

Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Modern Warfare

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In recent years the field of modern history has been enriched by the exploration of two parallel histories. These are the social and cultural history of armed conflict, and the impact of military events on social and cultural history.

Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Modern Warfare

intends to present the fruits of this growing area of research, reflecting both the colonization of military history by cultural historians, and the reciprocal interest of military historians in social and cultural history, to the benefit of both. The series will reflect the latest scholarship in European and non-European events from the 1850s to the present day.

Titles in the series

1 *Sites of memory, sites of mourning*

The Great War in European cultural history

Jay Winter

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JAY WINTER

Pembroke College, Cambridge

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Abbreviations

ADV	Archives départementales des Vosges
AFC	<i>L'art funéraire et commémoratif</i>
AIF	Australian Imperial Force
AN	Archives nationales
ARAC	Association Républicaine des Anciens Combattants
AWM	Australian War Memorial
BDIC	Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine
BEF	British Expeditionary Force
BN	Bibliothèque Nationale
CIAMAC	International Conference of Associations of War Wounded and War Veterans
IWM	Imperial War Museum
RCPA	Red Cross papers, Adelaide
RCPC	Red Cross papers, Canberra
WP	Wakeman papers, Imperial War Museum

Introduction

The history of the Great War is a subject of perennial fascination. In some ways the end of the twentieth century appears disturbingly close to its beginnings. We have witnessed recently the collapse of elements of the European state system and the ideological and geo-political divide which grew out of the 1914–18 conflict. The end of the 'Cold War' has brought us back not to 1939 or 1945, but in a sense to 1914. Ethnic and nationalist splits that seemed past history are painfully present today.

In other ways the chequered recent history of European integration makes even clearer the need to recall the bloody history of European disintegration. If we want to understand and ultimately to put behind us the cataclysmic record of European history in this century, we must revisit the war that set in motion these enduring centrifugal and centripetal forces, propelling us away from and towards a unified Europe.

In some respects, this historical terrain is very familiar. Whole libraries exist on the military, economic, and diplomatic history of the period. Less attention has been paid, though, to the process whereby Europeans tried to find ways to comprehend and then to transcend the catastrophes of the war. The many sites of memory and sites of mourning, both public and private, created in the wake of the conflict have never been analysed in a comparative framework. It is to these sites that we turn in this book.

Remembrance is part of the landscape. Anyone who walks through northern France or Flanders will find traces of the terrible, almost unimaginable, human losses of the war, and of efforts to commemorate the fallen. War memorials dot the countryside, in cities, towns, and villages, in market squares, churchyards, schools, and obscure corners of hillsides and fields. Scattered throughout the region are larger sites of memory: the cemeteries of Verdun, the Marne, Passchendaele, and the Somme.

Contemporaries knew these names and the terrible events that happened there all too well. The history of bereavement was universal history during and immediately after the Great War in France, Britain, and Germany. In the military service of these three countries alone,

more than 4 million men died, or roughly one in six of those who served. This figure represents nearly half the total death toll in the then bloodiest war in history.¹ Among the major combatants, it is not an exaggeration to suggest that every family was in mourning: most for a relative – a father, a son, a brother, a husband – others for a friend, a colleague, a lover, a companion.

Transcendence was a privilege, not a commonplace experience. To remember the anxiety of 1,500 days of war necessarily entailed how to forget; in the interwar years those who couldn't obliterate the nightmares were locked in mental asylums throughout Europe. Most people were luckier. They knew both remembering and forgetting, and by living through both, they had at least the chance to transcend the terrible losses of war. This book is about aspects of that process.

In the years following the war, in the face of the army of the dead, the effort to commemorate went beyond the conventional shibboleths of patriotism. Yes, these millions died for their country, but to say so was merely to begin, not to conclude, the search for the 'meaning' of the unprecedented slaughter of the Great War. Even to pose that question was bound to be appallingly difficult; full of ambivalence and confusion, charged with tentativeness and more than a fragment of futility. But that search went on in all the major combatant countries from the first months of the war.

The 'traditional' and the 'modern'

Current interpretations of the cultural history of the Great War focus on two basic components of that process of understanding. The first is encapsulated in the term 'modern memory'.² It describes the creation of a new language of truth-telling about war in poetry, prose, and the visual arts. 'Modernism',³ thus defined, was a cultural phenomenon, the work of elites whose legacy has touched millions. It had sources in the pre-war period, but flowered during and after the 1914–18 conflict. As Samuel Hynes has argued, the war turned back the clock on cultural experimentation at home. But at the same time, soldier-writers brought the 'aesthetics of direct experience' to bear on imagining the war in a way far removed from the 'lies' or 'Big Words' of the older generation which sent them to fight and die in France and Flanders. Their vision paralleled that of the non-combatant modernists – Eliot, Pound, Joyce – whose break with literary tradition seemed so valid after the upheaval of the war.⁴

The second way of understanding the war entails what many modernists rejected: patriotic certainties, 'high diction'⁵ incorporating euphemisms about battle, 'glory', and the 'hallowed dead', in sum, the sentimentality and lies of wartime propaganda. Some modernists,

notably the Italian futurists, struck nationalist poses during the war; most were more ambivalent about the war. But the power of patriotic appeals derived from the fact that they were distilled from a set of what may be called 'traditional values' – classical, romantic, or religious images and ideas widely disseminated in both elite and popular culture before and during the war. It is this set of values and the languages in which they were expressed which I call the 'traditional' approach to imagining war.⁶

Of course, both the 'modernist' and the 'traditional' forms of imagining the war were evident long before the Armistice. Furthermore, the distinction was at times more rhetorical than real. Modernists didn't obliterate traditions; they stretched, explored, and reconfigured them in ways that alarmed conventional artists, writers, and the public at large. Frequently that shock to the cautious was part of the programme of modernist art and literature,⁷ but it is important to bear in mind the continuing affinities between avant-garde artists and mainstream styles and modes of thought.⁸

This book attempts to go beyond the cultural history of the Great War as a phase in the onward ascent of modernism. This now fashionable and widely accepted interpretation will not stand scrutiny, primarily for two reasons. First, the rupture of 1914–18 was much less complete than previous scholars have suggested. The overlap of languages and approaches between the old and the new, the 'traditional' and the 'modern', the conservative and the iconoclastic, was apparent both during and after the war. The ongoing dialogue and exchange among artists and their public, between those who self-consciously returned to nineteenth-century forms and themes and those who sought to supersede them, makes the history of modernism much more complicated than a simple, linear divide between 'old' and 'new' might suggest.

Secondly, though, the identification of the 'modern' positively with abstraction, symbolic representation, and an architectural exploration of the logical foundations of art, and negatively through its opposition to figurative, representational, 'illusionist', naturalistic, romantic, or descriptive styles in painting and sculpture,⁹ is so much a part of cultural history, that it is almost impious to question it. But question it we must. What is at issue is both whether such a distinction is accurate and whether it contributes to an understanding of the cultural consequences of the Great War. On both counts, I dissent from the 'modernist' school.

Equally sacrosanct is the view that there was a 'modernist' moment in literary history, beginning in the 1860s, maturing before 1914, but coming of age after the Great War.¹⁰ 'Modernism', one literary scholar tells us, 'is part of the historical process by which the arts have dissociated themselves from nineteenth-century assumptions, which

had come in the course of time to seem like dead conventions.' In this process, the war of 1914–18 had both a crystallizing and a hastening effect.¹¹ A second literary historian has added: 'The Great War created one world by freeing us from that old one.'¹² A third view is that the war 'uncovered' the 'decay' of Edwardian values,¹³ and helped provoke a rejection of what had gone before, 'two gross of broken statues', 'a few thousand battered books', the cultural artefacts of what Pound called 'an old bitch gone in the teeth', 'a botched civilization'.¹⁴

The iconoclastic element in 'modernism', 'a rage against prevalent traditions',¹⁵ is taken frequently as its chief defining feature. Artist and audience are separated at times by an almost unbridgeable gulf. Gone is the comfort of conventional art and literature, for example, the safe, sentimental narrative of Dickens' prose or the warm embrace of the yellows and greens in Monet's water lilies. In its place are the harsher disciplines and forms of Joyce and Picasso, and the paradoxical, esoteric, fractured images of a host of their contemporaries.¹⁶ They offered, in the words of T.S. Eliot, 'something stricter' than conventional art, as a means 'of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history'. Eliot wrote this essay in 1923, a year after the publication of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. In that work, Stephen Dedalus 'complains that history is a nightmare from which he is trying to awake'.¹⁷ In the same spirit, two critics writing in the 1970s argued that 'Modernism is our art; it is the one art that responds to the scenario of our chaos' defined in many ways, but marked indelibly by 'the destruction of civilization and reason in the First World War'.¹⁸ Once again, this book offers a dissenting point of view on these widely held convictions about the location of the 1914–18 war within European cultural history.

That some aspects of twentieth-century art and literature are revolutionary goes without saying. It seems equally inoffensive to identify modernism as both an 'aesthetic project' – an exploration of the foundations of art – and a 'cultural force' – a critical and powerful commentary on contemporary events.¹⁹ What is more difficult to accept is that 'modernism' – more a temperament than a set of fixed beliefs – left behind as neatly and surgically as some scholars suggest the host of images and conventions derived from eighteenth and nineteenth-century religious, romantic, or classical traditions.²⁰ Furthermore, those outside the 'modernist' canon, whose work I shall explore in later chapters – Kipling, Lutyens, Käthe Kollwitz – were hardly as banal and barren of innovation as this argument has it. Lutyens' Cenotaph was described by one champion of modernism as 'derivative popular modern architectural sculpture. Not being an original work it has no intrinsic value'.²¹

It is the very teleology of this position – the search for precursors or exponents of what later critics have admired or rejected – which makes

the 'modernist' hypothesis about the cultural history of the early twentieth century just as misleading as other tendentious interpretations of recent or not so recent history. To array the past in such a way is to invite distortion by losing a sense of its messiness, its non-linearity, its vigorous and stubbornly visible incompatibilities.

The history of the Great War and its aftermath is full of them, and one purpose of this book is to go beyond the so-called modernist/traditionalist divide to a more sophisticated appreciation of the way Europeans imagined the war and its terrible consequences. I do so by concentrating primarily on aspects of one particular theme in the cultural history of the war: the theme of mourning and its private and public expression.

Tradition and the mediation of bereavement

The Great War brought the search for an appropriate language of loss to the centre of cultural and political life.²² In this search, older motifs took on new meanings and new forms. Some derived them from classical strophes. Others explicitly elaborated religious motifs, or explored romantic forms. This vigorous mining of eighteenth and nineteenth-century images and metaphors to accommodate expressions of mourning is one central reason why it is unacceptable to see the Great War as the moment when 'modern memory' replaced something else, something timeworn and discredited, which (following contemporaries) I have called 'tradition'.

It is the fundamental argument of this book that the enduring appeal of many traditional motifs – defined as an eclectic set of classical, romantic, or religious images and ideas – is directly related to the universality of bereavement in the Europe of the Great War and its aftermath. The strength of what may be termed 'traditional' forms in social and cultural life, in art, poetry, and ritual, lay in their power to mediate bereavement. The cutting edge of 'modern memory', its multi-faceted sense of dislocation, paradox, and the ironic, could express anger and despair, and did so in enduring ways; it was melancholic, but it could not heal.²³ Traditional modes of seeing the war, while at times less challenging intellectually or philosophically, provided a way of remembering which enabled the bereaved to live with their losses, and perhaps to leave them behind. *Can you substantiate this? Can you know which artifacts successfully enabled many, seeing the war and which engendered healing?*

Catastrophe and consolation

There is no alternative to starting with the palpable shock of the catastrophe of the war. I begin with a scene from the 1919 Abel Gance

film *J'accuse*, in which the dead arise and return home to see if their sacrifice has been in vain. This terrifying metaphor had an all too material reality. The question of finding the dead, gathering their remains in cemeteries or bringing them home, was posed in all combatant countries and answered in very different ways. Some of those answers are addressed in chapters 2–4, where we follow those in mourning from the shock of discovery, through the painful effort to understand what had happened, to the acceptance of their loss.

I begin with the families that suffered the losses, and with the multiple forms of associational life which had as their focus the commemoration of the dead and assistance to those they had left behind. I then consider the history of spiritualism – a reaching out of the living towards the dead, and metaphorically of the dead towards the living – which spread rapidly in this period. Then I turn to the history of war memorials, both during the war and in its aftermath, both at home and in military cemeteries.

Almost all towns and villages in the major European combatant countries were, in another sense, communities of the bereaved. Primary mourners – those directly related to the men who died in the war – numbered in the tens of millions. The construction, dedication, and repeated pilgrimages to war memorials in the interwar years provided a ritual expression of their bereavement, and that of their local communities. The grief of widows, orphans, parents, friends was 'seen' at the annual commemorative ceremonies, and, to a degree we will never know, their loss was shared by their neighbours and friends. Community here had a very local character, some of whose rich variety I discuss in chapter 4.

There is considerable evidence of the power of traditional modes of commemoration within communities, from small groups of men and women in family circles, to séances, to those gathered in more conventional forms of religious worship, to universities, ex-servicemen's associations, widows' organizations, to communities unveiling war memorials, and finally, to the 'imagined community' of the nation itself.²⁴ How to accept the shock of the war, how to remember the 'Lost Generation', were questions with disturbing communal and political repercussions; and in this part of the book I examine ways in which different groups of people tried to answer them.

The history of mourning discloses much about social solidarities in the wake of the war. Yes, in some ways, the Great War brought brutality into the centre of social life. But brutalization was not the only or even the dominant response in many quarters. Compassion was there too, and deserves to be recognized as an essential component in the process of recovery from the war.²⁵

Cultural codes and languages of mourning

In the second part of the book, I explore a number of ways in which the search for a language of mourning went on during and after the Great War. The evidence presented deals primarily with Britain, France, and Germany. Chapter 5 locates the cinematic visions of war, with which the book started, in an older tradition of popular religious art. I examine film as a language of aesthetic redemption, and present what was, for the time, a very modern, cinematic way of 'seeing' the dead. Here the most 'modern' techniques are used to present ancient motifs and images about sacrifice, death, and resurrection.

Gance's film is a remarkable mixture of two visions of war: the first is full of conventional romanticism; the second supersedes it by imagining the Apocalypse. I find in this film two facets of the romantic temperament confronting the problem of mourning the dead of the Great War. In the fifth and sixth chapters I trace these responses, initially, through the self-conscious naiveté of the French graphic art tradition of *l'imagerie d'Épinal* and similar modes of expression drawing on popular piety and religion; and then, through the apocalyptic visions of artists who reflected on the war and who, in very different ways, resurrected the dead.

I then approach the problem of the search for appropriate languages of mourning from other perspectives: those of war literature, in fiction, plays, and poetry. Here too 'seeing' the war meant more a return to older patterns and themes than the creation of new ones. Among the most powerful was the reformulation of the sacred, as an exploration of apocalyptic themes in prose, or as a poetic language of communication about and with the dead.

Aspects of cultural history: the Great War in the twentieth century

My primary aim here is to explore the complex impact of the 1914–18 war on European cultural history by focusing on one and only one central theme: the form and content of mourning for the dead of the Great War. I make no claim to present a *tour d'horizon* of the effect of the Great War on systems of representation of gender, social groups, or nations.²⁶ It would also be misleading to assert that I have presented a comprehensive history of mourning practices in Britain, France, and Germany. Such a task is beyond the scope of this inquiry.²⁷

Instead I take the reader on a journey past a number of 'sites of memory'. The physical, emotional, and artistic artefacts we pass testify to the catastrophic character of the Great War and to the multifaceted effort of the survivors to understand what had happened both to their

lives and to those who had died in the war. These facets of cultural history are no more than that: they are neither representative nor exhaustive; instead they are meant to suggest the dimensions of the disaster and the search for a language within which to try to find some meaning in it. My claim is that many were still able to do so after the Great War; the task was infinitely harder after 1945.

I have reformulated the question to what extent was the Great War a moment of discontinuity in cultural history, by reference to the history of bereavement. My emphasis is on the enduring character of what I have termed 'traditional' languages of mourning. But I recognize as equally true that the 1914-18 war was, if not the end of one phase of European cultural history, at least the beginning of the end. In contrast to the post-1918 period, the rupture of language and imagery which followed the Second World War was profound and enduring.

Continuities and discontinuities: 1939 and 1914

This book has focused on continuities in the cultural history of three combatant countries in the period surrounding the Great War: Britain, France, and Germany. But even in these three cases, by no means all 'traditional' languages survived the 1914-18 war and its aftermath intact. Slowly but surely, expressions of patriotism, or inhumanly idealized images of combat, suffering, and death as 'glory', began to fade away. It is true that, because of the 1914-18 conflict and popular understanding of its costs and uncertain outcome, the outbreak of war in 1939 was not greeted with patriotic bravado. Partly this was a result of the newsreels of the 1930s, and the knowledge, drawn from the Spanish Civil War, they spread about air raids and civilian casualties. But as Samuel Hynes has shown, by the 1930s the 'Big Words' - duty, honour, country - had a hollow ring for many people who had never read the war poets. The Dean of Durham, Hensley Henson, noted that clerical patriotism had to be muted in 1939; the patriotic lexicon of 1914 could no longer be used in the same way as before. Romantic notions about war did indeed take a battering during the 1914-18 war, and some wartime and postwar literature helped to discredit them further.

Nevertheless, in 1939 war could still be justified. What had changed in Western European culture was that the days of its glorification were over.²⁸ Whatever was true in Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and (after June 1941) the Soviet Union, the rest of European society greeted war as the abomination that it was.

The men and women who went to war in 1939 knew more about the cruelties of modern warfare than did the generation of 1914. They enlisted or supported the men in uniform without much patriotic fanfare, in part because they felt they had no other choice. But when the

time came to mourn fallen soldiers, many of the survivors tried to use the sombre languages and forms which derived from the memory of the Great War. After 1945 the names of the fallen were added to communal war memorials, and in Britain it is the poetry of the 1914-18 war which is still intoned to recall the 'Lost Generation' of both world conflicts.

1945 and after

There is a sense in which the dead of the two world wars formed one community of the fallen. But in time both the political character of the Second World War and some of its horrific consequences made it impossible for many survivors to return to the languages of mourning which grew out of the 1914-18 war when they tried to express their sense of loss after 1945.

The sources of this rupture are not hard to find. Many of the commemorative forms created after 1918 were intended to warn; when the warning was not heard, when the Nazis forced war upon reluctant Western European democracies in 1939, that message of hope, of using the witness of those who had suffered during the war to prevent its recurrence, was bound to fade away.²⁹

Warfare too had changed. In the 1939-45 conflict, more than half of the approximately 50 million people who died directly as a result of hostilities were civilians; and the ways millions of innocent people perished were new. The nuclear bombardment of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was new. So was the extermination of the Jews of Europe, an act with affinities to earlier mass atrocities, but which transcended them in method, character, and scale. Both of these catastrophes raised the possibility that the limits of language had been reached; perhaps there was no way adequately to express the hideousness and scale of the cruelties of the 1939-45 war.³⁰

Those doubts were present both during and after the Great War, but a host of writers, sculptors, poets, and others stilled them - at least for a time - to create some enduring works of art and monuments to those who died in war. After Hiroshima and Auschwitz, the earlier commemorative effort simply could not be duplicated. As Julia Kristeva has observed, the Second World War undermined the very symbols through which meaning - any meaning - could be attached to the 'cataclysm' of war.³¹

The Second World War helped to put an end to the rich set of traditional languages of commemoration and mourning which flourished after the Great War. Before 1939, before the Death Camps, and the thermonuclear cloud, most men and women were still able to reach back into their 'traditional' cultural heritage to express amazement and anger, bewilderment and compassion, in the face of war and the losses it

brought in its wake. If this book has drawn attention to their achievement, so human and so sad, then in part it will have realized its aim.

Towards a comparative cultural history of the Great War

A few words may be useful at this point to indicate the principles of selection and presentation of evidence used in this book. Cultural history suffers from two different problems. The first is that it tends towards eclecticism. Instances are chosen at random to indicate features of cultural life, without any attempt to establish significance or affinities. The second is too narrow a focus on canonical texts, the works of 'high culture' which, in an older Germanic tradition, are said to describe the 'spirit' of the age.

This study tries to avoid the scattered approach of eclecticism and the too-restrictive approach of *Geistesgeschichte* through an exploration of the comparative method. In other words, each chapter examines a theme in cultural history, based on evidence drawn whenever possible from all three countries' histories. Evidence has been selected to highlight comparative points, either with respect to national peculiarities or to cultural convergences. Where relevant, the history of non-European combatant countries forms part of the story.

The comparative approach is the only way to break out of cultural history limited by national perspectives. The rise of Hitler and a set of methodological problems stated by Max Weber at the turn of the century still dominate the agenda of German cultural history. In France, what might be described as the civic culture of the Third Republic is the focus of much important research. Here the study of *Les lieux de mémoire*, a seven-volume library of cultural history edited by Pierre Nora, is entirely restricted to French evidence.³² Incidents and artefacts are analysed with respect and affection in the search for some ineffable quality called 'Frenchness'. A certain antiquarian and reverential tone dominates this work, which abjures any attempt at systematic analysis or even assortment of the cornucopia of images and texts so lavishly presented. Much of this work is original; some brilliant; and in the *Annales* tradition, Pierre Nora and his colleagues have helped to expand further the range of evidence which historians must consult. I have gained much from this extraordinary project, but my 'sites of memory' are other than Nora's. First, they are international; secondly, they are comparative; thirdly, they are there for their value in answering specific historical questions related to the cultural consequences of the 1914-18 war. That is why my 'sites of memory' are also 'sites of mourning'.

Note too that this book makes no pretence as to the exhaustiveness of the material presented on this vast subject. We cannot visit the sites of memory in several lifetimes. Instead this journey through the cultural

history of Europe in the early twentieth century stops at places which tell us about the common history of mourning, which is inextricably linked with the common history of war.

National styles have limited the usefulness of much Anglo-American research as well. Many of the pioneering studies on modernism in literature are based primarily on British sources or on North American literary theory. The work of Northrop Frye, for example, has been profoundly important in this field.³³ The problem remains, though, that interpretations of 'modern memory' – as global a term as one can find – are rarely examined in a comparative perspective. Once this is done, the distorting effects of a narrowly national approach become apparent.

The exploration of mourning and remembrance during and after the Great War discloses striking convergences in the experience of loss and the search for meaning in all combatant countries. For this reason, this book ends with some thoughts on a sketch by Paul Klee, entitled *Angelus Novus*. The drawing grew out of a caricature of Kaiser Wilhelm II as the 'iron eater'. But Klee's search for the meaning of history did not end with this national stereotype. Instead, he transformed the image into the angel of history, a transcendental figure whose gaze embraces us all.³⁴ The *Angelus Novus* evokes our admiration for Klee's genius. Perhaps his angel can also encourage us to accept his challenge: the challenge to leave behind national boundaries and to keep searching beyond them.

Homecomings: the return of the dead

The army of the dead

Let us begin with one of the most powerful and haunting visions of the Great War. It is the final sequence of Abel Gance's film *J'accuse*, made in 1918–19. The hero, Jean Diaz, a wounded soldier-poet, begins to lose his mind. He escapes from hospital, and reaches his village. There he summons the villagers and tells them of a dream. The dream as we see it starts in a battlefield graveyard with wooden crosses all askew. A huge black cloud rises behind it and, magically, ghostlike figures emerge from the ground. They are wrapped in tattered bandages, some limping, some blind walking with upraised arms, some stumbling like Frankenstein's monster. They leave the battlefield and walk down the rural lanes of France to their villages. Their aim is to see if their sacrifices had been in vain. What they find is the pettiness of civilian life, the advantage being taken of soldiers' businesses, the infidelity of their wives. The sight of the fallen so terrifies the townspeople that they immediately mend their ways, and the dead return to their graves, their mission fulfilled. After recounting this dream, the poet, now totally mad, accuses the sun above of standing idly by and watching the war go on. Then he dies.¹

This sequence of the dead rising from their graves is one of the great scenes of the early cinema. Its force is made even more poignant when we realize that most of the men we see on the screen were actual French soldiers lent to Gance by the French army to play in this film. Gance's assistant in this film was the poet Blaise Cendrars, a Swiss-born veteran of the French Foreign Legion who lost his right arm fighting with the Legion's 'Moroccan Division' in Champagne in September 1915.² He can be seen clearly, the bandages around his stump unravelling, leaning on the shoulder of Jean Diaz, played by Severin Mars. Cendrars survived, but many of the soldiers in earlier scenes of Gance's film had returned to the front in the last months of the war and had been killed. Gance himself noted that some of those playing the dead in his film soon became the dead. Representation and reality had become one.³



1. Before the Dead arise, in a scene from the film *J'accuse* (1919)



2. The Return of the Dead, in a scene from the film *J'accuse* (1919). Cendrars is in the centre, leaning on Severin Mars.

This terrifying and profoundly moving moment, when on film the dead came home to judge the living, is unlike any other in the history of wartime propaganda. At the very end of the 1914–18 conflict, Gance's film brought to the cinema a vision of war in which the dead were the central figures. This is what turned it from a celebration of patriotic certainties into the exploration of eternal themes of love, death, and redemption.

Gance returned to the theme of the resurrection of the dead of the Great War in his second version of *J'accuse*, made in 1937. This time the hero, once more called Jean Diaz, is the sole survivor of his unit, the 'Death Patrol', sent out near Mort-Homme at Verdun on a pointless mission on the last day of the war in 1918. Only his moans save him from being buried with his comrades, who died for nothing. In effect, Diaz rises from the dead to be their spokesman, their emissary to those who don't know what war is.

Diaz is a scientist who works in a glass factory. To prevent another war, he invents an impenetrable form of armour, 'steel glass' so powerful that it would make war impossible. He keeps it as his secret weapon against war, but alas, it is stolen by a venal ex-serviceman and pillar of the *anciens combattants*, and put into the military arsenals of the day. The only way the hero can stop the outbreak of war is to go back to Verdun and raise the dead of the Great War from their graves. In a scene of epic grandeur, he gathers up the storm clouds at the vast military cemetery at Douaumont, and recalls the dead of all armies from their eternal sleep: 'My twelve million friends killed in the war, I call you.' They rise and terrify the populations of Europe into forming a world government and putting an end to war for ever. But before this happens, evil and fear still fester. Diaz's Christlike mission ends, as it must, in his death, burned at the stake – appropriately at the foot of a war memorial – by the ignorant masses who failed to see that war must never happen again. This last sacrifice, preceding the final triumph of peace, took place at Douaumont, near Verdun, where the hero had fought and had nearly died two decades before.

Gance's apocalyptic reveries are celebrated moments in the history of the cinema. His images of the return of the fallen were far from unique, though very few who worked in film so powerfully captured the almost unendurable sense of mass death in war which pervaded European society from 1914. That cloud of grief, and its expression in European culture, are the subject of this book.

I want to sketch some of the ways in which Europeans imagined the postwar world as composed of survivors perched on a mountain of corpses. How to relate to the fact of mass death, how to transcend its brutal separations and cruelties, were universal dilemmas. How artists, politicians, soldiers, and ordinary people understood them, imagined

them, dreamed about them, feared them, tells us much about the cultural consequences of the Great War.

Death of a poet

To start with Gance's *J'accuse* is to bring to the fore the theme of the return of the dead, a return longed for, dreamed of, dreaded, and both physically and symbolically realized in many parts of Europe after the Great War. The context of the film and the powerful notions it evoked are, therefore, much broader than may be apparent at first sight. As in the work of many other artists, Gance's power derived from his ability to express sentiments about the tragedy of the war shared by millions of his contemporaries.

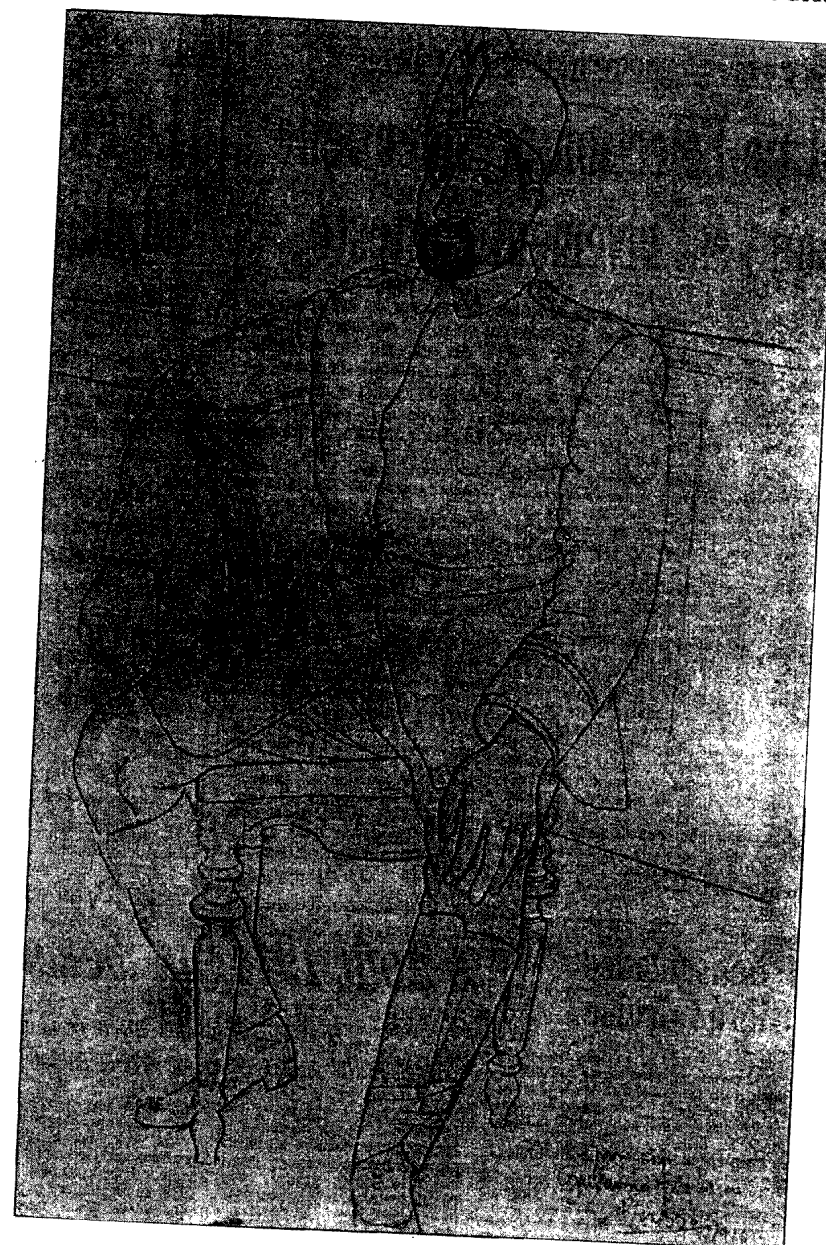
The filmic art of Abel Gance touched on a theme, the return of the dead, which transformed melodrama into myth. I am primarily interested in the way that myth emerged during the Great War, and the subsequent forms in which it was expressed. But the events surrounding the making of *J'accuse* in 1918 also shed light on other key issues in the cultural history of the war. Among them is the often cited impact of war on the emergence of 'modernism', however defined.

It is my contention that the war gave a new lease of life to a number of traditional languages expressed both conventionally and in unusual and modern forms. One such form was cinema, the most modern vehicle for the delivery to mass audiences of timeless messages.

The false antithesis of the 'moderns' and the 'ancients' was a theme well known to contemporary experimental avant-garde artists. Among them was the poet Guillaume Apollinaire. He is in *J'accuse*, amongst the dead, though not by name. Born Wilhelm de Kostrowitsky, of mixed Italian and Polish Catholic ancestry, Apollinaire (as he became known) was one of the great avant-garde poets of the pre-war years. He introduced Braque to Picasso in 1907, and spent years announcing the virtues of cubism. He was a young rebel, but not the enemy of tradition. A volunteer in 1914, and rewarded later with French citizenship, he was wounded in the head in 1916. In the poem 'La jolie rousse' ('the pretty redhead'), written after Apollinaire was wounded, he asks his elders for forgiveness for the sins of the young rebels. They are not the enemies of tradition, but exuberant spirits who 'want to bequeath to you vast and strange domains'. He asks not for the downfall of the old, but for its renewal, and above all for pity. He begs those of an older generation to take

Pity on us who are always fighting on the frontiers
Of limitlessness and the future
Pity our mistakes pity our sins⁴

Pity is a word appropriate to the circumstances of Apollinaire's death. After surviving combat, a head wound, trepanning, and military



3. Portrait of Apollinaire, by Picasso (1916)

medicine, Apollinaire was struck down in the last days of the war by the 'Spanish flu'. Blaise Cendrars tells of the poet's death. Cendrars was then in the midst of filming *J'accuse* with Gance in Nice. He went north to Paris to arrange for film clips and other items for the set. There he bumped into Apollinaire on Sunday 3 November 1918. They lunched at Montparnasse and spoke of 'the subject of the day, the epidemic of Spanish flu which had more victims than did the war'. Five days later, Cendrars passed the *concierge* of Apollinaire's building, who told him that his tenant had caught the flu. Cendrars bounded up the stairs, and was met by Apollinaire's wife Jacqueline. She too was ill, but not as bad as her husband, who was 'all black' and still. Cendrars rushed to get a doctor, who said it was too late to help Apollinaire. The following evening, Saturday 9 November, he died.⁵

According to Cendrars, the burial was held on Wednesday 13 November. He has left an unforgettable account of it, one which touches the themes of *J'accuse* in unanticipated ways. Cendrars told an interviewer in 1950 that he was still disturbed by memories of the burial of Apollinaire. For Cendrars, Apollinaire inhabited not the kingdom of the dead, but the kingdom of the shadows.⁶ Why? Because 'I had such an experience at the burial that after 32 years I still have trouble believing that he is dead.' What had happened?

The final absolution having been given, the casket of Apollinaire left the church of St Thomas Aquinas, draped in a flag, Guillaume's lieutenant's helmet on the tricolor, among the flowers and wreaths. A guard of honour, a squad of soldiers, arms at their sides, led the slow convoy, the family behind the carriage, his mother, his wife, in their mourning veils, poor Jacqueline, who had escaped the epidemic which had taken Guillaume, but who was still weak, the intimate friends of Apollinaire, Prince Jaztrebzofov, Serge, his sister, Baron d'Oettingen, Max Jacob, Picasso, all the other friends of Guillaume, including Pierre-Albert Birot and his wife who had given everything to stage *The Breasts of Tiresias* in the Maubel Theatre, all of literary Paris, Paris of the arts, the press. But as it reached the corner of Saint-Germain, the cortège was besieged by a crowd of noisy celebrants of the Armistice, men and women with arms waving, singing, dancing, kissing, shouting deliriously the famous refrain of the end of the war:

No, you don't have to go, Guillaume

No you don't have to go . . .

That was too much. And behind me, I heard the old glories of the end of symbolism, all the 'immortal' poets forgotten today, chattering, discussing the future of poetry, what young poets will do after the death of Apollinaire and rejoicing, as if they had come to celebrate victory in the battle of the Ancients and the Moderns. That was awful and I felt anger, indignation come over me.⁷

Cendrars left the cortège with his lover and future wife Raymone and the soldier-artist Fernand Léger. They had a warm drink to protect themselves against the flu. Then they took a taxi to the cemetery of Père

Lachaise in northeast Paris, only to find that the funeral was over, and Apollinaire's friends were leaving. They asked directions to the grave, and started searching among the headstones. They stumbled into two fresh graves, to the annoyance of the gravediggers. At times they seemed to be in Elsinore, not Paris. They asked the way, but though the gravediggers were decent men, they were of little help:

'You understand, with the flu, with the war, they don't tell us the names of the dead we put in the ground. There are too many.' . . . But I said, he was a Lieutenant, Lieutenant Guillaume Apollinaire or Kostrowitsky. We have to fire a salvo over his tomb! - 'My dear sir', the head of the gravedigging team answered me, 'there were two salves. There were two lieutenants. We don't know which one you are looking for. Look for yourselves.'⁸

They saw a grave with a bit of frozen earth nearby exactly in the shape of Apollinaire's head, with grass for hair around the scar where he had been trepanned. 'The psychisme was so intense, that one did not believe one's eyes.'

We were stunned . . . We left the cemetery, where already a thick glacial mist was enveloping the tombs and the cemetery, and said; 'It was he. We saw him. Apollinaire isn't dead. Soon he will appear. Don't forget what I tell you.'⁹

This surrealistic scene took place near the grave of Allan Kardec, the founder of French spiritualism. Cendrars and the other mourners passed the motto on Kardec's grave. It says: 'To be born, to die, to be born again and to progress without end. That is the law.'

'It was fantastic', Cendrars said. 'Paris celebrating. Apollinaire lost. I was full of melancholy. It was absurd.' He returned to the question which obsessed him: 'Under what mask will Guillaume return to the great celebration in Paris?'¹⁰

Eight days later, Cendrars returned to Nice to complete the work he had begun on Gance's *J'accuse*. He recruited a number of wounded soldiers, known as *les gueules cassées* (the smashed faces) to play the dead in the fourth part of the film, the section on 'The return of the dead'. Then Cendrars joined the dead himself. This is how Cendrars described his work in the final stages of the film:

in *J'accuse*, I did everything: troubleshooter, props, electrician, costume and stage designer, producer, cameraman, assistant director, chauffeur, accountant, cashier and in the scene 'The dead return', I became a Maccabee, covered in horses' blood because I had to lose my arm a second time in the interests of the scene. You know the song:

When Jean Renaud went to war

Holding his guts in his hand . . .

That was cinema!¹¹

The personal impressions Cendrars brought to *J'accuse* were inscribed in a new and revised scenario of the film. In 1922, Gance re-edited it, and

incorporated a powerful image, which went straight to the heart of Cendrars' experience. Gance added a scene which had not happened before the Armistice. On 14 July 1919, a victory parade traversed the Champs Élysées in Paris. Foch, Joffre, Pétain, Clemenceau were there. But leading the way, and changing the entire tone of the occasion were the *mutilés de guerre*. What had started as a victory celebration turned into a sombre moment of mass mourning.¹²

Three years later, Gance took film footage of this event and added another element to it. While the living soldiers defiled through the Arc de Triomphe, the army of the dead marched *above* it, in every sense *au dessus de la mêlée*. Apollinaire had come back, together with a million other men. What Cendrars had seen in Père Lachaise cemetery, what countless men and women had imagined in these immediate postwar years, Gance captured in cinematic form. It is an image to which I shall return.

Homecomings

Gance's film characterized a broad cultural response to the disaster of the Great War. The return of the dead was treated through allegory, metaphor, and allusion. I will sketch some of these figurative approaches in later chapters, but first I want to emphasize that there was a matter-of-fact dimension to this issue, of which everyone touched by the war was aware. The problem was where and how to bury the dead of the war.

The incident surrounding the burial of Guillaume Apollinaire captures the moment. The mix of despair and delirium in the celebration of victory suggests something of the manic, melancholic nature of the Armistice of 1918. Cendrars' sense that a fresh grave somehow resembled Apollinaire's profile, that he wasn't really dead, indicates the power of denial, the retention of hope in a loved one's survival, even if only in metaphoric form. So many others had no known grave that the possibility did indeed exist that they were still alive.¹³ But for most people, such hope faded rapidly, and all that was left was finding and honouring the grave of a loved one. Here too Cendrars' difficulty in finding Apollinaire once in Père Lachaise cemetery paralleled the problems millions had in locating their dead and in making the pilgrimage to their graves.¹⁴

The cultural history of the Great War was not only a matter of representations; real bodies were there in every theatre of military operations. Real friends and families in their millions mourned their loss, and wanted to give them a final, dignified resting place. That task was fraught with difficulty. How it was achieved tells us much about patterns of mourning and remembrance in the aftermath of the war.

By 1918 there were thousands of *ad hoc* cemeteries in northern France and Flanders (and elsewhere), and the remains of millions of dead soldiers, both identified and unknown, were scattered over vast tracts of land. In 1915 the French government agreed to finance the creation of an archipelago of military cemeteries, and to enlarge existing cemeteries at state expense for the burial of soldiers.¹⁵ Initially the French government agreed to look after the burial of Allied soldiers too, but in 1916 the British decided to separate their commemorative work from the French. Initially as the Prince of Wales' Committee for the Maintenance of Military Tombs,¹⁶ later as the Imperial (now Commonwealth) War Graves Commission, a separate organization was formed to deal with the creation of cemeteries to house British, Imperial, and Dominion war dead. With some exceptions, none was to return home.¹⁷

The creation of cemeteries for French war dead was a more complicated matter. Civilian graves were used, and civilian authorities sought compensation for loss of space.¹⁸ The final disposition of the war dead was undecided. They were buried in separate cemeteries, in civilian cemeteries in the 'Zone Rouge' or former combat zone, or – if they had died in hospital behind the lines – in their native villages. Not surprisingly, no decision was taken about policy on war cemeteries before the end of the war; consequently all three types of site were used, with disturbing results.

The sheer chaos of the devastated areas led many bereaved people to call for governments to let them bring their dead home, back to their villages where they could be interred in local cemeteries. This argument was voiced early in the war, but with little success. On 17 October 1914, the Mayor of Mantauban in the Tarn et Garonne, near Bordeaux, forwarded the request of a father in his town who wanted to bring his son's body home. The request was refused. A ship construction merchant from Dunkerque wrote to the Minister of the Interior on 14 February 1915 to ask for permission to exhume his dead son from a common grave in the civilian cemetery at Esternay, near where he had died. His body was clearly identified; thus the bereaved father asked to rebury him in a separate grave until the end of the war. At that time, he would bring his son home, all at his own expense. Permission was denied. At the same time, a bereaved father and mother asked to rebury their son, whose grave they had identified, so that they could conduct a funeral before the body had become 'impossible to identify'. The plea to hear 'la prière d'un père et d'une mère désolés', was refused by the Ministry.¹⁹

Such bureaucratic obstacles were circumvented by less scrupulous people. The Mayor of Florent on the Marne wrote to his prefect about the secret exhumation of the body of a soldier of the 47th Infantry Regiment. The Mayor of Bouchy-le-Repos reported another case of grave-robbing. The Mayor of Compalay told the Prefect of Seine et Marne of the arrival

in July 1919 of one widow Terrouet with the body of her son, who had died in September 1918. She had been helped by a 'Parisian entrepreneur' named Tanguy, who provided transport, exhumation, helped verify identification, placed the body in a coffin, and conducted the bereaved woman and the body of her son back to her village. All for a fee of 2.50 francs per kilometre and a handling charge. Such 'entrepreneurial flair' was recognized as widespread and unscrupulous.²⁰

It was a futile hope that such private enterprise would come to an end at the Armistice. Still, an attempt to bring order to the situation was made soon after the cessation of hostilities. On 24 November 1918, a Commission on Military Cemeteries was created, under the Presidency of General Castelnau, a bereaved father himself. The Commission's charge was to regroup isolated burials, and to create and maintain designated military cemeteries. While this process was under way, for a period of three years, no private exhumations and reburials were to be allowed.²¹

This decision did not end the matter. It simply intensified a long and at times acrimonious debate about the appropriate resting place for the fallen of the Great War. The spokesman for the view that the fallen should remain on the Western Front was Castelnau, Joffre's right-hand man at the outbreak of the war and later commander of the Armies of the East. An anti-Dreyfusard, he was one of the most prominent Catholic traditionalists in the army. He had lost three sons in the war. His view, and that of many other staff officers, was that the dead should rest where they had fallen.²² They had died for that land. It was sanctified by their sacrifice. Some hoped that the eventual return of greenery would create sacred forests, places of pilgrimage for the whole world.²³ 'Don't separate those whom death has united', wrote another advocate of the status quo in 1920.²⁴

These views were held by a minority. Over the next year, hundreds of people, prominent and obscure, from all over France joined in a campaign to bring the dead back home. One reason was to avoid a three-year wait while cemeteries were being built. To tarry, some argued, was to assure misidentification of the dead. On a more emotional level, others decried 'the cruelty of the erection of a new barrier between families and the bodies which belong to them'. After all, 'their sacrifice was made only to reinforce the family ties that bind them to us'.²⁵

In May 1919, these contradictory views were exchanged at a meeting of the Conseil d'Etat. On the one side stood those in favour of letting the dead rest where they had fallen. In De Morey's words:

I think my son must rest among those with whom he fought; he led his men in battle and I want him to remain among his comrades; that the battle will

continue for him, that he be on the frontier and there inspire future generations, in case of a new attack to defend his Country. . . I am convinced that, facing this army of sleeping heroes on the field of battle, the Country will be very profoundly moved.

In cemeteries already built, like Saint-Menehould, one sees the army that saved France; there, under the earth, and each year we will come to render homage where homage is due. Won't this be better, infinitely more beautiful than to scatter the bodies of our heroes in communal cemeteries, where, after one generation, military tombs will not be maintained?

He told his colleagues of a letter from Lady Cecil, who wrote to him that her British son, killed in 1915, 'should remain with his men, asleep in the soil of France, which will become dearer to me because my child is buried there'.²⁶

On the other side of the argument also stood bereaved and distinguished men. Louis Barthou, President of the Conseil d'Etat and soon to be Minister of War under Briand in 1920,²⁷ said: 'I have been told I could have retrieved the body of my son; others have done so' for a fee. But he had refused. He objected to waiting for three years after the end of the war; his son had died in 1914. Why wait seven years before he could properly be laid to rest?²⁸

Castelnau and his colleagues won the day. In June 1919, the Ministry of War forbade all exhumations in the Zone of Military Operations.²⁹ In September 1919, the Ministry of the Interior wrote to all prefects ordering the stamping out of the clandestine traffic in bodies.³⁰

As one might have predicted, such edicts carried little weight with families whose sadness led them to seek comfort even in illegal ways. A change in the government's line was urged from many angles. The journal *L'art funéraire et commémoratif* and its editor Lucien Marie took a leading part in this effort. It may be said ungenerously that memorial artists had a vested interest in bringing the dead home, and indeed alongside appeals to the government to let the dead return were advertisements for the latest tasteful designs for funereal statuary and sculpture. But the views aired in this journal were echoed throughout the country. 'Our sons, no, no, we don't want to leave them there', wrote one obscure father in July 1919,

Though they are dead, we want to remove them from those accursed places in the battlefields. They did their duty. Now we must do ours for them: to let them rest in peace in the cemetery of their ancestors. To abandon them there, is to condemn them to eternal torment.

The war today is over. The living are going home. Let's let the dead return to their villages, to those villages which were in their last thoughts at the tragic moment of their deaths.³¹

Catastrophe and consolation

Others called for 'the demobilization of the dead'³² for religious reasons. French war cemeteries were civic memorials, sanctified by a state which only a decade earlier had formally severed its ties with the Catholic church. For many Catholics, to bring the dead home was to return them to the parish church. In the pages of *L'art funéraire et commémoratif*, Lucien Marie even went so far as to suggest that the reluctance of the Ministry of War to accede to their demands was because some of the responsible officials were Jews. As we all know, he intoned, the Jews were 'the most materialist people on earth, and also the people with the least developed cult of the dead'.³³

It would be a mistake, though, to locate this agitation solely on the extreme right. Very respectable centrist groups and individuals subscribed to it as well. 'Return to families the remains of our heroes', wrote the editor of *Souvenir et fraternité*, the journal of the National Union of the Families of the Dead of the Great War.³⁴ He had the support of the Union of Fathers and Mothers of those who Died for their Country, an association of eminent Parisian politicians, scholars, and other public figures, whose meetings were held regularly at the Panthéon from 1915.³⁵

Bereaved people had the right to a free annual visit to the war cemeteries of the north of France. But those who lived in the south and southwest could not easily undertake such pilgrimages. It made sense, they felt, to bring the remains of the fallen back to the bereaved, so that they, the ordinary people of France, could put the dead to rest, and provide them with a funeral ceremony which many had been denied by the butchery at the front.

What may finally have swayed the authorities was that the return of the dead continued to take place illegally. Parents with means were still making private arrangements with gravediggers, who for a fee were willing to bring their sons home again. This form of private enterprise infuriated the army, which had to deal with both bribery and churned-up cemeteries, as well as the anger of poor parents, irate at the crassness and privilege of wealth.³⁶

On 28 September 1920, the French government finally gave in. It promulgated a decree establishing the right of families to claim the bodies of their loved ones, and to transmit them home, at state expense.³⁷ It took over a year to organize the bureaucracy, the procedure, and necessary transport,³⁸ but, starting in the summer of 1922, about 300,000 of the dead of the Great War actually went home. Since roughly 700,000 of over 1 million fallen French soldiers had been identified, this figure represented about 40 per cent of those whose families had the right to request their return.³⁹

It didn't all go smoothly. There was a dispute as to who had the right to claim the body: parents or widows. The parents' association argued

that the filial tie was the only one that could not be broken, and hence they had precedence. The widows' organization thought otherwise. The parents won. There were substantial difficulties in providing irrefutable proof of the identities of the fallen, a theme recently recreated in the film of Bertrand Tavernier, *La vie et rien d'autre*, where two women separately seek to find alive or claim the remains of the man they both loved. There were the real logistical problems of reaching the devastated areas, finding the appropriate grave, filling out the right forms, finding and paying for the right trains, and so on.⁴⁰ The anguish of disinterring the dead in the chaos of the battlefields, of distinguishing the remains of one man from another,⁴¹ of fighting off the 'jackals' ready to offer their help at exorbitant prices, accompanied this *rite de passage*.

But the operation was concluded, more or less successfully, by the beginning of 1923, to the great relief of the French military. As the man responsible for overseeing the military cemeteries of the north of France, General Ferre, put it:

1922 was a baneful year for our cities of the dead due to numerous exhumations which, practically without precautions, upset the soil of military burial places, broke some funerary emblems, destroyed trees and shrubs and surroundings. Thanks to the devotion and perseverance of our committees, we have just about escaped from the chaos and the damage has been repaired. Exhumations at state expense are over; there are no more transports of bodies (with a few exceptions); the situation has stabilized, and it is time to give these cemeteries their final crosses and steles.⁴²

War cemeteries are scattered over a vast area, in Eastern Europe, Africa, the Middle East. But since most of the casualties suffered by the major combatants were incurred on the Western Front, it is in France and Flanders that the problem of creating war cemeteries was most acute. For different reasons, the decision to let the dead rest where they had fallen was taken by all participants. Having lost the war, the Germans were in no position to return to the areas they had occupied and exhume the remains of their fallen soldiers.⁴³ The Americans were committed to the return of their dead soldiers, but the British ruled it out on grounds of expense and equality. So many men had no known grave that granting the privilege of bringing back only identified bodies would discriminate against about half the population.⁴⁴

Instead, symbolic gestures of the return of the fallen were made in many countries. In 1920, unknown soldiers were interred in Westminster Abbey in London,⁴⁵ and under the Arc de Triomphe in Paris.⁴⁶ In the following year, the same ceremony took place in the United States, Italy, Belgium, and Portugal. Most other countries followed suit, or, as in the cases of Canada, Australia and New Zealand, accepted the tomb in the Motherland to represent their own unknown soldiers.⁴⁷ On 11 November

1993, the Australians broke ranks, and brought home one of their unknown soldiers who had been buried in a Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery. After a full military funeral, he was laid to rest in the 'Hall of Memory' of the Australian War Memorial in Canberra.⁴⁸

The German approach to this question was bound to entail greater difficulty and ambiguity. A number of projects were formulated, but they lacked the power to focus attention on one sacred site. The absence of any consensus on the meaning of the war, the origins of the defeat, and the place of the military within German political culture ensured that the idea of burying an unknown soldier in Berlin or Tannenberg or Munich had a divisive as much as a unifying effect. Monumental art in Germany remains contested material to this day.⁴⁹ As the distinguished German scholar Reinhard Kosseleck put it in an article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, who is to say that the unknown soldier of the Great War hadn't shot the unknown war resister?⁵⁰ Among the 'winners', these problems also existed, but they could be absorbed in a consensus as to the value of commemorating the fallen who gave their lives for victory.

Commemoration was a universal preoccupation after the 1914-18 war. The need to bring the dead home, to put the dead to rest, symbolically or physically, was pervasive. All I aim to do here is to suggest the significance of an issue which was both allegorical and real. Those who tried to reunite the living and the dead, to retrieve their bodies and to give them a secure and identifiable resting place, faced staggering problems. There was the scale and chaos of the battlefields at the end of the war; there was as well terrible uncertainty as to the survival of thousands of men who simply had vanished in combat. Before commemoration came discovery, a theme to which I turn now.

2

Communities in mourning

Grief is a state of mind; bereavement a condition. Both are mediated by mourning, a set of acts and gestures through which survivors express grief and pass through stages of bereavement.¹ Many of these moments are lived within families supported by social networks.

Families were torn apart by war. Nothing could have reversed completely this tide of separation and loss. But after 1914 there was as well a gathering together, as people related by blood or by experience tried to draw strength from each other during and after the war. The bonds thus formed were powerful and in many cases durable. The process of their formation and expression is at the heart of this chapter.

In all countries touched by the war, there was a progression of mutual help, a pathway along which many groups and individuals sought to provide knowledge, then consolation, then commemoration. These elements were always there, though the language in which they were expressed varied considerably.

First I approach the initial stages of bereavement in terms of discovery: of how relatives and friends heard the awful news about casualties, and what some of them were able to do about it. Some were near the front lines. Moreover, the sheer scale of the conflict made it difficult, if not impossible, to discover the whereabouts of individual soldiers, whether alive or dead, missing or at base camps, on leave or in transit. Mistakes proliferated. Even when people were informed accurately that a man had been wounded, there was almost always a void of silence about what he had suffered and what were his chances of recovery. Into these silent spaces, fears and rumours flooded. The same silences attended the terse official messages about men who died in uniform.

As we shall see, some people were able to penetrate the maze and go to the bedside of a wounded man. Most were unable to do so. Instead, many different groups were formed to try to act on behalf of those who could not reach their loved ones, and to replace bureaucratic formulae by further information or by simple statements of fact. Some groups were officially sanctioned; most were private bodies of people committed

4

War memorials and the mourning process

The search for the 'meaning' of the Great War began as soon as the war itself. For some people that search goes on to this day. Visible evidence of that quest may be found in towns and villages throughout Europe. There are war memorials in virtually all of them: sculptures, plaques, or other objects that recall the 1914–18 war and the sacrifices it entailed.

Whom or what do they commemorate? Precisely what about the Great War do they ask us to remember? There is no single answer to these questions. Different cultural norms and religious traditions yield different meanings. First, the visible or stated subject of commemoration varied as between national communities. In France, a visitor to any major town or village will encounter a *monument aux morts*. This funereal term locates French war memorials within a tradition of suffering and sacrifice. In Britain and other Anglo-Saxon countries, and in Germany and Austria, the visitor will soon find his way to the local war memorial or *Kriegerdenkmal*. Here the specific subject of remembrance is at times fixed less precisely; the suggestion is that war memorials invite us to recall more than the central facts of loss of life and bereavement in the Great War.

But central facts they remain. While ambiguities of iconography and ritual are undeniably present in war memorials, and while they embody and proclaim a host of commemorative messages about war, they do not obliterate the simple truth that people die in war, and in the Great War their number was legion. That message may be direct; it may be indirect or muted; it may be drowned in sentimentality or lies, but between the lines of noble rhetoric, through the mass of figurative or sculptural detail, the harsh history of life and death in wartime is frozen in public monuments throughout Europe and beyond.

Decades after the Great War, what we now see obscurely, or with a hurried glance, was once visible and arresting to all. In this chapter, I concentrate on war memorials as foci of the rituals, rhetoric, and ceremonies of bereavement. This aspect of their significance has not attracted particular attention from scholars in this field. Most have

been drawn to war memorials as carriers of political ideas, from Republicanism¹ to nationalism,² imperialism,³ fascism,⁴ Stalinism,⁵ or the multiple justifications of the call to arms.⁶ There is as well a flourishing interest in these objects as public sculpture, and art and architectural historians have contributed much to our understanding of their character and form.⁷

From the Acropolis to the Arc de Triomphe, war memorials have been central to the history of European architecture and public sculpture. They have been important symbols of national pride. But however powerful the aesthetic or political message they carried or attracted, these monuments had another meaning for the generation that passed through the trauma of the war. That meaning was as much existential as artistic or political, as much concerned with the facts of individual loss and bereavement as with art forms or with collective representations, national aspirations, and destinies.

War memorials were places where people grieved, both individually and collectively. The ways they did so have never been fully documented. For anyone living in Europe, these 'documents' are part of the landscape. To find them one must simply look around. The still visible signs of this moment of collective bereavement are the objects, both useful and decorative, both mundane and sacred, placed in market squares, crossroads, churchyards, and on or near public buildings after 1914. Some were built during the war, mostly in the decade following the Armistice. They have a life history, and like other monuments have both shed meanings and taken on new significance in subsequent years.

This chapter tells one part of their life history and the life history of those who built them and visited them, and of some whom they helped to cope with loss. To understand war memorials is to see more clearly how communities mourned together during and after the Great War.

War memorials inhabit three distinctive spaces and periods: first, scattered over the home front before 1918; second, in postwar churches and civic sites in the decade following the Armistice; and third, in war cemeteries. The first category includes many objects of commemoration which drew on heroic images of war. The second had ecumenical and conventional patriotic elements, emphasizing at once the universality of loss and the special features of national political and aesthetic traditions. These local war memorials arose out of the postwar search for a language in which to reaffirm the values of the community for which soldiers had laid down their lives. The third embodies a more enduring achievement and a more universal language, drawing on particular traditions but, on occasion, transcending them.

The Home Front, commemoration and citizenship in wartime

Preserving the nation at war

After August 1914, commemoration was an act of citizenship. To remember was to affirm community, to assert its moral character, and to exclude from it those values, groups, or individuals that placed it under threat. This form of collective affirmation in wartime identified individuals and their families with the community at large, understood both in terms of a localized landscape and a broader and more vaguely defined national entity under siege or threat.

The first event commemorated was the call to arms. Mass armies were mobilized in all the major combatant nations without any significant opposition or obstruction, and monuments were built early in the war to celebrate this unprecedented response to the call to arms. Where the prompting of notables stopped, and popular initiatives began is very difficult to determine. Proud citizens of a working-class district in the East End of London marked the voluntary enlistment of 65 men in a street of 40 houses in one cul-de-sac by setting up what they called a 'street shrine'.⁸ The religious echo was one they chose, possibly reflecting the strength of Irish Catholicism in the area, but also blending well with general views of the war as a conflict of the children of light against the children of darkness.⁹ According to the Bishop of London, the Anglican rector of South Hackney helped to create the shrines, which were visited by the Queen in 1917.¹⁰ In Australia and New Zealand, celebrating the act of volunteering was also central to commemoration. The lists engraved in stone during the war of those who had joined up helped to encourage further enlistment; later lists formed a permanent and immediate chastisement of those who chose not to go.¹¹

As soon became apparent, the war the men of 1914 engaged to fight was nothing like the war that developed after the Battle of the Marne. Henceforth, the focus of commemoration shifted away from the moment of mobilization to the stupendous character of the conflict itself. One form of such commemoration was the collection and preservation for posterity of the ephemera of war. This was by and large a civilian operation, although many soldiers were collectors as well. It was also a patriotic act, and led (unintentionally at times) to the creation of what remain to this day the most important public repositories of artefacts and documents about the war.

In Britain, an officially sponsored Imperial War Museum was formed in 1917, ironically enough on the grounds of the former 'Bedlam' lunatic asylum.¹² It houses many military objects and records, as well as an

invaluable collection of photographs, manuscripts, books, and works of art. In France, the initiative was private. What is now known as the Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine started as the repository of wartime records, collected by the Leblanc family in their apartment in avenue de Malakoff, but intended from the start as a state museum. In the trench journal *Tacatacteuftueuf*, soldiers on leave were encouraged to visit the collection, which ultimately was indeed passed on to the City of Paris, and then the University of Paris, in one of whose outlying campuses it remains to this day.¹³ The Australians established a 'War Museum' (now the Australian War Memorial) in October 1917. Soldiers were invited to submit objects for display. As Ken Inglis has written, one 'Digger' replied forthrightly:

The GOC recently made a request for articles to be sent to the Australian War Museum, especially those illustrating the terrible weapons that have been used against the troops in the war. Why not get all the Military Police photographed for the Museum?¹⁴

A more austere parallel is the private initiative of a German industrialist, Richard Franck, which led to the creation of the Kriegsbibliothek (now the Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte) in Stuttgart.¹⁵ The Director of the Historical Museum in Frankfurt was responsible for yet another German collection of documentation and ephemera related to the Great War.¹⁶ On a smaller scale, the Cambridge University Library, spurred on by the University Librarian, gathered together a war collection of printed books and other documents.¹⁷ Similar efforts produced war collections in the New York Public Library.

Most of these acts of preservation were intrinsically valuable. They were the work of civilians, many too old to fight, or with sons in uniform, and determined to preserve the dignity and honour of their country's war effort. By their very nature, they both glorified the war effort and contained, at least initially, little about the appalling character and costs of trench warfare.

This was in part a function of censorship. But it also reflected some features of the mystification of warfare, especially in the press, whose 'eye-wash' struck many soldiers as absurd or dangerous.¹⁸ Commemorating the war in this ill-informed and blatantly non-combatant manner took on the air of propaganda, as indeed some intended it to do. Like most propaganda, it did not dwell on the sadder facets of the war: the maimed, the deformed, the dead, the widows, the orphans, and the bereaved.

After the war, the character of such collections was criticized powerfully by the pacifist activist Ernst Friedrich, who set up an Anti-war Museum in Berlin in 1924. Its collection of documents and gruesome photographs showed everything the patriotic collections

omitted. In displays of savage images of the mayhem caused by war, Friedrich pointed out graphically the dangerous selectivity of the patriotic collectors of wartime memorabilia, documents and books.¹⁹ It is important to note that even though Friedrich's monument to the victims of war was more unsparing and (in a sense) more truthful than the pro-war collections, both arose out of prior political commitments. Commemoration was a political act; it could not be neutral, and war memorials carried political messages from the earliest days of the war.

War memorials and popular culture

The mobilization of popular culture on behalf of the nation's war effort occurred in all combatant countries, and was bound to mark commemorative forms. Each nation developed its own language of commemoration, but some features were universal. One was the tendency to locate the men of 1914–18 in the long history of martial virtue. There is hardly any difference between the treatment of Marlborough at Blenheim, Nelson in Trafalgar Square and, a century later, Hindenburg in Berlin, except that Hindenburg was immortalized in gigantic form while the war was still going on. The victor of Tannenberg became a towering figure, whose lofty achievements were symbolized by a three-storey model placed prominently in the Tiergarten in the heart of Berlin.

The celebration of military or naval commanders was one way in which to glorify national military traditions. In some countries, though, a more egalitarian language was used to proclaim the virtues of the martial spirit. In Australia and New Zealand, generals and admirals did not bear this symbolic weight; the common soldier or sailor was the link with the past.²⁰ In France, both elevated and obscure soldiers celebrated the Gallic military tradition.

What cities did on a grand scale, individual households could replicate in a more domestic manner, thanks to the emergence of the thriving industry of wartime kitsch. Commemorative images were marketed on a mass scale in the Great War. Iron Hindenburgs were available in many materials and sizes.²¹ As I note in chapter 5, the French martial tradition was sold in poster form through the thriving 'industry of *imagerie d'Epinal*'.

Whether on the level of national celebration or domestic ornamentation, each nation adopted its own distinctive commemorative forms. One excellent example is the German phenomenon of 'iron-nail memorials'.²² These objects decorated sculptures, plaques, and domestic items like tables, and have (to my knowledge) no equivalent in France or Britain. We can learn much about them from an instruction book prepared by two public-spirited Germans early in the war. They were made of 'Ready-for-use materials' and were ideal 'for patriotic undertakings and

Der Eiserne Hindenburg.



Als zeitgemäßer Schmuck für alle Räume, als dauerndes Andenken an die große Zeit des Weltkrieges wird von

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Berlin W., Ferngasse Straße 49
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Der Eiserne Hindenburg

in porträtähnlicher, künstlerischer Wiedergabe in nachstehenden zwei Größen verkauft:

Größe 42 cm aus bestem Kriegsmetallguß gefertigt mit Marmorsockel in nur erstklassiger Ausführung Preis p. Stk. **RM. 22.50.**

Größe 110 cm aus bestem Kriegsmetallguß gefertigt mit Metallsockel in nur erstklassiger Ausführung Preis p. Stk. **RM. 500.—**

Die große Figur ist auch in Gips bronzefarbig patiniert z. Preise von **RM. 100.—** und elfenbeinfarbig getönt „ „ „ **RM. 70.—** zu haben.

Nach dem Kriege sind beide Größen auch in echter Bronze zu haben.

Porto und Verpackung werden zum Selbstkostenpreise in Rechnung gestellt.

Um gütige Empfehlung in Bekanntschaften wird höflichst gebeten.

12. The Iron Hindenburg

ceremonies in schools, youth groups and associations'. These objects were described both as 'war landmarks' and as war memorials, but the distinction between the two was rarely clear. In each case, the figure or image to be celebrated or sanctified was outlined or described by a series of nails. The iron cross was the most popular choice for such

objects, requiring according to the handbook between 160 and 200 nails per cross.²³ Among the images they displayed were iron crosses embellished by the Imperial initial or the date, but other nail memorials picture the turret or outline of a U-boat, Teutonic floral designs, swords, and mosaic designs for table tops.

Austrian examples of this form of patriotic art may also be found,²⁴ but it would be a mistake to assume a common Catholic origin. Indeed, Crucifixion images and motifs were probably more prevalent in Protestant than in Catholic art, especially in Germany, where Marian and other saintly iconography proliferated. Furthermore, the culture of popular nationalism in Imperial Germany was essentially Protestant. Sedan Day was to some extent an anti-Catholic festival, and the ambiguous place of Catholics within the state was not resolved before 1914. Iron-cross nail memorials fit in much more closely with Protestant celebrations of the Prussian military genius and the grandeur of the *Kaiserreich*.²⁵

Ceremonies at which these iron-nail memorials were created or displayed enabled patriots of whatever faith to show their commitment to the cause. Some paid for the privilege of nailing by contributing to a war charity or benevolent organization. Others introduced schoolchildren to the nobility of sacrifice in war by the declamation of lofty poetry. We can get some idea of the deliberate medievalism of this practice by citing one of these poems:

From whistle of lead, the bloody wound
A warrior falling
A red cross on the white ground
A trusted arm;
Leaning and leading in the heat of battle
A red cross arm
A good bed is made
Warm and comfortable . . .²⁶

And so on into a misty, medieval past remote from the ugliness of industrialized war.

A 24-part ceremony surrounding such poetic affirmations was outlined for school or other civic use. It was replete with the choreography of uplifting allegorical Teutonic plays, songs, and noble poetry. Items 22–4 were the following: 'Deutschland über alles', a Pledge of Truth and Faith in Victory, and a round of 'A mighty fortress is our God', Luther's hymn. The imagery of cleansing through the shedding of blood is repeatedly invoked, further suggesting the militarized Christianity of the memorial itself.²⁷ It is not at all surprising that such iron-nail memorials, and the ceremonies surrounding them, soon framed the lists of the fallen.²⁸

This is indeed the commemorative art of Tannenberg, not Verdun, and we can almost see the idealized form of Hindenburg, presiding in spirit over these ceremonies, just as he had done after his victory. Here is his own version of it, written just after the war:

In our new Headquarters at Allenstein I entered the church, close by the old castle of the Teutonic Knights, while divine services were being held. As the clergyman uttered his closing words all those present, young soldiers as well as elderly 'Landsturm', sank to their knees under the overwhelming impression of their experiences. It was a worthy curtain to their heroic achievement.²⁹

Some of the central themes of commemoration are visible in these early wartime rituals and the legends surrounding them. The need to reaffirm the nobility of the warrior by an appeal to 'ancient' tradition, the tendency to highlight soldiers' sacrifice and civilian debt, and the consequent unending duty of dedication to some noble communal task: all are expressed here in a romanticized form which described a war which changed rapidly after August 1914. So rapidly indeed that these rituals and the verse they inspired, were bound, as Sassoon put it, 'to mock the corpses' of whatever nationality 'round Bapaume'.

War memorials after 1918: metaphor and allegory in public space

The phenomenon of 'nail memorials' is just one example of the initial phase of commemorative art, in which the glorification of sacrifice was expressed in a deliberately archaic language, the cadences of knights and valour, of quests and spiritualized combat. The problem with this language was that it was too unreal, too uplifting, too patriotic, and insufficiently sensitive to the desolation of loss. For this reason, other forms of commemorative art emerged, both during and after the war. These objects and rituals expressed sadness rather than exhilaration, and addressed directly the experience of bereavement.

These two motifs – war as *both* noble and uplifting *and* tragic and unendurably sad – are present in virtually all postwar war memorials; they differ in the balance struck between them. That balance was never fixed; no enduring formula emerged to express it, though traditional religious images were used repeatedly to do so.

Both religious and lay communities devoted themselves to the task of commemoration after 1918. The resulting monumental art provided a focus for ceremonies of public mourning beginning in the decade following the Armistice, and continuing to this day. The languages, imagery, and icons adopted varied considerably according to artistic convention, religious practice, and political conviction. They also reflected more mundane considerations, such as the ability of the

community to pay for monuments. Consequently, some plans were scrapped and others had to be scaled down or redesigned to suit the means of the donors. Despite powerful currents of feeling about the need to express the indebtedness of the living to the fallen and the near-universality of loss in many parts of Europe, commemoration was and remained a business, in which sculptors, artists, bureaucrats, churchmen, and ordinary people had to strike an agreement and carry it out.

The business of commemoration

As Bertrand Tavernier showed in his recent film *La vie et rien d'autre*, the mix of the profane and the sacred is vividly evident in the chequered history of public commemoration after the Great War. His account of the mixed cast of characters surrounding postwar commemorative work is remarkably close to reality.

The first group of actors consisted of public officials. These were either elected or self-appointed notables who took upon themselves the time-consuming and frequently fractious task of drawing up plans, interviewing artists, arranging subventions, overseeing acquisition of a site, and the final construction or emplacement of the memorial. 'Quality control' was a worry for both artists and their patrons; self-appointed groups offered their services to communities seeking to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate commemorative art.³⁰

Some people had personal reasons for investing so much time in the business of commemoration: they had lost a son, or a brother, or another loved one. Others did it in the same way as they approached urban renewal or traffic problems. Even allowing for English understatement, the proceedings of the local committee which oversaw the construction of the Cambridge War Memorial, at a prominent intersection near the railway station, resemble discussions about many other town or university affairs. To such perennial committeemen, the construction of a war memorial was just one more task to overcome.³¹

Some individuals devoted themselves to this work with unusual energy and dedication. Consider the case of the war memorial in Mulhouse in the east of France. Over 2,000 men from this city had died on active service in the war. One man was primarily responsible for the construction of the town war memorial. Max Dollfus, *délégué générale* of the organization *Souvenir Français*, became vice-president of the *Comité d'initiative pour le Monument aux Morts*. The mayor was titular head of the committee, but Dollfus did the work. He spent five years on the project. After initial discussions about what to do in 1919–20, during which no consensus emerged, two commissions were convened, a *commission financière* and a *commission artistique*. Dollfus chaired both. A site was chosen on a prominent boulevard, and an estimated budget of

TRUMPINGTON WAR MEMORIAL



Ceremony of Unveiling and Dedication
SUNDAY, 11TH DECEMBER, 1921

13. Poster advertising the inauguration of the war memorial, Trumpington, Cambridgeshire, 11 December 1921

250,000 francs was prepared, for the costs of the monument and a garden in which it would be set. The artistic committee invited eighteen artists to submit designs. Of these, seven produced models in October 1922. The choice was in the hands of a jury composed of both local people and outside specialists, including the director of the Office of



14. The War Memorial at March, Cambridgeshire, after Remembrance Day

Fine Arts in Strasbourg, and the president of the Société des amis du Louvre. They chose three projects as worthy of prizes, of 5,000, 4,000, and 1,000 francs each. The first and third were both given to the same team, which had submitted two designs to the committee. They were both the work of the prominent Catholic sculptor Maxime Réal del

Sarte, who was awarded the job of constructing the memorial, in conjunction with a firm of architects in Mulhouse. To obtain the services of Maxime Réal del Sarte was a major achievement for the city. He was a celebrated artist, an *ancien combattant* who had lost an arm in combat at Les Eparges, and who went on to design over fifty war memorials.³² His plan for Mulhouse was suitably impressive. It included two statues of deliverance and peace, two *chimères* (mythical beasts), an obelisk, and a floral garden with reflecting pools.

The original estimate of costs was increased to 300,000 francs, to be divided between professional payments, works, materials, and other purchases. The *conseil municipal* set aside 50,000 francs for the project, and looked to private donations for the rest. The final cost was 309,000 francs. The deficit was made up through the indefatigable efforts of individual fundraisers. Approximately 260,000 francs were raised from 8,563 donors. One woman, Mme Henriette Deiber, whose son was killed in 1918, knocked on 630 doors in a working-class quarter, and over 3,000 schoolchildren from 31 schools collected about 8,000 francs.

Five years after the project had been approved, the monument was ready for assembly, and the landscaping was finished. The statues weighed 7,500 kilograms each, and the surrounding construction and *chimères* required two blocks of 10,500 kilograms each. It was completed in June 1927 and officially inaugurated in that month.³³

The Mulhouse memorial was characteristic of many other commemorative projects. One public-spirited individual, who happened to be the brother of the president of the Chamber of Commerce, spent years in committee-work and negotiation to see it through. In small towns, it was usually the mayor.³⁴ He had to navigate through artistic, political, and financial troubles, the solutions to which required the help of many local people, great and obscure.

Money was never irrelevant to the task at hand, nor were the interests of local contractors and artisans. Local committees attached late-fee penalties to the agreement with sculptors, who were often well-known local craftsmen. Unlike a man of the standing of Réal del Sarte, they could be instructed explicitly as to the requirements of the community. The small town of Belvaincourt in the Vosges insisted on a guarantee that the statue would be unpainted. The village of Bult opted for granite from the Vosges for a *poilu*, sculpted 'on the model of 1871', 'painted and bronzed', and precisely 1.80 metres high. Public funds were also supplemented by private subscriptions.³⁵ In some projects, the costs were shared by the municipality, the department, the state, and local inhabitants. In some communities people gave generously; in others, they did not.³⁶

Financial problems were not always resolved through public donations. The Cambridge War Memorial had to be scaled down when funds ran

out. An eight-foot-high returning soldier became a six-foot-high statue. The design intended to make the figure's stride abnormally long, to emphasize its athleticism; the smaller version did not increase this distortion, but visually reinforced it.³⁷ The reasons for this effect are pecuniary, not artistic, and this in a town where some of the richest private institutions in the country were based. Most were engaged in their own, private acts of commemoration, which limited their contribution to other public projects.³⁸

However sacred the task of commemoration, it still touched all the chords of local loyalties, petty intrigues, favouritism, apathy, and indifference. It also was about contracts, payments, and profits. In all major combatant countries there were firms like Swanser & Son of Kingsway, London, who advertised regularly as makers of 'Memorials, bronze, brass, duralumin'.³⁹ Their appeal serves to remind us that the business of commemoration was always that: a business, shaped by the character of the community which undertook it.⁴⁰

Metaphor and religious expressions of mourning in commemorative art

Some war memorials were essentially religious in character; others, primarily secular. It is important, though, not to exaggerate the difference. In Germany many memorials with specific religious reference were placed not only in churchyards and cemeteries but also in public thoroughfares. The separation of church and state in France, and the character and history of Anglican iconophobia made it more difficult to adopt such flexibility in reference to explicitly religious imagery, but exceptions occurred in these countries too. It is preferable to speak of religious expressions in commemorative art as a whole, rather than to limit the discussion to those located within the precincts of parish churches or their superior institutions.

Furthermore, as I suggested in chapter 3, the pagan perimeter of Christianity was inhabited by a host of spiritualists, many of whom believed that their practices were compatible with traditional religious teachings. Their quasi-religious approaches to communicating with the dead should also be considered when approaching the varied terrain of commemoration after the Great War.

With these caveats in mind, it may be useful to suggest that religious commemorative art had certain features found less prominently in secular forms. Not surprisingly, artists and sculptors drew on the rich traditions of late-nineteenth-century funerary art.⁴¹ Among the choices available for religious commemorative sculpture, the Pietà was perhaps best suited to express the sadness of the millions who had lost their sons. It also fitted on rectangular surfaces of a funerary kind, and drew the viewers' gaze to the fallen body held in the Madonna's arms.

We can see this form of religious art throughout Europe, and especially in Germany. Consider a few examples. In 1927, the sculptor Otto Hitzberger carved a wood Pietà as a war memorial for the Laurentiuskirche in the Moabit district of Berlin.⁴² The same motif was used by Ruth Schaumann for her 1929 stone casting of a Pietà sponsored by the German Catholic Women's League, and placed in the crypt of the Frauenfriedenskirche in Frankfurt. The inscription is specifically female: 'In praise of our husbands, sons, brothers, fathers, R.I.P.'⁴³ Here the metaphor was direct: there is no image of a soldier, only the unstated metaphor of the equivalence of his death with the Passion of Christ.

Variations abound. They included the Pietà form, but with mother and fallen soldier, as in the town of Brotterode, by Hans Dammann,⁴⁴ and in Karl Haussmann's sandstone sculpture (1929) in the old cemetery in Grötzingen.⁴⁵ There is the parallel motif of the comrade and fallen soldier (the work of Hermann Neppel in 1923), placed in the market square of Backnang,⁴⁶ and the more classical design by Friedrich Bagdons (also 1923) in the entrance to the cemetery at Freudenstadt, incorporating an unclothed seated woman staring out over a prone and unclothed dead man identified as a soldier only by his helmet.⁴⁷

Other scenes from the New Testament were used in similar ways in other German war memorial art. In 1922 Georg Busch designed an altarpiece for the Chapel of the Nails in Bamberg Cathedral. His work is in painted lime wood, and depicts the two Marys and St John grieving over the body of Christ.⁴⁸ At Euskirchen, a plaque was placed in the town *Gymnasium*. It was designed by Albert Figel in 1922, and lists teachers and students killed in the war. The image is of a dead soldier attended by three angels, with the archangel Michael on the right and St Barbara on the left.⁴⁹ At Frauenzell, the war memorial shows a statue of Jesus cradling a dying soldier, still holding a hand grenade.⁵⁰

Clearly the range of Christian reference was infinitely malleable and easily identified. Many examples of such art are visible in stained-glass windows in churches throughout Europe. Here the rule of horizontality does not apply. In glass, at least, religious motifs point upwards. In the Pas-de-Calais, 235 churches had been destroyed or severely damaged during the war. The stained glass incorporated in these resurrected churches shows the same ingenuity at adapting Christian metaphors and sacred stories to contemporary history. The flight from Egypt paralleled the flow of refugees away from the north of France early in the war.⁵¹ Joan of Arc makes an appearance here, as at the church of Saint-Martin at Graincourt-Lès-Havrincourt,⁵² and there are many neighbouring churches, as at Eglise Notre-Dame at Bertincourt, with scenes of Mary interceding with Christ for the soul of a dead soldier,⁵³ or (at Ecourt-Saint-Quentin) of angels accompanying the souls of the fallen to heaven.⁵⁴ Stained glass in Britain was used to similar effect, with images of tanks and aircraft adding to the traditional lexicon of warfare

in art.⁵⁵ The stained-glass windows at Brampton in Cambridgeshire show a soldier receiving the Sacrament at the front, and other scenes equating the Passion with the war. In one window a soldier's gaze at a wayside crucifix leads us to the same message.⁵⁶ In Germany, similar adaptations appeared. One example is the stained-glass window in Kemnath Cathedral, showing a Benedictine monk holding a cross and kneeling next to the coffin of a dead soldier.⁵⁷

None of this iconography is surprising or particularly original. Those in mourning who turned to the churches for aid in their sorrow were bound to dwell on traditional devotional art and sculpture. In Britain and (not surprisingly) in Ireland, Celtic crosses were particularly popular.⁵⁸ As Catherine Moriarty has shown, wayside crucifixes and crosses appeared in many parts of England,⁵⁹ as indeed they did in British war cemeteries, where Reginald Blomfield's Cross of Sacrifice, a bronze sword on a stone cross, was placed.⁶⁰

The Cross of Sacrifice was an abstract, chivalric, form. In some war art, though, crucifixion was more closely related to the fate of individual soldiers. The best-known example is Derwent Wood's 'Canada's Golgotha', a commemoration of an alleged German atrocity, showing a crucified Canadian soldier, surrounded by a group of mocking German soldiers. The diplomatic furor produced by this bronze sculpture resulted in its removal from displays of official Canadian war art. Whatever the morality of its suppression, the realism of this sculpture was far removed from the healing intentions of most commemorative art which referred to Christian iconography for consolation, not accusation.⁶¹

One important vehicle for the propagation of Christian messages of consolation was photography. Here the suffering of Christ could be suggested in the mutilation of his image in wayside crosses or churches. The Saarburger Cross, an image of Christ with outstretched arms, magically liberated from the Cross, obliterated presumably by bombardment in the first months of the war, was especially popular. It sold well as a wartime postcard. Other illustrations showed churches and religious objects torn by war, in the same way (it was suggested) as were the bodies of soldiers. These images were widely distributed before and after 1918.⁶²

In many ways, therefore, both 'high' and 'popular' culture (rarely divided clearly in any case) found in traditional images and techniques the inspiration for much of their work. In Germany, older art forms were rediscovered. The removal from Colmar in Alsace to Munich of the Isenheim Altarpiece 'for restoration' or 'safekeeping' in 1917 led to a renewed interest in Grünewald's art. According to one scholar, he provided a language to express the anguish many felt about the 'crucifixion' of Germany during and after the war.⁶³ The sources of

Rouault's remarkable series of engravings, *Miserere*, explicitly located in the artist's meditations on the 1914-18 war, may similarly have been late medieval.⁶⁴

Both popular craftsmen and avant-garde artists experimented with religious forms and icons in the aftermath of the war. The German sculptor Ernst Barlach created a remarkable aerial, suspended sculpture of an angel in the Gustrow Memorial, removed by the Nazis from Magdeburg Cathedral.⁶⁵ Otto Dix and Max Beckmann both chose the triptych as the framework for their extraordinary paintings on the war. Dix's may have been a direct comment on Grünewald's crucifixion. His interest in the old masters is evident both in his war art and in his overall painting technique.⁶⁶ One context of the work of Dix, Beckmann, and a host of other artists is the efflorescence of religious commemorative art after the Armistice.

None of it reached the nadir of despair perhaps most powerfully evoked in the masterpiece of Hans Holbein, *Christ in the Tomb*, painted in 1521, to which I will refer in chapter 6. Here there is no vertical line, no attendant mourners, no hope at all. Even Grünewald's masterpiece, with its pock-marked and hideously tortured Christ, places the crucifixion in a cycle of hope. Not so Holbein. Dostoyevsky's Prince Mishkin captures its chilling effect when he tells us that 'some people may lose their faith by looking at that picture!'⁶⁷ That is what those seeking sustenance from religious art after the Great War least wanted. Consequently, the rudiments of hope, of aesthetic redemption of the suffering of the war, of resurrection, of transcendence are never far from commemorative art of religious inspiration.

Bereavement, political messages and civic war memorials

Hope is a central theme in secular commemoration of the Great War. It is expressed in a multitude of ways, some banal, some profound. But there is another level on which to understand the wave of construction of these monuments after the Great War. They were built as places where people could mourn. And be seen to mourn. Their ritual significance has often been obscured by their political symbolism which, now that the moment of mourning has long passed, is all that we can see. At the time, communal commemorative art provided first and foremost a framework for and legitimation of individual and family grief.

Other interpretations of war memorials stress their political character. George Mosse refers to them as places where the nation worshipped itself. They are conservative expressions of the 'cult of the fallen', successfully exploited by Fascists in Italy and Germany.⁶⁸ Patricia Dogliani has pointed out the significance in Italian commemorative art of messages about the Risorgimento.⁶⁹ A study of American war

memorials is appropriately entitled *War memorials as political landscape*.⁷⁰

These, and many other works, have enriched our understanding of the character of civic commemoration. But we must beware of mistaking the part for the whole. War memorials had a specific purpose; lack of attention to this can lead to misunderstanding their meaning. One scholar, adopting a Foucaultian framework, has interpreted war memorials as exercises in 'biopolitics'. His argument takes this form. In the construction of war memorials, death is deconstructed: its horror, its undeniable individuality, its trauma, and the ignominy often associated with it, are buried. Then it is reinvested with meaning, as an abstraction, a collective sacrifice remote from individual extinction. 'A nos morts' is a disembodied message – there is no one speaking. Similarly, the dead are no longer individual people. They appear solely as names, inscribed on the war memorial. Their sacrifice thereby takes on the form of an expression of a general will, a collective spirit embodied in the state. In these memorials, the state affirms its right to call on its citizens to kill and to die. The only way to see their force is to place them in the context of 'une véritable économie de pouvoir'.⁷¹

Such are the fruits of this kind of semiological analysis. The strength of this approach is that it identifies war memorials as sites of symbolic exchange, where the living admit a degree of indebtedness to the fallen, which can never be fully discharged. What this interpretation lacks, though, is an historical sense of the meaning ascribed to war memorials at the time they were constructed. That meaning was highly personal. It used collective expression, in stone and in ceremony, to help individual people – mothers, fathers, wives, sons, daughters, and comrades-in-arms – to accept the brutal facts of death in war.

One expression of the sombre, existential purpose of war memorials set in civic space is their relative freedom from expressions of anger and triumph. There are clear national differences here, reflecting the distinction between victors and vanquished. But even in the victorious powers, the faces of noble soldiers sculpted in stone in hundreds of village squares only occasionally express exhilaration. Fatigue, and a reflective acceptance of duty and fate, are etched into their features. They have been through the fire, and rarely proclaim its virtues.

When anger appears, it is located less in soldiers than in the bereaved. One good example is the war memorial at Péronne, on the Somme, where a mother stands, clenched fist outstretched in rage, over the prone body of her son. However, as Annette Becker has shown, the sculptor Paul Auban simply refashioned a pre-war memorial to the victims of shipwreck by putting a uniform on the dead man.⁷² The evils of war, like the cruel twists of natural disasters, are hardly moments for political celebration; the elemental fact is that they leave armies of the dead and the bereaved in their wake.

Prost was the first to draw attention to what he called the 'monument funéraire', both patriotic and pacifist, in French commemorative art of the Great War.⁷³ More recently Annette Becker has discussed sensitively many other instances of the iconography of bereavement in war memorials. Old people, women, children: they are there in the memorials themselves. A mother with a Breton headdress, alongside a father, cap in hand, stand near a cross in the war memorial at Plozevet. At Gentioux, in the Département of Creuse, a child points to the inscription 'Maudite soit la guerre'. The sculptress Emilie Rodez engraved the same message in the monument at Equeurdreville, near Cherbourg, recalling the children of the village who died in the war. This monument is unusual in that it shows mother and children as victims, rather than primarily as mourners. More characteristically, at Suippe, in the Marne, a woman brings in the harvest alone, sadly gazing at all that is left of her husband, his helmet. At Compiègne, in one of R  al del Sarte's monuments, a mother and child grieve together.⁷⁴

The Compi  gne memorial reveals another level of meaning. The child in this statue looks to his mother with a questioning face. What are we to assume she is enjoined to tell him? Surely that his dead father died for a just cause. But there is little in war memorials to suggest that they are there to instil in the young a belief in the virtues of *their* return to the battlefield.

Citizenship is affirmed in war memorial art, but it is expressed in terms of a sacrifice which must never be allowed to happen again. The Abraham and Isaac myth, the Akedah, is the clear reference. As in Genesis, the message is the end of human sacrifice, not its eternal perpetuation.

Almost all commemorative monuments also express a sense of indebtedness. The living can go about their lives in freedom because of the selflessness and dedication of the man who fell. But it is only now, decades later, that anyone could see this message as repetitive, or enjoining a repetition. To do so ignores the sheer magnitude of the war effort, the pain of loss, the exhaustion of the populations who endured it, and the reluctance of many Europeans to contemplate the need to fight yet another war against Germany, until forced to do so by the Nazis.

This is not to suggest that most war memorials were pacifist. A few were; the overwhelming majority were not. But the attitude to the war they represent reflects their local character and their sensitivity to the needs of the bereaved, whose identities were in no sense a mystery to those who attended the annual ceremony, or who stopped for a moment's reflection or just passed by. The names inscribed were of the men who had died, to be sure. They were also the names of families in mourning, and pointed out who needed help in the aftermath of the war.

The form of many war memorials and the ceremonies surrounding them reinforce the view that their initial and primary purpose was to

help the bereaved recover from their loss. In many war memorials there is a fence, doorway, or border clearly marking the distinction between an area adjacent to the monument, a space set apart from the rush of daily life. In some larger memorials, the border described the space set aside for mourners, either family members, veterans, or officials, speaking for the community, who were present during annual commemorative ceremonies. But this point must not be pressed too far, since there was a more practical reason why war memorials were enclosed: to protect the monument from accidental damage through contact with passers-by, or even from the attentions of grazing animals. In these village sculptures, there was no space for individuals to stand between the memorial and the fence. They, and everybody else, stood alongside it when they remembered the dead.⁷⁵

These ceremonies took many forms, but they usually involved a procession to the war memorial, either on 11 November or on other similarly hallowed days relating to great battles like the Somme. The order of the procession showed the character of the ceremony. In Royston in Hertfordshire, the war memorial was inaugurated in March 1922. The monument was visited in turn by the Anglican vicar and Congregational minister, followed by 'a large number of relatives of the fallen men carrying wreaths', 150 ex-servicemen from the town, the local Voluntary Aid Detachment of nurses, and then civic groups, including the fire brigade, the urban district council, the girl guides, and the boy scouts. The chairman of the memorial committee spoke first, recalling the Biblical story of King David, who mourned the loss of his son, but who nonetheless returned to his tasks. He noted 'if we live true and useful lives', then our turn will come to meet the fallen 'on the Eternal shore'.⁷⁶ The memorial itself is unusual, in shadowing the Tommy in stone with ghostly white stone figures in relief, representing the men of Royston who had gone to wars past.⁷⁷

In Macclesfield, the procession was led by all the local worthies, the Mayor, the Town Clerk, the Town Council, the Board of Guardians, the War Memorial Committee, the Higher Education Committee, the headmaster of the local grammar school. We see the full battery of the Protestant voluntary tradition, the same tradition that had created the Pals' battalions of volunteers, many of whose names were inscribed on the memorial itself. They made way at the memorial for a soldier, Private George Taylor, blinded in the war, and (as the local newspaper report noted) 'being particularly pitiful as he leaned on the shoulder of a comrade who led the way'. Those bereaved looked up at the memorial, which showed a soldier gassed, and a grieving woman, 'a wife, mother, sister and sweetheart, who suffered in silent agony, and without complaint. She stands in the attitude of sad but stoic sorrow, holding in her hand a wreath of remembrance.'⁷⁸

In Dartford, the war memorial was unveiled by a lady, her 'voice, broken with emotion, but bravely struggling to express a calmness she is far from feeling'. Her words were followed by a stirring speech by the mayor asking the living 'to reap the harvest, so prodigal in the sowing, before the forces of evil once more capture the citadel of human intelligence and set men warring against their fellows'.⁷⁹

In both places, we can see clearly the two essential components of these ceremonies: the public recognition, and mediation through ritual, of bereavement; and the appeal to the living to remember the dead by dedicating themselves to good works among their fellow men and women. Grief and indebtedness, sadness and personal commitment are the pillars of local commemoration.

British ceremonies parallel the structure of ritual surrounding war memorials in interwar France, described so eloquently by Antoine Prost.⁸⁰ The local processions of mourners, the local dignitaries and veterans were all there. So were the town schoolchildren. What they heard was not a recounting of the names of glorious generals, or a celebration of the grandeur of victory, but a simple list of the names of the fallen. They heard old soldiers speak in the name of the living and the dead; they heard of the horrors of war and of the need to act for peace as the first duty of citizenship. Equality in death meant a dedication to promote equality in life; the appeal was for an extension of the camaraderie of arms into civilian life, in order to temper the petty local quarrels that faded into insignificance when set against the terrible sacrifices of the war.⁸¹ The rhetorical emphases in French ceremonies and the prominence of veterans reflect the specific features of the tradition of the nation in arms.⁸² But it was natural that ex-soldiers should feel a special responsibility to their fallen comrades, a responsibility expressed through care of their often makeshift graves on the battlefield, and care to mark their sacrifice in later years. The wartime pledge not to forget the tombs of the fallen, stated openly in French trench journals,⁸³ was honoured in later years in front of village war memorials.

There are important differences in national forms of commemoration. Utilitarian war memorials were preferred in many parts of Britain, a reflection of Protestant traditions remote from French political culture.⁸⁴ Some English communities carried on the old Puritan war against graven images, preferring obelisks to crosses. Obelisks abound in France, too, in part because they were cheaper to build than figurative art. Images of chivalry were preferred in some British memorials, though they are not entirely absent in French war art. Gertrude Alice Meredith Williams put a Crusader knight on horseback among Great War infantrymen in her design for the Paisley War Memorial. Even though he survived the war, the myth of Lawrence of Arabia is intrinsically tied up with the war. His gravestone shows the same search for the medieval. Eric Kennington

carved an effigy of Lawrence, berobed, and with legs crossed, Crusader-style, for his grave in Dorset.⁸⁵ A similar monument was built for André Thome, a 'soldier of the right' who fell near Douaumont at Verdun. New Zealand memorials commemorated the dead; most Australian memorials list all who served, not just those who fell. This distinction arises in part from the fact that New Zealand had conscription, but Australia did not.⁸⁶ In addition, the uniformity of ritual in France was missing in Britain, where administration never became the work of art perfected by French bureaucrats.

Particularities abound, especially on the regional level.⁸⁷ But the absence of hatred, or triumph, or worship of the military *per se* is evident not only on both sides of the English Channel, but also in Antipodean memorials. In their place, we find abundant evidence of commemorative ceremonies as moments of collective bereavement, during which the special place of those who lost their loved ones, their comrades in arms, friends, or family members, was recognized and solemnized.⁸⁸ War memorials marked the spot where communities were reunited, where the dead were symbolically brought home, and where the separations of war, both temporary and eternal, were expressed, ritualized, and in time, accepted.

That act was located specifically in time and place. Once the moment of initial bereavement had passed, once the widows had remarried, once the orphans had grown up and moved away, once the mission of veterans to ensure that the scourge of war would not return had faded or collapsed, then the meaning of war memorials was bound to change.

They could have had no fixed meaning, immutable over time. Like many other public objects, they manifest what physicists, in an entirely different context, call a 'half-life', a trajectory of decomposition, a passage from the active to the inert. Their initial charge was related to the needs of a huge population of bereaved people. Their grief was expressed in many ways, but in time, for the majority, the wounds began to close, and life went on. When that happened, after years or decades, then the objects invested with meaning related to loss of life in wartime become something else. Other meanings derived from other needs or events may be attached to them, or no meaning at all. The public experience of fête and civic ritual has also tended to fade away,⁸⁹ so that now, seventy-five years after the Armistice, war memorials have become the artefacts of a vanished age, remnants of the unlucky generation that had to endure the carnage of the Great War.

War cemeteries, abstraction and the search for transcendence

So far I have examined the passage from wartime celebration to postwar commemoration in religious and secular space. There was one other site of memory important for collective bereavement in the aftermath of the

Great War. War cemeteries were civil in character, as befitted the fact that men of all beliefs and of no belief fell in the war. These cemeteries were the repository of remarkable commemorative art, and some of it reaches a level of abstraction and universality unattainable in other memorials. Four examples are at Verdun, at the Cenotaph in London, at Thiepval on the Somme, and in Vladslo in Belgium.

The Trench of the Bayonets

The mix of traditional forms – pagan as well as Christian – with abstract motifs appears clearly in the war memorials located in military cemeteries. Consider the case of the monument near Verdun at what has become known as the Trench of the Bayonets. The story of this trench was bathed in myth. The facts are undisputed. The 3rd company of the 137th French Infantry Regiment was wiped out on 12 June 1916, in a ravine between Thiaumont and Douaumont. After this engagement, the trench they had occupied was found to have been completely filled in. Protruding from the earth at regular intervals were a number of bayonets, beneath which were the remains of the men of this unit. Legend had it that they had stayed at their posts until buried alive; common sense suggests that they were buried by bombardment, and that their graves were marked by the German soldiers who, briefly, had occupied this sector.⁹⁰

The Trench of the Bayonets, like the Battle of Verdun, became the stuff of myth, therefore, during the war itself.⁹¹ A French army commission was sent to Douaumont in 1917 to verify the incident. They found an aviator who had flown over the battlefield on 12 June, and who told of seeing ground shift suddenly, thus accounting for the cave-in of the trench. What better, more moving, symbol could there be of the indomitable will of the French army not to be broken at Verdun? The Commission decided that the site must be preserved.

To realize this objective, an American banker, George F. Rand, donated 500,000 francs. He had visited Verdun in December 1919, and had been deeply moved by the site and worried about its desecration. He noted that while the men buried there are mute, 'their appeal to the world is eloquent'. Urgent action was needed, since 'already bayonets were stolen and gashes made in the guns and pieces taken away as souvenirs'.⁹² Immediately after conferring with Clemenceau and confirming the gift, Rand was killed in a plane crash. The monument therefore had a double meaning: to remember the giver as well as the event he wished to commemorate.⁹³

The form of the memorial was minimalist. The architect-in-chief of the Meuse and Marne, André Ventre, summed up the idea behind his

design in the following terms:

It is evident that nothing could typify the tragedy and heroism of the bayonet trench better than the trench itself. With its rugged, broken outlines and in its narrow space in which are entombed the erect forms of nearly one hundred soldiers, the trench is enclosed with an impressiveness no monument could ever equal.

My design comprises a steel and concrete covering over the position, protecting the protruding rifle barrels and bayonets from the rain and snow and providing also a suitable tomb for the dead soldiers who, of course, remain interred in the trench. The structure will be heavily reinforced with steel and everything possible to ensure durability will be done. I guarantee the monument to last for at least 500 years.⁹⁴

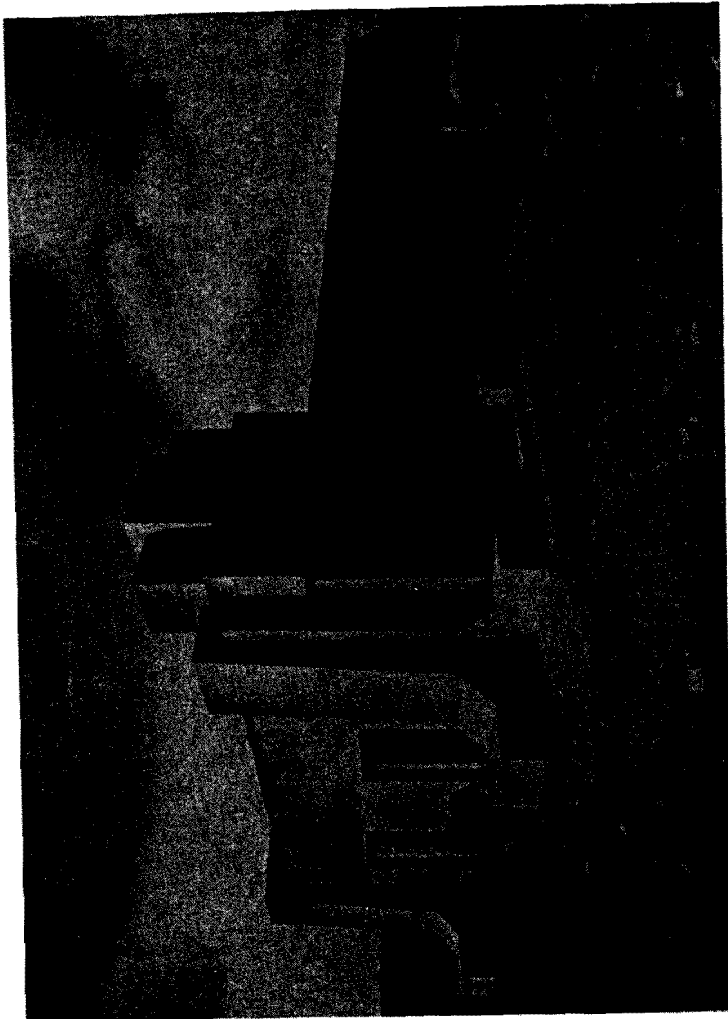
The monument was inaugurated in December 1920 by a host of dignitaries: the President of the Republic, Millerand, Generals Joffre, Foch, and Pétain. Rand's surviving son and American dignitaries were also there. As one contemporary observer put it, the sacred character of the monument was entailed by its design:

The Trench of the Bayonets will be everlastingly protected against the attacks of time or the cyclical pillage of the tourists. It will also be saved from the invasion of vegetable growths that would destroy its aspect and will remain under the dome of stone which shelters it, the symbol of all the trenches of the French front where the same magnificent drama of anonymous sacrifice has taken place.⁹⁵

In its 'utmost severity' and its avoidance of 'Anything cheap or approaching the fantastic', the monument to the Trench of the Bayonets sidestepped the dangers of 'sacrilege'. Instead it took on the character of a Roman memorial. The emerging bayonets were likened to the slaves supporting Roman generals who, according to Herodotus, heard voices saying to them: 'Look behind you; they make you what you are.'⁹⁶

The need to preserve the sacred from the twin dangers of 'destruction and commercialization' is a repeated theme in the creation of war memorials after the Armistice. The Trench of the Bayonets is unusual, though, in its austere avoidance of allegory, figurative art, or ornamentation. The hope is to approach the timeless by avoiding contemporary icons. The preference for the traditional is explicit. As one observer put it, the Trench of the Bayonets resembles the 'eternal monuments of Brittany, of that primitive age when man fought against the savage beast and the chaotic forces of nature'. The reference to Breton forms was entirely appropriate; the 137th Infantry was composed of men from Brittany and the Vendée, two of the most traditionally Catholic and conservative regions of France.⁹⁷

This monument is both unique and characteristic of many others built in the immediate postwar years. The fact that it was a joint Franco-American venture set it apart from most other commemorative



15. The Trench of Bayonets at Verdun, as illustrated in the *Guide Michelin* to Verdun of 1926

projects. But in its character and iconography, it was like many others. Both Rand and the architect Ventre understood that the sites of memory needed preservation to stop the voyeur or the tourist from degrading them. But what form was appropriate to the necessary act of preservation?

Their answer was original. They concluded that the most fitting memorial was the site itself, unembellished, unchanged. That is why they simply covered it with a concrete shell. Safe from the elements and the public, the men whose sacrifice symbolized millions of others', could rest in peace, undisturbed by art. The Trench of the Bayonets is a war memorial of a special kind: a tomb frozen in time and preserved not *by*, but *from* art.

Such minimalist sensibilities drew attention to the unmistakable fact that the site of memory was a tomb. But there is one irony which must be recognized. The location chosen for commemoration was flat; the place where the bayonets were found was a series of shell craters some 30 metres away. The memorial is, therefore, on an *imaginary* site of heroism. It is at best adjacent to the place where the men of the 137th regiment died.⁹⁸ Thus from the very outset the attempt to preserve the site of memory 'as it really was' entailed the creation of myth. Given the nightmarish quality of the landscape created by ten months of combat, it is hardly surprising that no one knew the precise location of the Trench of the Bayonets. What mattered was to preserve a site as modestly and austere as possible, and this they did.

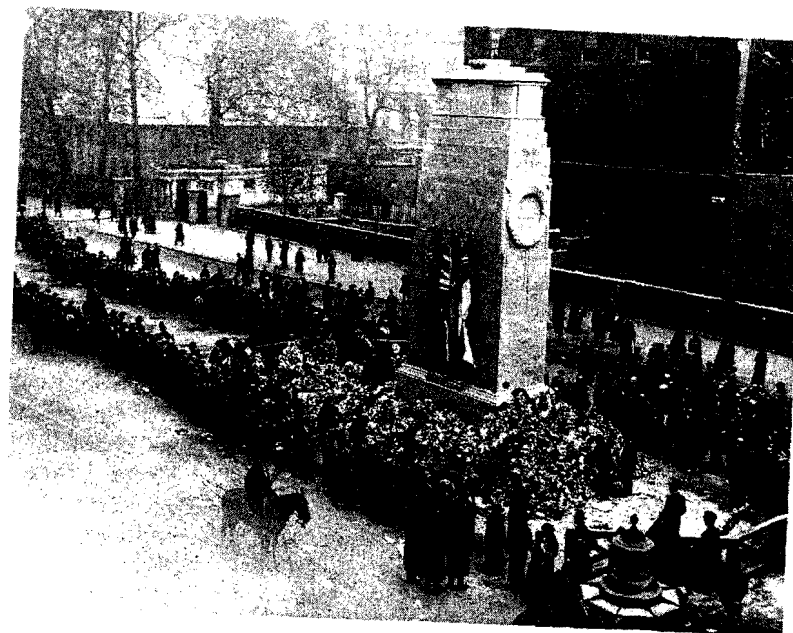
In the architecture which appeared both elsewhere at Douaumont and throughout the vast military cemeteries of the Western Front, artistic forms approached and sometimes replicated the simplicity of the Trench of the Bayonets. Many drew on pagan and Christian motifs to announce and (where possible) preserve the sacredness of the site.

Lutyens and elemental commemoration

A striking minimalism is evident in two of the most important British war memorials, the Cenotaph in Whitehall and the Memorial to the Missing at Thiepval on the Somme. Both are the work of Sir Edwin Lutyens, and show the specific features of abstract funerary art, so different from wartime patriotic commemorative forms and from postwar exercises in civic or religious art.

The Cenotaph

The story of the creation of the Cenotaph in Whitehall in the heart of London has been told many times.⁹⁹ But some features of this extraordinary moment of British commemoration are worth noticing here as they specify the distinctive features of what Lutyens himself referred to as the 'elemental mode' of commemorative art.



16. The Cenotaph, shortly after the unveiling ceremony, 11 November 1920

It was elemental in form and substance. Lutyens was a geometrician, who saw in mathematical relationships a language to express both architectural ideas and religious beliefs of an unconventional kind. He was a pantheist who moved in theosophist circles, through his wife's commitment to the movement and their friendship with some prominent spiritualists, Oliver Lodge, Arthur Balfour, and above all Annie Besant, president of the Theosophical Society and life-long champion of the cause of India. Lutyens' theosophy was ecumenical rather than occult, and his work in India as architect of New Delhi deepened his knowledge of and commitment to express what he took to be universal truths.¹⁰⁰ 'All religions have some truth in them', he wrote to his wife Emily in 1914, 'and all should be held in reverence.'¹⁰¹

Those universal truths were expressed in his two great projects in commemoration of war. The Cenotaph was initially meant to be the temporary centrepiece for a march past of the victorious armies and their leaders in London on 19 July 1919, along the lines of a similar parade in Paris five days earlier. The catafalque erected for the event in Paris was hastily removed when Clemenceau and other leaders objected to its 'Germanic' monumentality.¹⁰² The object designed by Lutyens for the London march, in contrast, was so powerfully evocative

of the mood of collective bereavement that, later that year, it was transformed by popular demand into a permanent, indeed, *the* permanent British war memorial, fixed to the place in Whitehall it had been meant to occupy only temporarily.¹⁰³ An abstract architectural form had somehow managed to transform a victory parade, a moment of high politics, into a time when millions could contemplate the timeless, the eternal, the inexorable reality of death in war.

A cenotaph is, literally, an empty tomb, and by announcing its presence as the tomb of no one, this one became the tomb of all who had died in the war. In the heart of London, in Whitehall, in the middle of the street adjacent to the Houses of Parliament – the seat of government – Westminster Abbey, and Horse Guards Parade, it brought the dead of the 1914–18 war into history. It did so without the slightest mark of Christian or contemporary patriotic or romantic symbolism, a feat which did not endear Lutyens or his work to traditional Christians.¹⁰⁴

There is a mathematical precision to the work which is entirely invisible to most viewers. It was unabashedly ancient, recalling Greek forms, with their curved surfaces creating the illusion of linearity, or entasis. As Lutyens himself noted of the Cenotaph:

all its horizontal surfaces and planes are spherical, parts of parallel spheres 1801 ft. 8 in. in diameter; and all its vertical lines converge upwards to a point some 1801 ft. 8 in. above the centre of these spheres.¹⁰⁵

Lutyens the geometer took the form of Greek commemorative architecture but stripped it of any hint of celebration.

Lutyens' Cenotaph is a work of genius largely because of its simplicity. It says so much because it says so little. It is a form on which anyone could inscribe his or her own thoughts, reveries, sadnesses. It became a place of pilgrimage,¹⁰⁶ and managed to transform the commemorative landscape by making all of 'official' London into an imagined cemetery.

How far we have come from the patriotic mode of commemoration, from the collection of artefacts of victory, from the trophies distributed among Allied communities, or the evidence of heroism under arms. Lutyens' Cenotaph leapt over the mundane into myth, and by doing so provided a focus for collective mourning of a kind unknown before or since in Britain.

There is an interesting recent analogy to the phenomenal appeal of the Cenotaph, which helps account for its strength. Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial of 1982 is like the Cenotaph in many ways. She also brought the American dead of the Vietnam war back into American history, by placing the memorial between the Lincoln memorial and the Washington monument. She also eliminated all hint of a celebration or affirmation of patriotism, the nobility of arms, or the dignity of dying for

a just cause. All we see are names, and our own reflection. Just as in the case of the Cenotaph, the Vietnam memorial has become a point of pilgrimage, drawing people to it as none of the more figurative and clichéd monuments has done.¹⁰⁷ Both monuments go beyond the political, and beyond conventional architectural forms, to express existential truths too often obscured in the rhetorical and aesthetic fog of war and its aftermath.

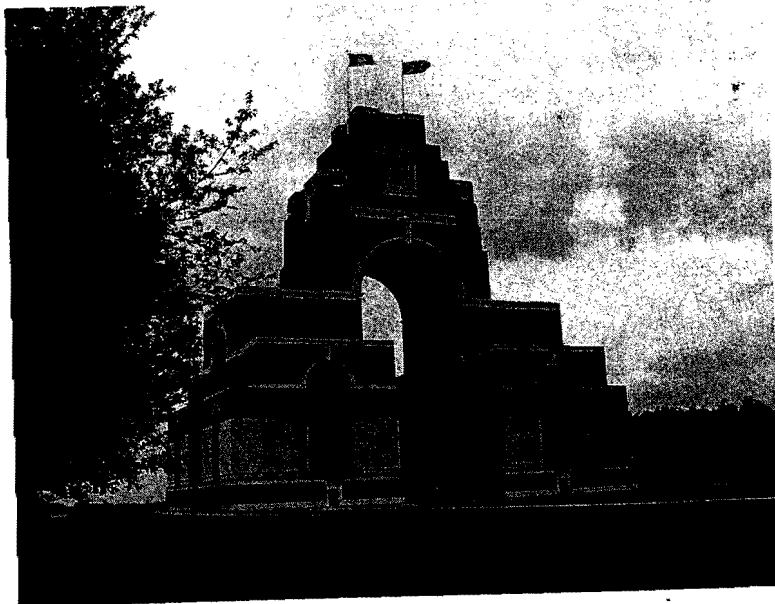
Thiepval

Though Lutyens drew on classical forms, he tended to reduce them to simpler and simpler outline or notation. This process has no better expression than in the Monument to the Missing of the Battle of the Somme at Thiepval. The hill dominated the battlefield. The terrifying and murderous task of taking it and the surrounding terrain was one of the most appalling chapters in the history of the war. Total casualties on both sides exceeded 1 million men; perhaps 600,000 died among the British and French forces. Of the British and Allied losses, the bodies of approximately 73,000 of these men were never found. It is their names which are inscribed on the internal walls of Lutyens' memorial.

Lutyens again chose geometry to express the inexpressible nature of war and its human costs. He took the form of the triumphal arch, and multiplied it. Four such arches describe the base of the memorial; their height is two and a half times their width, and they are superseded by a series of larger arches placed at right angles to the base. The ratio of the dimensions of the larger to the smaller arches is also precisely $2\frac{1}{2}$ to 1. The progression extends upward, from smaller arch, and therefore smaller area of emptiness to larger arch, and larger area of emptiness, to still larger arch in the centre of the monument, to nothing at all. We arrive at the vanishing point well above the ground, just as was the case with the Cenotaph. Just as in the case of the Cenotaph, Lutyens brilliantly managed to create an embodiment of nothingness, an abstract space unique among memorials of the Great War.

In the centre of the monument is a simple sarcophagus, from which one sees two small cemeteries of French and British soldiers, whose names are 'known to God', as the British inscription reads. All around are the other, smaller monuments to phases or encounters in the Battle of the Somme. The Thiepval monument is in the red brick characteristic of the region, and, depending on the angle of vision, it is either massive (when the open archways are hidden) or spacious (when the archways are confronted head-on).

One prominent recent interpreter, the architectural historian Vincent Scully, has described the face of Thiepval as 'a silent scream', a cry of protest against the unimaginable suffering of the Battle of the Somme. This is probably mistaken, though a good indication of the extent to



17. The Monument to the Missing at Thiepval (Somme)

which great art attracts different meanings in different generations. It is difficult to accept Scully's view that Thiepval was meant to be 'an enormous monster' with 'demonic eyes', or a 'horrific mask'.¹⁰⁸ We of the late twentieth century see these things in the monument, but Lutyens did not put them there. He was a conventional patriot, whose wartime swings of mood followed closely the trajectory of the fortunes of the British army.¹⁰⁹ Pacifism was simply not in his bones.

Not that Lutyens romanticized the battlefields or the cemeteries covering them. On the contrary. He wrote to his wife in July 1917 from France, and told her about the shock of seeing the detritus of warfare and some of the awful wrecked terrain of the Western Front.

The 'cemeteries' – the dotted graves – are the most pathetic things, specially when one thinks of how things are run and problems treated at home.

What humanity can endure, suffer, is beyond belief . . .

The graveyards, haphazard from the needs of much to do and little time for thought. And then a ribbon of isolated graves like a milky way across miles of country where men were tucked in where they fell. Ribbons of little crosses each touching each across a cemetery, set in a wilderness of annuals and where one sort of flower is grown the effect is charming, easy and oh so pathetic. One thinks

for the moment no other monument is needed. Evanescent but for the moment is almost perfect and how misleading to surmise in this emotion and how some love to sermonise. But the only monument can be one in which the endeavour is sincere to make such monument permanent – a solid ball of bronze!¹¹⁰

Here we see in embryo the two facets of Lutyens' commemorative art: the minimalist and the geometric, either nothing or a ball of bronze to commemorate loss of a kind and on a scale unfathomable perhaps even to those who went through the battle.

The same impulse is behind his design of a 'Great Stone of Remembrance', a white altar, placed in British military cemeteries, alongside Blomfield's Cross of Sacrifice.¹¹¹ Once again Lutyens's choice was ecumenical and abstract, not Christian. He sought out pictures of the Great Stone Elephant at the Ming tombs in China, and aimed to use such imagery to escape what he took to be the narrow parochialism of Christian symbolism.¹¹² It is not at all surprising that his approach was not to the taste of all Christians, or that the British government found a way to incorporate both his approach to commemoration and that of more conventional architects like Blomfield and Sir Herbert Baker, his rival and colleague with whom he had worked in Delhi before the war.¹¹³

Lutyens designed over ninety war memorials, both private and public, and many of his public commissions bore the same distinctive marks of mathematical abstraction in preference to figurative or allegorical forms. His design for a memorial at St Quentin, which was never realized, as much as his completed plans for memorials at Etaples, Arras, Gezaincourt, Hersin, and Barlin in the Pas-de-Calais all show the same mind at work.¹¹⁴ It was not at all a mind closed to conventional imagery, especially when an individual was commemorated. Witness the mounted cavalry officer, by Alfred Munnings, on a plinth designed by Lutyens in commemoration of Edward Horner in the Church of St Andrew, Mells, Somerset. Lutyens also accompanied Horner's mother when the two of them placed a tablet in the parish church for Raymond Asquith, the Prime Minister's son and her son-in-law.¹¹⁵ Here too the subject was the loss of one man. But so many individuals had died that, for Lutyens, a different language was required to express the meaning of the 'lost generation'. While inspecting sites for the war memorial at Mells, Lutyens simply noted of the people accompanying him: 'All their young men are killed.'¹¹⁶ In this setting he went beyond Christian symbols of sacrifice, and explored what he called more 'elemental' (or universal) responses to the terrible loss of life in war.

His monument to the missing at Thiepval is not a cry against war, but an extraordinary statement in abstract language about mass death and the impossibility of triumphalism. In Thiepval Lutyens diminished the arch of triumph of Roman or French art, and indeed of his own imperial

designs in New Delhi, executed on the eve of the war, literally to the vanishing point. Whether or not his calculations had it in mind, it is a singular fact that the most imposing view of this monument is from the air, where it presents a majestic form, light and eternal, invisible to those of us who come to Thiepval, as the soldiers did in 1916, on foot.

Käthe Kollwitz and Vladslo

Lutyens was present at the dedication of his war memorial at Thiepval on 2 August 1932.¹¹⁷ A few days before, another war memorial had been erected at the Roggevelde German war cemetery, near Vladslo in Flemish Belgium. It is the work of Käthe Kollwitz. Her sculpture is of two parents mourning their son, killed in October 1914. There is no monument to the grief of those who lost their sons in the war more moving than this simple stone sculpture of two parents, on their knees, before their son's grave.

There is no signature of the artist, no indication of individual proprietorship, no location in time or space. Only sadness, the universal sadness, of two aged people, surrounded by the dead, 'like a flock' of lost children. The image is Käthe Kollwitz's own.¹¹⁸ The story of her struggle to commemorate her son Peter's death in war testifies both to her humanity and to her achievement in creating a timeless memorial, a work of art of extraordinary power and feeling. Through the monument to her son Peter, she brought commemorative art to a level beyond that of most of her contemporaries.

Käthe Kollwitz was forty-seven when the Great War broke out. She was a prominent Berlin artist, whose lithographs *A weavers' rebellion* (1898) and *Peasants' war* (1908) established her as a master printmaker and visual poet *par excellence* of the suffering of the masses. She was the granddaughter of a Königsberg pastor, and his message of duty and calling informed all her work. Her husband was a physician, whose practice was in the drab Prenzlauer Berg district of Berlin, and whose patients brought before her eyes the evidence of deprivation, degradation, illness, and tragedy which she transformed into art.¹¹⁹ Her aim was to avoid formalism and overelaboration, and to use drawing and printmaking to simplify and render immediately accessible the humanity of her subjects. Her drawings of working-class life, past and present, all exhibit her belief in the need to keep 'everything to a more and more abbreviated form . . . so that all that is essential is strongly emphasized and all that is unessential denied'.¹²⁰

Peter Kollwitz volunteered early in the war, and was killed, on 30 October 1914, aged eighteen, in Flanders, not far from Langemarck, a name henceforth synonymous with the self-sacrificing idealism of German youth.¹²¹ 'Your pretty shawl will no longer be able to warm our

boy', was the touching way she broke the news to a close friend.¹²² To another friend she admitted, 'There is in our lives a wound which will never heal. Nor should it.'¹²³

By December 1914, she had formed the idea of creating a memorial to her son, with his body outstretched, 'the father at the head, the mother at the feet' to commemorate 'the sacrifice of all the young volunteers'. She initially thought of placing it 'on the heights of Schildhorn' near Berlin.¹²⁴ As time went on, she attempted various other designs, with Peter above the parents,¹²⁵ with the parents 'kneeling, as they carry their dead son',¹²⁶ with Peter's body wrapped in a blanket.¹²⁷ Then she wrestled with the possibility that 'a relief of the parents might be set upon his grave', or near the entrance to the war cemetery where Peter was buried.¹²⁸ The relief became a sculpture in the round by November 1917, with the parents kneeling before their son's grave, 'leaning against one another. Her head very low on his shoulder.'¹²⁹

Dissatisfied with all these designs, Käthe Kollwitz put the project aside temporarily in 1919. Her commitment to see it through when it was right was unequivocal. 'I will come back, I shall do this work for you, for you and the others', she noted in her diary in June 1919.¹³⁰ Five years later, she kept her word. Her idea was still to sculpt two parents, kneeling before their son's grave, perhaps at the gate of the cemetery, 'blocklike figures, Egyptian in size, between which the visitors would pass'.¹³¹ In October 1925, she began work on the parents. In June 1926 Käthe and Karl Kollwitz visited the German war cemetery at Roggevelde. This is what she saw:

The cemetery is close to the highway . . . The entrance is nothing but an opening in the hedge that surrounds the entire field. It was blocked by barbed wire . . . What an impression: cross upon cross . . . on most of the graves there were low, yellow wooden crosses. A small metal plaque in the center gives the name and number. So we found our grave . . . We cut three tiny roses from a flowering wild briar and placed them on the ground beside the cross. All that is left of him lies there in a row-grave . . .

We considered where my figures might be placed . . . What we both thought best was to have the figures just across from the entrance, along the hedge . . . Then the kneeling figures would have the whole cemetery before them . . . Fortunately no decorative figures have been placed in the cemetery, none at all. The general effect is of simple planes and solitude . . . Everything is quiet, but the larks sing gladly.¹³²

The project occupied her throughout the following years, and she was at last able to complete it in April 1931. 'In the fall - Peter, - I shall bring it to you', she noted in her diary.¹³³ Her work was exhibited in the National Gallery in Berlin and then transported to Belgium, where it was placed,

not near the entrance, but adjacent to her son's grave.¹³⁴ There it rests to this day.

Käthe Kollwitz's war memorial was an offering to a son who had offered his life for his country. She could not complete it until eighteen years after his death. This alone should tell us something about the process of bereavement described so movingly in her diary and in her work. On 31 December 1914, she noted in her diary:

My Peter, I intend to try to be faithful . . . What does that mean? To love my country in my own way as you loved it in your way. And to make this love work. To look at the young people and be faithful to them. Besides that I shall do my work, the same work, my child, which you were denied. I want to honor God in my work, too, which means I want to be honest, true and sincere . . . When I try to be like that, dear Peter, I ask you then to be around me, help me, show yourself to me. I know you are there, but I see you only vaguely, as if you were shrouded in mist. Stay with me . . .

She spent hours sitting in his room.¹³⁵ In October 1916, she wrote in her diary that 'I can feel Peter's being. He consoles me, he helps me in my work.' She rejected the idea of spirits returning, but was drawn to the 'possibility of establishing a connection here, in this life of the sense, between the physically alive person and the essence of someone physically dead'. Call it 'theosophy or spiritism or mysticism', if you will, she noted, but the truth was there nonetheless. 'I have felt you, my boy – Oh, many, many times.'¹³⁶ Even after the pain of loss began to fade, she still spoke to her dead son, especially when working on his memorial.¹³⁷ Kollwitz continued to be haunted by dreams of her son, and felt his presence in the same way that other bereaved parents did throughout the world.¹³⁸

What gives Kollwitz's mourning an added dimension was her sense of guilt, of remorse over the responsibility the older generation had for the slaughter of the young. This feeling arose from her initial reaction to Peter's decision to volunteer. Her attitude was apprehensive but positive. Her vision was internationalist and hostile to the philistine arrogance of official Germany. But, as she said time and again, she believed in a higher duty than mere personal self-interest, and had felt before 1914 that 'back of the individual life . . . stood the Fatherland'.¹³⁹ She knew that her son had volunteered with a 'pure heart', filled with patriotism,¹⁴⁰ 'love for an idea, a commandment',¹⁴¹ but still she had wept bitterly at his departure.¹⁴²

To find, as she did later in the war, that his idealism was misplaced, that his sacrifice was for nothing, was terribly painful for many reasons. First, it created a distance between her and her son. 'Is it a break of faith with you, Peter', she wrote in October 1916, 'if I can now see only madness in the war?'¹⁴³ He had died believing; how could his mother



18. Gedenkblatt für Karl Liebknecht by Käthe Kollwitz, 15 January 1919

not honour that belief? But to feel that the war was an exercise in futility led to the even more damaging admission that her son and his whole generation had been 'betrayed'. This recognition was agonizing, but she did not flinch from giving it artistic form.¹⁴⁴ This is one reason why it took so long for her to complete the monument, and why she and her husband are on their knees before their son's grave. They are there to beg his forgiveness, to ask him to accept their failure to find a better way, their failure to prevent the madness of war from cutting his life short.

Käthe Kollwitz also wrote in her diary of the 'need to kneel down and let him pour through, through me. Feel myself altogether one with him.'¹⁴⁵ This form of prayer was deeply important to her, and showed that despite the depths of her grief, she never abandoned the outlines of her Christian humanist faith. Before the war, she had produced two remarkable etchings entitled *From many wounds you bleed, O people* and *The downtrodden*. Both are in triptych form,¹⁴⁶ and both show a body remarkably similar to Holbein's *Christ in the Tomb*. In 1903 she produced an etching entitled *Woman with dead child – Pietà*,¹⁴⁷ and became renowned for her images of mothers and children. One of her most powerful etchings is a starkly primitive woman holding a dead child, modelled for her in 1903 uncannily by her son Peter.¹⁴⁸ The Christian Lamentation motif found perhaps its most celebrated form in her work entitled



19. *Der Leichnam Christi im Grabe*, 1921, Hans Holbein the Younger

Memorial print for Karl Liebknecht, which dwells more on the mourning workers than on their murdered leader. Here we can see the influence of the Christian sculpture of Ernst Barlach, whose war memorial sculpture in Gustrow Cathedral she admired in later years.¹⁴⁹ Her *Mary and Elizabeth* (1928) is derived from contemplating a devotional painting attributed to Konrad Witz and hung in the art gallery of Berlin-Dahlem.¹⁵⁰ As we shall see in chapter 6, a return to the German Renaissance was not unique in the postwar period.

What does separate the Kollwitz memorial from so many others, either of religious or secular inspiration, is its sheer simplicity, and its power to escape from the notation of a particular school of art or ideology. Her memorial to her son Peter has a timelessness derived from her gift for taking an older religious frame of reference and remoulding it to suit a modern catastrophe.

I saw Käthe Kollwitz's memorial to her son in a light drizzle, not at all foreign to the region of Belgium. What it produced was extraordinary: a hunched-over figure in granite, with drops of water falling from her face.

At Roggevelde, on their knees, Käthe and Karl Kollwitz suggest a family which includes us all; and that may be precisely what she had in mind. The most intimate here is also the most universal. The placing of her memorial in the German war cemetery where her son's body lay was a family reunion, a foretaste of what her broad religious faith suggested would happen at some future date. The sense of completeness, of healing, of transcendence is transparently present in her moving account of her last visit to the memorial. She was alone with her husband:

we went from the figures to Peter's grave, and everything was alive and *wholly* felt. I stood before the woman, looked at her – my own face – and I wept and stroked her cheeks. Karl stood close behind me – I did not even realize it. I heard him whisper, 'Yes, yes.' How close we were to one another then!¹⁵¹

Conclusion

Touching war memorials, and in particular, touching the names of those who died, is an important part of the rituals of separation which surrounded them. Many photographs of the period show mourners reaching out in this way,¹⁵² thus testifying that whatever the aesthetic and political meanings which they may bear, they are also sites of mourning, and of gestures which go beyond the limitations of place and time.

Freud's essay of 1917 on 'Mourning and melancholia' provides a way of understanding these gestures.¹⁵³ For some people the burden of bereavement is bearable; for others, it is crushing. The latter Freud



20. *Die Eltern*, by Käthe Kollwitz, Roggevelde German war cemetery, Vladslo, Belgium

termed 'melancholic'. They are trapped in a forest of loss, unable to focus on what had been torn from their lives. Their loss is palpable, but also generalized. In contrast, the non-melancholic mourner tests the reality of loss and ultimately disengages from the departed. The melancholic cannot do this, unless some mediating element can help isolate the loss, and establish its limits. Then the individual knows what is gone, and what has survived. Is it fanciful to suggest that rituals at war memorials, and in particular the reading of the names of the fallen, and the touching of those statues or those names, were means of avoiding crushing melancholia, of passing through mourning, of separating from the dead and beginning to live again? Ritual here is a means of forgetting, as much as of commemoration, and war memorials, with their material representation of names and losses, are there to help in the necessary art of forgetting.

This *rite de passage* was expressed in many different languages. Most of them were traditional, drawing on ancient motifs and tropes from religious, pagan, and secular sources. Art placed in cemeteries tended to a greater degree of abstraction than did that located in village squares or within the perimeter of churches, but even in the work of Lutyens or Käthe Kollwitz the humanist tradition is still robustly intact.

This point raises one of the most widely debated issues of the cultural history of the early twentieth century: the clash between 'traditional' and 'modernist' approaches to twentieth-century art. When we contemplate war memorials erected before the 1960s, the evidence is overwhelmingly on one side. There are numerous instances of the stubborn survival in the aftermath of the Great War of older forms in commemorative art. What may be termed 'traditionalism' in wartime and postwar religious and secular commemoration entails everything the modernists rejected: romanticism, old values, sentimentality, in sum, late-Victorian and Edwardian clichés about duty, masculinity, honour. Of course, both the 'modernist' and the 'traditional' forms of imagining the war were in evidence long before the Armistice, and they were never as distinctive as apologists on both sides suggested. But even when we add the towering examples of commemoration in war cemeteries to the catalogue of civilian art, religious or secular, the strength of traditional modes of expressing the debt of the living to the dead must be acknowledged.

That strength, I argue, lay in the power of traditional languages, rituals, and forms to mediate bereavement. Irony's cutting edge – the savage wit of Dada or surrealism, for example – could express anger and despair, and did so in enduring ways; but it could not heal. Traditional modes of seeing the war, while at times less profound, provided a way of remembering which enabled the bereaved to live with their losses, and perhaps to leave them behind.¹⁵⁴ This is the central reason why

most commemorative art until the Second World War harks back to earlier conventions, rather than forward to pure abstraction.

We confront here questions which may be posed and answered more appropriately by poets than by historians. How healing occurs, and what quietens embitterment and alleviates despair can never be fully known. But not to ask the question, not to try to place the history of war memorials within the history of bereavement, a history we all share in our private lives, is both to impoverish the study of history and to evade our responsibility as historians. For we must attend to the faces and feelings of those who were bereft, and who made the pilgrimages to these sites of memory, large and small, in order to begin to understand how men and women tried to cope with one of the signal catastrophes of our century.

Part II

Cultural codes and languages of mourning