IWM shop). At the time, this was because of

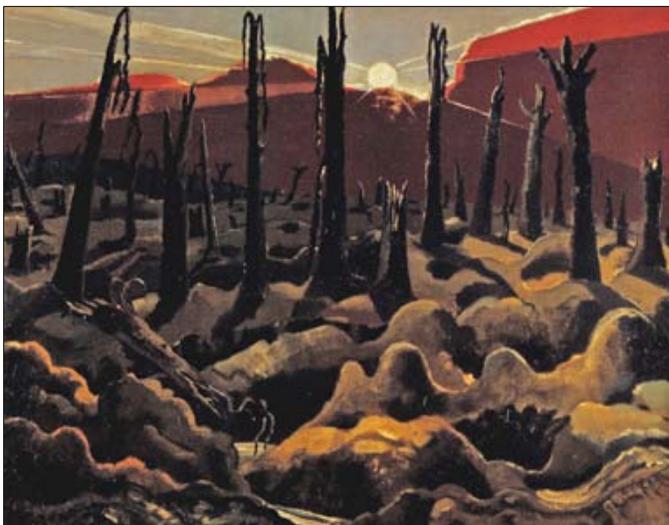


the depiction of the dead and wounded. But the early scenes of the film are now equally disturbing, like these men marching cheerily up to the front, from which many would not return.

Dilemmas, during the war, about how the Tommy was to be represented were an element of a much wider artistic problem: was the language of modernism, the developing trend towards abstraction,

simply up to the task of representing the human dimension of this awful war? In short, was the image able to carry the affect?

The work of the war artist Paul Nash has come to be seen by many as one highly successful solution to the problem of representing the inhumanity of the western front. Nash used his background, which was that of a landscape painter, to produce a striking portrait of a landscape that man has destroyed. This is 'We Are Making a New World', 1918.



Let us consider the simple image of destroyed trees as an illustration of how complex the cultural resonances of the Great War can be. I want to air two examples of how the iconography of the Great War has survived and changed over time.

The first was suggested to me by the Art Curator of the Canadian War Museum. The artists with the greatest influence in building a visual identity for 'Canada', as

a nation, in the 1920s and 1930s, were the Toronto-based painters known as the 'Group of Seven'. Their depictions of the unforgiving northern and arctic landscape, with the concomitant achievement of settling a hostile natural environment, played an important role in the development of anglophone Canadian national identity. Of these seven artists, three of them had been war artists on the western front and A Y Jackson, as it happens, was a great admirer of Paul Nash's work.



The blasted tree trunks of the western front appear in, to take one example, A Y Jackson's famous 'A Copse, Evening' painted in 1918, its rustic title mocking the fate that has befallen this clump of French woodland.



Similarly Varley's 'German Prisoners' makes the subject of its title -the human beings struggle for significance with an account of the damage done to the landscape in which they are moving. Trees, in these paintings of the western front by Canadian war artists, invariably appear devoid of all leaves and most branches, as indeed we can see they were from contemporary photographs.

This photo was taken at the Somme in 1917.

This might not seem particularly riveting, until we look at the visual conventions used to depict the landscape of Canada, not only by these three artists, but also by other members of the 'Group of Seven' . The trope of the blasted tree trunk, always in the





foreground of a receding landscape, has been incorporated into a totally new context.

Here we see it in some 'Group of Seven' paintings. Jackson's 1920 'October Morning, Algoma' (left) was praised as 'typical of the country in its breadth and freedom' but we may also notice the French tree-motif in the foreground.

This is another 1920 Jackson 'First Snow, Algoma'.



Lawren Harris's 'First Snow, North Shore of Lake Superior' of 1923, was composed on a camping trip with Jackson in 1922. In turn, indebted to Harris, is Frank Carmichael.

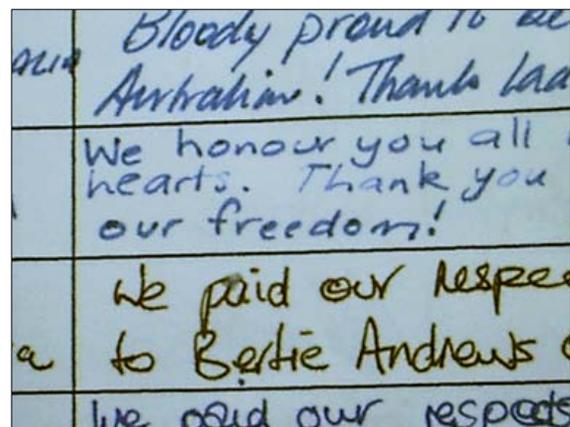
Here (right) is Carmichael's 1927 'Evening, North Shore of Lake Superior', and (below) 1929 'Wabagishik: Drowned Land'.



It is widely understood that the experience of fighting in the first world war was a formative one for the national identities of Australia, New Zealand and Canada. Their contributions may have begun in the imperial context, but the process of the war fostered independent national solidarity. The considerable national affects attached to Gallipoli, or Vimy Ridge, rest here. No static moment in history this, but a sentiment echoed - this year - in a typical entry in the visitors book of an allied war cemetery

in France which contains the graves of several Australians: instead of paying respects and honouring sacrifices we get "Bloody proud to be Australian! Thanks lads".

So, we can footnote the incorporation of war-time European iconography -the blasted trees -into the self-consciously nationalist repertoire of the painters of the 'Group of Seven'. The first world war played a part not only in national identity, understood socially and politically, but made a specific contribution to the visual culture through which that identity came to be represented.



As it happens, a new twist to the visual image of the landscape of western front is about to unfold. Recently brought to light from archives are panoramic photographs, assembled from as many as thirty separate frames, taken by Royal Engineers for military purposes from the front lines of the trenches. These panoramas are currently being analyzed by Peter Barton and Peter Doyle of the University of Greenwich, and are being digitized for display at the Imperial War Museum, to all of whom my thanks for what you are about to see. These panoramas will change for ever our image of the western front.

What they reveal is the "constructedness" of the devastated landscape: the much-reproduced scenes, where all the trees are destroyed, when seen from a wider angle, form only pockets in a landscape whose forested character remains completely recognizable.



Let us look first at Paul Nash's celebrated 'The Menin Road', (1919) looking towards the front lines, reached by leaving Ypres (the Belgian town leper) to the south east, towards Menen.

Next, a panoramic assembly of photographs, taken by engineers of the 2nd Army in May 1917, which also faces south east from Ypres, towards Menin. (below)



The panorama offers a 96 degree field of view, from which we can see the wider countryside in which the destroyed areas are located. So powerful is the image of 'nature-destroyed', as painted by Nash, that we may fail to register the surrounding surviving woodland. In fact, in 'The Menin Road' it is actually there, on the right horizon.



Meanwhile, approximately 85 years later, the tree stumps are a site of pilgrimage. At Hill 60, on the Ypres Salient, an authentic trench site the actual dead stumps there are preserved, standing still, with metal hoops.

They now act as shrines, to which are tacked the poppies of visitors.



Image and affect are imbricated in these memorials. Of course, we can point to the vacuities of memorial culture. It seems strange that people print out on their computers a Commonwealth War Graves Commission Scroll of Honour, and take it to France or Belgium to lay it, protected from the weather in a plastic folder, at a memorial. These scrolls, downloaded from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission interactive website, are high-design copies -and truly *simulacra* worthy of the post-modern era since, in fact, the original entry is found in the solid, typed, cemetery register at the gate.

## Affect

These personal tributes pose the question: why so much affect so many years later?

On this occasion I think I can get away with an autobiographical illustration. Believe it or not, it was long after I became interested in the cultural legacy of the first world war that it occurred to me to enquire about my own family's history in relation to it.



This photograph was taken in around 1905 and the seated couple at the centre are my maternal great-grandparents. Let's look at how the war affected them. Top right is my own grandfather, born in 1883. He was in the Royal Navy as a career, in action throughout the war and wounded in the leg in 1918; this gave him a heroic limp, but fortunately for me and some others here today he survived.

Top middle is the eldest daughter (known as Daisy); her husband Charles joined the London Regiment and was killed at Ypres in 1915, leaving her with two small children. His name appears with the 54 thousand on the Menin Gate with

no known grave. At the top left is Reg, who managed to come home again, after serving in the army in the war. Next is the youngest, Eric, I'll come back to him.

On the bottom right we have my great Aunt Geraldine - here shown in her uniform as

a civilian volunteer nurse in the VAD (right). The little girl is her niece Carol - the soon-to-be-orphaned daughter of Charles.

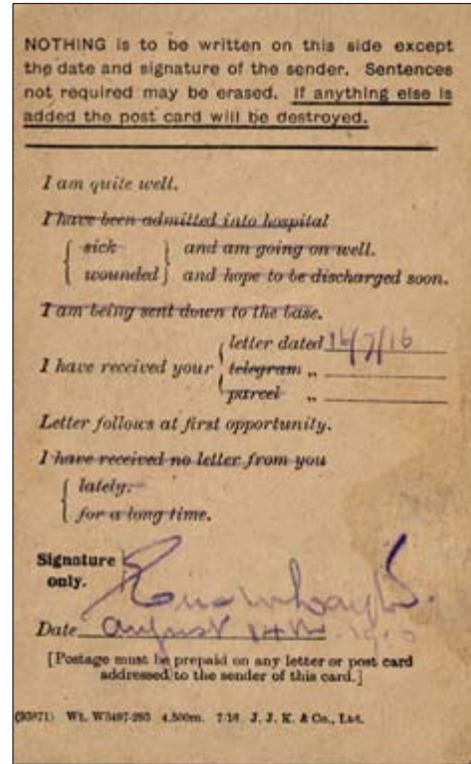


Eric (left), the boy at the bottom left of the group photo also joined the London Regiment, and his battalion, the First Surrey Rifles were at the Somme in the summer of 1916.



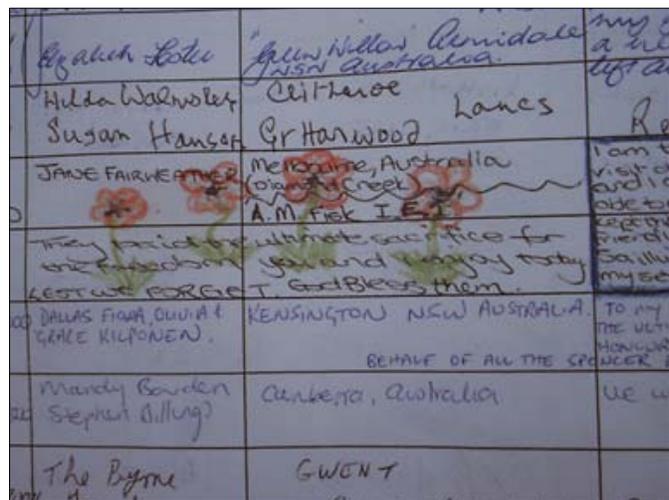
This Field Service Postcard, dated August 14th, reports that Eric is well. Would I be showing you this postcard if Uncle Eric had survived? Indeed, he was killed the next month, on the first day of the September offensive, and his name joins the 72 thousand listed on the Thiepval memorial. They were a religious family - when his mother died, in 1930, the funeral coupled her death with his: the order of service tells us that he "on September 15th, 1916, found the "Great Peace" amid the carnage of High Wood".

So here we have a fairly ordinary middle class family with five children who survived infancy. That parental couple had to deal with the fact that their three boys were all in the forces, one killed, one wounded, one unscathed. All three could have been killed. (Uncle Reg could have obliged me by getting shell shocked, but he didn't.) Of the two girls, one was a war widow, and the other was in the VAD. So not one of their children was unaffected.



I must say that although my family has quite a lot of material on all this - letters, campaign medals and so on - even the great uncle who was killed had not featured much in my consciousness until recently. The battlefield commemoration sites are now full of people like me - belatedly registering a long-dead, and if we are honest long forgotten, family member. What else can the enigmatic entry, in the visitors book at the memorial for the missing of the Somme at Thiepval, mean in the year 2001: "Found Arthur for you Mother".

The discovery, by yet another generation, of the lives behind the British deaths at Ypres and the Somme is one thing. But there is another aspect to the sentiment of battlefield commemoration that calls for attention -the post-empire dimension. The feeling of a settlement of accounts is palpable. A cemetery on the Somme records the visit of a woman from Diamond Creek, Melbourne, who has gone to pay her family's respects to the grave of a relative. She thanks the local people, explains that she is the first member of her family to go there, and gives herself a double row in the book to colour in her drawing of poppies.



Date	Signature	Location
18.8.01	P.K. Sinha	INDIA
19.8.01	PAM + MINE DARTMOUTH	ROBERTSON LANE 21/08/01
22/8.01	[Signature]	Harlow
23/08/01	[Signature]	Waltham
23/08/01	Arjun	Savitri P.O.
24/08/01	SK Sapat	INDIA
24 Aug 2001	Hg Ch B.K. Chenna	India
24 Aug 2001	Jashnet Chenna	INDIA
24 <sup>th</sup> Aug 2001	[Signature]	Leicester England
24 <sup>th</sup> Aug 2001	Ravi Sapat	INDIA
24 <sup>th</sup> Aug 2001	Anita Chenna	INDIA
24 <sup>th</sup> Aug 2001	Johan Chenna	INDIA
24 <sup>th</sup> Aug 2001	[Signature]	

At the Indian memorial at Neve Chappelle, the visitor's book shows the prevalence of visitors not merely from Leicester but many who have come the distance from India. Sociologically speaking, this is the product of the expansion of cheaper global travel - the opportunity and means to make such visits are available. But it also indicates a mood to renegotiate the personal affects, as well as the social effects, of the imperial past.

It may be difficult to interpret things as intangible and elusive as the affect attached to an event in the past by people in the present. One thing is for sure, though, which is that you will get absolutely nowhere if you set about it armed only with the implacable anti-humanism that has dogged cultural theory for years. The word 'affect' is not simply a more intellectual word for the tacky category of 'emotion': etymologically, it registers both mental and bodily disposition, it speaks of an 'emotion of the mind' that is explicitly opposed to reason, it delivers us passion - but threatens constantly to emphasize a mere semblance of affect - and tip over into affectation. I have emphasized the words 'image' and 'affect' to reinstate, in the antihumanist wastelands of cultural theory, both the sensory nature of human experience, and the unreasoned attachments of our lives.

The question of affect and war is strongly inflected in the accents of patriotism. Virginia Woolf, who regarded herself as having no stake in the nation, and saw herself as an 'outsider', nevertheless described 'some love of England' as a 'drop of pure, if irrational emotion'. When Edward the Eighth abdicated in 1936 she recorded in her diary that "He has ... thrown away the kingdom and made us all feel slightly yet perceptibly humiliated. It's odd, but so I even feel it. ... Not a very rational feeling." From the vantage point of 'now', the affective British investment in the monarchy as the literal as well as metaphorical figurehead of nation and empire, in the Great War, is difficult to empathize with.

## Reason

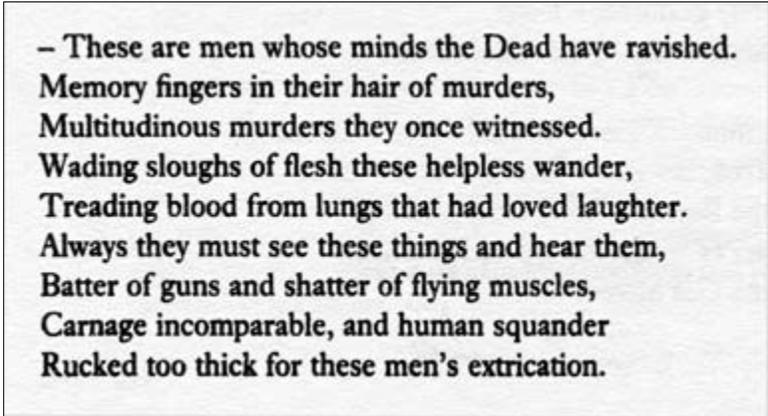
Everyone is familiar with the collapse of reason that was evident in the widespread phenomenon of "shell shock" - a term which has proved so resonant that it now forms part of everyday English vocabulary. This is despite the fact that the official War Office report called for a ban on

the 'nomenclature' of shell shock. The conversion of battle fatigue and stress into physical symptoms such as mutism or paralysis became widespread among soldiers during the latter part of the war, and is probably the most widely recognized form of 'hysteria' in modern times.

It is worth noting at the outset, however, that these military pathologies went hand in hand with a collapse of reason in the civilian population. Most spectacular, of course, was the rise of frank spiritualism, with its attempts to contact the dead and communicate beyond the grave. Moving along more moderately in the same direction, were the many forms of superstition that emerged at this time, or the extreme identifications apparent in the cult of the unknown warrior, for example. A toleration of the spectral can be spotted, as in Rudyard Kipling's 1924 story 'A Madonna of the Trenches'. After the war, a variety of artists and writers took a mystical turn, speaking to the uncertainties, ambivalences and fantasies of a people profoundly unsettled by the experience of war.

Wilfred Owen's poem 'Mental Cases' features as an epigraph to many an article or book on the topic of shell shock, and understandably so. Who are these men. . . he asks, of those who end up "pawing us who dealt them war and madness". His answer is,

-These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished



**- These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished.  
Memory fingers in their hair of murders,  
Multitudinous murders they once witnessed.  
Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander,  
Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter.  
Always they must see these things and hear them,  
Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles,  
Carnage incomparable, and human squander  
Rucked too thick for these men's extrication.**

Let me emphasize the last two lines:

Carnage incomparable, and human squander  
Rucked too thick for these men's extrication

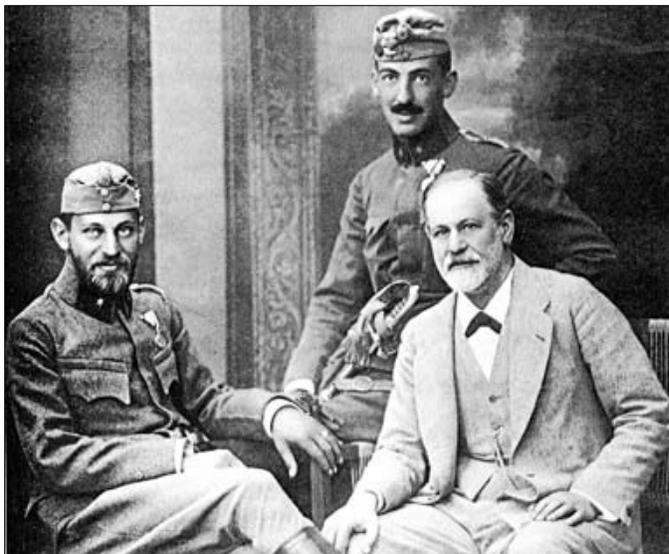
Owen described this as 'my terrific poem'; its original title was 'The Deranged'. The violent seduction of war, the debasement of the military into the merely murderous, the language of excess employed throughout the poem, its apocalyptic and revelatory allusions, all contribute to the finality of Owen's diagnosis in 1918 - the derangement is permanent.

When the war ended it became clear that some of these ravished minds would recover. As one commentator put it in 1926, the Armistice was heralded as “the greatest psycho-therapeutic incident in history”.

It is rather a surprise, however, to encounter the very confident announcement that “... when war conditions ceased to operate, the greater number of the neurotic disturbances brought about by the war simultaneously vanished.” Thus Sigmund Freud, writing of the 'episode, now closed' of war neuroses, in 1919. By February 1920 he was authoritatively stating that “... with the end of the war the war neurotics, too, disappeared - a final but impressive proof of the psychological causation of their illnesses.”

Freud's desire to place the phenomenon of 'war shock' firmly in the past is not inexplicable.

In 1920, Freud's daughter died suddenly. Six years later, he wrote to Binswanger: “It is true that I lost a beloved daughter at the age of 27, but I bore this remarkably well. It was in 1920, when we were crushed by the misery of war, and prepared for years to hear that we had lost a son or even three sons.”



Here is Freud in the summer of 1916 with two of his sons, Ernst and Martin, both home on leave.

Kurt Eissler, in his biographical sketch of Freud, comments that “his mourning potential was obviously exhausted by the long consuming worry about the life of his sons”. Freud's anxiety about his boys surfaces in a variety of ways - for instance in dreams about them in the war, which he duly added to new editions of *The Interpretation of Dreams*. When, in early 1919, he made that reference to the

“episode, now closed” his son Martin was actually a prisoner of war, and would remain so for another six months. In February 1919 he wrote to Jones: 'Martin's captivity is pressing hard on my spirits'.

The anxiety of a parent is evident in this rather awkward, touching photograph of Freud. Although there are many parents in this room today, there can be very few who have themselves experienced the feeling of seeing their own children in military uniform.

In his 1915 essay on the war, Freud refers to Germany as “... that nation, in whose language we write and for whose victory our dear ones are fighting”. His own 'dear ones' survived, but the difficult implications of Freud's actually being on the losing side of a war in which he had so

much invested, affectively, are so obvious and banal that they are rarely considered. His hope, in 1915, that “the pages of an impartial history will prove that that nation [Germany] ... has been precisely the one which has least transgressed the laws of civilization.”, was - we now know - comprehensively rejected in the anti-German reparatory mood of the post-war settlement. But for Freud this was complicated. In 1925 he reflected on his own treatment by German science, saying that “it hurt deeply to feel that my own experience would not allow me to contradict” the charge of barbarism laid, during the war, against the German nation.

Whether or not these biographical facts are relevant, it is certainly true that Freud fell short of his usual penetrating standards in his comments on the war. Rather than revising his theories, as many of his own followers were doing, to take account of non-sexual and adult traumas, he eventually, opted for the 'death drive' theory.

“ ... this instinct is at work in every living creature and is striving to bring it to ruin and to reduce life to its original condition of inanimate matter. Thus it quite seriously deserves to be called a death instinct, while the erotic instincts represent the effort to live.”

If anything, the exact reverse was the case. What Freud himself did not say or see, but which psycho-analytic colleagues of his did, was that the psychological damage of the war was caused by an external attack on the self. In war the ego is in conflict with the instinct for self-preservation, rather than with the sexual instinct. It is useful to differentiate between an instinct for the preservation of the individual and the species - but this is very different from Freud's counterposed life and death instincts.

Ernst Simmel, by contrast, explained the war neuroses, which he saw as protecting soldiers from more serious psychotic reactions, by linking them to the mental attacks a man was exposed to in war: he might be (paraphrasing) wounded several times, separated from important events in his family, exposed to murderous monsters such as tanks or a gas attack, shot or wounded he may lie for days among the mutilated bodies of his comrades, his self-respect sorely tried by cruel (and irrational) supervisors, on top of which his life has no individual value but is merely one unimportant unit of the whole.

The war neuroses proved to be neither as temporary as Freud had wished, nor as permanent as Wilfred Owen had feared. A lot of men did 'extricate' their minds from the trauma of war. Let us consider a statistic or two. A study of 3000 shell-shocked American soldiers, assessed longitudinally from 1918 to 1925 discovered that six years after the war approximately 10% of them were unemployable and another 10% moderately incapacitated. Looking at this small American sample, only 80% had more or less recovered by 1925. Taking another indicator, nearly 115 thousand 'shell shocked' ex-servicemen went through the British Army Pensions system, between 1919 and 1929, classified under 'war related neurasthenia'. In 1939, the Ministry of Pensions was still handing out over 2 *million pounds per year* under the heading of 'chronic' neurasthenia.

The psycho-pathology of war was part of a broader loss of the anchoring power of reason, and we can link the military form of war neuroses to the irruption of irrationality in the civilian population. These irrational phenomena were short-lived for some, and tragically permanent for others. In the middle lie those where we see a temporary collapse of reason - those many trauma-damaged soldiers who were cured, those many deranged by grief who recovered.

Foucault suggests that modern European cultures became, from the seventeenth century onwards, increasingly intolerant of 'madness'. A split between reason on the one hand, and madness on the other, becomes more and more persuasive, until the point that the madman or fool - whose erratic insights were previously accorded some respect - becomes treated as simply a medical problem. Modern reason replaces the dialogue between reason and 'unreason' with a monologue. On this model, the irruption of hysteria and irrationalism that we see at the time of the Great War is an interruption to this newly articulated monologue of reason. A faltering of the step on the road to modern rationalism. A reversion to earlier modes of thought and culture. It relives or acts out less modern, less technically rational, ways of dealing with the world. Religion, ghosts, prophetic dreams, superstitions, all form part of this culture of 'unreason'.

Some of the doctors who treated shell shock in Britain were scholars with a history of working at the boundary between psychology and anthropology. Often they believed that there was a connection between the unconscious of modern man, and the customs and religions of what they called 'primitive' societies. William Rivers is the most well-known example SLIDE 28 (here he is photographed in 1898 during the Cambridge Torres Straits expedition, testing the visual perception of the islanders on a colour wheel).

The widespread use of hypnosis to treat shell shock is apposite here. (Rivers had located an Indian contribution to the therapeutic use of hypnotism.) It was used extensively with the war neurotics. Ernst Simmel (in the collection on Psychoanalysis and the War Neuroses introduced by Freud) says that "one can demonstrate without difficulty during hypnosis the displacement from the psychical into the physical" (ie the point of 'conversion' to a hysterical symptom). Hypnosis, like dreams, he says "represents the same *niveau* [level] as that in which the germs of the illness lie embedded and can be removed".

Freud subsequently said of this: "There are still a number of psychotherapists who have not gone beyond catharsis as Breuer understood it and who still speak in its favour. Its value as an abridged method of treatment was shown afresh by Simmel [1918] in his treatment of war neuroses in the German Army during the Great War. The theory of catharsis had not much to say on the subject of sexuality."

In excerpts from the film of war neuroses made at Netley and Seale Hayne Hospitals in 1917-18, one can see what Simmel claimed. These cameos of 'shell shock' seem to me to illustrate a point without unduly invading the integrity of the subjects, for example Private Ross has a war-

induced facial spasm, that disappears under hypnosis. In due course, 'suggestion' is used in the hypnotized state to remove it. (*Excerpts from the Pathe film can be found by searching online*).

You may remember the fictional example from Pat Barker's 'Regeneration' trilogy: it is only under hypnosis that Billy Prior is able to remember the trauma that caused his mutism and amnesia. Rivers (as Simmel), used hypnosis to access repressed material; he was broadly using a Freudian framework but putting the specifically infantile Oedipal sexual content of the unconscious in the background, and focusing instead on more recent trauma of war, and its repression.

We can find in Foucault's discussion of madness earlier analogues for the ways in which the doctors of the 1914-18 war tried to deal with the epidemic of insanity that confronted them. Foucault gives an account of three eighteenth century treatments of madness, each with uncanny resonances in the strategies of the doctors of the Great War. The reversion to torture, instantiated in the way electricity was used by Yealland in Britain and Kaufman in Germany, mimics an earlier style of curing delirium and convulsive disorders. The patient must be 'awakened' from its dream like state, by brutal threat of punishment. A second eighteenth century approach, the 'theatrical' use of illusion as part of the cure, provides an exact account of the 'ritual drama' practised by W H R Rivers. You may remember from Barker's 'Regeneration' the scene where Rivers cures a paralysis by each day drawing circles progressively down the patient's legs. Foucault says that in a third tactic, the patient is returned to the immediacy of nature, using simply shelter, food and sleep as the cure: a practice illustrated in the Great War context by William Sargant's programme at the Maudsley, in which patients were woken once a day to be fed mashed potato and sedated again.

If it is helpful to think about the psycho-pathology of the 1914-18 war in terms of a reversion to older ways of experiencing 'madness', we might want to ask what the triggers of the insanity were. One suggestion: the Great War generated a problem of disposal of the dead of unprecedented proportions. More precisely, the problem was that of living with undisposed bodies as they decomposed.

Richard Aldington's 'Trench Idyll' describes

Taking the discs at night from men  
Who'd hung for six months on the wire ...

Isaac Rosenberg's 'Dead Man's Dump' is one of the war poems to deal with this issue directly. Rosenberg writes here about the meaning of the neglect of the bodies of the dead: the feeling created when you are in a vehicle that is running over a corpse, the different appearance of the older bodies from the more recent ones, the visible processes of decay.

Experiences such as these are profoundly disturbing; whatever one's culture of disposal of the dead - whether cremation, inhumation or even exposure - there are no cultures that leave the

corpses of valued people to rot away at length in cold and wet weather. The transgression is a fundamental one, and mental damage scarcely surprising.

What is reported consistently, is the breaking point reached when the corpses concerned were your friend, your brother. We are told of the extraordinary and dangerous lengths that soldiers would go to bring back remains for fit disposal or record. Great War literary references to the friend killed at one's side are ubiquitous. In Virginia Woolf's 'Mrs Dalloway', most resonant of all the post-war evocations of the psychic damage done by the war, we learn the trigger of Septimus Warren Smith's derangement. The madness, and eventual suicide, of Septimus is directly attributed to the fact that 'he could not feel' and this is itself directly attributed to the death of his friend Evans. "... when Evans was killed, just before the Armistice, in Italy, Septimus, far from showing any emotion or recognizing that here was the end of a friendship, congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably."

Woolf's 'very reasonably' is well put. The death of affect is a reasonable outcome in an intolerable situation. As Wilfred Owen put it

Happy are men who yet before they are killed  
Can let their veins run cold.

Woolf described the character of Septimus in 'Mrs Dalloway' as speaking 'the insane truth' of the novel. This notion of an insane truth links the question of sanity to the issue of truth - a more general issue to which I now turn.

## **Truth**

So, to truth then, proverbially 'the first casualty' in war. The modern definition of truth - something is true if in 'conformity with the facts' - sits on top of an older tradition of meaning whose referents are evaluative: sincerity, honesty, allegiance, virtue, integrity. This archaic hermeneutic of truth is what we need to recover.

In what follows I will simply take some instances where the renegotiation of 'then and now', of what we now think and do about the 'Great War', is an essentially moral question.

To mark the eightieth anniversary of the Armistice, Lionel Jospin issued a retrospective pardon to the 30 thousand French mutineers of 1917; in Britain, by contrast, the 'Shot at Dawn' campaign has so far failed in its attempt to persuade the government to pardon the 306 men executed for cowardice or desertion. Jospin's simultaneous gesture, in 1998, of awarding the Legion of Honour to all surviving British soldiers, was a way of marking the knowledge that the French mutiny exposed the British to the north, and contributed to the appalling numbers of British troops killed that summer at Third Ypres (Paschendaele).

The renegotiations of a younger generation can be seen in this image. This is the German cemetery, in Belgium, in which lies buried 18 year old volunteer Peter Kollwitz, for whom his mother created the legendarily poignant sculptures you see: his parents' grief burdened yet



further with remorse. Kathe Kollwitz's own figure is here the plinth on which is propped a large wreath, offending (me anyway) in terms of both image and affect - the colours are all wrong to start with, and the feeling is too national-official to be appropriate here. However, think again. The wreath is the tribute of an organization of young German people, who believe that the dead of the wars can be harnessed to a positive future. The banner of that wreath actually reads 'reconciliation over the graves' (in German). The offending colour scheme results from combining German national colours with flowers of remembrance: the French cornflower, the British poppy.

In August this year, you may have noticed a small item in the press. As the Queen Mother was not well, the Queen would be standing in for her at today's engagement. What kind of function has HM the Queen as the understudy? Clearly, something to take very seriously. Indeed, it was the opening of the new gates in Constitution Hill, the capital's belated acknowledgement of the

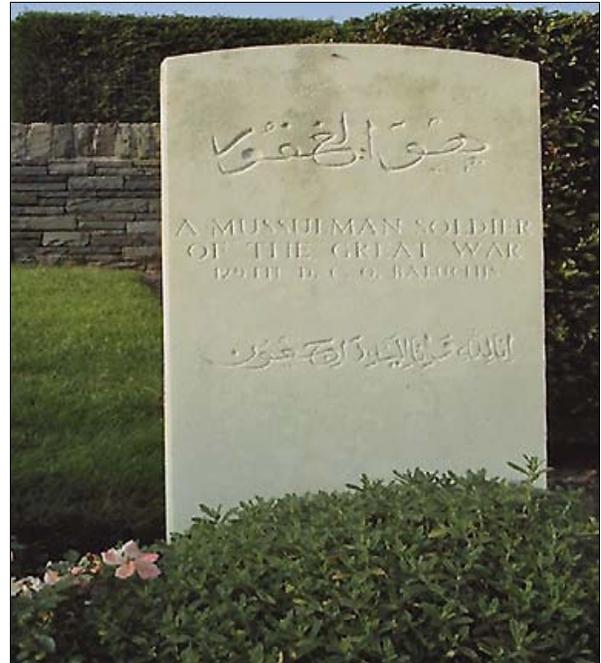


contribution of Imperial and Commonwealth troops to Britain's wars. Nearly 3 million in the case of world war one. It is estimated that of the 950 thousand British first world war dead, over 200 thousand were from Britain's empire. On "the western front", which I have focused on, there is much evidence of both the contribution of the colonies to the war effort, and of an ethnic diversity that figures not in the culture of the British veterans associations.

Here we have a member of the Chinese Labour Corps.



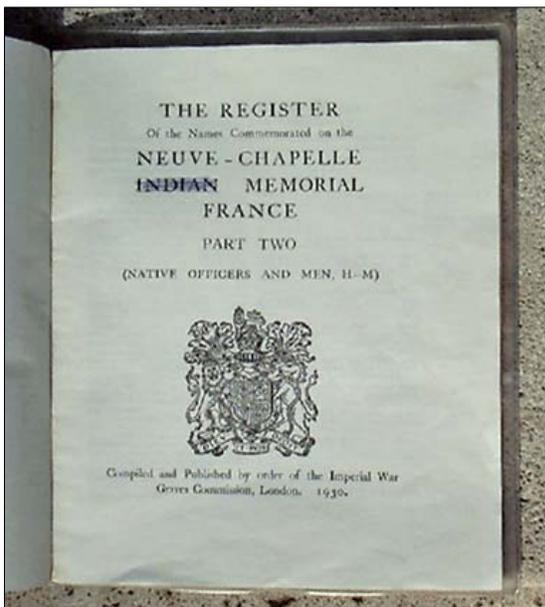
A Jewish British headstone, and a 'Mussulman' soldier of the Great War.



It is salutary to consider the precise language of imperialism in the war. In 1915 the King sent a message to the Indian troops whose tour of duty in France was finishing.

“More than a year ago I summoned you from India to fight for the safety of my Empire and the honour of my pledged word .... ” Of those who had died (they were to be 74 thousand of them) he declared "Let it be your consolation, as it was their pride, that they gave their lives in a just cause for the honour of their sovereign and the safety of my Empire.”

The French at least died for La France, the Indian Army, it seems, was dying for moi.

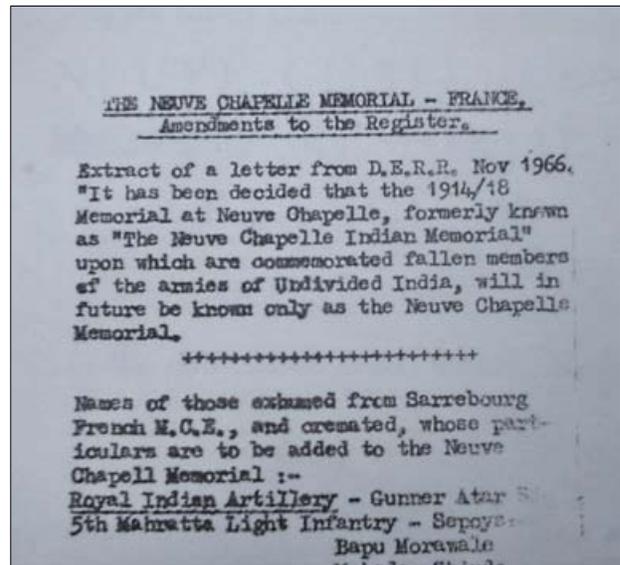


A memorial at Neuve Chappelle lists the names of over 5 thousand Indian soldiers. Here is the title page of the official register at the site. When I first saw this I had what I can only describe as a Derridian epiphany: a moment when with blinding clarity the import of 'under erasure' was vouchsafed to me. (Some of you no doubt can't get round Sainsbury's without Derrida .... ) Here, however, the deconstructive 'trace' is huge.

ty, Royal	BISHN SING TAKULI, Rfn., 3225. 1st/39th	INDEX No. M.R.28
5. Son of	Garhwal Rifles, attd. Burma Military Police. 24th	NEUVE-
di, Fyza-	June, 1915.	CHAPELLE
		MEM.
a Labour	BOAS HOW, Labr., 1753. Indian Labour Corps.	PART I
	16th May, 1918.	
as. 12th	BODO, Labr., 842. Indian Labour Corps.	
Barnala,	25th Dec., 1917.	
	BODO HAUSDAN, Labr., 875. 29th/31st Bihar	
udhiana	Coy. Indian Labour Corps. 1st Nov., 1917.	
n Singh,	BODO KISKU, Labr., 1236. 31st Bihar Coy.	
	Indian Labour Corps. 7th Feb., 1918.	
s. 12th	BOMBAHADUR ALE, Rfn., 1560. 1st/1st	
of Silo,	King George's Own Gurkha Rifles (The Malaun	
	Regt.). 20th Dec., 1914. Son of Ganbir Ale, of	
Punjabis,	Wamgar, No. 3 West, Bhirkote, Nepal.	
ng, of	BOMBAHADUR GHARTI, Jemr. 1st/9th	
	Gurkha Rifles. 11th March, 1915. Son of	
Sikhs,	Bahadursing Gharti, of Kaule, Parvat, Palpa,	
Kabhar,	Nepal.	
	BOMBAHADUR GHARTI, Rfn., 2505. 2nd/9th	
ioneers.	Gurkha Rifles. 11th March, 1915. Son of	
ohgarh,	Narbahadur Gharti, of Tandrang, No. 2 West,	
	Lamjung, Nepal.	
	BOMBAHADUR MAL, Rfn. 2071. 1st/0th	

The decision to erase 'Indian' is repeated on every page of the registers - here is a sample.

An explanation is given in an amendment to the register, in 1966, which simply announces "It has been decided that the 1914/18 Memorial at Neuve Chappelle, formerly known as 'The Neuve Chappelle Indian Memorial' upon which are commemorated fallen members of the armies of Undivided India, will in future be known only as the Neuve Chappelle Memorial."



There is no reference to the partition of India, to Pakistan or Bengal, to 1947, to Bangladesh - nothing. We have simply the ambiguous erasure of the word 'Indian' from a memorial whose 'Indian' architecture not to mention the word 'India' carved massively on the main plinth make an eloquent and obstinate statement to the contrary in the landscape of northern France.

Fanon has expressed these contradictions with customary eloquence: in the colonial context, 'there is no truthful behaviour'.

A second issue with a high profile in terms of 'truth' is the question of religion.. The sacralization of war is so common as to bear out Feuerbach's view that we have a tendency to project divinity on anything that we invest feeling in.



Stanley Spencer's 'Travoyes Arriving with the Wounded' shows a chapel that has been converted to a medical post: its new function heightens rather than detracts from the religious metaphor. Yet its meaning for the nonreligious viewer is also powerful. The fact that Spencer himself believed that he was in communication with the dead, very familiar with heaven and so on, is irrelevant. The painting is a sacralization of war, but also a humanist meditation on suffering and care.

An simpler example of sacralization can be seen in the milestones of Verdun. You can even have a small plaster model too, from a souvenir shop. What is now known as the Voie Sacree (holy path, sacred road), comes into Verdun from the south west and was the only access point to this fortified river town. Hence all the men and supplies that were needed to defend Verdun in 1916 had to be brought in on this one road - which had teams of engineers assigned to each stretch and maintained an average of one vehicle every 15 seconds. The physical geography of Verdun also accounts for the French 'national ossuary' in the hills to the north east - so narrow were the defiles on the sites fought over, so dense the killing on them, that layers of human bones (350 thousand men died) were all that was eventually collected for interment.



The sacralization of war is condensed in the vocabulary of 'sacrifice', another word whose etymology casts some light on today' s conflicting meanings. The sense we are meant to take is that of the surrender of something valued for the sake of something having a higher claim. But the word sacrifice has less ethically appealing connotations too: propitiation, homage,

possession, immolation. The primary referent, the slaughter of animals as an act of propitiating a deity, is usually occluded in the too-pious sacrifice-speak of modern war. Indeed, the elimination of the slaughter aspect, to be replaced by a more acceptable rhetoric of sacrifice, is an important part of this war of words.



A new variant of the sacrifice theme can be seen in this image that fell out of the Sunday paper on Armistice Day last month. *The sacrifice goes on* manages to combine a Rambo trope with a poppy that has inadvertently taken on the iconography of the alien films. This is the New British Legion, transformed into [www.poppy.org.uk](http://www.poppy.org.uk). Frankly, I'd rather have the East Yorkshires.



The third issue I want to consider, finally, under the heading of the ethics of truth, is that of pacifism. Virginia Woolf said of her friends and colleagues at the time of the 1914-18 war, "we were all COs then". The conscientious objectors of the Great War have "our" retrospective empathy; those who seek to justify it are by and large greeted with scepticism. We cannot feel that the scale of this slaughter was worth it, let alone relate to the impassioned, imperial religiosity so evident in Clara Butts' 1912 recording of 'Land of Hope and Glory' (God who made thee mighty, make thee mightier yet).

Virginia Woolf's difficulties with war were only just beginning. As the thirties progressed and the fascism she loathed became more powerful, more and more of her friends and colleagues changed their minds. Her nephew Julian was killed in the Spanish Civil War. Bertrand Russell's view, that it is only in the effects of war that we can ever find a justification, is right. But it leaves us with no guide to action, or inaction, only the huge weight of a choice whose parameters are moral. When the British government recognized Franco in 1938, Virginia Woolf then commented bitterly 'and Julian died for this'. But we know now that her judgment was too hasty.

'The pages of an impartial history', to use Freud's words, do not pass that judgment on those who died in the Spanish Civil War.

When I was wondering what to talk about in this lecture, I consulted two people: was it to be cultural theory, or my current work on the great war? My older interlocutor said politely that a lot of people found the first world war a very interesting topic; the younger one rolled his eyes expressively. So the first world war it was. My strategy, however, was to make a raid for a new cultural analysis, under the covering guns of the war. The categories in play here attempt to restore some balance to the domination of cultural theory by an anti-humanist theoretical agenda. 'Image' shorthands the importance of the senses; it counteracts the over-rating of the cognitive and the under-rating of the imaginative in cultural theory. 'Affect' speaks to the place of feeling, of emotional disposition, of powerful cathexes, in our mental and intellectual lives. Of reason and unreason I have spoken at some length; we live with these instabilities daily. 'Truth' I have used to insist that our understanding of our histories is an ethical undertaking.