

Muddy Poetics:

First World War Poems by Helen Saunders and Mary Borden

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Abstract: In its appearances in English literary history, mud is associated with dirt and disgustingness, but also with vitality, insurgence and creativity. Mud in First World War poetry, however, has been most often read as figuring ontological and epistemological crisis: the taboo and the abject. Two poems about mud written by women during the First World War permit a different interpretation. In Helen Saunders's 'A Vision of Mud' (1915) and Mary Borden's 'The Song of the Mud' (1917), mud is as fascinating as it is repellent. Blurring the boundaries between combatant and non-combatant, it serves as the inspiration for and the stuff of female creativity. It also reveals the possibilities of a critical thinking with muddiness which productively resists reductive dichotomies.

Keywords: mud – First World War – Helen Saunders – Mary Borden – poetry

Introduction: Mud Connoisseurs

On 30 November 1915, the London *Times* published in its 'Letters from the Front' column a rhapsody on mud. The letter-writer, named only as '[a]n officer writing home from Flanders', had confected a fantasy in which a mud salesman, sounding for all the world like an assistant in a Savile Row emporium, extols the varieties and qualities of his product to a potential customer:

'Now in mud – yes, Sir, mud – we can show you some remarkably fine lines – specialities, Sir,' as they would say at the West-end shops. 'Our range of colours is wide: it embraces the whole soluble strata of the earth. Our real London clay – the lighter yellow – or the guaranteed genuine pure native Flemish juice form a most charming contrast *Art Vieux* – as you say, Sir. ... But our particular pride is

in the consistency of our muds. Quite true, Sir, consistency ~~is~~ the test of life – character. I will remember what the late Dr. Samuel Smiles said, about character and consistency. But our mud, Sir, our chief line, Sir ...’ (Anonymous 1915b: 7)

The sketch constructs both salesman and customer as mud connoisseurs, able to distinguish between muds by colour and consistency (the latter associated with moral qualities and linked, possibly with some irony, to Samuel Smiles, the author of the influential *Self-Help* (1859)). Had the conversation proceeded, the two might have gone on to discuss texture, thickness, granularity, viscosity and glutinousness. For mud, whose problematic presence on the Western Front was being publicly discussed by September 1914,¹ has interpretable properties: that is, it is legible.

Mud: A Potted Poetic History

In literary history, mud has often been attributed with positive properties. In John Gay’s mock-epic *Trivia* (1716),² a young boy, the offspring of Cloacina, goddess of the sewers, and a mortal ‘Scavenger’ (II: 118), grows up (like Gay) as a distressed orphan. He is protected by his mother, however, who prays to her fellow-Gods ‘To teach his Hands some beneficial Art’ (II: 152). The ‘art’ turns out to be bootblacking: equipped with a brush from Diana, a tripod from Dies, a vase of oil from Neptune and soot from Vulcan, the boy cleans the ‘miry shoe[s]’ (II: 208) of gentlemen passers-by. ‘Why does mud matter?’ asks Clare Brant in relation to Gay’s poem, suggesting that the poet’s ‘fascination with mire’ points to ‘psychoanalytic frameworks’ (what is unconscious ‘rises to the surface’) (Brant 2007: 112). If male ‘art’ is cleaning and ordering in nature – the removal of mud – Cloacina’s creations are the ‘Show’rs of Mud’ she dashes from the

¹ The first mention of mud on the Western Front in the London *Times* was on 22 September 1914: ‘The mud is awful’ (Anonymous 1914b: 6). On 31 December 1914, an ‘eye-witness’ reported: ‘The liquid and cold mud from which the men suffered invaded the breeches of their rifles, so that they could no longer fire [...] Our soldiers [...] have become blocks of mud’ (Anonymous 1914c: 7).

² The edition of *Trivia* used is Brant and Whyman 2007: 169-205. Book and line numbers are given in the text. I am grateful to Ros Ballaster for alerting me to the muddiness of Gay’s and Pope’s poems.

‘black Canal’ (II: 212, 172); indeed the ‘muddy Spots’ that dry on the boy’s father’s face are explicitly likened to ‘Female Patches’ (II: 119, 120), i.e. beauty spots. Mud blots or beauty spots, there is something to relish in both the cheekiness and the maculation of Cloacina’s daubings. As Brant notes (Brant 2007: 109), Pope’s *Dunciad* (1728-43)³ has a similar interest in mud. Pope evokes the spot at which the Fleet Ditch ‘with disemboing streams, / Rolls the large tribute of dead dogs to Thames’ (II: 271-2): a nightmarish admixture of water, soil and dead animal matter, into which dive various scribblers in a competition to see who ‘flings most filth’ (II: 279). Mud is aligned with scurrilous, scandalous and sheer *bad* writing, but there is nonetheless something vital about it. As cheerily over-productive as the mud is squidgily luxuriant, the ‘black troop’ emit ‘showers of Sermons, Characters, Essays’ (II: 360, 361).

The association between mud and fecundity is picked up immediately before the First World War. Rupert Brooke claims in the surreal ‘Heaven’ (1913) that ‘Good / Shall come of Water and Mud’, imagining a piscine paradise ‘beyond Space and Time’ – a platonic ‘slimier slime’ – where ‘swimmeth One / Who swam ere rivers were begun’ (Brooke 1990: 35). This ‘celestially fair’ mud – reminiscent of ‘Nilus’ mud’ in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*, which breeds serpents, crocodiles and water-flies (5.2.58) – hosts ‘Paradiseal grubs [...] / Unfading moths, immortal flies / And the worm that never dies’ (Brooke 1990: 36): teeming with paradoxically everlasting insect ephemerae, it is both life-giving and life-perpetuating. A similar sense of mud, now in its desiccated form of soil, informs Brooke’s later poem ‘The Soldier’ (1914), with its famous opening ‘If I should die, think only this of me: / That there’s some corner of a foreign field / That is for ever England’ (Brooke 1990: 23). Contemplating the condition of his own dead and decomposing body with a clarity that is as discomfiting as it is unflinching, Brooke distinguishes between soil types – ‘There shall be / In that rich earth

³ The 1729 version of *The Dunciad* in Butt 1985 is used. Book and line numbers are given in the text.

a richer dust concealed' (Brooke 1990: 23) – envisaging the fertilization of the overseas soil by his own flesh-as-hummus. 'The Soldier' belongs to a micro-genre of poems in which a fallen warrior's remains, mixed with the earth they lie in, become fecund. Thomas Hardy's 'Drummer Hodge' (1899), for example, predicts that its subject's 'homely Northern breast and brain' will 'Grow to some Southern Tree' (Hardy 1984: 35). T. P. Cameron Wilson's 'A Soldier' (1919) describes 'that dim force, / Which is the ancient alchemy of Earth' changing the slain fighter into 'the very flowers he loved' (Cameron Wilson 1919: 13). And in Seamus Heaney's 'Requiem for the Croppies' (1966), the barley in the pockets of the rebels of 1798 starts to grow out of the mass grave of the uncoffined dead (Heaney 1998: 22). In this seam of poems, soil / mud is part of a kindly ecological system, whether enriching the micro-climate or nurturing the seeds of future generations.

But, despite his enthusiasm for the life-giving properties of mud, it was Brooke who, in his sonnet 'Peace' (1914), hailed the War as an opportunity 'To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping / Glad from a world grown old and cold and weary' (Brooke 1990: 19). The War would be revivifying and purgative, that is, and, as a consequence, mud, the very opposite of 'cleanness', is realigned with atrophy and torpidity. Gavin Ewart made the obvious retort in his poem '1914' (1986):

Rupert Brooke's young swimmers into cleanness

leaping

landed in the mud and blood of the Western Front. (Ewart 1991: 309)

And this is the mud with which the Western Front is most often associated: disillusioning, demoralizing, deadly. It has been given its most critical extended treatment by Santanu Das, who writes with astonishing vividness and feeling of what he terms the First World War's 'slimescapes' (Das 2005: 35). As Das illustrates, mud has ontological, epistemological and aesthetic implications. In his words, the mud of France

and Flanders confronted soldiers ‘with the threat, both physical and psychic, of *dissolution into formless matter* at a time when modern industrial weaponry was eviscerating human form’ (Das 2005: 37, *emphases original*). Those subject to this ontological assault were brought ‘to the precipice of non-meaning in a world that was already ceasing to make sense’ (Das 2005: 37). Das invokes Mary Douglas on dirt and Julia Kristeva on the abject to account for a seeping, staining, invasive and repugnant mud that undermines bodily integrity and affrights the senses. Douglas writes of ‘threatened boundaries’, personal and political, which are protected by the maintenance of order and cleanliness (Douglas 1984: 124; quoted in Das 2005: 37): mud, oozing over and through these boundaries, becomes a dangerous pollutant. Kristeva’s abject has in common with Douglas’s dirt the condition of being a feared *other*: it is ‘radically excluded’ from the ‘I’ and ‘draws me toward the place where meaning collapses’ (Kristeva 1982: 2). (In this vein, another officer published in *The Times*’ ‘Letters from the Front’ column, reported that his reaction to being ‘wet and grimy and caked in mud’ was to question, ‘Am I a human being?’ (Anonymous 1915a: 4).) As Das notes, Kristeva’s theory of abjection is founded on First World War mud since central to its analysis is Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s semi-autobiographical novel *Journey to the End of the Night* (1932) with its evocation of the deliquescent corpses in the trenches of the Western Front.

Das’s glutinous, sucking, contaminating, abjecting mud is the ‘all-enshrouding mud’ of Sir Henry Newbolt’s ‘*To Belgium, 1914*’ (1914); the mud of Wilfred Owen’s ‘The Last Laugh’ (1918) (‘his whole face kissed the mud’ (Owen 1983: 162)); the mud of Siegfried Sassoon’s ‘To The Warmongers’ (1917) (‘Young faces bleared with blood, / Sucked down into the mud’ (Sassoon 1999: 66)), ‘Attack’ (1917) (‘hope [...] / Flounders in mud’ (Sassoon 1999: 84)) and ‘Sick Leave’ (1917) (‘I think of the Battalion in the mud’ (Sassoon 1999: 83)). It has much in common with the mud that the protagonist of Herbert Read’s ‘Kneeshaw Goes to War’ (1919) encounters, a ‘viscous’, ‘oozing’ mud

which offers ‘A sucking, clutching death’ (Read 1992: 31, 32). A man drowns in this mud: ‘They could not dig him out,’ writes Read, ‘The oozing mud would flow back again’ (Read 1992: 32). This mud, however, is not wholly abject. Particularly striking in Read’s evocation is a sense of the mud’s irresistibility, its repetitive, fluid motion. This is Nietzschean (Kneeshawean) mud, excessive and chaotic, an expressionistic response to the war by Read, who had come up against the limitations of Imagist poetics.⁴

Writing With Mud

In this article, I want to illuminate mud from a different angle. Newbolt, Owen and Sassoon use mud to evoke the abject. But the mud I have in mind is closer to the phantasmagorical mud of Brooke’s ‘Heaven’ and the excessive, expressionistic mud of Read’s ‘Kneeshaw Goes To War’. It is a mud which constitutes a terrifying yet mesmerizing figure for creativity – and prohibited creativity at that. It is the mud of Helen Saunders and Mary Borden in their poems ‘A Vision of Mud’ (1915) and ‘The Song of the Mud’ (1917) respectively.

Now this kind of mud has its slimy and disgusting side, but it is also entrancing, even (apparently) edible, the stuff of nourishment and inspiration. (In this regard, it is worth noting that the officer writing to *The Times* from Flanders in September 1915 moves from his sketch of the mud salesman and customer to comparing battlefield mud to bread sauce: ‘Not the stiffer sort of bread sauce, but the sort which, without being watery, flops on the plate and slowly – but not too slowly – spreads out’ (Anonymous 1915b: 7).) David Trotter evokes such mud in recounting a story about the writer Mary Butts. In Butts’s childhood, a puddle formed one night on the gravel driveway of her home. The puddle was lined, relates Trotter, ‘with some rather enticing yellow mud’

⁴ ‘[T]hese Imagists,’ wrote Read, ‘may be accused of expressing a “slice” of their emotions, and of not discriminating between the vision of purely aesthetic value and the vision of emotional value only’ (Read 1918: 78).

(Trotter 2000: 1). The young Mary made ‘strenuous attempts’ to eat it, ‘dropping full length onto her belly in order to get at it’ (Trotter 2000: 1). Reprimanded by the adults, she ‘could not quite suppress a lingering doubt’, and queried, ‘Are you really and truly sure that you never cook with mud?’ (Butts 1988: 1-2, quoted in Trotter 2000: 1) The mud looks so mouth-wateringly tempting that Butts immediately assumes that its role is one of sustenance. It can – or ought to be – cooked with: that is, handled, shaped, transformed. Trotter takes the story as the starting-point for his study – entitled *Cooking With Mud* – of both ‘illusion-sustaining mess’ and ‘illusion-destroying mess’ (Trotter 2000: 8, 9). It is illusion-sustaining or, better, illusion-creating mud (mess is a large subject requiring separate treatment) that is the subject of my investigation.

But I hope to do more than simply change the emphasis from ‘bad’ mud to ‘good’ mud, as it were. ‘Writers and artists think *with* mess as well as *about* it,’ suggests Trotter, a claim that creates a critical opening. He cites the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips, whose work on clutter provides further illumination. Like Trotter, Phillips believes that clutter, ‘as chaotic accumulation’, may be ‘both a thwarting and a source of inspiration’ (Phillips 2001: 70). Indeed, as a manifestation of disorder (a characterization traceable back to Mary Douglas), it might entail ‘something orgiastic, something violent, something inchoate, something longed for and feared’ (Phillips 2001: 59). It is the idea of something ‘longed for and feared’ that I wish to keep in mind while reading the mud poems of Saunders and Borden.

Helen Saunders, ‘A Vision of Mud’

‘A Vision of Mud’ was published in the second (and final), ‘War Number’, issue of *BLAST*, Wyndham Lewis’s short-lived Vorticist publication. Information about its author, Helen Saunders, is scanty: the best source is Brigid Peppin’s *Helen Saunders 1885-1963* (1996), a publication accompanying a 1996 exhibition of Saunders’s works at the

Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, and Graves Art Gallery, Sheffield, on which I rely for the following remarks. Saunders trained with the artist Rosa Waugh, becoming, with Katie Gliddon, Elsie Tulloch and Cecilia Beatty, one of Waugh's 'inner circle' of painters (Peppin 1996: 5). In January 1907, Saunders enrolled at the Slade School of Fine Art, where she was taught by the surgeon and anatomist Henry Tonks (Peppin 1996: 7), who would go on in the First World War to produce drawings of the facial reconstructions performed on disfigured soldiers by another surgeon, Harold Gillies. Saunders left the Slade before the arrival of the renowned generation that included Christopher Nevinston, Stanley Spencer, Mark Gertler and Edward Wadsworth, and attended instead the Central School of Arts and Crafts (Peppin 1996: 7). By 1912, her style was 'recognisably "Post-Impressionist"', and she was invited by Roger Fry to contribute a painting to his exhibition 'Quelques Independents Anglais' at the Galerie Barbazanges in Paris (Peppin 1996: 8).

But the artistic movement with which Saunders has been most closely associated is Vorticism (though, unfortunately, none of her paintings survive from that period (Cork 1996: 4)). She participated in the decoration of the Vorticist Room at the Restaurant de la Tour Eiffel in Percy Street, London (Cork 1996: 4), and was often present at the Vorticist / Imagist dinners presided over by Ezra Pound at Gennaro's and other Soho restaurants; other regulars included T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, H. D. and Richard Aldington (Peppin 1996: 14). Lewis, the leading Vorticist, was a strong influence. Peppin quotes an interview with the artist Frederick Etchells: 'Saunders was completely potty about Lewis. If Lewis had painted Kate Greenaway pictures, Saunders would have done them too' (Cork 1976: 419; quoted in Peppin 1996: 10).⁵ Lewis, in turn, was influenced by the Austrian philosopher Otto Weininger, author of the notorious *Sex and Character*, published in 1903 in German and translated into English in

⁵ The remarks were made by Etchells in an interview with Cork in 1972.

1906: a treatise expounding theories of the mindlessness of women and their complete inferiority to men. ‘*The most inferior man is still infinitely superior to the most superior woman*’, claimed Weininger; ‘woman as a whole is mindless, or mindlessness itself’ (Weininger 2005: 230, 231, emphases original). Saunders mentioned to Lewis in a letter of 1912 or 1913 that she had been reading Weininger on his advice, adding, ‘I had worked out most of his ideas for myself but still persist in thinking I may have a soul’ (quoted in Peppin 1996: 11)⁶ (Weininger had written of ‘the *soullessness* of Woman’ (Weininger 2005: 186, emphasis original). Peppin does not venture further into the relationship between Weininger, Lewis and Saunders, but a certain pattern of imagery is evident in Saunders’s work which suggests that she was working through the issue of female silencing. An ‘Untitled Drawing’ of c. 1913, reproduced in Peppin’s catalogue and labelled ‘Untitled gouache: Female Figures Imprisoned’ in Cork 1976 (150), shows a blurred group of around six figures standing or crouching beneath a low ceiling in a cave-like setting. There is a palpable sense of uncomfortable confinement. Similarly restricted, the speaker of Saunders’s poem ‘The Cave’ (undated) sits ‘In concentrated narrowness’ against the ‘cold contact of shiny sides’ (Peppin 1995: unpaginated). In another poem, ‘I Have Eaten Daffodils’ (undated), the speaker refers to ‘Ears stuffed with clay / Eyelids shut down’ (Peppin 1995: unpaginated). The occlusion of orifices resonates with others in ‘A Vision of Mud’:

They fill my mouth with it. I am sick. They shovel it all back again.

My eyes are full of it; nose and ears, too.

I wish I could feel or hear. (Saunders 1915: 73)⁷

Trapped, gagged, imprisoned, Saunders’s women protagonists suffer sensory deprivation and consequent challenges in expression: to this extent, they are Weiningerian women

⁶ The remark is made in an undated letter from Saunders to Lewis held in Cornell University’s Rare Book and Manuscript Collection.

⁷ Subsequent references to ‘A Vision of Mud’ are to this text.

(this is complicated by the uncertain gender of the speaker in 'A Vision of Mud', a point discussed further below). But this is not the whole story, and, abhorrent as they are, Weininger's ideas can provide a positive way of thinking about Saunders's method of making meaning in her art and poetry: alogical, patternless, muddy.

In *BLAST* 2, 'A Vision of Mud' takes its place alongside a number of pieces (prose, poetry and artwork) by Lewis; poems by Ezra Pound, Ford Madox Hueffer (later Ford), T. S. Eliot and the 'other' woman Vorticist, Jessica Dismorr; Henri Gaudier-Brzeska's 'Vortex (written from the Trenches)' and artwork by Dismorr, Etchells, Gaudier-Brzeska, Jacob Kramer, Nevinson, William Roberts, Dorothy Shakespear, Wadsworth; and her own drawings 'The Island of Laputa' and 'Atlantic City'.⁸ The poem is attributed in the publication's Contents to 'H. Sanders'; the two drawings simply to 'Sanders'. Peppin gives Saunders's explanation for the anomaly:

My name was misspelt in the Manifesto so far as I remember by a sort of 'gentlemen's agreement' – in deference probably to my conventional home background. (quoted in Peppin 1996: 12)⁹

The idea of a woman entering a 'gentleman's agreement' undermines the Weiningerian view of female mindlessness; moreover, 'deference' is not what comes to mind when reading 'A Vision of Mud'.

The long lines of the poem seep across the page, filling and overflowing the allotted space, overwhelming any attempt to count syllables or stresses. The opening plunges reader and unidentified speaker into a mud that is similarly swirling, at once present and ubiquitous:

There is mud all round

This is favourable to the eclosion of mighty life: thank God for small mercies!

⁸ Peppin also ascribes the colophon on page 16 to Saunders (Peppin 1996: 13).

⁹ Saunders made this remark in a letter of 1 September 1962 to William Wees. Peppin plausibly conjectures that the family pronunciation of the name was 'Sarders' rather than 'Sawnders' (Peppin 1996: 12).

How is it that if you struggle you sink?

Immediately, this mud is characterized as positive: it favours the ‘eclosion’ – that is, the emergence from concealment – of ‘mighty life’. Like Brooke’s mud in ‘Heaven’, Saunders’s mud is fertile: what might emerge could be biological life or creative endeavour. A ‘small merc[y]’ perhaps, but such endeavour on the part of a woman (though the speaker is not necessarily a woman) would indeed be something ‘mighty’ in the context of that traditionally male preserve: war writing. In an important 1999 article, James Campbell uses the term ‘combat gnosticism’ to characterize this preserve. As Campbell argues, battle experience is very often constructed ‘as a kind of gnosis, a secret knowledge which only an initiated elite knows’ (Campbell 1999: 204). This initiated elite is a male one, women traditionally having been denied access to the war zone in most cultures and societies. The belief consequently arises, Campbell continues, ‘that combat represents a qualitatively separate order of experience that is difficult if not impossible to communicate to any who have not undergone an identical experience’ (Campbell 1999: 203). Now at this point it is important to emphasize that ‘A Vision of Mud’ does not make clear whether the speaker of the poem is male or female or combatant or non-combatant. There are a couple of small clues (both discussed further below): a reference to a ‘Hydro’ or ‘health-resort’ which could imply that the speaker is a woman taking a mud bath, and an image of bodily swelling which, indicating pregnancy, would also suggest a female voice. But I would prefer to leave the point as vague as it is in the poem, since doing so permits a reading of ‘A Vision of Mud’ as a canny response to combat gnosticism in which mud is used to blur the boundaries between male and female and combat and civilian experience.¹⁰

¹⁰ Or ‘a restless reverie on the urge to bridge the chasm between home and the front in verse’ (Peppis 2000: 126).

Immersed in the mud, the speaker of the poem immediately experiences sensory deprivation. With his or her eyes, nose, ears and mouth clogged with mud, he or she is obliged to rely on touch, feeling and grasping an iron bar:

Its edges are rather sharp.

I twist my hand round the bar so that the edge saws gently at my wrist,

I am glad of the slight pain. It is like a secret.

There is something self-destructive about sawing at the wrist in this way, but this is a productive pain that gives the speaker a gladdening bodily awareness. Saunders next introduces a number of battle-related images. The sound of 'a recruiting band' penetrates: 'The drums thud and the fifes pipe on tip-toe'. A 'giant cloud like a black bladder with holes in it hovers overhead': the ominous shape resembles a zeppelin, used in raids over Britain from January 1915. The poem continues:

Out of the holes stream incessant cataracts of the same black mud that I am
lying in. There is a little red in the mud.

This line, the longest in the work, mimics the flow and swirl of its subject, and now the black mud has become 'a little red' or bloodied (the detail is picked up later in the line 'The black has a deeper tinge of red in it'). The corpse-scape of the Western Front comes to mind here,¹¹ an evocation reinforced by the later line 'I have just discovered with what I think is disgust, that there are hundreds of other bodies bobbing about against me'. This is the mud of battle, a mud saturated with bodies, tainted by blood, sucking, drowning.

But it is also another, more beneficent kind of mud. 'Hands are spreading mud everywhere,' writes Saunders; 'they plaster it on what should be a body'. These disembodied 'hands' are disquieting: who exactly might spread and plaster mud on a body? Jane Beckett and Deborah Cherry have suggested that the speaker of the poem is

¹¹ See Tate 1998: 66, 65.

experiencing a mud bath (Beckett and Cherry 1988: 135). In 1914, David Bomberg, a Vorticist like Saunders, produced a painting called 'The Mud Bath',¹² a composition of angular blue-and-white figures against a red background and a fragmented beige surround, clustered round a dark-brown pillar (the painting is now on display at London's Tate Britain). According to the Tate, Lilian Bomberg mentioned that she had heard that a mud bath had been opened in the East End about the time her husband painted the picture (<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bomberg-the-mud-bath-t00656/text-catalogue-entry>). The baths in question have been linked to the Russian Vapour Baths opened in Brick Lane by Benjamin Schewzik (<http://www.jewishmuseum.org.uk/jb-Russian-Vapour-Baths-sign>). Richard Cork points out that Schewzik's did not contain a mud bath, but nonetheless concurs that 'the Baths and the bathers it housed' would seem 'to have aroused Bomberg's interest' (Cork 1976: 204). Mud therapy, whether in the form of immersion in a bath or of a whole body wrap, *was* available in the period – *The Times*, for example, advertised the 'balneological [...] cure method' known as 'Fango Radio Active Mud treatment' at Buxton spa (Anonymous 1914a: 11)¹³ – and seems similarly to have inspired Saunders. In addition to the hands that spread and plaster mud over the body and a reference to experiencing 'heat' (such would be the case in an actual mud wrap or bath), 'A Vision of Mud' explicitly mentions the curative properties of mud:

Such mud, naturally, is medicinal: that is why they have set up this vulgar 'Hydro' here.

It is a health-resort.

The lines are incongruous, even shocking, in the course of a description of what had already become one of the most notorious features of the Western Front, but the

¹² See <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bomberg-the-mud-bath-t00656/text-catalogue-entry>, accessed 4 March 2015.

¹³ 'Fango' is the Italian word for mud.

characterization of mud as health treatment, as opposed to trench menace, permits a civilian re-appropriation of it. A new kind of gnosticism is proposed: one that does not demarcate combatant from non-combatant but depends in both cases on somatic experience.

And so Saunders is quite explicit that the speaker of her poem is immersed in mud but not sinking in it:

One of these mud-shafts is just above me.

It is pouring into me so that my body swells and grows heavier every
minute.

There is no sign of sinking.

Mud has impregnated the body, which swells into an image of fertility. This is an imaginative fertility that keeps the non-combatant writer afloat, a creatively revitalizing mud bath. Saunders's 'How is it that if you struggle you sink?' is, figuratively, a question about writerly endeavour. It suggests that, rather than struggling to earn the right to write about war through firsthand combat experience, her method is to float on or within a tide of mud that penetrates barriers to infiltrate such preserves. And so the strategy of the speaker of 'A Vision of Mud' is 'to lie quite still'. Buoyancy is the key: the speaker's body 'floats like a dingy feather on stagnation'.¹⁴

Floating, the speaker notices a 'taste of honey': the mud that has filled his or her mouth is somehow sweet. In connection with this observation, the speaker remarks:

This mud has curious properties.

It makes you dream. It is like poisoned arrows.

The sweet mud is expressly endowed with the property of creative stimulation ('It makes you dream'). The reference to 'poisoned arrows' extends the thought: the effect of such

¹⁴ In a striking forerunner of Saunders's 'dingy feather', in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-2), Will Ladislav laments that Dorothea will not 'value any word I ever uttered to her again at more than a dirty feather' (Eliot 1986: 835). But, while Eliot aligns the dirty feather with verbal worthlessness, Saunders uses the feather image – a classic sign of writing – to figure her speaker's ability to float.

arrows might be numbing but it could also be (dangerously) hallucinatory. The mud is responsible, that is, for a drugged and dream-like state. In the final lines of the poem, having rejected the possibility of killing one of the 'fellow-monstrosities' adrift in the sludge on the grounds of being 'too proud and too lazy', the speaker experiences a positive vision of fertility:

Rain falls in the grave distance
 You laugh thickly with delight at this sound
 There are wet young flowers away to the West.
 You smell weak moss, brown earth.
 The wind blows gently.

The 'grave distance' suggests the killing-fields away on the Western Front. There, in the West, the falling rain will disperse the mud, revealing and nurturing 'wet young flowers'. Eyes, nose and ears previously stuffed with mud, wishing for the ability to 'feel or hear', the speaker can now smell the fragile vegetation and hear and feel the gentle wind. What was mud is now a more distinct brown earth. It is a tranquil vision, but the speaker still appears to be immersed in mud: indeed, the adverb 'thickly' maintains the suggestion of a mouth filled with it. The ending may be read as a glimpse of a world beyond war from a world of war, a glimpse made possible by the 'curious' and visionary properties of the mud in the mouth.

In mud, therefore, Saunders finds the stuff of poetry: both as subject and as hallucinogenic figure for inspiration. 'A Vision of Mud' – which, despite the 'full' eyes of its speaker, *is*, finally, a vision – undermines the authority of combat gnosticism by placing a body that is not definitively male or female, combatant or non-combatant in a substance that is continuous with the conditions on the Western Front. Far from abjecting, the blurring of forms and boundaries emerges as phantasmagorically suggestive.

Mary Borden, 'The Song of the Mud'

Saunders's vision of mud is of an imaginatively fertile, if still sometimes disgusting, substance (a characterisation that itself encapsulates the fascination and repulsion of war writing). 'The Song of the Mud' by the American-born writer Mary Borden finds in mud an even greater versatility. Borden is increasingly the subject of critical attention; I owe the biographical details here to Jane Conway's *A Woman of Two Wars* (2010). A Chicago heiress, lover and patron of Wyndham Lewis (Meyers 1980: 72-4), Borden established and funded her own unit, the Hôpital Chirurgical Mobile No 1, which was set in operation in Flanders in July 1915 (Conway 2010: 46). As a frontline facility, the Hôpital received the most seriously wounded men: in the first six months, over 800 extreme cases were treated, with the remarkably low mortality rate of 68 deaths (Conway 2010: 47). In October 1916, Borden set up another unit, the Hôpital d'Evacuation, behind the Somme. In both hospitals, mud was conspicuous. Conway describes the floor of the Hôpital Chirurgical Mobile as 'a sea of sludge' (Conway 2010: 47). Borden herself wrote of the Somme unit:

Looking back, I do not understand that woman – myself – standing in that confused goods yard filled with bundles of broken human flesh. [...] The air was thick with steaming sweat, with the effluvia of mud, dirt, blood. (Borden 1929: 149, quoted in Conway 2010: 58)

Here, mud is one of the components of a process of de-gendering.¹⁵ The process was furthered by encounters with the human detritus of the frontline fighting that arrived in the hospitals:

¹⁵ On the 'alternate [...] persona' to Borden's 'depersonalized, deadened, and de-gendered voice' – 'a frankly sexual, gendered voice' evident in her sonnets – see McGowan 2011: unpaginated.

There are no men here, so why should I be a woman? There are heads and knees and mangled testicles. There are chests with holes as big as your fist, and pulpy thighs, shapeless; and stumps where legs once were fastened [...] How could I be a woman and not die of it? (Borden 1929: 60)

The question might be extended: how could she be a woman *writer* and not die of it? But, as was the case with Saunders, the war both annihilated and creatively revived Borden. She published three poems about the war – ‘Where Is Jehovah?’, ‘The Song of the Mud’ and ‘The Hill’ – under the title *At the Somme* in *The English Review* in August 1917 alongside pieces by D. H. Lawrence and Maxim Gorki. ‘The Song of the Mud’ was reprinted in the American magazine *Current Opinion* in October 1917 where Borden’s name is given as ‘Mary Borden-Turner’ (Turner was her married name). ‘The sense of beauty may be enhanced by the view of ugly things,’ wrote the *Current Opinion* editor by way of introduction. ‘We can’t appreciate virtue if we know nothing of vice. Here is a war-poem that treats of ugliness and treats of it in a way to enhance our longing for its opposite’ (Anonymous 1917: 275). When, in 1929, Borden published the set of autobiographical sketches she had been working on in 1917 as *The Forbidden Zone*, the three *English Review* poems were included, along with ‘The Virgin of Albert’ and ‘Unidentified’. The 2008 Hesperus edition of *The Forbidden Zone* unfortunately omits them.

‘The Song of the Mud’ is both a song in praise (and dispraise) of mud, and a song *by* mud – mud become articulate.¹⁶ As in ‘A Vision of Mud’, the lines are long and viscous (indeed, both works blur another distinction: that between poetry and prose).¹⁷ Here, to be sure, is mud that is both disgusting and abjecting. The second stanza states:

This is the song of the mud, the uniform of the *poilu*.

¹⁶ The edition of ‘The Song of the Mud’ referred to in this article is Borden 1929: 179-82.

¹⁷ On the similarities between Borden’s and Walt Whitman’s versification, see Montefiore 2003: 119-120.

His coat is of mud, his poor great flapping coat that is too big for him and too heavy,

His coat that once was blue, and now is gray and stiff with the mud that cakes it.

This is the mud that clothes him—

His trousers and boots are of mud—

And his skin is of mud—

And there is mud in his beard.

The distinctions between man and material have been obliterated: the *poilu* both wears and *is* mud.¹⁸ Invader and denier of bodily integrity, this is the treasonous mud that ‘mixes in with the food of the soldiers’ (nothing mouth-watering about the mud here); that ‘spoils the working of motors and crawls into their secret parts’; that ‘spreads itself over the guns’. This is mischievous, morale-sapping mud. More: it is ‘the obscene, the filthy, the putrid, / The vast liquid grave of our Armies’. It has ‘drowned our men’; it is ‘thick, bitter, heaving’. While Saunders writes of bodies buoyed and swelled by mud, Borden writes of the grotesque antithesis:

It has drowned our men—

Its monstrous distended belly reeks with the undigested dead—

Our men have gone down into it, sinking slowly, and struggling, and slowly disappearing.

Here, mud has become, in its lethal swallowing down of ‘Our fine men, our brave, strong young men’, a figure for the War itself, spreading mercilessly across and beyond Europe, engulfing a generation.

¹⁸ There is a notable resemblance (though no influence is suggested) between Borden’s evocation and the officer’s description of mud in Anonymous 1915a: ‘My hands are caked in mud [...] My breeches are thick with mud [...] my muffler is more like a mud pie than anything else [...] My watch has stopped at 5, as the wet and mud have penetrated it [...] I have just waded through our trenches, which have fallen to pieces and are filling with mud and water [...] men [...] wet and grimy and caked in mud’. It is after this account that the officer asks, ‘Am I a human being?’

But there are other aspects to Borden's mud. Her song is also of the kind of mud:

That sucks the guns down and holds them fast in its slimy, voluminous lips,
 That has no respect for destruction and muzzles the bursting of shells,
 And slowly, softly, easily,
 Soaks up the fire, the noise, soaks up the energy and the courage,
 Soaks up the power of armies,
 Soaks up the battle—
 Just soaks it up and stops it.

Mud is both war and the cessation of war. Its squelchy operations stymie, slow and soak up battle (the repetitions mimic its relentless thickening and oozing). In this role, mud is tender, acting 'slowly, softly, easily'. It is a soporific and an analgesic. And, with its 'slimy, voluminous lips' fellating the guns, it is erotic: a substance of both horror and desire. Borden's lines resonate with Phillips's psychoanalytic account of clutter: 'anything that stops something happening is making something else possible' (Phillips 2001: 61). Clogging the machinery of war, Borden's mud makes possible the smooth operation of the (female) imagination. And, as the gooey mantle spreads, it acts as a camouflage – or, as Borden puts it, 'the fantastic disguise of the War Zone' – first covering, then burying, the paraphernalia of armed conflict. The notion is ethically troubling: is this black stuff a willed whitewash of the War?

'Clutter may not be about the way we hide things from ourselves but the way we make ourselves look for things,' writes Phillips (Phillips 2001: 64). As Borden lays an 'extinguishing mantle' on the battle zone, she re-directs the speaker's and reader's gaze. Mud seen from this angle appears as an object of beauty. In the first and last stanzas of the poem, Borden writes of 'pale yellow glistening mud' that covers 'naked hills' like 'satin'; of 'gray, gleaming, silvery mud' that is 'spread like enamel'; of 'frothing, squirting,

liquid mud that gurgles'; of 'thick elastic mud'; of 'beautiful, glistening, golden mud'; of 'mysterious, gleaming, silvery mud'. Evoked by colour, saturation, luminance, texture, viscosity, warmth, plasticity, sound, this multi-faceted mud stimulates the desire to touch, to stroke, to knead, to spread, to squelch, to feel its glide across the body's nakedness. But there is something disturbing about this beautiful mud, something excessive about the layered repetitions of adjectives and the incantatory nature of the polysyllabic vocabulary. Certain cross-currents can be discerned in the sludge: Borden is at once warning against the infinitely beguiling yet ethically troubling nature of the 'fantastic disguise of the War Zone' and relishing the discovery that it is creatively productive. The resultant tone is one of forbidden pleasure: a paean, simultaneously guilty and excited, to a mud that is 'invincible, inexhaustible'.

Conclusion: Mud and Meaning

Literary criticism, like psychoanalysis, 'has an inclination to sort things out', Phillips claims (Phillips 2001: 60). Both disciplines invite us 'to make meaning in the absence of pattern' (Phillips 2001: 60). Poetic mud, like its real-life counterpart, has a strange attractiveness: who is not drawn to its semantic squelchiness, its thematic thickening, its mesmerizing protean movement? Reading mud as a figure for the abject or, as in this article, for the liberated, female, civilian imagination itself risks clearing up what appears to be muddle but what is in fact creatively chaotic. (In similar vein, Judith Butler recommends the productive disorderliness of grief.)¹⁹ Saunders's and Borden's poems, then, invite a muddy criticism, which leaves undifferentiated male and female and combatant and non-combatant (in Saunders's case) and desire and repulsion (in

¹⁹ 'When grieving is something to be feared, our fears can give rise to the impulse to resolve it quickly, to banish it in the name of an action invested with the power to restore the loss or return the world to a former order, or to reinvigorate a fantasy that the world formerly was orderly [...] Is there something to be gained from grieving, from tarrying with grief, from remaining exposed to its unbearability?' (Butler 2006: 29).

Borden's). This is not to dismiss precision but to deploy muddiness as a productive way of thinking.

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