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978-0-521-06687-7 - Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature

Santanu Das

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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.

SANTANU DAS is a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at Queen Mary College, University of London and a former Research Fellow at St John's College, Cambridge.

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521846035

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First published 2005
Reprinted 2007
This digitally printed version 2008

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-521-84603-5 hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-06687-7 paperback

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in memoriam
Subhas Ghosal
1924–1998
Kajal Sengupta
1931–2006

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‘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

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Acknowledgements

My deepest gratitude is to Dame Gillian Beer who supervised the thesis on which this book is based. Gillian has known the work intimately in its various forms. Her great capacity for pleasure in language, astuteness as a reader and constant generosity have made working with her an inspiring experience, and I have benefited immensely from her advice and warm support. Throughout, I have been indebted to the kindness and goodwill of the Master and Fellows of St John's College, Cambridge. They elected me to a research fellowship and made the writing of this book possible. The Cambridge Commonwealth Trust and the Cambridge English Faculty have also helped me at critical moments.

John Kerrigan has been a powerful presence since my undergraduate days: he read Chapter 3 with his usual forensic care and his intellectual encouragement, kindness and practical advice over the years have been very important. Jon Stallworthy has been extremely generous with his time and learning, and a supportive friend of the book from its initial stages. David Trotter was always open-handed with knowledge and expertise, and his insightful comments pushed my thoughts forward while revising the thesis as a book. Trudi Tate has shown a sustained interest in the project and been a great interlocutor: many thanks to her and to Supriya Chaudhuri for reading several chapters at short notice and for their valuable criticism; and to Michèle Barrett and Mary Jacobus for their warm encouragement and generous support.

Fran Brearton and Laura Marcus read the typescript for Cambridge University Press, and I am grateful for their detailed engagement with the work and criticism of the most constructive kind; thanks are also due to the anonymous third reader. Alison Hennegan and Sarah Cain kindly heard or read early versions of some chapters while Stefan Goebel, John Pegum and Mike Roper involved me in conversations on nailed bodies, trench journals and maternal relations respectively. Clémence O'Connor and Emma Wagstaff helped me with the French translations and

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Bernhard Malkmus with German. Ari Reimann provided some useful references. My special thanks to my editors at Cambridge University Press – Ray Ryan and Maartje Scheltens – for their efficiency and understanding, and for evolving the process of editing into one of friendship.

My warm thanks to the staff of St John's College library, the University Library and the English Faculty Library, Cambridge and the British Library, London for their kind assistance which made the research possible. I am particularly indebted to the staff of the Imperial War Museum, London for their helpful and courteous service, and for permission to use some of their documents, photographs and paintings; to the copyright holders of different private collection of letters for their kind permission to use them in the book; to Jon Stallworthy and the Wilfred Owen Estate for allowing me to quote from the manuscript poems of Wilfred Owen and to Oxford University Press to quote from Owen's *Collected Letters*; and to the University Library, Cambridge to quote from a typescript version of Siegfried Sassoon's 'The Last Meeting'.

In a book about intimacy, it is a great pleasure to be able to acknowledge some of my close friends as some of its most enthusiastic readers: Robert Macfarlane, Ralph O'Connor, Toby Smith and Hugh Stevens commented acutely on large portions of the book, often at very short notice. They pointed me to areas which needed more work as well as to a whole world beyond it: long walks by the river, cava, battlefield tours (thanks, Toby!) and endless chats have been all parts of the process which helped the thesis to grow into a book. Hugh made important suggestions for the section on Rosenberg and kept me entertained with music, ballet and fine food: I am very grateful for the quality of his affection and attention. Subha Mukherji was also always there, providing support and infusing academia with a spirit of fun; my thanks to her and to Debdulal Roy for many memorable hours and dinners together.

Warm thanks to Amit Chaudhuri, Barnita Bagchi, Shantimoy and Ranjana Mukherji, Aroon and Anima Basak, Yota Batsaki, Andreas Bücker and Barnali Ghosh for drawing me into their different worlds, and to my teachers in Calcutta, at Presidency College and Jadavpur University; and particularly to Lina Guha Roy. Finally, I would like to thank my parents, especially my dear mother for continuing to place every interest of mine above her own. Their phone calls and e-mails continue to sustain me. Without the love and support of my father and my mother – and of course Sasha – it would have been very difficult to undertake this research. The book is dedicated to the memory of two remarkable people: Kajal Sengupta who lit up our days at Presidency College, Calcutta, and my beloved uncle Subhas Ghosal.

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Acknowledgements

Several portions of this book have been published: a version of Chapter 3 in *Modernism/Modernity*, 9, 1 (January 2002), and reprinted in *The Kiss in History*, ed. Karen Harvey (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005) and *The Book of Touch*, ed. Constance Classen (Oxford: Berg, 2005), and portions of Chapters 5 and 6 in *Textual Practice*, 19, 2 (June, 2005).

Abbreviations

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

IWM	Imperial War Museum, London.
<i>CP&F</i>	<i>Wilfred Owen: The Complete Poems and Fragments</i> , ed. Jon Stallworthy, 2 vols. (London: Chatto and Windus, Hogarth and Oxford University Press, 1983).
<i>CL</i>	<i>Wilfred Owen: Collected Letters</i> , ed. Harold Owen and John Bell (London: Oxford University Press, 1967).
<i>CW</i>	<i>The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg: Poetry, Prose, Letters, Paintings, and Drawings</i> , ed. Ian Parsons (London: Chatto and Windus, 1984).
<i>FZ</i>	Mary Borden, <i>The Forbidden Zone</i> (London: William and Heinemann, 1929).
<i>GWMM</i>	Paul Fussell, <i>The Great War and Modern Memory</i> (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).
<i>PP</i>	<i>The Poetry and Plays of Isaac Rosenberg</i> , ed. Vivien Noakes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
<i>SE</i>	<i>The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud</i> , translated from the German under the General Editorship of James Strachey, 24 vols. (1953–74).
<i>UF</i>	Henri Barbusse, <i>Under Fire</i> , translated from <i>Le Feu</i> (1918) by W. Fitzwater Wray (1919; London: Dent, 1965).
<i>WTWY</i>	Irene Rathbone, <i>We That Were Young</i> (1932; New York: The Feminist Press, 1989).