Introduction

In Memoriam

As toilsome I wander'd Virginia's woods,
To the music of rustling leaves kick'd by my feet, (for 'twas autumn,)
I mark'd at the foot of a tree the grave of a soldier;
Mortally wounded he and buried on the retreat, (easily all could
I understand.)
The halt of a mid-day hour, when up! no time to lose – yet this sign left,
On a tablet scrawl'd and nail'd on the tree by the grave,
Bold, cautious, true, and my loving comrade.

The impulse to mark a life that has just been lost is constitutive of being human. Here Walt Whitman catches the dash, the hurry and risk, of retreat in battle ('when up! no time to lose – '), but also in its midst that same impulse, not just to bury and so to protect and dignify the body, but to leave a trace of what the dead man meant to his living friend. The personal element of this is evident; while the past participles ('scrawl'd', 'nail'd') embody the past moment, they carry also a sense of the present, the moment of scrawling and nailing – the pressing need for speed. The speaking voice embodied in the elisions contributes to this effect. And the italics, signifying the inscription, act also to emphasise to the reader what the dead man was to his friend: 'Bold, cautious, true, and my loving comrade'.

Whitman takes us into the moment when he comes upon a marker of a life cut short. But he further takes us into the moment when the companion of the dead man decided to mark that life, with words that are both deeply personal and publicly commemorative. Two levels of time are recorded, both caught in the one inscription. Whitman shows us the

impulse to remember and the impulse to memorialise. Remembering
needs no inscription; memorialising needs an audience. Crucial to the
memorial is that others will read it, others who never knew the dead man.
Furthermore, the memorial marker can be read when the once living
rememberer, the person who made the inscription, is also long gone.

In this way, Whitman's poem becomes a further memorial to the dead
man, as the reader too stumbles upon the inscription in the act of reading
the poem. For a twenty-first-century reader, the historical moment is so
long gone that there could be a quaintness in that constructed encounter.
But it is the peculiar quality of poetry, especially that which speaks directly
and intimately to the reader, that it can carry her imaginatively into the
drama of the moment. Whitman propels us into the past moment so
that it seems like our present. And, as he performs this act of imaginative
recreation which we call remembering, he also reflects on the business of
remembering itself.

In his second, final stanza, Whitman redoubles the act of memory by
recording the way that the inscription comes back to him:

… at times through changeful season and scene,
abrupt, alone, or in the crowded street,
Comes before me the unknown soldier's grave, comes
the inscription rude in Virginia's woods,
Bold, cautious, true, and my loving comrade.

This is the moment of real drama in the poem, as the inscription of a man's
past life – the marker of his deadness – rears into the present consciousness.
We move from the past tense of the first stanza, where the memorialising
of the dead man is recorded, to the present tense of the second, where the
memory of the dead man's memorial erupts into the lived life of the poet.
The inscription of a man's past life becomes more present than the minutiae
of the current, lived life, and thus brings thoughts about extinction into
the living consciousness. As we see this death, through Whitman's poetic
reflection on its commemoration, we have the fleeting understanding that
we too will die.

This existential understanding (as distinct from an awareness of the brute
fact of death) is a highly modern preoccupation, so it is no surprise that
Whitman, for all his historical distance, struck a chord with the poets of the
First World War. Ivor Gurney, Harold Monro, Isaac Rosenberg, Siegfried
Sassoon and Edward Thomas were all overt admirers.¹ ‘Drum Taps’ in

¹ For a fuller account of Whitman's influence on First World War poets see Andrew Palmer and Sally
Minogue, ‘Modernism and First World War Poetry: Alternative Lines’, A History of Modernist Poetry,
particular made an impression on these poets, being a sequence of poems about the current of battle; Rosenberg called it ‘unique as War Poetry in my mind’. To grasp the ineluctability of our own extinction is one thing; it is deferrable, not necessarily immediate. But for those encountering deaths in the midst of battle, this understanding is a fearful thing, for not only is death the ultimate fate, it is imminent. The business of remembering those who died, and the dependent business of memorialising them, is in the First World War made acute by the suddenness of their deaths and the cutting-short of their lives. These factors bring into sharp focus standard features of death: that it comes to us all; that its exact moment is unknown.

In the First World War, death was intensely anticipated and while its particular moment was unknown, its likelihood in a given sector could be judged. This did not make the sudden apprehension of a particular death any less vivid or unsettling. Henri Barbusse, writing in the midst of the war, catches this exactly when he recounts crossing the battlefield with his fellow soldiers, and coming across a head, separated from its body, ‘planted in the ground, a wet and bloodless head, with a heavy beard’. At first the sight is grotesque, no more – then they realise that they know the person to whom the head belongs:

‘Ah!’ we all cried together, it’s Cocon!

When you hear of or see the death of one of those who fought by your side and lived exactly the same life, you receive a direct blow in the flesh before even understanding. It is truly as if you heard of your own destruction. It is only later that you begin to mourn.

The moment of understanding another person’s death is, then, full of complexity. It is a point where common humanity comes to the fore, as one person sees and knows the one thing that links all human beings, that they are mortal. There is a sense of loss, whether individual if the person is known to you, or generalised if not – Whitman catches both. There is the sudden knowledge and understanding of one’s own future extinction. And at the moment when we know ourselves to be most fully, selflessly human, as we feel for a fellow human being’s extinction, we selfishly fear for our own. Perhaps from all of this comes the desire to put into language...
something about the life lost. As is also evident from both Whitman and Barbusse, these feelings are brought into sharp focus by death in battle. Whatever our feelings about war, whether we see the death as heroic or futile, or both, the sudden cutting down of life in battle seizes us, perhaps partly because that life is often young, and death comes well before the usual allotted time. Because of this, the impulse to memorialise can ally itself powerfully with the deeply conservative desire to keep the dead person alive or, at least, to keep open the possibility that the dead person can, in some sense, return to us. Both forces, as we shall see, permeate the poetry of the First World War.

All these elements are further intensified where the writer – the one doing the scrawling – is himself in imminent danger of suffering the same fate. As Santanu Das reminds us: ‘The trench experience was one of the most sustained and systematic shattering of the human sensorium: it stripped man of the protective layers of civilization and thrust his naked, fragile body between the ravages of industrial modernity, on the one hand, and the chaos of formless matter, on the other.’6 In this situation, where ‘Death could drop from the dark / As easily as song’,7 soldier-poets such as Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, Ivor Gurney and David Jones – and non-combatants like Mary Borden, Harold Monro and Wilfrid Gibson who were close enough and/or imaginative enough – seek to commemorate dead soldiers in ways which evade comfortable pieties and reach for those complexities. If the cataclysmic nature of the war was experienced most directly by combatants, or by those close to the action as were many medical workers, its effect was also powerful on those at home who held particular soldiers dear or, if a male non-combatant, felt the strains of his position. A different dimension of the experience of remembering dead soldiers is expressed in poems by those who could experience the war only through fear of loss, and loss itself. The imaginative effect of the war on poets at the time cut across barriers of experience.

Starting with these poets of the war years, and moving beyond to poetry written in the succeeding century, this study is concerned primarily and specifically with the ways those who died in the First World War have been commemorated in poetry. The poem written by a First World War combatant poet about the loss of a friend in the thick of battle is the

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7 ‘Returning, we hear the larks’ in Rosenberg, Isaac Rosenberg, 113.
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equivalent of Whitman’s discovered ‘Bold, cautious, true, and my loving comrade’. This may be a specific memorial to a specific man, such as Alan Mackintosh’s ‘In Memoriam Private D. Sutherland’ or Siegfried Sassoon’s ‘The Last Meeting’. Such a poem is the ur-text of our discussions. But as we have suggested above, there is far more to the memorial poem, the poem that gives some sort of account of someone who has (or those many who have) just died.

The memorial poem, being a reflection in language, is a deeply self-conscious act, often set in a formal and thematic tradition. Many of the First World War poets were steeped in the classical tradition, with its set pieces of heroic action, and its often formulaic responses to death in battle. The broader elegiac tradition, with classical roots but developed in a particular way in English poetry from Milton through to the Romantic poets, was also a profound influence. Faced with the grotesque reminders of what happens to the body in sudden, violent death, First World War poets grappled with a poetic inheritance which didn’t seem to fit their current experience. Sometimes they took refuge in the simplicities of that inheritance; the more interesting examples are those where we can see poets asking questions of the traditions, disrupting formal certainties, and struggling to find new forms and languages to fit new modes of consciousness.

Our title, The Remembered Dead, is indicative of that struggle. The phrase is taken from Arthur Graeme West’s poem ‘The Night Patrol’, and he uses it in a way that deliberately unsettles our understanding of remembrance. West is an interesting figure. He is little known as a poet, and is probably best known for his posthumous The Diary of a Dead Officer (1919), in which he expresses constant uncertainty about the rightness of the war and whether he should be fighting in it, as well as voicing his deep dislike of the condition of soldiery. He enlisted as a private soldier, but was recommended for officer training, and it was during that training that he conceived a deep disbelief in the rightness of the war. Nonetheless, and

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9 By ‘First World War poets’ we refer to all poets of the period.
in spite of deciding at key points that he would register his dissent, he returned to the Front as an officer, and was killed in 1917.

In September 1916, he was in the front line and writing about the effect on his men of seeing their comrades killed under heavy shelling. For the most part, he describes their traumatised state while representing himself as the calm officer walking among them with words of comfort. One survivor ‘mutter[s] away on the firing-step like a nervous rabbit and making vague gestures with his hands and head’, others ‘cowered and trembled’; West meanwhile ‘talked to them and did [his] best to comfort them’ and later sits smoking a cigarette in order to ‘soothe the men simply by being quiet’.  

But he begins to touch on his own trauma when he describes the process of trying to dig out buried men:

you dig and scratch and uncover a grey, dirty face, pitifully drab and ugly, the eyes closed, the whole thing limp and mean-looking. This is the devil of it, that a man is not only killed, but made to look so vile and filthy in death, so futile and meaningless that you hate the sight of him.

In ‘The Night Patrol’, West considers the corpses around him in a different way. The poem begins in the thick of night-time reconnaissance. The first words of the poem – ‘Over the top!’ – carry the sense of fear and excitement of a daytime attack, but this is one of several reversals of expectation that operate in the poem. Written in blank verse, the poem nonetheless carries both the immediate speech of the officer’s instructions to the night patrol, and the interior narrative of those on patrol, deliberately gathered in the pronoun ‘we’, though the controlling consciousness is that of the individual poet/narrator. The importance of the ‘we’, however, is to suggest both the communality of the patrol and of the experience; this is no singular, heightened consciousness at work – this is what men saw and felt. By line 12 the ‘we’ has disappeared and instead a general observation and consciousness are depicted:

Packs, rifles, bayonets, belts, and haversacks,
Shell fragments, and the huge whole forms of shells
Shot fruitlessly – and everywhere the dead.

But the dead are not objects of pity or distress, or even reminders of imminent extinction as in Barbusse. What West fixes on is their ‘vile

\footnotesize{Ibid., 66–7.}  
\footnotesize{Ibid., 67.}  
\footnotesize{Ibid., 81–3.}
sickly smell of rottenness'; he devotes eight lines to their smell. Just as 'everywhere the dead', so 'the dead men stank through all, / Pungent and sharp'. He even describes the fading of their smell as his patrol passes further away from them. There is something discomfiting about the tone of the description; the intent emphasis on the smell reminds us that there is little awareness of these bodies as dead human beings – they are dead matter. Even Barbusse, with his attempt to describe the alienating feeling given by meeting the dead body of someone he has known, retains in doing so a sense of common humanity – that is what disturbs him when he recognises, not just a dead head, but the dead head of Cocon. But the narrator of 'The Night Patrol' has abandoned any sense of the bodies as humans. We think briefly that there is compassion in the lines 'They lay, all clothed, / Each in some new and piteous attitude'. But the run-on line that follows puts us right: 'That we well marked to guide us back'. The bodies are 'marked' only as landmarks, the best signposts to be had in a landscape stripped of distinguishing natural features. The narrator identifies in scrupulous detail different dead individuals or groups, but only and specifically to act as guide points back to the home trench.

There is a certain knowingness in the alienated consciousness West voices; he wants the reader to know what war has done to its soldiers, reading the trench landscape in terms of the geography created by different kinds of dead bodies. But this is also a poem about survival:

We lay in shelter of the last dead man, 
Ourselves as dead, and heard their shovels ring.

The shovels belong to the Germans; playing dead, under cover of 'the last dead man', means that the men on the night patrol might survive. The consciousness which sees dead men simply as useful way-markers and sources of cover is pragmatic; the dead can be used to help the living survive. And the night patrol does survive:

We turned and crawled past the remembered dead: 
Past him and him, and them and him, until 
For he lay some way apart, we caught the scent 
Of the Crusader and slid past his legs, 
And through the wire and home, and got our rum.

The flatness of tone and emotion is almost comical. Yet underlying the whole is a sense of irony, an understanding that this is not how it should be. 'The remembered dead' are not honoured as individuals, they are turned
into useful objects. But as readers we would not feel the shock of this without the other, honouring and honourable sense of ‘the remembered dead’ underlying it.

‘The Night Patrol’ is the converse of Whitman’s ‘As Toilsome I Wander’d Virginia’s Woods’. But, for all that, the Whitman sentiment underlies West’s poem – for what West highlights is the way the extremes of battle and the constant currency of death in the First World War sapped men of even the most natural of feelings, compassion for the death of a fellow man and the desire to remember the dead. This is all the more clear if we set ‘The Night Patrol’ alongside a similar poem, Max Plowman’s ‘The Dead Soldiers’. Plowman also describes the corpses strewn across No Man’s Land as a series of markers – ‘A crescent moon of men who showed the way’ – and movingly creates an image of a whole group of men killed at one time, almost carelessly:

Just as the scythe had caught them, there they lay,
A sheaf for Death, ungarnered and untied.

Plowman describes, in words similar to West’s, the dead men’s ‘Fantastic forms, in postured attitudes, / twisted and bent’. The images are powerful, and yet Plowman is unable to pull himself fully away from the consolations of the elegiac tradition. Where West’s image of ‘an archipelago of corrupt fragments’ emphasises both the navigational utility and the inert non-humanity of the corporeal remains, Plowman’s lunar image – ‘a crescent moon of men’ – seems to romanticise and beautify the dead, and reiterates their humanity. West’s speaker notices the dead cornstalks beneath his body which ‘No man had reaped’, but pointedly resists the metaphorical connection with the uncollected bodies; Plowman succumbs with the biblical image of dead men as mown grass ‘ungarnered’. Where West’s speaker has forgotten the humanity of the objects by which he steers, Plowman struggles to remember it: ‘Their individual hopes my thought eludes / But each man had a hope to call his own’. West emphasises the stink while Plowman limits himself to the less visceral sense of sight and, in the closing lines, shifts into argumentation:

God in every one of you was slain;
For killing men is always killing God,
Though life destroyed shall come to life again
And loveliness rise from the sodden sod.

44 ‘The Dead Soldiers’ in Max Plowman, A Lap Full of Seed, (Orford: Blackwell, 1917), 75–6.
Plowman here makes use of a Shelleyan trope which appears in a number of poems from this period, that of the corpse rising up as l'ora, which has its origins in ‘Adonais’, Shelley’s elegy on the death of John Keats. Shelley consoles himself and the reader with the idea that ‘The leprous corpse … / Exhales itself with flowers of gentle breath’, which, as the poem later confirms, embodies spiritual as well as physical regeneration. However, for Plowman the consolations of elegy are eclipsed by his pacifist convictions. For all its power to move us, ‘The Dead Soldiers’ retains familiar poetic tropes which search for meaning in soldiers’ deaths. West’s deadpan conclusion, with its unspoken irony indicating that all is changed utterly, is the more radical. Like both Plowman and West, the poets discussed in this book reconsider and re-engage with the poetic tools they have inherited, often struggling to reshape them, and sometimes refusing them, in order to commemorate meaningfully those who have been killed.

Cultural Memory

If, in this book, we are often focused on the ways individual poets have worked within and pushed against their poetic traditions, we remain strongly aware of wider cultural forces which shape our experience and understanding of ‘First World War poetry’ as a body of work and, by extension, the commemoration that goes on within it. For ‘First World War poetry’ is a key element in the socio-cultural memory of the war and its dead. In using the term ‘socio-cultural memory’, we refer to a body of ideas originating in the 1920s, whose principal exponent was Maurice Halbwachs, and to developments of his theory in the latter part of the twentieth century. Common to this work is an emphasis on the social and collective nature of memory, and the way it is shaped by ideological forces, even when it appears to be individual and personal. Halbwachs argues that, ‘The succession of our remembrances, of even our most personal ones, is always explained by changes occurring in our relationships to various collective milieus – in short, by the transformations these milieus undergo separately and as a whole.’ For Halbwachs then, memory is

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92 This poem is an early expression of Plowman’s dissent, which led to a courageous refusal to serve in 1918. See the biographical note in Dominic Hibberd and John Onions (eds), The Winter of the World: Poems of the Great War (London: Constable, 2008), 323.
always socially determined, even where it appears to be individual and personal, and this determination inheres foremost in the influence of social frameworks to which the individual belongs, the most important of which are the social groups to which she belongs: ‘No memory is possible outside frameworks used by people living in society to determine and retrieve their recollections.’ Halbwachs’s concept of collective memory includes both the formation of memory and its transmission, and one distinction he makes between memory and history is that of the span of time: memory (as defined within a group) has a limit, at most, of a hundred years: the utmost span of a life. History, conversely, stands as a sort of sentinel separate from the mobility and interactivity of social memory. Building on these ideas, Aleida and Jan Assmann accept Halbwachs’s concept of collective memory but make a distinction within it between communicative and cultural memory: the former allows for the structures of the personal, individual and everyday in the formation and expression of memory; it is the means by which groups ‘conceive their unity and peculiarity through a common image of their past’. As with Halbwachs’s notion of collective memory, communicative memory has a ‘limited temporal horizon … [that] does not extend more than eighty to (at the very most) one hundred years into the past’. Cultural memory, conversely, is not time-limited. It refers to ‘fixed points … fateful events of the past, whose memory is maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments)’. The Assmanns ascribe to ‘cultural memory’ the performative attributes of communal, ceremonial memory and its transmission. They further define cultural memory as comprising ‘that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose “cultivation” serves to stabilize and convey that society’s self-image’. One might almost call this state-sponsored memory. It is

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9 Jan Assmann, ‘Collective Memory and Cultural Identity’, trans. John Czaplicka, New German Critique, 65 (1995), 127. Although he is the sole author of this article, Jan Assmann uses the pronoun ‘we’ throughout, explaining in a footnote that these ideas about communicative and cultural memory were formed jointly with Aleida Assmann.

10 Ibid., 129.
11 Ibid., 126–9.
12 Ibid., 132.