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Echoes of Violence: Past and Present Perspectives of World War One in Literature

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Echoes of Violence

For: “Histories of Violence in War”, 23-24 November 2023, Lisbon

Organised by The Society for the History of War

With over 8 million military casualties, World War One remains in the collective memory as a merciless bloodbath and one of humanity’s deadliest disasters. What started as an exciting adventure, a readiness to take part in something historic, in “the war to end all wars” soon turned into an almost impossible mission to simply stay alive.

A record number of authentic war accounts written directly from the battlefield, but also retrospective narratives, document the experience from various angles, often in shocking detail, unveiling the true face of war and familiarising civilians with the reality of trench life and the cruelty of battle.

In his autobiographical novel *Goodbye to All That*, Robert Graves writes about the immense casualties of war and the violence that decimated his generation: “At least one in three of my generation at school died (...). The life expectancy of an infantry subaltern on the Western Front was, at some stages of the war, only about three months; by which time he had been either wounded or killed. The proportions worked out at about four wounded to every one killed. Of these four, one got wounded seriously, and the remaining three, more or less lightly. The three lightly wounded returned to the front after a few weeks or months of absence, and again faced the same odds.”¹

Now, more than a century later, the topic is still very much present in the literary world. Fictional literature, building on those memoirs, continues to contribute to the way war is perceived and remembered. Among them is Alice Winn’s debut novel “In Memoriam”, the book I have chosen to present today.

Written in 2019 and published this year, Winn’s novel is set between 1913 and 1919 and draws inspiration from numerous sources, as the writer herself admitted: The two main characters, Sidney Ellwood and Henry Gaunt are echoes of British writers Siegfried Sassoon and Robert

¹ Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, Penguin Books, 1957, London, pp. 60-61

Graves. Gaunt's twin sister, Maud, also has a real-life parallel in the person of Vera Brittain, whose account of serving as a nurse during World War One fascinated Winn.

The hardest to achieve, however, for the writer of war literature who has never actually experienced a war zone first-hand is the faithful portrayal of the vicious brutality of life on the front, without which a war novel cannot be complete.

I will thus follow Winn's portrayal of violence and its effects in her debut novel by tracing its sources back to one of the most famous European war memoirs, which Winn herself calls an "invaluable" source and admits to have used as documentation for "the bulk of the deaths and injuries in the novel": Ernst Jünger's *Storms of Steel*, first printed in 1920 and based on the writer's war diary written during 1914-1918. Portraying the English trenches by using a German war memoir as the main source of inspiration for battlefield violence might come as a surprise at first, but it stands as proof that artillery fire, the sound of guns and bombs, poisonous attacks and the enormous toll all that violence took on the human soul are not a matter of one side or the other; instead, they become universal experiences of pain and suffering for every soldier of the First World War, whichever side he is fighting for.

I will approach the portrayal of violence and its adaption today from three perspectives:

- Violence on the Body
- Violence on the Mind
- Violence on Nature

Finally, I will touch upon the unique aspects of war violence explored by *In Memoriam* which are not present in Jünger's memoir.

PHYSICAL VIOLENCE

"I didn't make up ways in which they were killed, I just found them", admits Alice Winn when asked about the detailed, gruesome scenes of violence from her novel.

Like a collage, Winn's "In Memoriam" depicts an impressive catalogue of tragic destinies and terrible deaths "borrowed" by the author from different war accounts and fashioned together into a new story which preserves the authenticity of a memoir written in 1919.

Sidney Ellwood and Henry Gaunt, two English boys not yet of enrolling age decide to rush their destinies and leave behind their school days to join the war. While Gaunt is reticent from the beginning, Ellwood very much embodies the *air du temps* described by Jünger in 1914: "Grown up in an age of security, we shared a yearning for danger, for the experience of the extraordinary. We were enraptured by war. (...) We thought of it as manly, as action, a merry duelling party on flowered, blood-bedewed meadows. 'No finer death in all the world than...'. Anything to participate, not to have to stay at home!"² Having read and studied the history of war during his school years, Ellwood embodies that same wild wish to be at the centre of something bigger than ordinary life, to sign up, "joining one of the public school regiments with all their friends, singing songs as they marched to war, gleaming rifles slung over their shoulders. Cavalry charges and sharp uniforms."³

But the initial enthusiasm wears off all too soon and the soldier is left to confront the reality of trench life and the chaotic brutality that becomes an everyday occurrence.

People are reduced to their individual parts, to forms and shapes, moans and pain, dehumanised, disintegrated and disembodied, the visual proof of war's force of destruction: "Arms and legs and heads stuck out of the slopes; in front of our holes were severed limbs and bodies, some of which had had coats or tarpaulins thrown over them, to save us the sight of the disfigured faces."⁴ This apocalyptic world constitutes the universe Winn throws her characters into, images that remain imprinted on Gaunt's mind ("I wrote to Ellwood right away (...)", he writes to a fellow soldier before Ellwood's own enrolment, "no mention of the man's face I saw floating in a muddy trench this morning. It had detached from the skull. The nose was all flat and it had no eyes. Just a mask of skin."⁵) and that haunt Ellwood even beyond the battlefield: "Our bodies

² Ernst Jünger, *Storm of Steel*, Pocket Penguin, London, 2016, p. 3

³ Alice Winn, *In Memoriam*, Penguin Books, London, 2023, p. 27

⁴ Alice Winn, *op. cit.*, p. 100

⁵ Alice Winn, *op. cit.*, p. 53

were used to stop bullets, thought Ellwood. (...) He thought of a torn-off leg he had once found in the woods while on reserve. Blood so clotted it was nearly black. (...) He thought of Grimsey's groin, ripped out by shrapnel."⁶

After a particularly bloody affair, Jünger recalls with painful precision how they "seized hold of the limbs sticking out from the wreckage, and pulled out the corpses. One man had lost his head, and the end of his torso was like a great sponge of blood. Splintered bones stuck out of the arm stump of the second, and his uniform was drenched with blood from a great wound in his chest. The intestines of the third were spilling out of his opened belly."⁷

As the war progresses and the battles become more gruesome, violence begins to show its perverse creativity: The First World War introduces a diversity of methods in which human beings can be killed and tortured unlike anything that the soldiers had either heard of, read about or experienced before.

One of the most striking elements is how "strange, so impersonal"⁸ the war appears, so unlike the heroic battles both Jünger and Winn's characters had grown up imagining. The purpose is not to kill heroically, but to wipe away as big of a number of soldiers as possible. For this reason new methods had to be invented, among which the use of chemical weapons. Although it wasn't as lethal as other forms of attack, its invisibility, the inability to avoid it, as well the terrible pain it cause to those affected made gas into one of the most feared combatants: "Gas had become a nightmare", recalls Graves.⁹

After an attack with chlorine, Jünger takes to his diary to note the effects it had on his fellow soldiers. His descriptions remain clinical, noting the effects of the gas: "Outside the company office in Monchy, we saw a lot of men affected by gas, pressing their hands against their sides and groaning and retching while their eyes watered. It was a bad business, because a few of them went on to die over the next several days, in terrible agony."¹⁰ Although concise, his notes on the

⁶ Alice Winn, *op. cit.*, p. 338

⁷ Ernst Jünger, *op. cit.*, p. 139

⁸ Ernst Jünger, *op. cit.*, p. 5

⁹ Robert Graves, *op. cit.*, p. 151

¹⁰ Ernst Jünger, *op. cit.*, p. 83

gas attacks prove themselves an important source of inspiration. Just as Jünger, Winn's Gaunt records the immediate aftermath of a gas attack in a letter, describing a troop of Algerians as they "came flooding by. Some were only choking, but others were coughing up scrambled bits of blood, their lungs were melting inside them and drowning them. They scabbled at their throats (...)." Shocked by the events, Gaunt tries to overcome his own horror and forces himself to envelop it in words, in order to show those at home the true face of war: "I must write, I must describe, I must tell you about the man I saw trying to claw open his own windpipe without seeming to realise that he was missing a hand and was only succeeding in smearing the blood and tendons of his blasted arm all over his blackening face."¹¹

Attacking thus the mind and the senses, violence overtakes the human being completely. Winn recreates that deadly universe starting from war memoirs and ebbing those smells, colours and emotions into her fictional story. Because the war is indeed vibrant, as we learn from Jünger.

The writer-soldier uses a wide palette of colour to depict the gruesome images following a blood-filled attack: "A giant form with red, blood-spattered beard stared fixedly at the sky, his fingers clutching the spongy ground. A young man tossed in a shell-crater, his features already yellow with his impending death."¹² The horror continues as Jünger inspects further, the writer resorting to an expressionistic language in order to authentically recreate the cacophony of stimuli: "A sweetish smell and a bindle hanging in the wire caught my attention. (...) Flesh like mouldering fish gleamed greenishly through splits in the shredded uniform. (...) Empty eye-sockets and a few strands of hair on the bluish-black skull indicated that the man was not among the living."¹³

The same colour palette is picked up by Winn, who draws inspiration from Jünger's sensory language: "It was impossible to move without stepping on the wounded, who groaned pitifully for water. A young man with the yellowing complexion of the nearly dead turned his head away from them with a resentful look, as if he did not want to be watched."¹⁴ Upon his first walk

¹¹ Alice Winn, *op. cit.*, p. 75

¹² Ernst Jünger, *op. cit.*, p. 22

¹³ Ernst Jünger, *op. cit.*, p. 23

¹⁴ Alice Winn, *op. cit.*, p. 135

through the battlefield, Ellwood notes: “The smell was overwhelming, but worse than that were the bits of corpses sticking out of the wall.”¹⁵

The violent imagery is thus not only made up by images of mutilated bodies, but by a complex arsenal of stylistic devices meant to engage all senses of the reader.

REACTIONS TO VIOLENCE

“Don’t think about it Elly”, says Gaunt, “you’ll go mad if you think about it.”¹⁶

Confronted with this enormous anthology of human suffering, it is no wonder that the violence no longer only remains on the outside, but also crawls into the very soul of those thrown into that hell, stripping them of their humanity. As if calculating the expiration date of an aisle product, Robert Graves estimates the time it takes for an officer’s “slow general decline”: “Between three weeks and four weeks he was at his best, unless he happened to have any particular bad shock or sequence of shocks. Then his usefulness gradually declined as neurasthenia developed. At six months he was still more or less all right; but by nine or ten months (...) he usually became a drag on the other company officers. After a year or fifteen months he was often worse than useless.”¹⁷

After two years of war, Jünger is still fighting, yet he confesses: “We had seen and been through too much already to care.”¹⁸ On leave or upon communicating with civilians, the writer admits that he struggles to take their “peacetime anxieties”¹⁹ seriously; the violence, it seems, overtakes every other reality, rendering the world outside the trenches unworthy of all that pain.

The sentiment is echoed in Winn’s novel. After throwing himself into the fight, Ellwood finds it impossible to distance himself from the violence and reclaim his place in the society he had so finely fit before. He is riddled with outbursts of anger and can no longer stand to be in the same room with his mother, whom he’d formerly adored: “There was a sudden sound of smashing

¹⁵ Alice Winn, *op. cit.*, p. 85

¹⁶ Alice Winn, *op. cit.*, p. 139

¹⁷ Robert Graves, *op. cit.*, p. 178

¹⁸ Ernst Jünger, *op. cit.*, p. 106

¹⁹ Ernst Jünger, *op. cit.*, p. 45

crystal. Red wine trickled down the papered walls in rivulets where Ellwood had thrown his glass. Ellwood stood, alight with hatred, his mouth tightly shut. His hands shook at his sides.”²⁰ In an attempt to console his mother, Gaunt tells her: “I think he hates everyone who hasn’t been to the front.”²¹

For his part, Jünger seems to keep his composure throughout the narrative, seldom appearing distraught or even impressed with the violence surrounding him, admitting that it feels as though “fire had burned everything else out of it”²².

Nevertheless Jünger’s memoir and its depiction of the irreparable damage violence has on the human soul remain an important departure point for Winn: The “profound change” that Jünger feels going through him as he first comes face to face with the battle scene²³ is thoroughly explored by Winn through Ellwood’s character, who goes from being a naive and smug 17-year old boy who could charm an entire school through the verses of Tennyson, to a man whose “heart seemed to be made up of edges; and instead of affection, a choking anger built beneath his ribs.”²⁴ The surrounding violence quenches the poetry from his soul, leaving him entirely cold and speechless even after he discovers that Gaunt, the man he had loved and thought dead is alive: “Ellwood knew there was a quotation for this particular, painful speechlessness, but it did not come to him. (...) Ellwood groped blindly for it in his mind, but found nothing.”²⁵ Later, after Gaunt confesses his love to him, Ellwood still can’t find the right words: “Some long-dead poet must have written the lines with which to answer, but Ellwood no longer knew them.”²⁶ The war has stripped him of the most human sentiment, replacing everything with a cold detachment that echoes Jünger’s own attitude as he dives deeper into the fire.²⁷

²⁰ Alice Winn, *op. cit.*, p. 333

²¹ Alice Winn, *op. cit.*, p. 333

²² Ernst Jünger, *op. cit.*, p. 94

²³ Ernst Jünger, *op. cit.*, p. 5

²⁴ Alice Winn, *op. cit.*, p. 323

²⁵ Alice Winn, *op. cit.*, p. 337

²⁶ Alice Winn, *op. cit.*, p. 342

VIOLENCE ON NATURE

It must also be mentioned that the violent battles of the First World War did not only affect the people, but also the structure of the world itself, leaving imprints on the nature that can still be seen today: The soil was contaminated by the chemical weapons used in the battles, sometimes so severely that the zones had to be declared inhabitable. Moreover, the artillery fire added to the destruction, creating more than 20 million craters throughout the war²⁸ and therefore changing the topography of the world. To add to that, entire villages were bombed to the ground during the four years of fighting: “The villages we passed through on our way had the look of vast lunatic asylums. (...)”, writes Jünger. “As far as the Siegfried Line, every village was reduced to rubble, every tree chopped down, every road undermined, every well poisoned, every basement blown up or booby-trapped, every rail unscrewed, every telephone wire rolled up, everything burnable burned; in a word, we were turning the country that our advancing opponents would occupy into a wasteland.”²⁹

Winn brings back the images of the desolated landscape with the help of Jünger’s own written memory of it: upon marching through to the battlefield, he recalls “The road was reddened with pools of gore; riddles, helmets and sword belts lay around.”³⁰, as if the world itself was bleeding under the relentless fire.

Nature and the surrounding areas reflect in an explicit way and on a big scale the grotesque extent of devastation, as Winn shows when linking the soldier’s decay to that of the world around him: “Gaunt wondered whether, like the battlefields in France, the landscape of Ellwood’s character had been irrevocably marred by the war.”³¹

Nature thus portrays not only as the backdrop for the fighting, but it merges with the front, that comes to life under the unrelenting firing: in his first days in the trenches Jünger hears the “slow grinding pulse of the front”, a sound that “soldiers would come to familiarise themselves with

²⁸ Hupy, “Bombturbation”, p. 826

²⁹ Ernst Jünger, *op. cit.*, p. 130-131

³⁰ Ernst Jünger, *op. cit.*, p. 5

³¹ Alice Winn, *op. cit.*, p. 344

over the course of the war.”³² Winn, like Jünger, uses personification, portraying nature as contributing to the threatening atmosphere, both succumbing to violence and demanding to be avenged: “It was as if the dirt had a heartbeat, and it pounded to be saved, urgently alive. (...) The land had lain for a century dead, but now it had awoken, demanding blood.”³³

OTHER ASPECTS

Last but not least, I want to highlight Winn’s contribution to the memory of World War One by mentioning one aspect in the portrayal of violence that does not feature in Ernst Jünger’s memoir and had previously been only marginally addressed in accounts from the Great War, a silent and dangerous aspect of war which can be explored today in more ample ways, restoring a previously hidden part of history. For, in spite of the 270 British soldiers who were court-martialled for “gross indecency”³⁴, few novels show the additional violence experienced by queer people.

“In Memoriam”’s main characters Gaunt and Ellwood have been in love with each other since their school days. In fact, Ellwood’s main reason for enrolling is Gaunt, despite him doing the best to discourage him through his letters. “I was crying as I ran into the machine-gun fire (...)”, he admits to Ellwood, “I am terrified. I wish to God I could see you again before I die.”³⁵ Understanding the unwritten plea, Ellwood immediately joins him in battle.

However, it soon becomes clear that their love for each other, while a mutual comfort, is as dangerous as the battlefield itself. Caught in a tight embrace by Bourgoyne, a former school colleague, now in a superior position within army ranks, the situation quickly escalates and Ellwood punches Bourgoyne. The following events leave no room for interpretation: by Bourgoyne’s order, the two are to be sent together to the opposite side to grab a German prisoner for questioning – a task that serves only one purpose, as Gaunt immediately understands: “It’s murder.”³⁶. Such a useless act of violence, based entirely on childish resentments and hate

³² Ernst Jünger, *op. cit.*, p. 3

³³ Alice Winn, *op. cit.*, p. 272

³⁴ <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/gay-world-war-1-in-memoriam-b2304524.html>

³⁵ Alice Winn, *op. cit.*, p. 77

³⁶ Alice Winn, *op. cit.*, p. 142

harboured against the same-sex couple almost costs Gaunt his life and pushes Ellwood into a dark abyss.

What could have been is shown through the character of Caruthers, an older colleague that had attended the same school and who had been in love with another man. When his letters to his lover are discovered by a superior officer, he is left with no choice: “The day that Caruthers went over the top with such gallant bravery, he knew he was about to be summoned to Headquarters. Court-martial and disgrace, or a Military Cross for his grieving family.”³⁷

With less luck, it is certain that Gaunt and Ellwood would have suffered the same faith.

Finally, I would like to bring my presentation to a conclusion.

Violence and war have always been and unfortunately still are part of our world. This fact reflects in the thousands and thousands of literary accounts that we have - stories of soldiers, of nurses, of civilians who survived the worst kind of violence and found a way to put it into words. On top of that, the fictional accounts inspired by those works add to the collective memory of humanity’s most blood-filled conflicts, constantly uncovering new perspectives and new ways of remembering our shared past.

But it is not only that. War novels such as Winn’s are a constant reminder of the tragedy of war and the universal suffering it causes – Ellwood and Gaunt might have fought on the opposite side to Jünger, but their experiences of violence are nevertheless the same. That Ellwood and Gaunt are fictional does not make a difference for the reader when experiencing the horrors on their side, for they are not *truly* fictional. Ellwoods and Gaunts have existed and were just as real as Ernst Jünger and the stories of these experiences – with all their necessary violent imagery – help us recover a terrible world that must continuously be retold in order to never be repeated.

³⁷ Alice Winn, *op. cit.*, p. 66