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INTRODUCTION

Why and How Should We ‘Remember’ the Great War?

In his alternate history novel *After Dachau*, Daniel Quinn envisages a chilling dystopian reality two thousand years after the Second World War. The most meaningful scene is set in a history class during which it becomes clear that for both the teacher and the students the battle of Verdun has as little meaning as the battles of Thermopylae and Hastings (120). Despite its ostentatiously implausible plot, Quinn’s novel poses the highly relevant question of the impact of an inevitable and ever-increasing temporal distance on the significance of historical events for contemporary and future generations. In other words, how are societies to ‘remember’ their past if there is no one left who actually remembers it? Quinn conjures a disturbing fictional world in which “no one cares” (217) about history because any type of community (be it ethnic, social, or national) without memory is bound to be epistemologically and empathetically disconnected from its own historical heritage. Thus, the protagonist, Jason Tull, embarks on a self-appointed mission to ‘unbury’ whatever memory-traces can still be found, including photographs and paintings, as well as diaries and novels. The gallery that he creates, where he puts on display both the documents and the art of a long-forgotten past, may be interpreted as an attempt to construct – albeit only symbolically – a “cultural memory” for his society.

The passing away of the ‘Last Veteran[s]’ of the Great War hit both the national and international news, each official announcement inevitably accompanied by remarks underscoring that these deaths signify far more than just a personal loss for the family involved: “We have come to *the end of a chapter in history*” (“Last living U.S. World War I veteran dies”); “Babcock is *our last personal connection* to a remarkable generation of Canadian heroes” (“Canada’s last known Great War veteran, dies at age 109”); “Florence Green, the world’s last surviving First World War veteran has died, marking *the end of an era* in British history” (“Last surviving veteran of First World War dies aged 110”) (emphases mine). These deaths are thus depicted to be the (symbolic) demarcating moments of our time, prompting also the urgent questions of, first, how to preserve and perpetuate a ‘memory’ of the Great War when the beholders and guardians of its authentic and living memory are forever gone, and, second, how to endow this war with a contemporary relevance that would allow “the past [to] be reclaimed as ‘ours’” (Assmann 113). There appears to be a general consensus, as Jan Assmann writes,

that “knowledge about the past [needs to acquire] the properties and functions of memory” and – in order to do so – it must be “related to the concept of identity” (113). This “identity” needs to be considered in both its national and transnational/global variants, with an awareness of the multifarious facets (geopolitical, socio-political, military, legal, medical, psychological, anthropological, philosophical, or cultural) determining the dominant epistemologies and ideologies of war.

It does not suffice to simply disseminate the basic facts about the Great War, for example, by means of the educational system. One may ask – so what if students know that the First World War took place in 1914–1918? This is just a date. A teacher wanting to create an affective shock may quote the numbers constituting the “unprecedented losses” of the Great War: “Germany lost more than 1.8 million, Russia 1.7 million, France 1.3 million, Austria-Hungary 922,000, Italy 460,000, the USA 50,500, Bulgaria 75,000, [...] Britain 888,000, Canada 65,000, Australia 62,000 [...],” even adding that “these figures were approximately 50 per cent greater than for the Second World War” (Haythornthwaite 54) – yet these are just statistics. And why should contemporary and future generations read and/or watch the ‘documents of the imagination’ of that time (letters, diaries, memoirs, poetry, fiction, drama, film)? The knowledge of the facts of the Great War (dates, battles, adversaries, and also the culture of the period) is meaningless if not cognitively and ideologically embedded within contexts that will allow us to see how many aspects of our contemporary reality have their roots in what happened a hundred years ago, and if not affectively contextualized by authentic or imagined stories of personal experiences.

To speak of an enduring fascination with a military conflict that took place a hundred years ago would be an overstatement. It is more accurate to say that one can detect impressive institutional, scholarly and cultural efforts to perpetuate an empathetic understanding of the countless and varied human experiences in the time of the Great War, as well as an awareness of the scale of its geopolitical impact and the vastness of the social changes it brought into being, giving birth to the modern age. In the words of Modris Eksteins, to look back to the Great War demands of us to consider the various forms of “[our] becoming,” and “the emergence, in the first half of [the twentieth] century, of our modern consciousness” (xiii). The proliferation of histories and documentaries, academic studies and popular literature and film, museum exhibitions and information centres at memorial sites, the adherence to annual commemorative ceremonies and the erection of new monuments all serve to ‘undo’ the inevitable processes of ‘forgetting’ the past and to diminish the “historical distance” dividing the ‘then’ of 1914–1918 from the ‘now’ of the twenty-first century. They serve to “make the historical scene as vivid and palpable as possible” by representing it as “a place of [possible] emotional or ideological engagement” (Phillips 92).

It is the purpose of “cultural memory” to convince us of the relevance of the past for the ‘here and now,’ i.e. to effectively situate historical events within

“[our] temporal horizon” (Assmann 113). In Jan Assmann’s definition, “cultural memory” is “exteriorized, objectified, and stored away in symbolic forms,” and it needs to be “supported by [...] institutions of learning, transmission and interpretation; [...] cultivated by specialists and [...] celebrated on special occasions” (111). Despite the advantages of globalization that allow for an unlimited access to the ‘histories’ of other nations, “cultural memories” tend to be “local, egocentric, and specific to a group and its values” (113). Thus, there is no one “cultural memory” of the Great War but multiple modes of its memorialization and representation across different nations. This can best be seen in the different designations for the November 11 commemorations as Remembrance Day (as in the Commonwealth of Nations) or Independence Day (as in Poland), which suggest strikingly different interpretations of the First World War. Remembrance Day is all about pausing to think of the dead of the Great War, the extent of the loss of human life morally superseding the fact of these nations having achieved a military victory. Independence Day signifies a different hierarchy of meaning, where national freedom is considered a superior ethical category to the deaths of millions.

The positive impact of “historical distance” is such that it allows for “the possibility of new [...] perspectives that are conferred by the passage of time,” i.e. “there is much we can see about [the past] that was difficult to understand and speak about at the time” (Phillips 91). Though in varying degree, different “cultural memories” of the Great War have been strongly affected by feminist, postcolonial, memory and trauma theories, the impact of which is most clearly visible in the reshuffling of the epistemological focus in contemporary (post-memory) museums and memorials, literature and film, as well as academic studies. National, social, ethnic and gender-related identities in the present demand a re-evaluation of the representations of these identities in the past, such as for instance ‘unforgetting’ women’s experience, ‘undoing’ the absence of Indigenous people in the “cultural memory” of the First World War, or depicting civilian grief to be cognitively as significant as soldiers’/veterans’ trauma. It is beyond doubt that today’s sociological and ethical concerns have resulted in an interest in the (non)meaning of social class, race and gender in the construction of ‘memories’ of the Great War in the time of the conflict and its aftermath, accompanied by efforts to bring these hitherto suppressed issues to the forefront of contemporary attention. One may also detect a tendency towards restoring the significance of the ‘fields’ of the Great War that had been overshadowed by the overwhelming focus on trench warfare in France and Flanders, ranging from the renewed interest in the Armenian genocide to the ‘forgotten’ fronts of Eastern Europe or Africa.

One may speak here of the phenomenon of belatedness which effectively re-structures the prevailing modes of cultural ‘remembering.’ Within the context of “cultural memory,” belatedness can be compared to the effect of creating a new work of art as put forth by T. S. Eliot: “The existing monuments form an

ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new” (2207–2208). Belatedness should thus be understood as the cognitive, affective, and ideological impact of the construction(s) of various post-memory forms of commemoration, as well as cultural and scholarly representations. Their aim has been to foreground aspects of a long-past historical event which were ignored within the commemorative and representational modes of their ‘own’ period, due to the socio-political and cultural restrictions at that specific time and the prevailing ideological frameworks for interpreting the Great War in a given nation.

The appearance of a ‘belated’ memorial, text, film or historical study concomitantly testifies to the absence of their allegedly ‘new’ subject of commemoration, representation and study in the mnemonic forms hitherto accepted as canonical, forcing one to reassess their place in the hierarchy of meaning for an understanding of the Great War and its impact on ethnic, social, gender or national identities. One may cite here the telling example of the 1995 “Never Forget” memorial by John Boxtel, commemorating the Ukrainian-Canadians detained in internment camps during the Great War. The very existence of this new memorial has irrevocably changed the Canadian ‘memorialscape’ by adding a sense of national guilt to the hitherto dominant myth of “the birth of a nation” (see Vance 68–112) as carved by Walter Allward into his Canadian National Vimy Memorial (unveiled in 1936). Every post-memory memorial, museum exhibition, documentary, popular film, novel, poem or drama; the re-publications of wartime or interwar historical, documentary and literary texts up till now ‘absent’ within the accepted national canons; or scholarly studies focusing on hitherto suppressed aspects of the 1914–1918 conflict ranging from ‘forgotten’ battlefields beyond the Western Front to the specific topics of facially disfigured soldiers or women’s grief – all these have set the grounds for redefinitions, revaluations, restructurings and re-orderings within the dominant schemata of “cultural memories” of the First World War.

In the words of Pierre Nora, when “there is no spontaneous memory,” it is necessary to “create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills because such activities no longer occur naturally” (12). However, “[societies] without ritual” (Nora 12) open the door to creating new rituals, new forms of commemoration, and new forms of representation. And the phenomenon of belatedness inevitably draws attention to “cultural memory” itself, prompting the questions as to how it differs from wartime and inter-war representational strategies – and thus how it (potentially) alters our contemporary understanding of the epistemological and ideological undercurrents determining the mnemonic forms of a past historical period. Expanding on Ann

Rigney's typology, the contemporary drive to scrutinize the "cultural memory" of the Great War can be seen as performing several functions. The question that needs to be asked regards the extent to which the various modes of "cultural memory" (institutional, educational, architectural, academic, literary, or filmic) serve the purposes of "relay stations, [...] recycl[ing] earlier forms of remembrance" and "stabilizers, [...] celebrat[ing] [...] 'monuments' from the past," as opposed to being "catalysts, [...] drawing attention to 'new' topics or ones hitherto neglected in cultural remembrance" and "calibrators, [...] reflecting critically on dominant memorial practices" (350–351).

The centenary of the Great War provides the perfect opportunity not only to reassert the significance of this first global-scale conflict of the twentieth-century for contemporary generations in light of its numerous cultural representations but also to highlight the epistemological and interpretative diversity surrounding the subject of the war that has emerged in the recent decades. It was the choice of our editorial team to include articles that altogether attest to a desirable centrifugality at the core of cultural memory. The Great War should be understood as a 'site' of myriad combatant and civilian experiences, social and political processes, geopolitical turmoil and repercussions; as well as a 'site' of conflicting ideologies and mythologies. The 'stories' about the Great War that emerge from the different articles included in this special issue do not add up to a unified 'image' of the Great War, showing instead that there is no one 'truth' of this military conflict but innumerable 'truths' and 'untruths.' An understanding of this war in all its complexity, as Jules Romains so aptly wrote in his 1938 novel *Verdun*, requires a simultaneous 'seeing' through both the "microscopic" and "telescopic" lens (36). Hence our decision to include articles that deal with the 'documents' of the time as well as texts offering an analysis of the 'vastness' of the historical and mythopoeic processes that took place, concomitantly mapping unchartered 'territories' within Great War studies and critically reassessing the hitherto dominant representational paradigms in comparison to post-memory forms of writing, showing, and commemorating this historically distant conflict.

The articles are ordered so as to underscore the most important trends comprising a multifarious "cultural memory" of the First World War. The opening and closing articles were deliberately chosen to form a framing of the entire issue, beginning with a scrutiny of a document from the past (Marjorie Gehrhardt's "Mobilising the *Red Cross Journal*: A Charity's Periodical in Wartime") and concluding with an analysis of contemporary commemorative practices (Ross J. Wilson's "Witnessing the Great War in Britain: Centenaries and the Making of Modern Identities"). Within this interpretative frame 'from document to monument,' the articles are arranged so as to highlight the necessity to also acknowledge the successes and failures of the propaganda efforts undertaken during 1914–1918 to ensure either national or transnational support for the military effort, propaganda being a 'battlefield' as significant as the combat zones (Sara Prieto's "'War song

of America’: The Vigilantes and American Propagandistic Poetry of the First World War” and Natalia Stachura’s “British Film Propaganda in the Netherlands: Its Preconditions and Missed Opportunities”). The subsequent texts serve to highlight the distinction between the actual geopolitical repercussions of the Great War versus the constructions of mythopoeic national identities (Anne Samson’s “The End of the 1914–1918 War in Africa” and Donna Coates’s “Happy is the Land that Needs No Heroes”). One cannot ignore the reasons for which inter-war (documentary and fictional) literary accounts written by male veterans of the Great War came to be seen as the dominant representative ‘truth’ of the conflict (Martin Löschnigg’s “How to Tell the War? Trench Warfare and the Realist Paradigm in First World War Narratives”), yet it is also essential to see that historical distance does not necessarily affect the accuracy of the depiction of the human experience of war (Nancy Sloan Goldberg’s “From Barbusse to Lemaitre: The Evolution of Experience”). The re-writings of the First World War in post-memory fiction have paved the way for substantial re-interpretations of the social and political meanings of the conflict from the perspective of fictional protagonists representing a range of human experiences missing from the accepted canonical war narratives (Anna Branach-Kallas’s “World Travellers: Colonial Loyalties, Border Crossing and Cosmopolitanism in Recent Postcolonial First World War Novels” and Rūta Šlapkauskaitė’s “‘Like being trapped in a drum’: The Poetics of Resonance in Frances Itani’s *Deafening*”). Pertinently, our special issue thus ends with an article on post-memory forms of commemoration, so as to accentuate that the “cultural memory” of the Great War is our only venue to an understanding of what happened in 1914–1918. This ‘understanding’ is inevitably filtered through contemporary perspectives that aim to prove the ethical relevance of past representations of the war for our ‘here and now.’ All the articles comprising our special issue aim to answer the vital question put forth in the subtitle for this introduction, namely, *why* and *how* should we remember the Great War a hundred years after it occurred?

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