

# Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature



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John Singer Sargent, *Gassed* (1918-19)

The world's first major industrial warfare ravaged the male body but also restored tenderness to touch in male relationships (Das 4).

Touch has a particular relationship to time and representation. The visual appearance of a person can be preserved through photography; recorded voices may speak from beyond the grave; smell and taste, more difficult to re-create, have been successfully simulated in recent years. But touch dies with the person, impervious to technology and preservation, as if the soul lodged in the skin. [...] Touch [...] seems to break the chain of signification in that it cannot be directly represented (27).

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# PART I. TRENCHES

## I. Slimescapes

On meurt de la boue comme des balles, et plus horriblement. La boue où s'enlise l'homme et – ce qui est pire – l'âme. Mais où sont-ils tous ces « chieurs » d'articles héroïques quand il y a de la boue haut comme ça ! La boue recouvre les galons. Il n'y a plus que de pauvres êtres qui souffrent. [...] L'enfer n'est pas du feu. Ce ne serait pas le comble de la souffrance. L'enfer, c'est de la boue !

*Le Bochofage, 26 mars 1917*

Mud divested the soldiers of the cloak of cleanliness and heroism that Victorian ideology and war propaganda had wrapped round them (43).

Thus mud on the Western Front represented the paradoxical nature of time during the Great War: itself the result of the latest technology (combined with bad weather), it looked back to some primeval chaos (45).

‘It "drew" at you, not like a quicksand, but a real monster that sucked at you.’

Jack Dillon, Sound Archives, Imperial War Museum

Toucher du visqueux, c'est risquer de se diluer en viscosité. Or, cette dilution, par elle-même, est déjà effrayante, parce qu'elle est absorption du Pour-soi par l'En-soi comme l'encre par un buvard .

Sartre, *L'Être et le Néant*, 702.

— Je ne le reconnais pas, dit Joseph qui s'avance très lentement et s'exprime avec peine.

— Moi, je le reconnais, répond Volpatte.

— C'barbu-là ? fait la voix blanche de Joseph.

— L'n'a pas de barbe. Tu vas voir.

Accroupi, Volpatte passe l'extrémité de sa canne sous le menton du cadavre et détache une sorte de pavé de boue où la tête s'enchâssait et qui semblait une barbe. Puis il ramasse le casque du mort, l'en coiffe, et il lui tient un instant devant les yeux les deux anneaux de ses fameux ciseaux, de manière à imiter des lunettes.

— Ah ! nous écrivons-nous alors, c'est Cocon !

Henri Barbusse, *Le Feu*



On oblique, attirés par une masse formée de deux hommes étrangement mêlés, épaule contre épaule, les bras autour du cou l'un de l'autre. Le corps à corps de deux combattants qui se sont entraînés dans la mort et s'y maintiennent, incapables pour toujours de se lâcher ? Non, ce sont deux hommes qui se sont appuyés l'un sur l'autre pour dormir. Comme ils ne pouvaient pas s'étendre sur le sol qui se dérobaient et voulait s'étendre sur eux, ils se sont penchés l'un vers l'autre, se sont empoignés aux épaules, et se sont endormis, enfoncés jusqu'aux genoux dans la glaise.

Henri Barbusse, *Le Feu*

Our very frustration as readers becomes the index of Barbusse's success: the relentless reminder that the ultimate outcome of war is not the victory of one side but the dissolution of form. [...] In *Under Fire* there is almost no development in terms of plot or characterization: the 'slimescape' that is evoked so powerfully impedes narrative progression (60).

The trauma of bodily dissolution in the First World War trenches thus can be said to filter through Céline into the theory of abjection. (62).

## II. Geographies of Sense

A landscape not understood in terms of maps, places and names, but geography as processes of cognition, as subjective and sensuous states of experience, and its relation to literary narrative (73).

The geography of fear is thus registered and represented through a haptic mode of perception: the threat of enclosure and exposure alike produces a sense of space that is felt as volume surrounding the body rather than as surface or distance to be covered (76).

Darkness seems to have acquired substance (78).

The sensation of this sort of artillery fire is not that of sound. You feel it in your ears more than hear it, unless it is only about one hundred yards away.

Lieutenant Chandos of the 2nd Grenadier Guards (quoted in Ellis, *Eye-deep in Hell*, 63)

‘My ear somehow had become attuned, so that as soon as the first sound was heard I knew approximately where the shell would burst.’

Sephen Foot, *Three Lives* (1934).



Pour qualifier cette atmosphère qui se cachait là-dessous, qui maintenant lui fait front, et dans laquelle il lui faut rentrer, il n'y a pas d'hyperbole familière qui soit de trop : « puanteur à couper au couteau, à remuer à la pelle, etc... » Tout ce qu'il peut exister de repoussant, de violemment inacceptable, pour les narines, pour la poitrine, est comme pétri ensemble, baratté ensemble dans cette substance qui ne se prend pas avec les mains, mais qu'on n'ose plus appeler de l'air. Il y a là-dedans, à saturation, de l'haleine pourrie, de la fermentation d'intestins, du concentré de chien mouillé ; il y a de la botte de gendarme, de la vieille pipe ; même de la sale friture de fortifs, et des vestiges de suicide au charbon de bois.

(Jules Romains, *Verdun*, chapitre IX : « Clanricard à Vauquois »)

When we combine these facts with his racial and cultural difference, we realise that the war writings of this sensitive and immensely gifted young man would be very different from that of the middle-class English officer-poet. (89).

‘You know how earnestly one must wait on ideas, (you cannot coax real ones to you) and let as it were, a skin grow naturally round and through them.’ [...]

When the ideas come ‘hot’, the artist must ‘seize them with the skin in tatters raw, crude, in some parts beautiful in others monstrous’.

Rosenberg, letter to E. Marsh, 4 August 1916.

## PART II: INTIMACIES

### III. 'Kiss me, Hardy': The Dying Kiss in First World War Trenches

As we arrived at the barn-door he said, 'Just a moment, Frank, before we go in I've something else to give you, – put that light out.' I put the lamp out and into my pocket, wondering what was coming. Then I felt an arm round my neck and the dear lad kissed me once – 'that's from Evelyn' [Cocker's fiancée] he said; then he kissed me again and said, 'that's from your Mother.' I returned his tender salute and said, 'that's from me.' There we were, two men, like a couple of girls, – but then, there was no one about, and the matter was a sacred one between us, – and you.

Lieutenant Franck Cocker, 'Papers', IWM 82/11/1.



Soldier and sailor brothers greeting each other on leave in front of their parent's house. 1916.

Following the logic of the sentence, if 'sacred' is taken to be a Freudian slip for 'secret', the moment hovers curiously between the sacrosanct and the furtive. [...] Situated between a radical innocence and a transgressive thrill, the exchange mirrors a moment of epistemological crisis in the interlocked histories of sexuality, gender and gesture at a crucial moment in modernist history and culture. (110)

In the trenches of WWI, the norms of tactile contact between men changed profoundly. Mutilation and mortality, loneliness and boredom, the strain of constant bombardment, the breakdown of language and the sense of alienation from home led to a new level of intimacy and intensity under which the carefully constructed mores of civilian society broke down. (111)



A new world of largely non-genital tactile tenderness was opening up in which pity, thrill, affection and eroticism are fused and confused depending on the circumstances, degrees of knowledge, normative practices and sexual orientations (114).

Pour comprendre comment l'individu moderne pouvait faire l'expérience de lui-même comme sujet d'une «sexualité», il était indispensable de dégager auparavant la façon dont, pendant des siècles, l'homme occidental avait été amené à se reconnaître comme sujet de désir.

Michel Foucault, *L'Histoire de la sexualité*, volume II : « L'usage des plaisirs », Paris : Gallimard, 1984, note 25, 11-12.

As I stepped over one of the Germans an impulse made me lift him up from the miserable ditch. Propped against the bank, his blond face was undisfigured, except by the mud which I wiped from his eyes and mouth with my coat sleeve.

Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930; London: Faber, 1997), 57.

Sharing everything, down to the last cigarette end, the last army biscuit, the last bit of cover under an enemy bombardment, can you wonder when I say we almost loved each other. [...] I well remember on one occasion when I was sickly, how old Petch tried to nurse me . . . taking care to tuck me in as a mother would a child.

W.A. Quinton, 'Memoirs', IWM, 79/35/1, 56

‘The aestheticisation of the male body and eroticization of male experience [...] might result from the effort to find a suitable poetic language to articulate the specificity of war experiences.

[...]

Having challenged the centrality of desire as the structuring principle of heterosexual civilian society, most poets would nonetheless draw on a rhetoric of desire – yet the constant effort to evoke another experience is perceptible in their language and suggests a different kind of relationship (130).



## **IV. Wilfred Owen and the Sense of Touch**

## **PART III: WOUNDS**

### **V. 'The Impotence of Sympathy'**

Very busy. Amp. Of rt arm. (Turk died a few hrs later) Amp left leg. Spinal Anaesthetic. Amp rt leg. Spinal Anaesthetic. Turk quite happy, smoked a cig. all the time they were sawing off his leg.

M. A. Brown, 'Diary', IWM, 88/7/1.

Such moments occur obsessively in the nurses' writings, as if the hand was doomed to a compulsion to repeat the experiences from which it most shuddered (176).

I have dared to dedicate these pages to the Poilus who passed through our hands during the war, because I believe they would recognize the dimmed reality reflected in these pictures. But the book is not meant for them. They know, not only everything that is contained in it, but all the rest that can never be written.

Mary Borden, *The Forbidden Zone* (London: William Heinemann, 1929),  
Preface.

Gender that excluded women from battle also threatened to bar them from a full understanding of the male ordeal. While the act of ‘witnessing’ suggests a certain degree of exteriority and detachment, the idea of ‘service’ is of the order of action and participation. These two categories are conflated in the nurses’ ‘testament’: these memoirs become a covenant between marginality and intimacy. These two senses – of at once being at the periphery and at the centre – are the twin forces driving the nurses’ narratives. [...] Both the alienation and the agony spring also from witnessing the actual debris of the male body at hand, from a realisation of the gap between the witness and the body in pain (188).

Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language. [...] Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned.

Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (1985) 5,4.

The pain of one creature cannot continue to have a meaning for another. It is almost impossible to nurse a man well whose pain you do not imagine. A deadlock.

Enid Bagnold, *A Diary Without Dates* (1918) 88.

I think that woman, myself, must have been in a trance, or under some horrid spell. Her feet are lumps of fire, her face is clammy, her apron is splashed with blood; but she moves ceaselessly about with bright burning eyes and handles the dreadful wreckage of men as if in a dream.

Mary Borden, *The Forbidden Zone* (1929), 60.

Having become, at last, the complete automaton, moving like a sleep-walker through the calm atmosphere of Millbank, I was no longer capable of either enthusiasm or fear. [...] With the ending of apprehension had come a deep, nullifying blankness, a sense of walking in a thick mist which hid all sights and muffled all sounds.

Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth* (1933), 458.

What interests me, in the context of the nurses, is not what is forgotten but what is *remembered*: the ways in which the astonishingly detailed description of wounds can help us to understand – or can even be interpreted as a function of – a particular relation between trauma and witnessing, and may point us to a different form of memory and narrative (197).

## **VI. The Operating Theatre**



Whose wounds are the nurses going to write about : the physical wounds they are bound to as duty, or their own mental wounds which seem to lose significance in comparison? How can they write about experiences that above all efface their own subjectivities, reduce them to a cipher: 'ghost of a woman'? There is thus a basic ethical and epistemological problem in testifying to another's wounds (226).

Touching the wounds of soldiers is the most intimate way of body-witnessing history, witnessing in and through exposed flesh; repairing the wounds marks the female body with the knowledge of actually shaping that history though its underside is often helplessness and trauma. If wounding and pain cannot possibly be shared, the WWI nurses repeatedly dwell on acute body memories and knowledge to establish almost a *physical continuum, a bodily bridge, as it were, over an ontological impossibility* (227).

For all the now conventional scepticism about knowledge and representation, in reading the nurses' memoirs, we tighten, we crack, for in some obscure way that goes beyond literary affect, our bodies are touched (228).