TOUCH AND INTIMACY IN FIRST WORLD WAR LITERATURE

The First World War ravaged the male body on an unprecedented scale, yet fostered moments of physical intimacy and tenderness among the soldiers in the trenches. Touch, the most elusive and private of the senses, became central to war experience. War writing is haunted by experiences of physical contact: from the muddy realities of the front to the emotional intensity of trench life, to the traumatic obsession with the wounded body in nurses’ memoirs. Through extensive archival and historical research, analysing previously unknown letters and diaries alongside close investigative readings of literary writings by figures such as Owen and Brittain, Santanu Das recovers the sensuous world of the First World War trenches and hospitals. This original and evocative study alters our understanding of the period as well as of the body at war, and illuminates the perilous intimacy between sense experience, emotion and language in times of crisis.

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SANTANU DAS

Queen Mary College, University of London
in memoriam
Subhas Ghosal
1924–1998
Kajal Sengupta
1931–2006
'In every touch more intimate meanings hide.'
Rupert Brooke, 'Town and Country', The Collected Poems, 65

'I have not seen any dead. I have done worse. In the dank air I have perceived it, and in the darkness, felt.'
Wilfred Owen, Collected Letters, 429

'My hands could instantly tell the difference between the cold of the harsh bitter night and the stealthy cold of death.'
Mary Borden, The Forbidden Zone, 124

'Language is a skin: I rub my language against the other. It is as if I had words instead of fingers, or fingers at the tip of my words. My language trembles with desire.'
Roland Barthes, A Lover’s Discourse, 73
Contents

List of figures viii
Acknowledgements x
List of abbreviations xiii

Introduction 1

Part I Trenches

1 Slimescapes 35
2 Geographies of sense 73

Part II Intimacies

3 ‘Kiss me, Hardy’: the dying kiss in the First World War trenches 109
4 Wilfred Owen and the sense of touch 137

Part III Wounds

5 ‘The impotence of sympathy’: service and suffering in the nurses’ memoirs 175
6 The operating theatre 204

Afterword 229
Bibliography 239
Index 265
Figures

I.3 The final entry from the diary of A. Reid, IWM, 87/8/1 (DOC).
I.4 A hand-drawn map and clock-face diagram found in the diary of H. Gladstone, 86/2/1, IWM (DOC).
I.5 A page from the diary of T. Dalziel, 86/31/1, IWM (DOC).
I.7 Two letters from G. W. Hayman to his girlfriend, 87/31/1, IWM (DOC).
I.8 Envelope, trench post-card and letter from G. H. Bennett to his wife, with some pressed flowers, Miscellaneous 265, IWM (DOC).

Part I One of the nameless dead. Q 11688. Photograph Courtesy of Imperial War Museum.
1.1 Attempting to pull a field-gun out of the mud, IWM, Q 5938. Photograph courtesy of Imperial War Museum.
1.2 Stretcher-bearers struggling through the mud, Q 5935. Photograph courtesy of Imperial War Museum.
List of figures

2.1 Letter of Rosenberg to R. C. Trevelyan, with pencil sketch of himself in the dug-out, PP/MCR/C38, IR/I/232, IWM (DOC). 92 & 93

Part II Men of the Duke of Wellington’s Regiment after the capture of Marfaux on 23 July 1918, during the battles of the Marne. Q 6867. Photograph courtesy of Imperial War Museum. 107

3.1 Interior of Undressing Room, IWM, Q 58122. Photograph courtesy of Imperial War Museum. 112

3.2 Soldiers bathing in the pond of a farm near St Eloi, 19 June 1917, Q 5500. Photograph courtesy of Imperial War Museum. 113

3.3 British soldier and sailor brothers greeting one another outside their home while on leave, Q 31046. Photograph courtesy of Imperial War Museum. 121

Part III The entry for 4 February 1917 from the diary of M. A. Brown, 88/7/1 IWM (DOC). 173

5.1 A poem and a sketch, ‘Two Autograph Albums’, Misc. 31, Item 573, IWM (DOC). 179

5.2 A letter from a soldier-patient to Nurse Ruth Whitaker, Papers, 76/123/1, IWM (DOC). 180

5.3 An entry in an autograph album, ‘Two Autograph Albums’, Misc. 31 Item 573, IWM (DOC). 181
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Abbreviations

Quotations from the following works are cited in the work through these abbreviations.

IWM Imperial War Museum, London.