

# Against Oblivion. Remembrance, Memory and Myth in Julian Barnes's "Evermore" (1995)

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Remembrance is an act of symbolic exchange between those who remain and those who suffered or died. They went through much; they lost or gave much; we give the little we can (...). (Winter, *Remembering* 279)

Miss Moss, the bereaved sister of a First World War soldier, is the protagonist of Julian Barnes's "Evermore", a story focusing on loss and grief, and on the attempt to perpetuate the memory of those who died.<sup>1</sup> For fifty years she has been travelling to the Somme battlefields to visit cemeteries and monuments dedicated to the war victims. What started as part of a process of healing developed into an aim in itself, her loyalty to her brother's memory grew into an obsession, her life eventually became devoted to death.

Each year she wondered if this would be her last visit. Her life no longer offered up to her the confident plausibility of two decades more, one decade, five years. Instead, it was renewed on an annual basis, like her driving license. (E 94)

Miss Moss belongs to a generation the war has cast adrift. Honouring her dead brother and the thousands of soldiers who lay in those sites is what she has lived for (see Winter, *Sites*). Every year she crosses the Channel to visit his grave. She then also visits the Somme cemeteries and monuments dedicated to those whose remains have not been found and pays tribute to

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<sup>1</sup> First published in *The New Yorker*, November 13, 1995, 104-112. Henceforth abbreviated as E.

their sacrifice. Her “family history has collided with world history” (Winter, *Remembering* 180)<sup>2</sup> but, except for the fact that the parents have long been dead, the reader knows about no other relations. For two years she had been in a white marriage to Dennis, seriously shell-shocked “all down the rest of his life” (E 102), “hit by shrapnel and taken back down the line to hospital without a farewell to his best pal Jewy Moss” (E 101), before their mutual inability to communicate decided her to “return” him to his sisters (E 102). The reader merely learns that

it was the only time she had behaved with such pure selfishness: she had married him for her own reasons, and discarded him for her own reasons. Some might say that the rest of her life had been selfish too, devoted as it was entirely to her own commemorations; but it was a selfishness that hurt nobody else. (E 101)

Her isolated existence and the repetitive nature of the pilgrimage reveal how she has been stuck in the perpetuation, enactment and re-enactment of the very same annual rituals, oblivious to the fact that the past can never be recovered.

Miss Moss inhabits the loneliness of those who live among ghosts.

Becoming old, she is as conscious of the ultimate futility of her effort as she has become of the futility of the soldiers’ sacrifice, “an army which had thrown them away so lightly now chose [through the monuments] to own them again so gravely” (E 97).

Soon she will no longer be able to come and pay tribute to all those men. And she does not trust younger generations to carry on with such acts of remembrance:

Soon—in fifty years or so—everyone who had served in the War would be dead; and at some point after that, everyone who had known anyone who had served would also be dead. (...) Then the great forgetting could begin, the fading into the landscape. The war would be levelled to a couple of museums, a set of demonstration trenches, and a few names, shorthand for pointless sacrifice. (E 110)

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<sup>2</sup> Winter is referring to real families, not to fictional characters.

Only annihilation, total oblivion awaits those victims.

While her private grief, “a calliper, necessary and supporting” (E 96), provides the core of the story, the main issues it calls upon are public and extremely relevant. The emotional links between past and present, the myths of the Great War, the relations between memory and history or the significance of remembrance for later generations have been among recently addressed, often polemically debated, questions in cultural and literary history. Miss Moss’s lifelong obsession represents one (possibly extreme) example of the traumatic effect of the Great War on individuals and families, of the war’s persistent resonance in millions of personal histories.<sup>3</sup>

My reading of Barnes’s “Evermore” will argue that Miss Moss’s apprehensions might be a little premature. In a quiet understated way, the short story itself functions as a thought-provoking vindication of the role of literature and its meaning as an ultimate site of memory.

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To try and attend to some of the issues Julian Barnes addresses in “Evermore”, the present essay takes into consideration the decisive contribution made by Jay Winter in the same year the short story was first published. In *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*, Winter briefly revisits and moves away from Pierre Nora’s massive *Les lieux de mémoire* (1984-92), focuses his attention on international and comparative sites, and explores the cultural history of Europe in the twentieth century to articulate “specific historical questions related to the cultural consequences of the 1914-18 war”

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<sup>3</sup> Dan Todman refers to Jay Winter’s calculations that “more than half a million men under thirty had been killed. The dead were concentrated amongst younger men: more than one in seven of the adult male population under twenty-five had been killed, compared to those between twenty-five and forty, and one in twenty of those over forty” (Loc. 1020-21). Here Todman uses Jay Winter’s *The Great War and the British People* (Cambridge, 1986, 66-72), to which I had no access. In “Evermore”, Miss Moss reflects: “beyond a certain point, the numbers became unaccountable and diminishing in effect. The more dead, the less proportionate the pain” (E 97).

(Loc. 373).<sup>4</sup> His sites of memory are also “sites of mourning” (Loc. 379) and he claims that these are inseparably linked with a common European history of war.<sup>5</sup>

The remembrance of the war dead and the diverse monuments and commemorations which have been devoted to them provide a privileged research ground for the study of collective memory. In Winter’s perspective, in the wake of the First World War, the cult of memory became a cult of mourning.

The collective effort of commemorating the war’s lost generation became a collective struggle against forgetting. The war memorials erected after the conflict and the rituals connected with such sites were a process of coming to terms with bereavement and “a means of forgetting, as much as of commemoration” (*Sites* loc. 2426-33).<sup>6</sup>

In the last four years of continuing public tributes on the occasion of the centenary of the Great War, the visits, tours and journeys to such sites have persisted and have actually been extremely popular.<sup>7</sup> Throughout one hundred years, such acts of remembrance have had a fundamental role in the private as well as in the public quest for some meaning or consolation. They have been instrumental in the process of societal healing. They have been useful and used for political propaganda, sometimes for nationalistic indoctrination. However different the European sites may be, they have managed to provide a considerable grammar in how to deal with a formerly unimagined and unthinkable carnage. Virginie Renard distinctly interprets what they have come to evoke:

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<sup>4</sup> Nora’s study centrally confronts French collective memory.

<sup>5</sup> “Everyone in mourning for a soldier was a victim of war, and to see the ways they were helped (and the ways they helped each other) enables us to appreciate the importance of kinship—familial or socially defined—in the process of coming to terms with bereavement in wartime” (*Sites* loc. 698).

<sup>6</sup> On some toxic dimensions of collective remembrance and the uses of forgetting see David Rieff.

<sup>7</sup> These trips are private and also school, community and group organized. See, among others, <http://www.greatwar.co.uk/events/2014-2018-events-france.htm>. Accessed 27th May 2018.

The very names of these places—Verdun, the Somme, Passchendaele and Ypres—have become sites of memory that crystallize the whole conflict in a few syllables: it suffices to pronounce them to summon terrible events and their almost unimaginable loss of lives and devastation. (308)

Even before the end of the conflict, along with several early private activities of people and communities whose shared experience of bereavement had initiated the movements to commemorate their deceased, public action had emerged. To this day, villages and towns all over Europe (and beyond) show in market squares, local churchyards, at numerous crossroads, a display of plaques, little shrines, sculptures, diverse records which have become an integral part of the landscape. Small local memorials were before long followed by decidedly official governmentally commissioned monuments gravely owning the deceased. The imposing scale, impressive architecture and symbolical impact have served as a public exhibition of national heroism, as a form of tribute, also as a warning, however futile. As the war continued and finally came to an end, commemorative art “expressed sadness rather than exhilaration, and addressed directly the experience of bereavement” (Winter, *Sites* loc. 1866).<sup>8</sup>

To this day, all types of monuments are bearing witness to the war. Nonetheless, in spite of its lasting endurance, we cannot help being aware that the resonance, the emotional and cultural meaning of those sites will ultimately wear out. Miss Moss’s fight against oblivion is certainly doomed even if not in a period as short as the one she assumed.

In the context of the Great War and its aftermath as in other private and social contexts, the process of collective remembrance and the issues of cultural memory, the intersecting of personal, family and community memories with public commemorative art all eventually announce the inevitable—a fading away of memory:

aging takes its toll: people fade away, either personally or physically. The collective remembrance of old soldiers and the victims of war is (...) a quixotic act. It is an effort to think

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<sup>8</sup> See chapter 4, “War memorials and the mourning process”.

publicly about painful issues in the past, an effort which is bound to fade over time. (Winter, *Remembering* 140)

The war's more obvious fatalities have necessarily been passing out of living memory.<sup>9</sup> The revisiting, re-examining and rewriting of the experience of war has, in the last decades of the twentieth century and in these early decades of the twenty-first century, been less engaged than before in the narratives of soldiers, focussing more upon stories of the witnesses and victims, showing a renovated attention to trauma and victimhood, both in social history and fiction.<sup>10</sup> Contemporary society is still, after one hundred years, troubled by the twentieth century's inaugural conflict in its appalling brutality as well as in its foreshadowing of the cruel century to follow. The endurance of multiple commemorative forms and remembrance sites has been remarkable.

Cultures noticeably depend on multiple processes of connection, on a [C]ontract between the living, the dead and the not yet born. (...) humans (...) do not have to start anew in every generation because they are standing on the shoulders of giants whose knowledge they can reuse and reinterpret. [And] in order to remember some things, other things must be forgotten. (...) The continuous process of forgetting is part of social normalcy. As in the head of the individual, also in the communication of society much must be continuously forgotten to make place for new information, new challenges, and new ideas to face the present and the future.<sup>11</sup> (A. Assmann 97)

Once the links between any individual's memory and his or her identity are severed, once the private sharing of a set of narratives about the past is finished, the preservation of a common connection to the past may become the domain of historians, archaeologists, and sociologists. But the legacy of the First World War has undoubtedly continued to be a much wider

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<sup>9</sup> See, among others, Peter Parker, particularly "Remembering War, Resisting Myth: Literature, Memory and the Last Veterans" (2010). See also Andrew Motion's five poems devoted to "Harry Patch" (2009), 5-9.

<sup>10</sup> See Winter, *Remembering*. Among others see also Joanna Bourke, or Beate Piatek.

<sup>11</sup> See also Rieff.



cultural and literary ground inhabited by different artists, particularly by literary creators and their many readers. In the dynamics of cultural memory, the Great War has been kept alive as an integral part of a shared transnational, though mostly European aesthetic inheritance. As a form of collective remembrance, it is active, part of a social process meant to “search for some redemptive meaning (...) at the heart of social and collective languages of mourning” (Winter, *Remembering* 189).

The dominant cultural and literary war myths are well-known and some revisionist approaches have been addressing them, often judging them as historically wrong, misguided or obsolete. While the official English state narrative during the centenary commemorations has presented the general efficiency of fight as indisputable and the soldiers' deaths as heroic and meaningful, the history of the war's understanding in collective memory and in English literature has gone through several significant moments: during and immediately after the war, throughout the 1960s, in the 1980s and the 1990s, and after the turn of this century up until the commemorations of the war's first centenary.<sup>12</sup> With the possible exception of the years between 1919 and 1926, during which Samuel Hynes records “no imagined version of the war (...) entered the canon”, the chaotic disruptive experience of the conflict was at once exceptionally shocking for most writers and a challenge they knew they must confront.<sup>13</sup> Randall Stevenson notes that:

All literary, linguistic, and rhetorical devices (...) may misleadingly endow reality with ‘coherency’ possibly absent from the events concerned. (...) Words hold horror up for the readers to see, but may also hold it back, or hold it away—

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<sup>12</sup> For recent commemorations see, among others, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/projects-partnerships/first-world-war-centenary-partnership> and <http://www.greatwar.co.uk/events/ypres-salient-events.htm> and currently <https://www.iwm.org.uk/season/making-a-new-world> Accessed 27th May 2018.

<sup>13</sup> “For a period of nearly a decade, there was a curious imaginative silence about the greatest occurrence of recent history” (Hynes 423). See also Winter, *Sites*. In 2017, Trott's pioneering study of the book market between 1919 and 1930 shows how the publishing industry played a decisive role in that “imaginative silence”, and that the impact of the war on publications began earlier than has usually been accepted. See Trott, particularly “Publishing the First World War, 1919-1930”, pp. 13-49.

keeping events at a steady distance, even suppressing any urge to intervene in their terrible course. (221-222)<sup>14</sup>

No matter how often challenged and certainly challengeable, the literary canon first defined in 1975 by Paul Fussell has endured. In Fussell's persuasive argument, the war, i.e. the frontline combatants' experience of the war then transfigured into literature, was crucial to shape modern culture. It was a turning point, a radical rupture both with past forms of aesthetic representation and the understanding of war. *The Great War and Modern Memory* has remarkably explored how the experience of the First World War contributed to defining the ironic mode that would distinguish (Western) literature and culture throughout the twentieth century.

Of course, Lynne Hanley's lucid comment on Fussell's canon in her 1991 study, *Writing War: Fiction, Gender and Memory*, remains true to this day. He ignored "the devastation wreaked by war on women, children, civilians, animals, (...) the entire fabric of family, social and civilized life". And surely in the canon he imagined, the world was "inhabited only by soldiers" (31).

In 2003 Vincent Sherry maintains this last example when observing that Fussell "reserves this [ironical] modern sensibility for writers who report from the combat zone" (*The Great War* 7).<sup>15</sup> Sherry clearly articulates his critique of Fussell's restricted approach and emphasizes that:

Even in shock and outrage, the Edwardian and Georgian literature that provides the backdrop for Fussell's focused concerns simply does not sustain the kind of consciousness he wants this war to have forged as the dominant modern sensibility. (...) His eloquent attentions are best spent on the psychologized record of this historical event, on the private crises of his individual writers, whose pathos is enhanced by the extremity of the frontline circumstance. (7)

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<sup>14</sup> Stevenson is here particularly addressing Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (first German edition, 1929).

<sup>15</sup> Sherry is highly critical of "the readiness with which Winter's *Sites of Memory*, *Sites of Mourning* dismisses the claim that such a disruption [of traditions that appear immune from the sensibility usually attached to the label and category of modernism] occurred" (8). That issue is not the object of the present essay.

In 2017 Vincent Trott, in *Publishers, Readers and the Great War: Literature and Memory since 1918*, also highlights how Fussell's contribution to the war's cultural and literary legacy has remained influential, though drawing primarily from a small group of English poets and overlooking:

the broad range of writing triggered by the war, much of which was traditional, patriotic and free of ironic reflections. Through portraying the war as a radical shift in cultural expression, moreover, *The Great War and Modern Memory* has become, like the literature it discusses, an important locus of First World War mythology, further characterizing the war as an irreversible rupture with the past. (3)

While poets, writers, some veterans (and some academics) have been instrumental in the shaping of those myths, in more recent decades this canon has been both challenged and reinforced.

With Hynes I here refer to myth not in the sense of "a falsification of reality, but an imaginative version of it, (...) a tale that confirms a set of attitudes, an idea of what the war was and what it meant" (ix). Some of the elements of the "Myth of the War" have long retained their identities: the Old Men, the Big Words, the Turning Point, and Disenchantment:

[T]hey are everywhere in the war narratives published in the myth-making years [the end of the Twenties] (...) the idealism betrayed; the early high-mindedness that turned in mid-war to bitterness and cynicism; the growing feeling among soldiers of alienation from the people at home for whom they were fighting; the rising resentment of politicians and profiteers and ignorant patriotic women; the growing sympathy for the men on the other side, betrayed in the same ways and suffering the same hardships; the emerging sense of the war as a machine and of all soldiers as its victims; the bitter conviction that the men in the trenches fought for no cause in a war that could not be stopped. (Hynes 439)

To this day, the whole mythology here depicted has crystallized into the prevailing collective memory of the Great War, the one more firmly entrenched in public consciousness and unquestionably more often revisited in literary texts. The persistence of this mythology in no way ignores the necessarily more complex dimensions of the realities it aims at evoking.

The matter of the First World War has become intensely disputed, arguably more than any other period in history. The popular images of the war illustrated by futility, mud, wire, and trenches, emphasizing the suffering and foulness in the frontlines, the trials of individual persons, the rotten “no man’s land”, the pervasive depiction of a totally pointless and avoidable conflict, so often presented by the war poets, have in the meantime been challenged by some historians who interpret the war and its origins from considerably different perspectives.

In his 2009 *The Great War: Myth and Memory*, Dan Todman has argued that the war was necessary, and “the British army played a major part in the defeat of the Germans in 1918: a great forgotten victory” (Loc. 73). Todman studies what he considers as a rather partial and inaccurate image of the conflict, especially as seen from the military angle:

The war was depicted as a tragedy and a disaster. (...) Safely ensconced miles behind the lines, [the] generals were unable to grasp the realities of the new style of warfare they were facing. Their men were stuck, for four years, in the most appalling conditions, living in trenches scraped into the ground, surrounded by mud, rats and decaying corpses. (...) The war finally ended because of German disintegration at home and the arrival of the Americans. The pitiful survivors who returned to Britain were silenced by the trauma of their experiences—only the words of a tiny band of warrior poets could communicate the truth of what they had been through. (Loc. 52-58)

While the condescension of such an outline is apparent, it is both credible and indisputably documented that many combatants were proud to fight in what they deemed “as a war of ideals, a struggle between aggressive militarism and more or less liberal democracy” (Loc. 64).<sup>16</sup>

As formerly evoked the war was early on represented in literature, afterwards in popular culture, as the prolonged unacceptable sacrifice

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<sup>16</sup> Todman also defends that the passing away of a considerable number of veterans in the 1970s contributed to the reinforcement of the notions of horror and futility, which many had previously refused. “They no longer had the numbers or the vitality to influence popular culture” (Loc. 2544 *et passim*).

of millions of men, barely surviving in dreadful conditions, led by “incompetent swine” (Sassoon l. 4) and brought back to endure trauma, unemployment and the widespread misapprehension of those fortunate enough to have stayed at home. In Hynes’s words, “war poetry would shape the way that subsequent generations would imagine the war they never saw” (259).<sup>17</sup>

The Great War was a literary war.

Literature has dominated the general perception of the war and, although less conspicuously substantial than war memorials, cemeteries and other monuments, quite a few war texts have become sites of memory in themselves.<sup>18</sup> The easy availability of such texts as well as the introducing of some in school and university curricula have made them an integral part of the wider canon of British literature.

The negative myths of the war experience are certainly much too unequivocal to correspond to any accurate comprehension of historical reality but, at least in literature, we deal in imaginative truthfulness and aesthetic emotion. The fact that most of the war writers (chiefly poets) were not socially representative of all those who fought does not necessarily mean that they were misguided in the ways they wrote about the war.<sup>19</sup> The fact that, in more senses than one, most of them belonged to a very restricted elite minority does not signify aesthetic or cultural irrelevance.

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<sup>17</sup> Hynes is adopting Arthur Waugh’s first attempt at a history of war poetry of the Great War (“War Poetry”, *Quarterly Review*, Oct. 1918), to which I have had no direct access. According to Waugh “The new poetry strove to be absolutely free of convention and of sentimentality; it set a new standard of truth-telling, and by telling truth it created the history of its own time in its own image” (259).

<sup>18</sup> “The poetry of Wilfred Owen (...) experienced a significant rise in stature: his poems became *lieux de mémoire*—literary sites which distilled and transmitted the mythology of war. (...) Vera Brittain’s *Testament of Youth* also achieved a symbolic position in the latter half of the twentieth century” (Trott 201).

<sup>19</sup> “Skeptics argue that Owen and company did not share the working-class attitudes of the overwhelming mass of soldiers who served in the ranks. Such men, they hold, had lived difficult lives, and living in a ditch in Flanders was not fundamentally different from living in urban or rural poverty before 1914. They were proud of their war service, and did not shirk from boasting about it. Whether or not these claims are true is beside the point” (Winter, “Beyond Glory” 244).

“What matters is that the words of the war poets reverberated; and millions of readers have been drawn to their work, still in print long after the Armistice” (Winter, “Beyond Glory” 244).

In Trott’s argument:

This mythology—centred on horror, futility and disillusionment—can be traced back to the works written during the conflict itself, but its foundations were largely constructed during the interwar years. Still fresh in the memory, the Great War was a mainstay of British culture during the 1920s in particular. Writers and readers reflected on and evaluated the conflict, seeking to understand why it was fought and what it had meant. For these reasons, the literary response to the Great War is often explained in psychological or ideological terms. Scholars have frequently sought to determine why writers responded in a particular way to the war at particular times. Despite the importance of these considerations, we also need to view memories of the First World War as a product of the commercial forces of publication and reception. (199)

However critical we may be of Fussell’s approach and constructed myth, or of the enduring mythical elements Trott analyses in their central connexions with the influence of publishers and with the readers’ response, there is no doubt whatsoever that the First World War has indeed meant, possibly still means, a crucial defining moment in cultural, social and literary history.

As the old soldiers passed away and the centenary approached, there was a considerable increase in popular, cultural and academic attention. The trauma of the First World War had inaugurated a succession of very public memory booms, shaping modern ability to make sense of a profoundly changed world. Jay Winter writes that each memory boom “is an act of defiance, an attempt to keep alive at least the names and images of the millions whose lives have been truncated or disfigured by war” (*Remembering* 12).<sup>20</sup> The most recent one, of which the 2016 Lisbon

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<sup>20</sup> “The ‘memory boom’ of the later twentieth century arrived in part because of our belated but real acceptance that among us, within our families, there are men and women overwhelmed by traumatic recollection” (*Remembering* 43).

Conference *In Remembrance of the Great War* was a part, brings together our awareness that present-day literature has been reclaiming this past along with the current effort to try and understand why it has been going on for so long. In the words of Stevenson in 2013,

the Great War's continuing presence, in the twenty-first century, [is] perhaps not even a matter of choice. Like the troubled mind of a trauma patient, the conscience of later ages continues to return repeatedly to the Great War, simply because its events were too deranged and desolate—too far beyond the destructiveness even of earlier conflicts—ever to have been fully contained in mind or conscience. Questions the Great War raises about the capacities of language, literature, and culture to contain experience—to 'hold the horror of the world', to prevent catastrophe, or to communicate effectively its nature when it occurs—remain thoroughly troubling, and perhaps ultimately unanswerable. For that reason alone, the Great War and its literature cannot be allowed to fade into any twilight of historical inattention, or of critical unconcern. (224-25)

No matter how accurate the historical documents are, how scientifically valuable they may be, the revisionist approaches, most of them originating in military historians, have also served and still serve commercial and political functions. The political agenda is often unconcealed. Likewise, the commodification of the First World War and of its dominant mythology is unquestionably real. In the sites of memory and in the merchandising they abundantly make available the war performs a central role in the selling of places.<sup>21</sup>

English literature of and on the war is, to this day, ambivalent: "proud, elegiac, angry and dedicated to protecting from trivialization the memory of men pushed beyond the limits of human endurance in a war which placed metal against men and assured that men would lose" (Winter, "Beyond Glory" 253).

Fiction keeps coming back to those myths, revisiting, re-examining and rewriting them, insisting on their imaginative value. In recent decades,

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<sup>21</sup> See, among others, Dunkley, Morgan and Westwood. See also Beaumont.

many writers have addressed them, quite a few have certainly profited from the public interest or from what Patrick French describes as: “the saturating cult of remembrance, the eroding stone memorials in every village decorated with fresh red wreaths, the hanging medals, the television solemnity, the slew of novels about contemplative officers on the western front” (230). The resilience of the First World War myths has gone hand-in-hand with interpretations continually troubled by the connexions between public history and personal memory. The revisiting of historical situations and the literary canon, the exploration of different dimensions of the war experience, its transformative impacts on people and society have been instrumental in novels such as Susan Hill’s *Strange Meeting* (1971), Pat Barker’s *Regeneration* trilogy (1991-1995) or Sebastian Faulks’s *Birdsong* (1993).<sup>22</sup> Though explicitly devoted to Barker’s trilogy, the most popular of those fictions, John Brannigan’s comment is appropriate to most of them: “History, after the Great War, is continually haunted by the memory of loss, and is constantly striving to regenerate the past” (Brannigan 24).

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Julian Barnes’s 1995 “Evermore” is one among the many literary instances of the reclaiming of the Great War. Death and dying, grief and memory have been recurrent themes in his work.<sup>23</sup> The writer has admitted to being obsessed with death and conceded that “this obsession (...) comes from not wanting to be dead and not liking the idea of being dead, and being frightened by the idea of not existing anymore for eternity” (Guignery and Roberts 161).

The resistance against death and oblivion represented by Miss Moss, the persistence of the memory of the war, its cultural and emotional impact

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<sup>22</sup> For literary criticism see, among others, Renard and Piatek.

<sup>23</sup> See, among others, all the short stories in *Cross Channel* and in *The Lemon Table* (2004) as well as *Nothing to be Frightened of* (2008), *The Sense of an Ending* (2011) and *Levels of Life* (2013). See also Guignery and Roberts, particularly “Julian Barnes: The Final Interview”, pp. 161-88 *et passim*, and Hartung. “Evermore” is not studied in Hartung’s essay.



throughout the decades, and the futile struggle against forgetting all come together in this short story. The death in 1917 in combat of her brother Sam has determined Miss Moss's choices, her life has been exclusively devoted to remembering and commemorating him in a doomed fight against total oblivion. Initially, in the first years after the cemeteries and war memorials had been erected, Miss Moss had found comfort in shared mourning.

Addressing the issues of collective memory and rituals and the need to come to terms with their proliferation in recent years, Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan may help focus some of the meaning in Miss Moss's early visits:

Collective remembrance is public recollection. It is the act of gathering bits and pieces of the past, and joining them together in public. The 'public' is the group that produces, expresses, and consumes it. What they create is not a cluster of individual memories; the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Collective memory is constructed through the action of groups and individuals in the light of day. (...) When people enter the public domain, and comment about the past—their own personal past, their national past, and so on—they bring with them images and gestures derived from their broader social experience. (...) When people come together to remember, they enter a domain beyond that of individual memory. (Loc. 265)

Every year on Armistice Day she would come to the cemeteries and join the crowd of mourners in their ritual tributes to the deceased. "At first this holiday coincided with the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month" (E 103). Back then she was seeking a mode of somehow positioning her private grief within a public sphere.

Later she changed her dates to avoid precisely the sort of commonality she had formerly valued:

At first, back then, the commonality of grief had helped: wives, mothers, sisters, comrades, an array of brass hats, and a bugler amid grassy morning mist that the feeble November sun had failed to burn away. (E 95)

While Miss Moss's yearly pilgrimages may have begun as those of other mourners' journeys, i.e. as a ritual of bereaved people in search of some form of communion with their dead, as a tribute to the sacrifice of millions of young men, the official commemorations along with the commercial dimensions of dark tourism may have alienated her from such homages. The narrator provides no access to any clear interpretation of her behaviour. But her compulsive devotion to grief, the obsessive character of her "almost immutable" (E 94) annual routine, her neurotic alienation from any other visitors may encourage the reader to consider that Miss Moss is neither grieving for her long gone brother nor paying her respects to the generation decimated by the war. "Was it a vice to have become such a connoisseur of grief?" (E 94). At some point her visits have become about herself. If not at first, then later:

Remembering Sam had changed: it became work, continuity; instead of anguish and glory, there was fierce unreasonableness, both about his death and her commemoration of it. During this period, she was hungry for the solitude and the voluptuousness of grief: her Sam, her loss, her mourning, and nobody else's similar. She admitted as much: there was no shame to it. (E 95)

For years the sister had sought to make sense of Sam's death by attempting to reconstruct her brother's final days in battle and scrutinising the inexplicable handwritten margins of his last three buff field-service postcards, "his final evidence" (E 91). She found neither answer nor closure. Renard comments: "Miss Moss tries to supplement the story of the past but it remains inaccessible, and this unreachability eventually drives her to the verge of madness" (276).

The fact that no meaning, redemptive or otherwise, is found undoubtedly relates Barnes's story to the dominant negative myths of the war experience formerly identified. The futility of the young men's sacrifices, the brutality of their war experience, the disillusionment and bitterness of both combatants and civilians saturate the story.

However, as Brian Dillon observes:

Miss Moss concentrates her energies on tending to her private grief. As the object of her grief, Sam is dispersed into re-

collections notable for their vagueness. His physical appearance is recalled by her thinking of one photo of him so impressed on her memory that she does not need to view it again. (...) The narrator neither takes the reader to the trenches to witness Sam in uniform, with his company, under fire, nor recounts his final home visit, perhaps altered appearance, shreds of remembered dialogues: the body of textual evidence readers of war literature expect.

Through the protagonist's obsessive endeavour to delay the soldiers' final erasure from history, Barnes addresses the forgetting that will of necessity be the future of each and every one of us. In 2000 he declared: "Evermore' is about the fear that things will be forgotten, but of course history will be forgotten just as people will be forgotten" (Guignery 59).

For Miss Moss, who considers that "man is only a clerical error corrected by death" (E 94), remembrance is about some significant form of agency, however misguided or obsolete. Because "passive memory—understood as the personal recollections of a silent individual—is not collective memory", and as formerly cited "when people come together to remember, they enter a domain beyond that of individual memory" (Winter and Sivan loc. 265). She considers herself as the gatekeeper of memory. Her own private grief is paramount in her returning, after fifty years, to ritualistically mourn her brother:

There was consolation in solitude and damp knees. She no longer talked to Sam; everything had been said decades ago. (...) But the hours she spent with him at Cabaret Rouge were the most vital of her life. They always had been. (E 106)

However, Miss Moss's zeal includes the annual visits to the "lost men", those "whom the fortune of war denied the known and honoured burial ground given to their comrades in death" (E 96).<sup>24</sup> The war had been too

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<sup>24</sup> The short story echoes Miss Moss's reading of the inscription at Thiepval memorial, whose full text proclaims: "Here are recorded names of officers and men of the British Armies who fell on the Somme battlefields July 1915 February 1918 but to whom the fortune of war denied the known and honoured burial given to their comrades in death" ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thiepval\\_Memorial](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thiepval_Memorial). Accessed 27th May 2018). Designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens and unveiled on 1st August 1932, the Thiepval

bleak, her mourning too protracted. Miss Moss has not come to terms with her bereavement. By the enactment and re-enactment of the very same annual rituals, thoroughly aware of the hopelessness of such endeavour, she nonetheless attempts to perpetuate the memory of those who died. If the millions of soldiers victimised by the war are forgotten, it is as if somehow they will have suffered premature deaths a second time.

Might there be one last fiery glow of remembering? (...) If this [forgetting] happened to the individual, could it not also happen on a national scale? Might there not be, at some point in the first decades of the twenty-first century, one final moment, lit by evening sun, before the whole thing was handed over to the archivists? (E 111)

Miss Moss's private struggle against forgetfulness and the soldiers' final erasure from history may, in recent years, have found some public forms of redress, however fragile or controversial—"one final moment, lit by evening sun". Some historians and politicians have been trying to rescue the war from its persistent perception as a gigantic pointless waste of lives and means, by arguing that the conflict represented unavoidable, necessary, triumphant sacrifice. And, one hundred years after the Great War, the English literary and cultural imagination is still creatively haunted by the persistence of those old myths. "Peculiar in its challenge to the imagination, and in its role in the advance of modernity, the Great War also occupies a highly particular place in the history of literature, even in the history of the English language itself" (Stevenson 227).

In the search for some redemptive meaning for the enormous human and civilizational losses of the First World War, literature has had and may continue to have a significant part to play. Echoing "Tunnel", the coda story to *Cross Channel* where Barnes metafictionally revisits "Evermore" and questions of remembrance, memory and myth, Renard observed:

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Memorial to the Missing of the Somme is a war memorial to 72,337 missing British and South African servicemen who died in the Battles of the Somme of the First World War between 1915 and 1918, with no known grave (<https://www.cwgc.org/find/find-cemeteries-and-memorials/80800/thiepval-memorial/history>. Accessed 27th May 2018).

Fiction has the ability (...) to extrapolate from the resonant 'remaining fragments' to recreate the past and make it present and alive once more for its readers, giving rise to a paramemory of former times that also has the ability to reflect on itself, on its memorial functions and its mythifying processes. (326)

In their different ways, both historians and writers keep trying to preserve the memory of the Great War and stop the inevitability of forgetting history as well as people.<sup>25</sup> The long-established myths of the futility of the war—"Was it for this the clay grew tall?"—in Owen's haunting expression, have been revisited (l.12). Perhaps Miss Moss's lifelong misery has not been in vain.<sup>26</sup>

The victims were actually heroes who will be commemorated for evermore, i.e. in her chosen meaning "[f]or all future time" (E 100). And some deliverance from irrelevance and oblivion may have been achieved.<sup>27</sup>

Dealing in imaginative truthfulness and aesthetic emotion, writing against death, writing against oblivion, literature may be the ultimate site of memory. "[L]iterature gave the myth a more articulate form, and, as a *lieu de mémoire*, played and continues to play a decisive role in the fixation and endurance of the myth in the British collective memory" (Renard 75)

Although Miss Moss would not have anticipated that, perhaps whatever afterlife the war victims may hope for now rests precisely with the power of literature to breathe new life into them:

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<sup>25</sup> Ludmilla Jordanova's words might here be considered: "Historians rely on the memories of others when it comes to sources (...). The practice of history is, after all, a highly specialised form of commemoration" (138).

<sup>26</sup> "Cultural memory has its fixed point; its horizon does not change with the passing of time. These fixed points are fateful events of the past, whose memory is maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice, observance)" (J. Assmann and Czaplicka).

<sup>27</sup> "[T]he story's poignancy rests on the knowledge that all specificity will be forgotten, and the living memory of the war will perish in a general feeling of unease without detail" (Childs 128). Yet "Against all odds (...) the short fictions in *Cross Channel* make their bids for remembrance, in as much as they bring the past to our attention" (Holmes 45).

EVERMORE. She wondered if there was such a thing as collective memory, something more than the sum of individual memories. If so, was it merely coterminous, yet in some way richer; or did it last longer? She wondered if those too young to have original knowledge could be given memory, could have it grafted on. She thought of this especially at Thiepval. (...) Grief and awe lived here; they could be breathed, absorbed. And if so, then [the] child might in turn bring its child, and so on, from generation to generation, EVERMORE. Not just to count the Missing, but to understand what those from whom they had gone missing knew, and to feel her loss afresh. (E 100-1)

Writing against death, writing against oblivion, literature may be the ultimate site of memory.<sup>28</sup> Or, in the words of Kate McLoughlin, “[w]henver war is written or read about, it is also actually happening and this must give both urgency and humility to our reading and writing” (3).

In “Tunnel” Julian Barnes, author and grandson, wrote:

His grandfather had joined the Missing of the Somme. He had come back, it was true; it was just that he had lost everything later. His name might as well be chiselled on the great arch at Thiepval. (...) He was gone beyond memory, and no plump little French cake dipped in tea would release those distant truths. They could only be sought by a different technique, the one in which this man’s grandson still specialised. (206)

Time will eventually erase everything. Words, monuments, memories. For evermore.

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<sup>28</sup> “Acts of shared remembrance require a time and a place at which they can be expressed. Without a place, or a substitute for a lost home, collective memory vanishes. War memorials create such a focus of attention, a site where the past can be evoked, re-created, perhaps misinterpreted, but in any event kept alive. (...) In future what forms these cultural patterns of remembrance will take is anyone’s guess” (Winter, *Remembering* 179-80).

What was he, finally, but a gatherer and sifter of memories: his memories, history's memories? Also, a grafter of memories, passing them on to other people. It was not an ignoble way of passing your life. ("Tunnel" 210)

If we as readers imagine those war victims they will have attained some, however passing, form of eternity.

"We will remember them" (Binyon loc. 16)<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Binyon's words are of course used in Remembrance Sunday services throughout the United Kingdom. Also, in yet another instance, the fourth stanza is used as an exhortation during the daily 8pm Last Post Ceremony at Ypres. "They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old: / Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn / At the going down of the sun and in the morning, / We will remember them" (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57322/for-the-fallen.%20Accessed%2025th%20May%202018>. Accessed 25 May 2018).

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### ABSTRACT

Miss Moss, bereaved sister of a First World War soldier, is the protagonist of Julian Barnes's "Evermore", a story focussing on the attempt to perpetuate the memory of those who died. For fifty years she has been travelling to the Somme battlefields to visit cemeteries and monuments dedicated to the war victims. What started as part of a process of healing developed into an aim in itself. Becoming old, she is as conscious of the ultimate futility of her effort as she had always been of the futility of their sacrifice. Soon she will no longer be able to come and pay tribute to all those men. And she does not trust younger generations to carry on with such acts of remembrance. Only annihilation, total oblivion awaits those victims. "the collective remembrance of old soldiers and the victims of war is (...) a quixotic act. It is an effort to think publicly about painful issues in the past, an effort which is bound to fade over time" (Winter, 2006). Miss Moss's private struggle against forgetfulness and the soldiers' final erasure from history has, in recent years, found some new forms of redress, however fragile or controversial. At the heart of the so-called memory boom "is an act of defiance, an attempt to keep alive at least the names and images of the millions whose lives have been truncated or disfigured by war" (Winter, 2006). Some revisionist historians have questioned long-established myths of the futility of the Great War, arguing instead that the conflict represented unavoidable necessary sacrifice. And, against oblivion, perhaps as the ultimate site of memory, literature has persisted in the quest for some redemptive meaning.

### KEYWORDS

Remembrance; Great War; literature; Barnes

### RESUMO

Miss Moss, irmã em luto por um soldado da Primeira Guerra Mundial, protagonista "Evermore" de Julian Barnes, uma história centrada na tentativa de perpetuar a memória dos que morreram. Ao longo de cinquenta anos, tem viajado pelos

campos de batalha do Somme, em visita a cemitérios e monumentos devotados às vítimas da guerra. O que começara como parte de um processo de fazer o luto tornara-se um fim em si mesmo. Ao envelhecer, entende que o seu esforço é tão fútil como sempre considerara o dos que se tinham sacrificado. Em breve não conseguirá regressar e prestar tributo a todos aqueles homens. E não confia nas gerações mais novas para dar continuidade a tais actos de memória. Apenas a aniquilação, o oblívio total espera essas vítimas. "... the collective remembrance of old soldiers and the victims of war is ... a quixotic act. It is an effort to think publicly about painful issues in the past, an effort which is bound to fade over time" (Winter, 2006). A luta pessoal de Miss Moss contra o esquecimento dos soldados, contra o apagar final da sua memória histórica tem, em anos recentes, encontrado alguns modos de reparação, ainda que frágeis ou controversos. No centro do chamado 'memory boom' "is an act of defiance, an attempt to keep alive at least the names and images of the millions whose lives have been truncated or disfigured by war" (Winter, 2006). Alguns historiadores revisionistas têm posto em causa mitos há muito estabelecidos acerca da futilidade da Grande Guerra, argumentando que, pelo contrário, o conflito representou um sacrifício necessário e inescapável. E, contra o oblívio, talvez a literatura, em demanda de algum significado redentor, venha persistindo como sítio último de memória.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Memória; Grande Guerra; literatura; Barnes

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