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Review

ANNA BRANACH-KALLAS and PIOTR SADKOWSKI, *Comparing Grief in French, British and Canadian Great War Fiction (1977–2014)*. Brill Rodopi 2018, Leiden. ISBN 978-90-04-36477-6. 251 pages. (Katarzyna Więckowska <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3408-3695>)

In *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture*, published in 1990, Samuel Hynes famously claims that the war was not merely “the great military and political event of its time; but it was also the great *imaginative* event” which “altered the ways in which men and women thought not only about war but about the world, and about culture and its expressions” (ix). The war, as Hynes forcefully phrases it, “changed reality” (ix), putting an end to the established ways of thinking, systems of values, and modes of writing; it gave impetus to the process of “terminating faiths in progress, modernity, and rational systems of thought that had been sustained ever since the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century” (Stevenson viii), and radically destabilized the general belief in “a seamless, purposeful ‘history’ involving a coherent stream of time running from past through present to future” (Fussell 21). Writing about the war and its effects in 2013, over two decades after the publication of Hynes’s seminal study, Randall Stevenson argues that the conflict, far from being forgotten, “refuses to remain buried in the past” (vii) and is kept alive not only by such collective practices as Armistice days, poppies, or war memorials, but above all by literature, the writing the war continues to produce (vii).

Comparing Grief in French, British and Canadian Great War Fiction (1977–2014) (2018) by Anna Branach-Kallas and Piotr Sadkowski attests to the widespread and continuing impact of the First World War, which it examines in a selection of British, French, English-Canadian, and French-Canadian novels written in the last forty years. Significantly, in contrast to the prevailing analytical framework, Branach-Kallas and Sadkowski do not focus on literary representations of combat and front life, but on texts that depict the long-lasting aftermath of the war in order to investigate the psychological and social effects of the conflict and to inquire into why the war refuses to be buried in the past. *Comparing Grief* explores the “changed reality” after the Great War and analyses the cultural trauma produced by the war in France, Canada, and Britain, focusing on shell-shock and the ensuing disintegration of individual identity and communal bonds. The examination of the manifold effects of the conflict concentrates on the

personal, the local and the particular, so as to address the question “*how* did people suffer?” during and after the First World War (7). The book refers to numerous literary, sociological, historical, and philosophical studies to explore the links between the social and the individual, the political and the private, as well as the corporeal and the incorporeal. The key concept employed by Branach-Kallas and Sadkowski is that of grief, which they define, drawing on the work of Jay Winter and Judith Butler, as both a series of acts mediated through mourning and a state of mind which may prepare the ground for forming a (political) community (7) by “bringing to the fore the relational ties” that stress notions of “fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility” (Butler 22). Analysing various facets of grief and approaching grieving as a process, the authors stress connections between the past and the present, and point to those affective and ideological aspects of the Great War that continue to be important for contemporary writers, readers, and critics (10).

Comparing Grief presents an analysis of twenty-three novels written between 1977 and 2014 in France, Britain and Canada, thereby effectively disrupting the usual framework used for analysing Great War fiction which places it in the national context. It should be stressed that many of the novels have not been analysed yet, and that the comparative approach makes it possible to discuss a number of issues and problems across national denominations and to illustrate the global impact of the war without, however, erasing the differences between the nations and various national myths. Accordingly, in the five chapters that make the book, British, Canadian, and French fictions are examined to discuss recurrent themes and to outline the differences and similarities between the national literatures. The first chapter, *Faces*, is dedicated to the analysis of literary representations of facially disfigured soldiers and war veterans in *The Officers' Ward* (1998) by Marc Dugain, *My Dear, I Wanted to Tell You* (2011) by Louisa Young, *Tell* (2014) by Frances Itani, *The Great Swindle* (2013) by Pierre Lemaitre, and *Toby's Room* (2012) by Pat Barker. The second chapter focuses on the portrayal of women in war fiction, looking into the dominant constructions of gender, the gendering of war experience, and female grief and trauma in Alice Ferney's *Dans la guerre* (2003), Louisa Young's *My Dear, I Wanted to Tell You* (2011), Helen Dunmore's *Zennor in Darkness* (1993), Frances Itani's *Deafening* (2003), and Angélique Villeneuve's *Les Fleurs d'hiver* (2014). Chapter three, *Communities*, discusses the destruction and reconstruction of communal bonds during and after the war as represented in Philippe Claudel's *By a Slow River* (2003/2006), Louisa Young's *The Heroes' Welcome* (2014), Louis Caron's *The Draft Dodger* (1980), Daniel Poliquin's *A Secret Between Us* (2007), Jack Hodgins's *Broken Ground* (1998), and Robert Edric's *In Desolate Heaven* (1997). Chapter four focuses on the gendered representations of mourning during and after the war and explores the relations between intimate and collective remembrance in *The Stone Carvers* (2001) by Jane Urquhart, *Toby's Room* by Pat Barker, *The Great Swindle* (2013) by Pierre

Lemaitre, and *Le Monument* (2004) by Claude Duneton. The final chapter of the book, *Post-memory*, offers an examination of collective and personal remembrance, and discusses the ways in which the war is remembered and re-constructed in Timothy Findley's *The Wars* (1977), Claude Simon's *The Acacia* (1989), Jean Rouaud's *Fields of Glory* (199), Robert Goddard's *In Pale Battalions* (1988), Sebastian Faulks's *Birdsong* (1993), and Olivier Barbarant's *Douze lettres d'amour au soldat inconnu* (1993). As the titles of the chapters indicate, Branach-Kallas and Sadkowski begin from the exploration of corporeal traces of the war in *Faces*, focus on those usually left out of narratives of combat in *Women*, consider the disintegration of social ties and the possibility of regaining a sense of belonging in *Communities*, and explore practices of grieving in *Mourners*, to conclude with a discussion of strategies of distancing and reconstructing memories of the war in *Post-memory*. Central to all these explorations is the question of ethics, which the authors examine in and across individual texts, various modes of writing, and practices of reading.

The chapter opening the book presents a disturbing, yet fascinating examination of facial disfigurement and its effects on personal and public life. Approaching loss of face as loss of self (14) and as a sign of human frailty (43), Anna Branach-Kallas explores "the stigmatising and sacralising potential of the mutilated face" (19) and carefully disentangles the various meanings of facial disfigurement, from a signifier of shame, dishonour and loss of masculinity, and a site of abjection, to a marker of courage and dignity, and a symbol of suffering and communal belonging through which personal identity may be reconstructed. To document the diverse aspects of corporeal damage, Branach-Kallas refers to military and medical histories in innovative and revealing ways, and situates the discussion within the fields of health, humanities, and disability studies. Accordingly, physical disfigurement is analysed from an existential, psychological, and social perspective, and in relation to the question of alterity and the ethical responsibility harboured in the mutilated face. "If the precariousness of life is communicated through the face of the Other," asks Branach-Kallas, then "what is communicated when the Other has literally lost his human face?" (40) The answers to the question document the ethical and aesthetic responses to facial injuries during the conflict and signal the existence of a "hidden history" of the First World War (50). They also indicate that the cognitive and corporeal crisis precipitated by otherness may recur, and that it may lead to various reactions, including those exemplified by the practice of masking the facial wound, interpreted here as a sign of "the society's desire to forget the war and move forward" (213). Drawing on the work of Emmanuel Levinas and Judith Butler, Branach-Kallas stresses the productive potential of grief and the ethical dimension of the encounter with corporeal disfigurement and loss both in literature and in real life, and examines the ways in which the soldier's alterity and precarity fundamentally question social, political, and aesthetic norms, destabilizing the very idea of "the human."

The second chapter, by Anna Branach-Kallas, interrogates the prevailing representations of war as an archetypal masculine experience (52) by focusing on the marginalisation of women in war discourses and literature, and by foregrounding the female experience of war. Branach-Kallas uses the concept of “quiet or family trauma” (58), developed by E. Ann Kaplan, to analyse the experience of women in war fiction. She refers to Sara Ruddick’s idea of maternal thinking and links it with First World War feminist pacifism to describe as “maternal pacifism” the representation of “attentive love as a model of non-violent relationships” in war literature (60–61). The analyses presented in the chapter clearly demonstrate the pernicious effects of the gendering of war and the conservative ideology disseminated by war propaganda, which worked to dismiss or ignore the trauma suffered by women. Emphasising the uniqueness of each trauma, the author convincingly argues for the recognition of the importance of female suffering and the traumatisation of the civilian population during the Great War. As Branach-Kallas states, although the recent shift to cultural history and history of emotions has re-focused critical attention on women, “a variety of women’s experience has so far been unexplored: that of elderly women, married women, and those from the peripheries” (52). The concept of “asymmetric similarities” (81–82) proves particularly useful in discussing literary representations of male and female trauma, or military and domestic suffering, making it possible to discern illuminating similarities between, for example, military surgery and cosmetic facial treatments, as well as other individual and public practices which reveal the vulnerability shared by soldiers and civilians alike.

The various ways in which public conflicts and disasters intervene in the private sphere are a recurring theme of *Comparing Grief* and they are the explicit focus of the third chapter, where Branach-Kallas and Sadkowski analyse the destruction and reconstruction of real and imagined communities. The notion of community, as the authors note, plays a very important role in discussing a conflict which was presented at its outbreak as a universal struggle against “the onrush of organized barbarism” (Kipling 106) in defence of civilization and democracy – or, as Ford Maddox Ford famously put it, as a battle for “the culture of the future, the very life and heart of the future” (xx). Starting with the vision of the war as an event that was to “usher a new dimension of human interaction” (88) transgressing all existing divisions, Branach-Kallas and Sadkowski discuss the images of egoism and brutalisation that counter the ideals of the community of August 1914 and that both express and reinforce “the anxiety about the crisis of humanity caused by the First World War” (133). A key issue in the formation and recognition of communities is visibility, which becomes particularly significant in the case of facially disfigured war veterans, whose “monstrosity,” while excluding them from the larger (normative) community, may create the basis for forming communities of a different kind. Against the background of growing social disparity and division, Branach-Kallas and Sadkowski discuss several

such “new” communities, real and literary, which translate grief into a productive experience (89) and which realize “the possibility of community on the basis of vulnerability and loss” (Butler 20). The examples of such social groups presented in this chapter include a community of adoptive kinship, described by Jay Winter as formed “through a process of informal or figurative ‘adoption’” (Branach-Kallas and Sadkowski 97), and a community of memory, where the shared memory of the war provides ways for constructing a better future (111). While these “new” types of communities use the memory of the war in constructive ways, the authors point also to instances in which the past can and has been used to build a sense of separateness that reinforces national myths and conflicts (124) and stress the “profound sense of disillusionment, emptiness, and rupture with the past” (128) that makes the post-war communities particularly precarious and ambivalent.

Mourners, by Anna Branach-Kallas and Piotr Sadkowski, examines another global community created by the Great War and discusses the rituals of private and collective mourning that appeared after the war in an effort to come to terms with the past and bereavement. Analysing mourning and melancholy in the framework established by Sigmund Freud and developed by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, the authors describe various stages of private and public grieving, drawing attention to the problem of who was and who was not allowed to mourn. The fact that “heroic status was strictly regulated during the Great War” (155), and that it continues to be variously distributed among disparate social groups, is illustrated through references to literary works and history, discussed within the context of the problem of grievability – the question of whose lives should and should not be grieved (163). An example of such exclusionary practices is the gendering of mourning, demonstrated by the absence of fathers and men from the funeral ceremonies during the First World War (156). The chapter explores various forms of communal and private mourning, including the construction of public memorials, and ironically depicts “the cult of mourning,” painfully mocked through the trafficking in bodies in Pierre Lemaitre’s *The Great Swindle*. Ultimately, as Branach-Kallas and Sadkowski prove, the memory of the Great War lingers on as “infinite grief” and “interminable mourning” (167), resurfacing as the responsibility to bear testimony to the past that has become an inevitable part of the present.

The work of memory, the lingering of trauma, and the need to reconstruct the past are the major focus of the final chapter of the book, *Post-memory*, where Piotr Sadkowski approaches the First World War as effecting “a crisis of affect, testimony, and imagination” (174). Employing the concept of post-memory developed by Marianne Hirsch, the author analyses fictions depicting instances of inheriting the trauma of the 1914–1918 conflict by children or grandchildren of war participants (175). The novels analysed in the chapter are examples of what Dominique Viart calls *filiation narratives*, in which fiction and historical and biographical research are mixed “to expose dramatic events in the protagonists’

family history” (175). Sadkowski stresses the necessarily mediated nature of history, where examining the enigma of the past leads to a confrontation with “scars, wounds, and traumatic effects, which are experienced indirectly by the post-memory biographer and reader” (181), as well as emphasizes the fragmented and uncertain status of post-memory (196). Featuring a return to the painful past, the texts analysed by Sadkowski stage “an act of sepulchre,” where the re-discovery of familial history disrupts the boundaries between past, present, and future, thereby testifying to unfinished mourning (191). Whether driven by the desire to reconstruct the genealogical tree, to rediscover one’s identity, or to turn the “mythologised hero” into “a man of flesh and blood” (210), such texts, frequently through the use of metafictional devices, force their readers to take part in the exercise in “mnemonic empathy” (182) and to become “witness[es] of the process of reconstruction of the traumatic past” (179).

Comparing Grief is the first book-length study offering a comparative reading of recent French, British and Canadian Great War fiction which describes the global impact of the war, examining the ways in which the conflict has been variously re-incorporated into national narratives and myths, and outlining the diverse effects of the cultural trauma of the war. Branach-Kallas and Sadkowski approach the First World War from the contemporary perspective and historicize their own critical intervention so as to uncover the “current concerns, such as alterity, gender, trauma, mourning, precarity, dissent and communality” that shape the understandings of the 1914–1918 conflict and its representations (219). Referring to literary and cultural studies, sociology, philosophy, and history, the book presents an overview of not only recent Great War literature, but also of First World War scholarship and contemporary critical approaches to cultural texts and practices. While *Comparing Grief* contains numerous revealing insights, the chapters dedicated to facial disfigurement, women, and communities seem to merit special attention, because of the transdisciplinary approach they adopt, the gaps they fill in, and their relevance to the present (global) situation. Commenting on the fact that the Great War refuses to remain buried in the past, Branach-Kallas and Sadkowski suggest that the reasons for its endurance “might result from our deeply hidden anxieties about a war that has not yet come” (221–222). This is an anxiety that is intricately linked with grief, the emotion that “challenge[s] the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control” (Butler 23) and that, as the authors argue, is used by contemporary novelists to “unsettle the readers and engage them ethically” (222). *Comparing Grief*, as well as the texts analysed therein, testifies to the contemporary “desire to enter into a dialogue with the past” (212), to confront the haunting presence of the First World War, and to yet again face its many ghosts, acknowledging that “One cannot not have to, one must not be able to reckon with [spirits], which are more than one: the *more than one/no more one*” (Derrida x).

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