

IN SEARCH OF THE UNCANNY IN THE NARRATIVES OF THE GREAT WAR

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You through the Gate of Death have come to Life
John Oxenham (“Little Crosses in the Snow”)

Özet

Birinci Dünya Savaşı Anlatılarında Tekinsizliğin İzinde

Savaş şiiri, genellikle şiddet, kan dökme ve ölüm gibi temaları dile getirdiğinden karanlık ve kasvetli bir tona sahiptir. Bu durum özellikle kanlı çatışmaların yaşandığı siperlerde yazılan şiirlerde daha yoğun hissedilir. Dehşet verici siper deneyimi nedeniyle ruhsal yıkıma uğramış olan savaş şairi yaşam ve ölüm arasındaki eşikte konumlanmıştır. Kimi zaman kendini ölü olarak tasavvur eder, kimi zamansa ölülerle konuşur veya ölüler, rüyalar ya da karanlık hayaller aracılığıyla onunla konuşurlar. Ölmüş askerler, parçalanmış bedenler, tanınmaz haldeki cesetler gibi süreklilik gösteren imgeler ve travma geçirmiş zihnin ürettiği korkutucu düşler bu dünyaya ait olmayan bir atmosfer yaratarak, savaş şiirini genellikle gotik ve fantastik edebiyatla ilişkilendirilen “tekinsizlik” kuramının konusu haline getirir. Bu çalışmada, tekinsizlik kuramının Birinci Dünya Savaşı şiirlerinde işlenen travmatik savaş deneyiminin ve milliyetçilik fikrinin incelenmesinde sunacağı yorumsal olanaklar ele alınmıştır. Birinci Dünya Savaşı sırasında yazılan şiirler çalışmanın odak noktasında yer almaktadır. Ancak, savaş etrafında şekillenen farklı söylemlerin karşılaştırmalı olarak incelenmesi amacıyla savaş hatıraları, anıtlar ve cepheden yazılan mektuplar gibi diğer savaş anlatıları da çalışma kapsamına dâhil edilmiştir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Savaş Şiiri, Savaş Anlatıları, Yapısalcılık Sonrası, Psikanaliz, Tekinsizlik, Ulusal Kimlik, Ölüm Temasının Temsili.

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Abstract

War poetry, particularly the poems scribed in the trenches - the burning centre of the combat, generally has a dark and sombre tone as it speaks of violence, bloodshed and death. Psychologically devastated by the appalling experience of the trench warfare, the war poet occupies the liminal space between life and death. He sometimes imagines himself dead; sometimes he converses with the dead, or conversely the dead communicate with him through dreams or phantasms. The recurrent images of dead soldiers, detached body parts, unrecognisable corpses, and ghostly imaginings of traumatised mind create an otherworldly atmosphere, drawing the genre into the terrain of the uncanny, which has been conventionally associated with gothic and fantastic literature. The present study explores the interpretive possibilities that the theory of the uncanny may offer in analysing the traumatic war experience and the presentation of the idea of nationalism in the poetry of the First World War. The present study, as indicated in the title, is a search for the uncanny presented in the poetry of the Great War; however, it also includes other forms of war narratives, such as memorial monuments, memoirs and letters in order to compare different discourses that came together around the war and its rhetoric.

Keywords: *War Poetry, War Narratives, Post-structuralism, Psychoanalysis, The Uncanny, National Identity, Representation of Death.*

The uncanny has been part of critical thinking since 1906. It was in that year that German psychologist Ernst Jentsch published an article applying the term to a mild form of anxiety. It is hard to imagine Jentsch comprehended the extension and debate his study would cause. The uncanny has moved beyond its origin in psychology and become an interdisciplinary concept in critical scholarship, incorporated into such diverse fields of study as literary theory, photography, cinema, architecture and cultural studies. Today, a simple search for ‘the uncanny’ on the Modern Language Association Database will reveal over three thousand articles. Anneleen Masschelein notes that “the growing interest in the uncanny in the fields of study other than psychology first occurred in the late sixties, early seventies and coincided with the transition from structuralism to post-structuralism” (Masschelein, 2003). The notorious difficulty to define the uncanny made it an epitome of the signifier’s relational status and its inevitable failure to reach a perfect meaningful closure. Masschelein observes, “[a]lthough the history of its conceptualisation can be clearly traced because it is a relatively young concept, the uncanny has gradually come to signify the very problem or even impossibility of clearly defined concepts as such” (Masschelein, 2003).

Literature, unlike other fields of study, has been the double of the uncanny right from its inception. First Ernst Jentsch and then Sigmund Freud presented an analysis of E. T. A. Hoffman's fantastic story, "The Sandman," in their studies in order to exemplify the instances of the uncanny. These initial applications of the concept, as Masschelein points out, "insured a lasting interest in the uncanny in the context of the genre study of the fantastic, the gothic and other related genres, which is still a vivid tradition in literary theory and criticism" (Masschelein, 2003). This paper, however, attempts to consider the concept within the context of the First World War poetry and aims at exploring the interpretive possibilities that it may offer in analysing the traumatic war experience and the presentation of the idea of nationalism in poetry as well as some other forms of war narratives, including statues, memoirs and letters. Such an attempt may look puzzling given the concept's traditional association with the fantastic and gothic literature. Hence, there seems to be a preliminary question to be answered from the outset to justify such an attempt: What characteristics of war poetry make it compatible with the theory of the uncanny?

Poetry was one of the few aspects of social life that the First World War did not stop. On the contrary, poetic output accelerated as literally almost everyone started to write poems with the outbreak of the war. In *English Poetry of the First World War: A Bibliography*, Catherine W. Reilly (1978) has listed 2.225 published poets (1914-1922), 1.808 of whom were civilians. The present study, in particular, focuses on the poems written by combatant soldiers in the trenches. Contrary to the body of work produced by armchair poets, trench poetry reported the immediate experience of a radically new form of warfare with all its violence and bloodshed. In an attempt to explain the significance of trench poetry, David Roberts notes:

The biographies of the war, the dairies, the histories, novels, films, museums, cemeteries and monuments all contribute to our grasp of it, but the poetry of the First World War has a special significance. Written, in the main, by soldiers who had experienced the burning centre of the action, and in language which is intensely conceived, it encapsulates and communicates much of what is humanly important and deeply moving of that vast war experience. (Roberts, 1996:14-15).

As shall be shown in the following pages, the Great War bred a culture that tried to erase the facts of death (photographs of dead soldiers were not allowed to be published in the papers, for instance) or mystify it in different forms of national narratives, such as war memorials. Trench poetry sustained humane feelings for the dead when the military culture exploited and

propagandised those very feelings for political purposes. That trench poetry spoke of death, the dead and dying in a militarised culture that forbade it shows that it shares the subversive quality of the literature of the uncanny, which, as Rosemary Jackson (1981:72) points out, “by permitting an articulation of taboo subjects which are otherwise silenced, threatens to transgress social norms”.

War poetry is also similar to the literature of the uncanny with respect to its distance from the mundane. Simon Featherstone points out, “...war poetry is largely separated from the literary and intellectual cultures of the society which produced it and seems to come from what Keith Douglas terms ‘another place,’ unaffected by the historical and social forces of the peacetime” (Featherstone, 1995:1). It is easier to understand what Douglas means by ‘another place’ if one looks into poetry written during the Great War. The war poet occupies the liminal space between life and death. He speaks about and through the dead. He sometimes imagines himself dead; sometimes he converses with the dead, or the dead communicate with him through dreams or phantasms. The recurrent images of dead soldiers, detached body parts, unrecognisable corpses, and ghostly imaginings of traumatised mind create an otherworldly atmosphere, drawing the genre into the terrain of the uncanny.

The present study is a search for the uncanny presented in the poetry of the Great War; however, it also includes other forms of war narratives, such as memorial monuments, memoirs and letters in order to compare different discourses that came together around the war and its rhetoric. The critical argument in this paper unfolds in three parts. The first part presents a brief historical survey of the concept of the uncanny from Ernst Jentsch to Hélène Cixous. The second part of the study focuses on the ghostly design of war memorials and presents a discussion of the relationship between war memorials and the uncanny. The third and final part is devoted to an analysis of the postcards, letters and poems composed in the trenches, describing the war poet’s liminal space between life and death, between the paper and the gravestone.

1. The Theory of the Uncanny from Ernst Jentsch to Hélène Cixous

The concept of the uncanny was introduced to the field of psychology by Ernst Jentsch in his 1906 article titled “Über die Psychologie des Unheimlichen” (“On the Psychology of the Uncanny”). Nevertheless, the concept is generally attributed to Sigmund Freud who wrote an essay in 1919 as a response to Ernst Jentsch’s study. The following comparative

analysis of the two respective studies and their repercussions on twentieth-century theory, particularly on Hélène Cixous's poststructuralist reconceptualisation of the term, will not only show the dramatic change in the understanding of the concept in such short span of time, but also provide a practical framework for its spectral presence that eschews any theoretical closure.

Although both Jentsch and Freud agree that the uncanny is a specific form of fear and anxiety caused by certain phenomena in real life or certain themes in art, they differ in their views as to the essential cause of the production of the uncanny sensation. For Jentsch, the excitement of the uncanny sensation is bound to certain external circumstances under which consciousness fails to master its physical environment. As a result of this intellectual confusion, something hitherto considered to be old/known/familiar seems new/foreign/hostile to the mind and thus evokes fear and anxiety in the individual. According to Jentsch, the most successful device to create uncanny effects, particularly in literature, is to blur the boundaries between the animate and the inanimate. Therefore, the automaton with its disconcerting effect on intellectual certainty becomes the epitome of the uncanny in his theory. Although his examples are drawn from works of literature, Jentsch considers the uncanny in purely scientific terms and claims that the conditions culminating into the uncanny sensation disappear with the introduction of "sufficient orientation with respect to psychical processes, and enough certainty in the judgement of such processes outside the individual" (Jentsch, 1997:14). In other words, the uncanny, for Jentsch, is as a kind of mild psychological disturbance that can be explained and treated scientifically.

Freud finds Jentsch's conceptualisation of the term 'uncanny' theoretically insufficient to explain its essence since the psychic conditions leading to this particular form of feeling are more complicated and need to be assessed in a broader scope. Freud asserts,

On the whole, Jentsch did not get beyond this relation of the uncanny to the novel and unfamiliar. He ascribes the essential factor in the production of the feeling of uncanniness to intellectual uncertainty; so that the uncanny would always, as it were, be something one does not know one's way about in. The better orientated in his environment a person is, the less readily will he get the impression of something uncanny in regard to the objects and events in it... It is not difficult to see that this definition is incomplete, and we will therefore try to proceed beyond the equation 'uncanny' as 'unfamiliar.' (Freud, 2001:931).

Freud's critique of Jentsch is, as will be shown, based on his simplistic conclusion that it is possible to efface the uncanny sensation through intellectual orientation of the individual. For Freud, the uncanny is a symptom of psychic processes beyond conscious control. Nevertheless, he does not reject Jentsch's conclusions altogether. Rather, he offers a new definition of the uncanny and a completely different understanding of its psychic production, which includes Jentsch's own argument, but goes beyond it.

Unlike Jentsch, the feeling of the uncanny, for Freud, does not result from what is new or unfamiliar; on the contrary, "[it] is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (Freud, 2001:930). Something seems uncanny or arouses the feeling of uncanniness only because it has been repressed from consciousness and made strange. It is nothing but the reappearance or reanimation of the familiar yet repressed feelings that evoke the feeling of uncanniness in the individual. In other words, "the *unheimlich*" as Freud puts it, "is what was once *heimisch*, familiar" and thus, the prefix "*un*" is not a sign of opposition, but "the token of repression" (Freud, 2001:947). Freud, thus, comes to the conclusion that "an uncanny experience occurs either when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed" (Freud, 2001:950). For Freud, there are four common instances of uncanny experience: a) the confusion between animate and inanimate (automaton), b) the double, c) animistic beliefs (primitive beliefs that one's wishes or thoughts come true) d) experiences related to death and mental disturbances.

Evidently, Freud shifts the emphasis in the excitement of the uncanny feeling from external stimuli to internal psychic factors. Freud dedicates the remainder of the essay to the discussion of the uncanny examples drawn from literature and real life. Here, Freud refers to Jentsch's study once again only to challenge and surpass his precedent's conclusions. Particularly, he makes a lengthy analysis of E. T. A. Hoffmann's fantastic tale *The Sandman* in order to demonstrate that Jentsch's interpretation of the story is theoretically impertinent to the uncanny effect the text creates. In view of his theory of automaton, Jentsch claims that the uncanny effect in Hoffman's story is the beautiful robotic woman called Olympia. Freud, however, relocates the uncanny kernel of the text in a mythic figure, Sandman, who is believed to tear out children's eyes. He justifies his conclusion, arguing that the fear of losing one's eyes is a substitute for the fear of castration in psychoanalytic theory. He also relates other examples of the uncanny drawn

from everyday life, myths and literature to repressed infantile complexes or primitive beliefs. As primitive beliefs coincide with infantile complexes; fiction mixes with reality, the Freudian distinctions collapse and blur into a set of heuristic fictions. The Freudian theory of the uncanny thus casts considerable doubt on the usefulness of the concept: Is the prefix “un-” really a sign of repression as Freud claims it to be, or is it an empty space providing the writer-psychologist the opportunity to create yet another fiction?

It is clear from the picture drawn so far that the uncanny is a highly elusive concept. It eschews any full definition, theoretical closure, or neat categorisation. Its borders grow larger and its definition gets more ambiguous with each attempt to pin it down to a stable theoretical paradigm. The dissatisfaction seems to stem from the restraints of the structuralist ambition to classify natural phenomenon in order to explain it rationally. It is, therefore, wise to look for the essence of the concept in some other paradigm of thought; one that works not in the direction of mastering it, but formulating a theory that reflects the very vagueness/indeterminacy inherent in it. As Anneleen Masschelein notes, such a transformation in the characterisation of the concept did not take place until the introduction of post-structuralism in the late sixties (Masschelein, 2003).

Theoretical use of the concept as such proliferated in the twentieth century with a number of important readings of Freud’s “The Uncanny” from post-structuralist perspective.¹

One notable example is H el ene Cixous’s (1976) feminist deconstructive reading of Freud’s essay: “Fiction and its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud’s *Das Unheimlich*”. Through playful language of parody, Cixous uncovers the contradictions in Freud’s essay and reveals the fact that the Freudian theory works against its grain. In an attempt to provide a scientific account for the uncanny, Freud creates yet another piece of fiction about *a fiction*. Freud rewrites Hoffmann’s tale, transforming the story into “a linear, logical account of Nathaniel... strongly articulated as a kind of case-history, going from childhood remembrances to the delirium and the ultimate tragic end” so as to

¹ Anneleen Masschelein (2003) lists a number of studies: “Freudian Reading, Analytical and Fictional Constructions” (Moller), “Reading Freud’s Reading” (Gilman), “Quatre Romans analytiques” (Kofman), “Freud’s Masterplot” (Brooks), and “Freud’s Uncanny Narratives” (Lydenberg), “The Sideshow, or: Remarks on a Canny Moment” (Weber), “L’inqui etante  tranget . Notes sur l’unheimliche” (M erigot), and “Quelques notes de lecture concernant “Das Unheimliche”” (Van Hoorde).

thread his theory of castration into the narrative (Cixous, 1976:533). Having substituted the complex story of “The Sandman” with his own straightforward summary, Freud redistributes the roles among characters to justify his own interpretation of the story. Cixous regards Freud’s selective account of the story as an indication of his search for a unifying answer to the enigmatic question of the uncanny, and relates his dissatisfaction to the impossibility of capturing subjective experience of uncanniness.

Thus, for Cixous, Freud manages to convey the sense of uncanniness, not so much by what he writes, but by what he does not or cannot possibly write. Informed by poststructuralist theory, she contends that the feelings of instability and uncertainty evoked by the uncanny does not stem from the anxiety of castration, but its status as a “relational signifier” (Cixous, 1976:536). It is a concept that can only be relationally defined, and as such it is of essentially unrecognisable origin. Freud himself cannot steer clear of this characteristic of the uncanny in his study, and ends up thematising the very process he is supposed to define: “This text [Freud’s study] proceeds as its own metaphor... as if one of Freud’s repressions acted as the motor representing at each moment the analysis of the repression which Freud was analyzing” (Cixous, 1976:526). In her view, the instances of uncanniness (the automaton, the fantasy of intra-uterine existence and ghosts) are not uncanny in themselves. They are designated as such because they help to reveal the ambivalence and instability of the uncanny as a relational signifier.

For Cixous, death and thoughts of mortality present the epitome for the uncanny: “[t]he relationship to death is the highest degree of the *Unheimlich*” (Cixous, 1976:542). As it is impossible to know the experience of death, it is always and only relationally represented. Cixous argues,

Death does not have any form in life. Our consciousness makes no place for the representation of our mortality. As an impossible representation, death is that which mime, by this very possibility, the reality of death. It goes even further. *That which signifies without that which is signified*. What is an absolute secret, something absolutely new and which should remain hidden, because it has shown itself to me, is the fact that I am dead; only the dead know the secret of death. Death will recognize us, but we shall not recognize it. (Cixous, 1976:543) [emphasis added]

This experience is most commonly manifested through the ghost or spectre: “The Ghost is the fiction of our relationship to death, concretized by the spectre in literature” (Cixous, 1976:542). By shifting the focus of

attention away from the uncanny as a sensation, Cixous paves the way for thinking of the concept in relation to the problems of representation. Her study generates several questions on the representational possibilities of death: Who or what represents the corpse? Who gives voice to the dead? And above all what difference does it make if the corpse in question belongs to a soldier? The remainder of this paper will seek answers to these questions in the context of the First World War narratives: war memorials, letters and particularly poetry.

2. War Memorials and the Uncanny

Today it has become almost axiomatic in academia to think of nations fundamentally as fabrications rather than as natural formations. That is, the nation, like other social organisations, is invented, constructed and formally instituted by political authority. One of the most influential accounts of this critical formulation was proposed by Benedict Anderson in his seminal book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. Anderson defines the nation as *an imagined political community* because “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson, 1983:6). The existence and continuation of a nation depends on its citizens’ unyielding belief that they are part of a community which shares a “deep, horizontal comradeship” (Anderson, 1983:7). Thus, the notions of collectivity and belonging need to be sustained habitually by various forms of national narratives, symbols, emblems, and rituals so as to unite individuals as the members of a greater collective, called the nation.

The idea that nations are invented has also found its expression in some other studies. One notable example is Eric Hobsbawm’s *The Invention of Tradition*, which traces the historical development of the means of constructing national symbols. In his introductory essay to the volume, Hobsbawm proposes that some of the national symbols that seem to be linked to an immemorial past are in fact comparatively recent inventions with a traceable history. Hobsbawm coined the term “invented tradition” to refer to “a set of practices... which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past” (Hobsbawm, 1983:1). Hobsbawm notes that the majority of invented traditions, such as the national anthem, the national flag, or the personification of ‘the nation’ in symbol or image (Marianne and Germania, John Bull, the lean Yankee Uncle Sam or the German Michel) came into existence with the birth of national movements and nation states (Hobsbawm,

1983:7). It was a period of time when many new nations were emerging from the dust of crumbling empires throughout Europe, demanding self-determination. Newly formed nation states attempted to assert their autonomous national identity, and the political authority built up the nation's future by inventing its traditions, a traceable past. Ritualised and institutionalised in time, the invented traditions help impose a collective sense of national belonging among citizens.

Corresponding to Hobsbawn's examples, war memorials where selective moments from a nation's history are utilised for their mythic appeal as a catalyst to invigorate the nation's collective memory have been complicit in forging national identity as well. They share the same ritualistic quality as other components in the inventory of national symbols, such as the national flag or the national anthem. They create powerful ritual spaces where citizens gather to celebrate the nation's victories, commemorate its losses and memorialise its heroes. In view of this, Benedict Anderson regards war memorials, particularly cenotaphs or the tombs of the Unknown Soldiers, as one of the most important symbols of modern nation states. Anderson maintains,

No more arresting emblems of the modern culture of nationalism exist than cenotaphs and tombs of Unknown Soldiers. The public ceremonial reverence accorded these monuments precisely *because they are either deliberately empty or no-one knows who lies inside them*, has no true precedents in earlier times....Yet void as these tombs are of identifiable mortal remains or immortal souls, *they are nonetheless saturated with ghostly national imaginings*. (Anderson, 1983:9) [emphasis added]

Although Anderson does not mention it explicitly, it is evident that monumental space draws its power from its ideological aura imbued with an uncanny sense of liminality in terms of architecture, ceremonial and location. Erected in remembrance of the nation's losses, war memorials are always and necessarily designed in a way to incorporate in a ritualised ceremony the living members of the nation with those who died elsewhere. While the living folk stand still mimicking the dead, the dead soldiers' presence is strongly felt. In other words, they produce, what Hélène Cixous calls, a fiction of our relationship to death, but this time on an ideological base. Given that war memorials are a common practice among nation states, it is surely not incongruous to suggest that one common way of producing the senses of collectivity and belonging is to conjure up the absent occupants of the nation, its communal ghosts. It is therefore necessary to probe into a

discussion of how this spectral architecture functions, which will help understand what Anderson means by ‘ghostly imaginings’.

Whitehall Cenotaph, erected in 1919, presents a typical example of the ideological politics behind the construction of war memorials as national symbols. This thirty-five foot monolith is probably one of the most important monuments in Britain. Like other national monuments, it celebrates a pivotal moment in the nation’s history and is the focus of an annual ritual, honoured with a minute of silence at 11 a.m., on 11th November every year: Remembrance Day. In his book *Postcards from the Trenches: Negotiating the Space between Modernism and the First World War*, Allyson Booth (1996) presents a detailed historical account of the Cenotaph interspersed with anecdotes and authentic accounts of important public transactions. In his vigorous study, Booth manages to draw attention to the fact that the Cenotaph operates on a liminal space in terms of architecture, ceremonials and location; however, he, just like Benedict Anderson, overlooks the interpretive possibilities that the theory of the uncanny may provide in explaining the reasons behind the construction of war memorials as such.

The story of the construction of the Cenotaph is well known. In July 1919 the Prime Minister, Lloyd George petitioned Sir Edwin Lutyens to produce a temporary monument, a catafalque, for the Peace Celebrations to act as a tribute to the nearly million dead of the Empire. Lutyens, however, responded that a cenotaph would be more appropriate (Booth, 1996:32). “Presence and absence of a corpse,” Allyson Booth notes, “marks the essential difference between catafalque and cenotaph: a catafalque is a platform made to hold a coffin, while a cenotaph is a memorial to someone whose corpse lies elsewhere” (Booth, 1996:33). Lutyens must have felt that a symbolic coffin placed on a catafalque would not create the same effect on the participant crowd as a cenotaph, “an empty tomb” in Greek (*OED*), would do. It provides a substitution for dead soldiers that are physically absent, but powerfully felt through the psychological investment of the crowd attending remembrance ceremonies. A Cenotaph is a ghostly design then, for it evokes a feeling of presence paradoxically by speaking of an actual absence.

This ghostly architecture can better be understood if one looks into Remembrance Day ceremonials. Booth relates a historical anecdote about how Sir Lutyens organised the initial military ceremony held at the Cenotaph: “[m]any have suggested to me to place bronze figures, representing sentries, round it. This I would greatly regret: it would prevent

living sentries being posted on days of ceremony” (Booth, 1996:33). Just like his preference for an empty tomb rather than a catafalque with a symbolic coffin, Lutyens sought a means of producing an emotionally activating scene for the public by incorporating the dead soldiers and their living fellowmen. “His [Lutyens’s] notion of commemoration,” Booth argues, “blends concepts we ordinarily think of as mutually exclusive: the guards must mimic the stony inaccessibility of the dead, but not permanently as sculptures would. They must fluctuate ceremonially between life and death” (Booth, 1996:33-34).

At this point, one might ask, what is the role of the individual in this ceremonial ritual? In an attempt to analyse the relationship between monuments and production of subjectivity in his study “Monumental Space and the Uncanny,” Derek Hook addresses a similar question and maintains that people attending ceremonies “think of space as itself possessing a kind of imaginative persona” (Hook, 2005:693). However, this is, as Hook puts it, “a presence without a real, corporeal embodiment... a paradox, in short, of disembodied presence” (Hook, 2005:698). For Hook, this is one of the rudimentary elements of the uncanny as in other instances where we see human forms, figures, bodies without attached subjectivities. In other words, the imaginative presence the crowd brings to bear on monumental space, in turn, incurs a moment of ontological error, which disturbs the ego because as socialised and rational human subjects, we think of soul and body always together. This is the natural ontological coupling of the human reasoning, the disturbance of which troubles the ego (Hook, 2005:696). Hook further explains the effect of the imagined subjectivity of a given monumental place on the ego as follows,

A disquieting ontological gap is opened, which vexes and troubles the ego, and which the subject would see resolved, even if an imaginative contribution is required on their part, and even if an element of their own subjectivity, their own imaginative or actual involvement (or participation) is required. The ‘gravity’ of this restorative urge to re-couple psychological presence with a bodily dimension has hence taken on an ideological force, such that it itself becomes *an interpellative force* in the case of uncanny monuments. (Hook, 2005:696) [emphasis original]

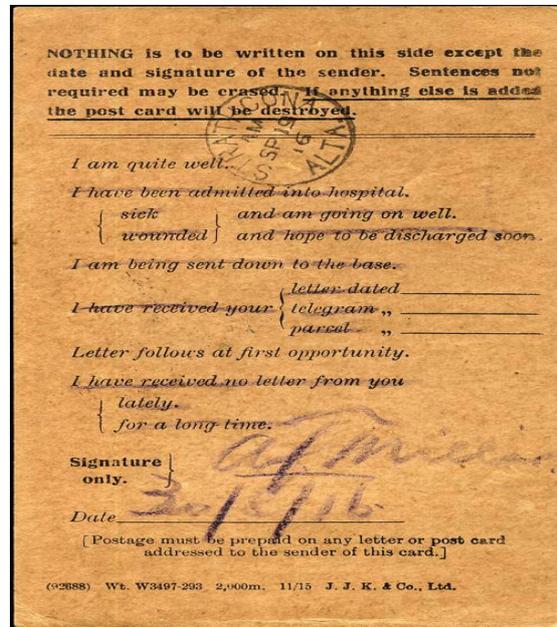
The uncanny dissonance is closed only with the completing involvement of the individual, which entails an identity transaction, a sort of intersubjectivity, between monumental space and the individual. One is reminded here of the return of the dead since in this imagined communion with the dead soldiers, our animistic conception of the world peopled with

spirits is exploited through the ideologically regulated power of monumental space.

Last but not least, the location of the Cenotaph is indicative of its uncanny design that attempt to incorporate the dead and the living. Whitehall Cenotaph, like many other Great War memorials, occupies a busy public site rather than a secluded one like a park and a military cemetery, which, as Allyson Booth puts it, helps “reconstruct the inherently contradictory relationship between life and death as we intuitively apprehend it through corpses: death can only occur at the site of life” (Booth, 1996:41). Seen in this light, it is reasonable to suggest that monumental space presents one of the most pertinent examples of Cixous’s understanding of the uncanny as a relational signifier that merges at a liminal intersection: “death within life, life in death, nonlife in nondeath... a bit too much death in life; a bit too much life in death, at the merging intersection” (Cixous, 1976:545). To recapitulate, war memorials are architecturally ceremoniously and locationally designed in a way to erase the distance between life and death, bringing the living into a closer intimacy with the dead. It follows that the war memorial is not an ordinary monument. Nor is it a burial ground, as the names, cenotaph (an empty tomb) or tomb of Unknown Soldiers, suggest. Rather, it is a ritual space that draws its ideological power from its uncanny design.

3. The Poetry of the Great War

Although it is a common practice to create narratives that speak of and through the dead in the post-war era, such an attempt was almost forbidden in wartime. During the war, the British government introduced certain regulations to keep the nation’s dead away from home. Allyson Booth notes, “[t]he governmental policy dictated that the corpses would not be shipped home for burial and that photographs of corpses would not be circulated” (Booth, 1996:11). In other words, back home the corpses appeared only in the form of casualty lists. The government also invented some other strategies to dominate the war narratives, thereby keep all the suffering of the war in the battlefield. One such example is the government-generated post cards: Field Service Post Card. The soldiers were required to send printed post cards to their families immediately after a battle that they took part in (Fussell, 1975:184). Just like the image of the martyr that speaks for nearly a million dead soldiers, the post card presents an official representation of the war, not allowing dissident individual voices to be heard.

Field Service Post Card²

The note at the top of the card shows how strict the military censorship was. The message was complied by crossing out the irrelevant sentences. The brief and neutral sentences on the card gave a far more optimistic picture of the trench warfare than it was experienced by the soldiers. As a result, soldiers turned to poetry and letter writing as a means of self-expression. However, in contrast to the Cenotaph or the pre-printed post cards, the thematic issues in their poetry vary from patriotic fervour to growing despair and disillusionment.

Most of the poems written by combatant soldiers are of a sombre tone, for they deal with the funerary issues of death, graves, headstones, cadavers, coffins, skeletons and rot. Hence, the most common rhetorical device used in these poems is the speaking of the dead. John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields," (1915) is perhaps the most famous war poem with a dead soldier as its persona. McCrae, Canadian physician and Lieutenant Colonel, wrote it on 3 May 1915 after witnessing the death of his friend, Lieutenant Alexis Helmer, only 22 years old. McCrae himself performed the funeral ceremony

² Paul Fussell used a reproduction of Field Service Post Card with no marks on it. The example presented here was taken from the digital library of Emory University (Field Service Post Card).

in the absence of the chaplain. The poppies referred to in the poem grew in Flanders in the battlefields and cemeteries where war casualties were buried later became a national symbol of Remembrance Day (Ruggenberg, 2008).

The poem opens with a pastoral portrayal of Flanders fields covered with wild red poppies. This relatively serene scene is abruptly cut short with the intrusion of a dead soldier's anonymous address: "We are the Dead"

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved, and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields (McCrae, 1996:262).

The short and syntactically broken sentences in the second stanza reflect the sacrifice and sorrow of war, pleading for brotherly love and affection for the dead soldiers. With the third stanza, however, the diction of the poem shifts from brotherly love to official military discourse, detached and dictating. It reads like a recruiting rhetoric applicable to any war, calling new recruits to the mission, to be ready to sacrifice their lives as their fellowmen did before them:

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
in Flanders fields (McCrae, 1996:262).

McCrae's wayward diction of brother love and military rhetoric destabilises the tone of the poem. Critic Paul Fussell, in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, points out that the last six lines of the poem are "grievously out of contact with the symbolism of the first part" and considers the final stanza "a propaganda argument" (Fussell, 1975:262). The word 'ye' particularly stresses the collectivity of the message the poem delivers in the last stanza. Fussell thus concludes that appearing in 1915, the poem might have been written in opposition to a negotiated peace that would end the war (McCrae, 1996: 250). The significance of the poem for this study, however, lies in the tension between the poet's private self and

public role as a soldier. As Simon Featherstone notes, the poetry of the war signifies “a negotiation between... personal experience and the public role of the poet” (Featherstone, 1995:18). That is, the war poet, as in the case of McCrae, does not always speak for himself, but also for his fellowmen and nation, or conversely his private voice is transformed into an instrument of nationalist propaganda by military authority. It seems that McCrae’s private imagination is coloured and controlled by military rhetoric that does not allow any elegiac voices to be heard. The poem, therefore, illustrates an early example of military propaganda that transforms the dead into an immortal symbol signifying the fallen hero.

The individual responses to the war and the suffering it caused did not always reflect the military discourse of honour and heroism. As the war raged on, it was no longer seen as an adventure by soldiers on the front, but rather as their patriotic duty. In his last poem “Fragment” Rupert Brooke (1986:62) demonstrates the fact that the soldierly spirit dictated by the recruitment office was not enough for new recruits to take up action. They should first come to terms with the idea of death. Like most of the poems written by combatant soldiers, “Fragment” is also based on a true story. David Roberts relates the anecdote that inspired the writing of the poem: “As Rupert Brooke and his friends sailed towards Gallipoli, he watched them with a detached gaze that saw them turning into ghosts before his eyes: and then, at the last moment, he accepted simply that he might share their fate” (Roberts, 1996:185). The poem is an exact description of the scene. In an introspective mood, Brooke describes his psychological struggle to face the reality of war and death. Under the pressure of fear of death, his imagination finds a way out of this moment in an uncanny fantasy by translating his comrades into ghosts.

I strayed about the deck, an hour, to-night
 Under a cloudy moonless sky; and peeped
 In at the windows, watched my friends at table,
 Or playing cards, or standing in the doorway,
 Or coming out into the darkness. Still
 No one could see me.

 Only, always,
 I could but see them—against the lamplight—pass
 Like coloured shadows, thinner than filmy glass,
 Slight bubbles, fainter than the wave’s faint light,
 That broke to phosphorus out in the night,
 Perishing things and strange ghosts—soon to die
 To other ghosts—this one, or that or I. (Brooke, 1986:62).

This uncanny experience can also be seen as a symptom of the loss of identity experienced in army life where personal identity is sacrificed to the organisational discipline of the army. As the army takes over the control of the individual's body, personal identity, memory and imagination are all erased. It is a body not to be owned, but to be sacrificed: "This gay machine of splendour'd be soon broken" (11).³ Brooke describes himself and the soldiers around him as martyrs at stake since death was considered to be imminent end for the soldiers at the front. His deliberate choice of the word 'ghost' rather than the words 'spirit' or 'soul' with more positive religious connotations recalls this liminal position of the soldier, constantly fluctuating between life and death.

Trench soldiers inhabited the world of the dead in the literal sense of the word. While dead soldiers' bodies sprouted from their shallow graves, live soldiers covered in mud and dirt were almost buried alive. The accounts of the trench warfare in private letters and war memoirs show that the proximity of dead bodies and the possibility of getting killed in action made the distinction between life and death unclear. In many cases, the corpses were perceived simultaneously as animate and inanimate, which reminds the uncanny figure of the automaton in Jentsch and Freud's theories. In an oft-quoted anecdote, Leonard Thompson, a veteran of the Great War, recollects an uncanny incident that took place while they were burying the dead soldiers in Gallipoli:

We set to work to bury people. We pushed them into the sides of the trenches but bits of them kept getting uncovered and sticking out, like people in a badly made bed. Hands were the worst; they would escape from the sand, pointing, begging – even waving! There was one which we all shook when we passed, saying, "Good morning," in a posh voice. Everybody did it. The bottom of the trench was springy like a mattress because of all the bodies underneath (qtd. in Carey, 1987:452).

For those in daily contact with rotting corpses, the idea of death became uncannily familiar. Modris Eksteins, in his cultural history of the war and its consequences, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of*

³ According to the infantry training, the first and quickest method of teaching discipline is close order drill... it secures the whole attention of the man to his commander by requiring: i) Absolute silence, ii) The body controlled and motionless, iii) Eager expectation of the word of command and instant readiness to obey it (qtd. in French, 2005:64).

the Modern Age recounts a similar incident experienced in the Ypres where soldier started to shake hands with a severed arm lying on the sandbags used to reinforce trench work: “In the Ypres salient at one point men being relieved all filed past an arm protruding from the side of the trench and shook hands with it – ‘Tata, Jack.’ Those effecting the relief did the same on arrival - ‘ello, Jack’” (Eksteins, 1989:151). The uncanny effect caused by the proximity of the dead was sometimes compounded by harsh weather conditions. In a letter to his mother (4 February 1917), Wilfred Owen (1986) describes the landscape of trench warfare in bleak winter conditions. As the poet distances himself from the official discourse, the idealised view of the battlefield, as reflected in “Flanders Fields,” turns into a barren wasteland with all its grotesque ugliness.

We were marooned on a frozen desert. There is not a sign of life on the horizon and a thousand signs of death. Not a blade of grass, not an insect; once or twice a day the shadow of a big hawk, scenting carrion. I suppose I can endure cold, and fatigue, and the face-to-face death, as well as another; but extra for me there is the universal pervasion of Ugliness. Hideous landscapes, vile noises, foul language and nothing but foul, even from one's own mouth (for all are devil-ridden), everything unnatural, broken, blasted, the distortion of the dead, whose unburial bodies sit outside the dug-outs all day, all night, the most execrable sights on earth... In poetry we call them most glorious. But to sit with them all day, all night... and a week later to come back and find them still sitting there in motionless groups, THAT [sic] is what saps the “soldierly spirit” (qtd. in Roberts, 1996:177).

This is a letter of a young soldier shocked into the realisation that he might die a violent death, frostbitten in a barren wasteland. It has got a deathly voice born out of war, a voice that the poet needed to narrate perhaps one of his worst experiences in the trenches. Here, Owen sets his stance firmly against the propagandist poetry: “[i]n poetry we call them [the dead soldiers] most glorious” as his prose slips into a gothic style, inflected with gruesome realism.

“Exposure,” a poem Owen wrote the following year also gives the reader insights into the wretchedness of everyday life in the trenches. He describes a group of soldiers waiting for a possible attack on a snowy winter night. Nature itself is depicted as the enemy in the poem, suggesting that the soldiers did not only die because of battles. Owen uses the first person plural throughout the poem in order to reflect the shared fate of the soldiers in the trenches on a frozen battlefield: “Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knife us...” (Owen, 1986:80). He repeats the sentence “but

nothing happens” in the final lines of four stanzas to show the mental and physical exhaustion caused by the tedium of the trench routine. The soldiers are deadened into mere perceiving dullards by nerve-racking, treacherous immobility of the trench warfare: “we only know war lasts, rain soaks, and clouds sack stormy” (Owen, 1986:81). The only way to fight this ghostly existence is nostalgia for peacetime, so they dream of home as if in a hallucination:

Pale flakes with lingering stealth come feeling for our faces -
We cringe in holes, back on forgotten dreams, and stare,
snow-dazed,
Deep into grassier ditches. So we drowse, sun-dozed,
Littered with blossoms trickling where the blackbird fusses.
Is it that we are dying?
Slowly our ghosts drag home: glimpsing the sunk fires glozed
With crusted dark-red jewels; crickets jingle there;
For hours the innocent mice rejoice: the house is theirs;
Shutters and doors all closed: on us the doors are closed -
We turn back to our dying (Owen, 1986:80-81).

The ghostliness needs to be understood in the context of the general feeling of radical displacement and estrangement. Fighting in the foreign lands, the soldiers belonged to nowhere and had nothing but their memories to cling to. They try to find comfort in contemplating home. However, as they are living deads or dying soldiers, the dream of home does not bring any hope to mend the broken soldierly spirit, and the poem ends with a grim picture: “The burying-party, picks and shovels in shaking grasp,/Pause over half-known faces. All their eyes are ice,/But nothing happens” (Owen, 1986:80-81). The depiction of the soldiers awaiting death in a half-dreaming state, along with those who have already died of cold, creates a stark contrast with the image of the heroic martyr in war memorials and thus offers a subversive counternarrative to the dominant military discourse.

The uncanny experiences caused by encounters with the dead and the confusion between the animate and the inanimate form part of a considerable body of the trench poetry. Like the image of the ghost, corpses provided the trench soldiers a ghastly vocabulary to speak of their fearful imagination. In his poem “A Dead Boche” (1916), Robert Graves addresses to pro-war advocates who want to hear only blood and fame and offers a cure for their blood thirstiness. The pacifist tone in the first stanza does not prepare the reader for what follows. Graves goes on to describe a fallen German soldier that he found in Mametz Wood at the Somme in July 1916. The cure he has found is the corpse of a dead German soldier itself:

Where, propped against a shattered trunk,
 In a great mess of things unclean,
 Sat a dead Boche; he scowled and stunk
 With clothes and face a sodden green,
 Big-bellied, spectacled, crop-haired,
 Dribbling black blood from nose and beard (Graves, 1986:70).

The scene is imbued with the silence of death; the only movement is the black blood dribbling from the body's nose and beard. In a steady scrutiny of the rotting corpse, Graves stresses the inaccessible and separate destiny of each particular death. Written during the battle of the Somme, one of the bloodiest military operations ever recorded, Graves manages to capture the portrait of one and half million of forgotten and unmourned soldiers in this relatively short poem. Similarly, in "Dead Man's Dump," perhaps one of the most disturbing war poems, Isaac Rosenberg presents a photographic view of the dead troops as they drive over a battlefield to deliver some supplies to the front. It is a complete carnage, and Rosenberg does not censor any detail that the military authority would find disturbing: "A man's brains splattered on/A stretcher-bearers face" (Rosenberg, 1986:82). The wheels of the truck crushes the bones on its way: "The wheels lurched over the sprawling dead" (Rosenberg, 1986:82) until they hear a dying soldier yell, stretching his hand weakly out for help. The cart rushes towards the dying soldier only to hear him murmur his last words: "We heard his weak scream/We heard his very last sound./And our wheels grazed his dead face" (Rosenberg, 1986:83). The three poets, Owen, Graves and Rosenberg, present a significant rejection of the ideals and abstractions of the propagandist rhetoric with their un-heroic portrayals of the dead and the dying on the battlefield.

Trench poets witnessed so much violence and bloodshed that black humour became the only defence against hysteria. For instance in "The Trench Poets" Edgell Rickword (1986) tells the story of how he has made friends with a rotting corpse stuck on the wire near his trench. The neutral tone he employs in describing the corpse shows the banality of death in the trenches:

I knew a man, he was my chum,
 But he grew blacker every day,
 And would not brush the flies away
 Nor blanch, however fierce the hum (Rickword, 1986:79).

He reads the dead soldier excerpts from John Donne and Alfred Lord Tennyson's poems, expecting him to rouse, but finally leaves the corpse to be eaten by rats: "He stank so badly, though we were great chums,/I had to leave him, then rats ate his thumbs" (Rickword, 1986:79). The poet's

indifferent attitude shows the impossibility of mourning the dead when habitually exposed to rotting corpses. A similar feeling of indifference seems to inform Arthur Graeme West's (1986) poem, "The Night Patrol." In a letter of 12 February 1916, West recounts the event that inspired the poem: "...I had rather an exciting time myself with two other men on a patrol in the 'no man's land' between the lines. A dangerous business, and most repulsive on account of the smells and appearance of the heaps of dead men that lie unburied there as they fell, on some attack or other, about four months ago" (qtd. in Housman, 2002:289). A month later, in March 1916, Graeme West wrote "The Night Patrol," describing his experience in the no man's land. As the poem opens, a group of soldiers infiltrates into the no man's land with the command they have received over the radio. They start to crawl through the valley of death itself. The poem unfolds as they progress among the decomposing bodies. The poet's description of the scene is unrelentingly realistic.

Only the dead were always present — present
As a vile sickly smell of rottenness;
The rustling stubble and the early grass,
The slimy pools — the dead men stank through all,
Pungent and sharp; as bodies loomed before,
And as we passed, they stank: then dulled away
To that vague fœtor, all encompassing,
Infecting earth and air. They lay, all clothed,
Each in some new and piteous attitude
That we well marked to guide us back... (West, 1986:76-77).

The dead here are neither to be pitied nor to be glorified. They have been turned into familiar objects despite their terrible stench and repulsive sight. The three soldiers make a path in order to find their way back to their trenches by marking the corpses. Graeme West amuses himself by talking about the peculiar positions of the dead bodies: "as he, outside the wire, that lay on his back and crossed/His legs Crusader-wise: I smiled at that" (West, 1986:76-77). The facetious tone in this part of the poem, as in Edgell Rickword's "The Trench Poets," is symptomatic of the soldiers' endeavour to master the traumatising terror they felt upon encountering the dead. The soldiers are forced to go back to their trench when a flare bursts and illuminates the landscape:

We turned and crawled past the remembered dead:
Past him and him, and them and him, until,
For he lay some way apart, we caught the scent
Of the Crusader and slide past his legs,
And through the wire and home, and got our rum (Rickword, 1986:79).

Like other examples of trench poetry analysed in this paper, West's "The Night Patrol" offers a criticism of the propagandist military discourse simply by describing the battlefield with all its revolting and unacceptable sights of violence, its dead and mangled bodies. That is, trench poetry retains the silence of the dead only to remind us of the horror and devastation of war that we all too readily tend to forget in the glorified image of the fallen hero.

Afterword

The epigraph to this paper, a line from the war poet John Oxenham's "Little Crosses in the Snow," also reads like an afterword, bringing the critical discussion pursued thus far into a closure. Dead soldiers do come to life. The most common example of their revival is war memorials. The architecture and location of these memorials as well as the ceremonials held there are patently marked with an uncanny design that attempts to incorporate the dead and the living. The psychological investment of the crowd gathered for remembrance ceremonial imbues the monumental space with a sense of presence, whereby the revenant, the heroic figure of the fallen soldier, returns to the land of the living. In this imagined communion, various national ideals and aspirations are communicated to the living generation through the glorified and *exemplary deaths* of the soldiers. However, this single and homogenous image of the heroic martyr cast in stone shatters and breaks into thousands of individual stories of suffering and death in combatant soldiers' poetic testimony to the war. The realistic portrayal of the dead soldiers lying on frozen battlefields, detached body parts and corpses left to rot in the woods shows the horror and the futility of war. In other words, trench poets form their subversive narratives around a theme index conventionally associated with the literature of the uncanny: ghosts, corpses and detached body parts. However, the uncanny here is not simple optical illusions or phantasmagorical allegories that inform Jentsch and Freud's theories. They are genuinely born out of the trauma and tragedy of the trench warfare constantly surrounded by the dead and dying. It can therefore be argued that the uncanny finds one of its most salient literary representations in trench poetry.

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