

**An Exploration of Sight, and its Relationship with Reality, in
Literature from Both World Wars**

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Abstract

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Writers from both world wars, concerned with the representation of war, wrestled with the predicament of partial sight. Their work reveals the problematic dichotomy that exists between the individual's selective range of vision and the immense scale of conflict. Central to this authorial dilemma is the question of the visual frame: how do you contain – within the written word – sight that resists containment and expression? The scale of the two world wars accentuated the representative problem of warfare. This thesis, by examining a wide range of World War One and World War Two literature, explores the varied literary responses to the topical relationship between sight and reality in wartime. It examines the war poetry of Wilfred Owen, Ford Madox Ford's tetralogy *Parade's End*, *The Return of the Soldier* by Rebecca West, Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day*, and Virginia Woolf's novels *Mrs Dalloway* and *Between the Acts* alongside less well-known works such as David Jones's prose-poem *In Parenthesis*, the two short stories 'The Soldier Looks for His Family' by John Prebble and 'The Blind Man' by D.H. Lawrence, as well as William Sansom's collection of short stories *Fireman Flower*, and Louis Simpson's war poetry. This thesis, by focussing on the inherent difficulties of reconciling perception and representation in war, interrogates the boundaries of sight and the limits of representation. The changing place of sight in writing from the two world wars is examined and the extent to which discourses of vision were shaped and developed, in the early decades of the twentieth century, by war experience is explored. The critical containment and categorisation of sight that often dominates readings of sight in texts from both world wars is questioned suggesting the need for a more flexible understanding of, and approach towards, sight.

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Introduction: sight and the reality of war

Representing the world wars

Wilfred Owen famously stated that ‘the true poets must be truthful’ but, as the Second World War poet Donald Bain remarked, ‘we [...] can only see the small components of the scene’.¹ Writers from both world wars, concerned with the representation of war, wrestle with the predicament of partial sight. Their work reveals the problematic dichotomy that exists between the individual’s selective range of vision and the immense scale of conflict. How accurate or relevant are incomplete observations and fragmentary accounts of war? Central to this authorial dilemma is the question of the visual frame: how do you contain – within the written word – sight that resists containment and expression? The opening of Lieutenant Bernard Adams’s 1917 memoir, *Nothing of Importance*, captures this tension explicitly. The combatant is rendered silent when asked by a friend to tell the truth and describe what war is like.² The soldier is momentarily struck dumb because words fail to translate accurately the sights of war. The writer of war, so often also a witness to war, is therefore hindered profoundly by sight. The inability to see war completely, and the inadequate means to capture what is seen, results in an authorial anxiety about sight that is established and disclosed in many written representations of war. Richard Aldington’s review of Herbert Read’s 1925 war memoir, *In Retreat*, for example, draws attention to the ‘torturing sense of something incommunicable’ that writers concerned with the experience of war as a subject must grapple with.³

¹ Wilfred Owen, ‘Preface’, *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, ed. Jon Stallworthy, 2 vols. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1983), II, p. 535; Donald Bain, ‘War Poet’, *Penguin New Writing*, 21 (1944), 148-152 (p. 150).

² Bernard Adams, *Nothing of Importance: A Record of Eight Months at the Front with a Welsh Battalion – October 1915 to June 1916* (London: Methuen, 1917), p. xv. Adams served as a Lieutenant in the Royal Welch Fusiliers and was killed at the Somme in 1917.

³ Richard Aldington, ‘Review of *In Retreat* by Herbert Read’, *The Criterion*, 4.2 (1926), 363-367 (p. 363).

Indeed, this is true of all the works analysed in the following chapters; they reveal a constant struggle to reconcile perception and representation.

This dilemma is not confined to the two world wars – it is a predicament of all war. However, as Elizabeth Bowen wrote, the significance of world war is that it is ‘uncontainable’.⁴ It is the *scale* of world war that accentuates the representative problem of warfare. Fourteen million people died in the First World War; twenty thousand British soldiers were lost on the first day of the Battle of the Somme alone.⁵ That day, as David Cannadine notes, saw the British Army sustain the greatest loss of life recorded in a single day; its total equalled the collective losses of the Boer War.⁶ The Great War also extended spatial and temporal boundaries with twenty-eight states participating in four years of warfare.⁷ Of these statistics, Wyndham Lewis famously wrote: ‘The War went on for far too long, or too long for a ‘totalitarian’ war [...]. It was too vast for its meaning, like a giant with the brain of a midge. Its epic proportions were grotesquely out of scale’.⁸ Lewis intimates that world war – total war – is of a scale that defies comprehension: it exceeds all sense. An effective representation of world war cannot be easily drawn because it disrupts ordering frames of reason, logic, and proportion. If we understand the First World War to be uncontainable, how do the writer and reader scale the statistics of the 1939-1945 war? Fifty million people died; five continents, including sixty-one states, were involved in fighting; eighty-five million service men and women survived; sixty-six per

⁴ Elizabeth Bowen, *The Heat of the Day* (1949; London: Reprint Society, 1950), p. 298.

⁵ Martin Gilbert, *First World War* (London: Harper Collins, 1994), xv.

⁶ David Cannadine, ‘War and Death, Grief and Mourning in Modern Britain’, *Mirrors of Mortality: Studies in the Social History of Death*, ed. Joachim Whaley (London: Europa, 1981), pp. 187-242 (p. 197).

⁷ Joanna Bourke, *The Second World War: A People’s History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 2.

⁸ Wyndham Lewis, *Blasting and Bombardiering* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1937), p. 205.

cent of recorded fatalities were civilian deaths.⁹ This, then, is the nearest to total war that mankind has been historically.

War statistics are easy to read but difficult to translate adequately into descriptive language. Representing fifty million dead people and five continents within the confines of a book inevitably results in a reduction: an author can write effectively about a few individuals but would obviously fail to capture in detail the stories of several million. Choices have to be made, details selected, and certain facts prioritised. These decisions result in some aspects of war being seen whilst other aspects are simultaneously discarded and/or concealed. Joanna Bourke persuasively argues that most accounts of the Second World War are 'fractured and incomplete' and that the basic narrative elements – 'what', 'when', and 'who' – are always open to dispute and question.¹⁰ This is, in part, because of the multiple perspectives and viewpoints that operate in war: who has the authority and capacity to really 'see' war let alone tell it? Kate McLoughlin interestingly refers to an increase in '360° reporting' where she notes that most depictions of war have come to 'resemble a hall of mirrors as war reporters observe and describe other war reporters, who in turn observe and describe them'.¹¹ This thought-provoking observation suggests that the act of seeing war, or being seen to see war, has perhaps become more important than accurately representing war: if true, sight could be read as shorthand for the details of war experience.

A recent United Nations backed report appears to affirm this trend: it claims that the increase in the death of journalists covering war, throughout the twentieth

⁹ Martin Gilbert, *Second World War* (London: Phoenix Press, 1989), p.1; Kate McLoughlin, *Authoring War: The Literary Representation of War from the Iliad to Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 51; Bourke, *The Second World War*, pp. 2, 3.

¹⁰ Bourke, *The Second World War*, p. 3.

¹¹ McLoughlin, p. 22.

and twenty-first centuries, directly results from a desire to be seen 'in the field'.¹² The article significantly makes a direct link between truth and sight: to be observed 'live' and in 'real time', seeing war, is to be perceived as a 'truth-teller'.¹³ The report implicitly suggests that the problem of partial sight, of incomplete representation, has become an accepted characteristic of war reportage. This, then, seems to be a legacy of the two world wars: their global scale resisted the notion of a complete account or accurate representation and significantly altered the way war is perceived. A similar conclusion was reached in a 2008 interdisciplinary research workshop that discussed the representation of war. It was noted that the two world wars resulted in 'the aesthetics of warfare' – the way war is artistically perceived and presented – definitively shifting, in the twentieth century, away from 'the eye of God' towards 'the gaze of the soldier'.¹⁴ In other words, a partially sighted, ground level perspective culturally holds more currency in accounts of modern warfare than an all-seeing, bird's eye view. Although I question whether this visual transition can be so clearly traced, and discuss this premise in more detail later, the observation nevertheless usefully shows that the gaze of the individual is generally perceived as more accessible and comprehensible: it provides the writer with a way into global warfare by narrowing the gap between perception and representation. It scales down war.

Sight therefore is rendered profoundly unstable by the scale of both the world wars. Kate McLoughlin calls world war 'slippery' and 'ungraspable' intimating that it is a fluid and elusive construct: a phenomenon that evades depiction and the

¹² Lee Woodyear, 'In today's world, journalists face greater dangers', *World of Work Magazine*, 47 (June 2003), 19-20 (p. 19) <www.ilo.org/global/publications/magazines-and-journals/world-of-work-magazine/issues/DWCMS_080608/lang--en/index.htm> [accessed 17th August 2013].

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Roundtable Transcript: 'Representing War', moderated Elena Baraban, University of Manitoba (7th March, 2008), p. 5. <http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/arts/departments/german_and_slavic/media/transcript_workshop_roundtable_representing_war.pdf> [accessed 15th February 2013]. The moderator, Elena Baraban, has since incorporated some of the workshop material into her book, *Fighting Words and Images* (2012), which explores the topic of representing war in detail.

boundaries of sight.¹⁵ McLoughlin's reference to 'mirrors', when describing the effect of 360° reporting, also seems significant when considering the stability and, by extension, the solidity of sight. The destabilising effect of war upon sight draws attention to the surface of sight and the multifarious perspectives that operate in war. Paul Rodaway reminds us that sight consists of multiple surfaces but that seeing ultimately imposes a visual order upon these surfaces: 'sight is concerned with appearances. On its own it gives us access only to surfaces. [...] Seeing is a creative interpretation of appearances, a translation of what appears as patterns of illuminated surfaces into what is represented'.¹⁶ But war interrupts this interpretative process because war resists representation. In resisting a visual order, war blurs the distinction between fantasy and reality: accounts from both world wars reveal witnesses struggling to believe and process sights that defy reality but that nevertheless possess a kernel of truth. Many of the works I explore show this. Tietjens in Ford Madox Ford's *Parade's End* 'sees' the blood of a lost comrade running across the page of a book; Jenny in Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* 'sees' Chris in No Man's Land; William Sansom's Fireman Flower 'sees' the seat of a fire but cannot locate it; Septimus Smith in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* 'sees' dead men walking towards him; Miss La Trobe in Woolf's *Between the Acts* 'sees' the meaning of her play but fails to communicate it to her audience. In all these instances, the reality of sight is questioned and the meaning of what is seen is more often than not presented as something near but beyond reach.

In the 'Preface' to the 1930 edition of *Great Stories of the War*, Captain Humphrey Cotton Minchin argued that fictional writing was necessary to tell the

¹⁵ McLoughlin, pp. 8, 51.

¹⁶ Paul Rodaway, *Sensuous Geographies: body, sense and place* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 117.

reality of the First World War as well as factual accounts.¹⁷ Stephen Cullen, approaching this work from a historian's perspective, proposes that Minchin's statement reveals that 'war fiction carried in it essential truths about the war'.¹⁸ Cullen's observation importantly suggests that the reality of modern warfare is often so fantastical that it needs a fictional form to represent it. The mirror becomes an important motif when considering this collision between fantasy and reality and its significance as a representative tool of vision in World War One and World War Two fiction is examined throughout many of the following chapters. Foucault's writings on the mirror as an ultimate example of heterotopia, an in-between site at once in reality and outside it, are helpful in understanding the mirror as effectively representing the fantastical visual elements of wartime reality. Foucault writes that a heterotopia houses a reality that is 'simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted'.¹⁹ In other words, as Andrew Thacker elaborates, heterotopias function as examples of '*illusion* that show up [reality] as more illusory even than fantasy'.²⁰ Foucault, and Thacker, by showing fantasy and reality operating as two sides of the same coin, importantly emphasise the unseen/seen, hidden/revealed, and internal/external aspects of the fantasy/reality coin whilst blurring the demarcations between these pairings. The mirror captures these heterotopic visual contradictions implicitly: it mediates a dialogue between reality and fantasy by showing that the seer – the individual looking at their reflection – is at once seen and seeing. This exposes the inherently uncertain dual nature of sight: as Paul Rodaway writes, '[seeing] is both a reaching out to the world as a source of information and an understanding of that

¹⁷ Humphrey Cotton Minchin, *Great Stories of the War*, ed. Edmund Blunden (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1930).

¹⁸ Stephen Cullen, 'Gender and the Great War; British Combatants, Masculinity and Perceptions of Women, 1918-1939' (unpublished DPhil modern history thesis, University of Oxford, Trinity 1998), p. 65.

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, 'Of other spaces', *Diacritics*, 16.1 (Spring 1986), 22-27 (p. 24).

²⁰ Andrew Thacker, *Moving through modernity: Space and geography in modernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), p. 26.

world so gathered'.²¹ In other words, sight is active and passive, objective and subjective, internal and external.

War accentuates this dual reality of sight. Freud drew attention to this in his work on trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Writing of the traumatic experience of World War One, Freud suggested that total war breached the 'shield', or divide, between 'internal' and 'external' experience resulting in a complex and unstable interplay between the two.²² This disintegration of the demarcation between internal and external reality implies that unseen or hidden truths of war can be thus revealed. However, the aura of immediate access suggested is misleading. Wyatt Bonikowski, who uses Freudian theory as a framework for his study of the death drive in First World War fiction, writes that what distinguishes Freud's theory from the many other narratives of war trauma is Freud's recognition that the real 'lies behind the phantasy'.²³ Sight, as a means through which the reality of war is perceived, can therefore be understood to inhibit as well as enable direct comprehension. The blurring of internal and external reality can result, as Bonikowski claims, in accounts being ambiguously undecided as to whether they detail a 'real event or fantasy'.²⁴ Sight can be confusing as well as illuminating. The reality of war is therefore not so much unrepresentable or unseen as unfixed and indeterminate. There is no standardised visual frame that fits the experience of war because war cannot be standardised. Representing war is not about fixing the sights of war within a single frame; it is about providing the reader with access points to war. The variable

²¹ Rodaway, p. 5.

²² Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, ed. Anna Freud, Alix Strachey, Alan Tyson, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), xviii, pp. 7-66 (p. 31).

²³ Wyatt Bonikowski, *Shell Shock and the Modernist Imagination: The Death Drive in Post World War One British Fiction* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013), p. 10. Bonikowski deliberately echoes Lacan's commentary on Freud's analysis of the Wolf Man; hence his use of the French variant of 'fantasy'. In scholastic psychology, the noun 'fantasy' can also be spelt 'phantasy': both variations refer to the mental apprehension of an object of perception.

²⁴ Bonikowski, *Shell Shock and the Modernist Imagination*, p. 48. 'Fantasy', as used here by Bonikowski, embodies the imaginary, hallucinatory, delusive elements of perception.

collection of works analysed in the following chapters exposes the multiple viewpoints that operate in war and the multiplicity of sights seen. It is this sense of novelty, of uncertainty, of perceiving for the first time, of seeing war afresh that gives representations of war their unpredictability and power. Bourke finds it hard to identify the 'what', 'when', and 'who' in literature from both world wars because these basic narrative elements are continuously renewed and renegotiated: the common experiences of war – death, injury, fear – can be presented a thousand times in a thousand different ways.

A crisis of the senses

The unstable nature of sight, as revealed and enhanced by the inherent difficulties of seeing and representing world war, is contextually framed by a destabilising sensory crisis that occurred in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries pre- and post-World War One. Sara Danus, exploring how modernist literature provides us with an index of this crisis, explicates: 'high-modernist aesthetics is inseparable from a historically specific crisis of the senses, a sensory crisis sparked by [...] late-nineteenth- and early twentieth- century technological innovations, particularly technologies of perception'.²⁵ Danus concludes that developments such as the X-ray machine intrinsically connected the artistic with the technological and this resulted in visual perception being increasingly grounded in the bodily individual rather than 'in the ideality of the sense of sight'.²⁶ Technological innovations that blurred internal/external demarcations challenged not only the supremacy of the human eye but also the legitimacy of sight. The mechanical eye's capabilities emphasised the human eye's finite capacity to see: to see was not necessarily to know. Danus

²⁵ Sara Danus, *The Senses of Modernism – technology, perception, and aesthetics* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 3.

²⁶ Danus, p. 55

articulates this visual realisation as a historical shift away from seeing through a God-like ‘infallible, transcendental eye’ towards an eye embedded ‘in the physical and anatomical functioning of the empirical body’.²⁷ In other words, sight became increasingly associated with the body at ground level rather than on an elevated plane.²⁸

A reconfiguration of the hierarchy of the senses can be seen here. Traditionally, the senses have been privileged in relation to their perceived distance to the human body. Paul Rodaway writes that sight and hearing were generally regarded as superior because they were acknowledged to be ‘the distant senses’ whilst smell, taste, and touch were considered to be closer to the human body and therefore thought of as intimate or, as David Trotter terms them, the ‘proximity senses’.²⁹ The diagram ‘The range of senses’ (1967), by psychologists Larry Skurnik and Frank George, captures this distinction. The drawing shows a figure with an arm outstretched away from the body. The five senses are positioned between the body and outstretched arm: taste is situated within the body; touch and smell are positioned just outside the body along the arm; hearing is near to the hand; sight is located furthest away from the body beyond the arm and hand.³⁰ The diagram clearly depicts sight as the most elevated and distant sense. Danus claims that this

²⁷ Danus, pp. 62-63.

²⁸ Jonathan Crary argues that modernity’s visual crisis, or ‘rupture’, can be traced to earlier in the nineteenth century with the camera obscura becoming redundant: ‘Modernity [...] coincides with the collapse of classical models of vision and their stable space representations. [...] What begins in the 1820s and 1830s is a repositioning of the observer, outside of the fixed relations of interior/exterior presupposed by the camera obscura and into an undemarcated terrain on which the distinction between internal and external signs is irrevocably blurred’. *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Massachusetts: Massachusetts University Press, 1990), p. 24. Like Danus, Crary notes this sensory crisis was marked by the realisation that sight was located in the body: ‘The body that had been a neutral or invisible term in vision was now the thickness from which knowledge of the observer was obtained. This palpable opacity and carnal density of vision loomed so suddenly into view that its full consequences and effects could not be immediately realized’ (Crary, p. 149).

²⁹ Rodaway, p. 26; David Trotter, ‘The British Novel and the War’. *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the First World War*, ed. Vincent Sherry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 34-56.

³⁰ Larry S. Skurnik and Frank George, *Psychology for Everyone* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 14.

distant/intimate sensory divide was partly established through Hegel's philosophy of art in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Because Hegel believed that sight and hearing were theoretical senses, abstracted from the human body, he claimed that they were ideal aesthetic senses: the eye and ear were comprehended as organs of artistic enjoyment.³¹ 'Only the eye and the ear', writes Danius of Hegel's philosophy, 'are capable of respecting the integrity and freedom of the work of art'.³² An aesthetic discourse developed which privileged sight and hearing over the other senses because of their perceived abstraction and elevation.

Andrew Thacker identifies this aesthetic discourse in many of the realist novels of the nineteenth century. He writes that panoramic scenes described through an elevated eye are a distinctive hallmark of realist narratives.³³ Citing Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) as an example of this, Thacker explains that the opening of chapter two, which details Hardy's description of Blackmoor Vale from 'the summit of the hills that surround it', reveals a narrative where 'everything has its proper place [...] and the land, the sea, the city and the hills do not intermingle or overlap in this mapped place'.³⁴ Thacker emphasises the visual stability of Hardy's passage: the removed eye imposes order over vision and sight is contained. Power, then, can be detected in the all-seeing / all-knowing eye. Luce Irigaray considered this in an interview on pornographic photography: 'More than the other senses, the

³¹ See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel's 'Aesthetics': Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T.M. Knox, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

³² Danius, p. 194.

³³ This effect, as described by Thacker, appears to be part of what Italo Calvino has termed the art of visibility in the novel. Calvino traces the history of visibility in the novel arguing that the intention of many nineteenth century novels was to make 'persons and things visible' to all. Calvino argues that a 'crisis of visibility' followed and links this with the advent of photography, the cinema, and other related technologies of visual representation in the late-nineteenth / early twentieth centuries. Calvino, 'Gustave Flaubert, *Trois Contes*', *Why Read the Classics*, trans. Martin McLaughlin (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), pp. 151-53 (p. 152).

³⁴ Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, ed. David Skilton (1891; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), pp. 48-49; Thacker, p. 34.

eye objectifies and masters. It sets at a distance, and maintains a distance'.³⁵ The eye is shown to order visual content through establishing a distinct distance, both physical and emotional, from its subject. Critics interested in the relationship between sight and space have shown that how we see, and what we see, is, in part, socially prescribed: cultural and political filters affect our vision. Jean Gallagher, for example, participating in this debate from a feminist perspective, argues that the social history of visual perception, before the two world wars, is defined by 'a clear and gendered distinction between the masculine "authoritative eyewitness" and the feminine "passive spectator"'.³⁶ However, Paul Rodaway claims that the visual domination of marginalised subjects, such as women, can be interpreted as part of a general 'modern European view of the world, a visual geography which seeks objectivity and distance from what is viewed, and composes, organises and expresses a control over what is made visible'.³⁷ This discriminatory way of seeing gives the viewer an implied sense of power over the visual content. The viewer electing to see renders the subject visible or invisible.

Thacker's reference to Hardy's 'mapped place' is important when considering the cultural investment of power in the distant eye. A map is an essential representative tool of vision and it is an important motif that is examined in many of the following chapters: Chapter Two particularly looks at the mapping eye in Ford Madox Ford's *Parade's End*. A map scales and simplifies the complexity and obscurity of space; it provides the viewer with knowledge of the unknown or unseen; it creates order through establishing distinct boundaries. In short, a map visually defines, classifies, and orders. Thacker reminds us that the map was a crucial

³⁵ Luce Irigaray qtd. from 'Interview with Luce Irigaray', *Les Femmes, La Pornographie et L'Erotisme*, ed. M.F. Hans and G. Lapouge (Paris: Seuil, 1978), p. 50.

³⁶ Jean Gallagher, *The World Wars through the Female Gaze* (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998), p. 3. Gallagher is quoting the feminist theorist Susan Schweik to support her argument.

³⁷ Rodaway, p. 126.

element of nineteenth-century colonial rule: 'the map of domination of the world's spaces changed out of all recognition between 1850 and 1914'.³⁸ The distant colonial administrator's eye mapping out the world's terrain exemplifies the professed qualities of abstracted vision: power and knowledge. Yet Thacker's observation also hints at visual turmoil during this period. By suggesting that previous demarcations were removed by invasion and reterritorialization, he reveals not only the instability of sight, through the mutability of visual and spatial boundaries, but also the fallibility of the mapping eye through its ineffectual registering of change witnessed. Without a stable frame of reference or visual anchor, the eyes cannot read or 'recognise' the surrounding landscape. As Jonathan Crary points out: 'modernization [starting in the nineteenth century] effected a deterritorialization and a revaluation of vision'.³⁹ The traditional hierarchy of the senses, with sight presented as elevated, stable, and all-knowing, was subject to significant scrutiny by the failure of the elevated eye to map modernity effectively in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Mark Larabee believes that this reconfiguration of the hierarchy of the senses, cemented by the two forthcoming world wars, was literally mapped out on the literary maps of modernist works. He writes: 'The shortcomings of maps in modernist literature, like the desire and inability to see, constitute a key aspect of modernist authors' engagement with the changing sense of seeing'.⁴⁰ By exploring the use of mapping as a literary tool, by authors such as Conrad, Blunden, and Woolf, Larabee shows that the conditions of the modern early twentieth-century battlefield 'laid bare the limitations of knowledge, the inadequacies of observations, and the failure of

³⁸ Thacker, p. 37. The French poet Charles Peguy captured this sense of profound disorientation in 1913 when meditating on a half-century of significant upheaval: 'The world has changed less since Jesus Christ than it has in the last thirty years'. Charles Peguy qtd. by Frank Roy Willis in *Western Civilization: From the Seventeenth Century to the Contemporary Age*, 2 vols. (Lexington Massachusetts: Heath, 1973), II, p. 738.

³⁹ Crary, p. 149.

⁴⁰ Mark D. Larabee, *Front Lines of Modernism* (New York: Macmillan, 2011), p. 184.

mimesis in graphic representation'.⁴¹ Larabee stresses that aspects of modern warfare, like the difficulty of seeing the enemy at close hand, resulted in a systematic breakdown in, what he terms, the 'logic of visualisation': the ability of the eye to see wholly and transcribe clearly.⁴²

This failure of the mapping eye contributed to a wider reassessment of the relationship between sight and modernity. Implicit in Larabee's argument is the idea that war writing provides the reader with an exposé of the modernist aesthetic: 'war writing replicated modernist techniques [...] as a way of overcoming the limitations on meaning imposed by frustrated vision and absence – qualities that also appear across the range of modernist writing'.⁴³ It highlights narrative discontinuities and stylistic fragmentation as well as emphasising modernism's dominant themes of alienation and chaos. But such writing should not be merely perceived as bearing the hallmark of modernism. A large body of early twentieth-century war writers, far from passively adopting modernist aesthetics in their writing, display a self-consciousness about the modernist form and so offer a critique or historization of modernist aesthetics. Martin Jay in *Downcast Eyes*, whilst admitting that it is difficult to generalize about the impact of the two world wars on visual experience, stresses that a general critical consensus has emerged, amongst recent commentators like Stephen Kern (*The Culture of Time and Space*), Kenneth Silver (*Esprit de Corps*), and Sidra Stich (*Anxious Visions*), that convincingly suggests the conditions of modern warfare clearly impacted upon sight by producing an effect 'more visually disorientating than those produced by [...] nineteenth century technical

⁴¹ Larabee, p. 26.

⁴² Ibid. Eric J. Leed makes a similar point about the invisibility of the enemy impacting upon vision during the First World War. See Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 19.

⁴³ Larabee, p. 182.

innovations'.⁴⁴ It is therefore sensible to note that although both world wars did not singularly alter early twentieth-century understanding of vision, they did heighten, contribute to, and further shape, on an unprecedented scale, the changing discourses of vision. The conflicts also gave focus to the nebulous term 'modernism' and the wide range of discourses surrounding space and vision that exist under the umbrella term. As Shafquat Towheed points out, these discourses are diverse originating from hugely 'differing fields such as sociology, particle physics, developmental psychology, cellular biology, architecture, aesthetics, acoustics, optics, evolutionary genetics, philosophy and even linguistics'.⁴⁵ One of this thesis's central questions is the extent to which war experience in particular, though not exclusively, accelerated and shaped the discourses of vision in the early decades of the twentieth century.

The significance of sight in war

In *Blasting and Bombardiering* (1937), Wyndham Lewis recounts an exchange during the First World War between him and his sergeant major over emerging Vorticist artwork.⁴⁶ The sergeant major, mystified by Lewis's artistic perspective, says: "They say – these newspaper-wallahs – that is write – that – er – one has to look at these things you do as if one were *inside* them instead of outside them".⁴⁷ Lewis sardonically affirms this is so with underlying sincerity. If literature from the two world wars is largely understood to mirror as well as contribute towards a general modernist gravitation of a fixed, all-seeing, external God-like eye towards a more

⁴⁴ Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century Thought* (1993; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), p. 212.

⁴⁵ Shafquat Towheed, 'Territory, space, modernity: Elizabeth Bowen's *The Demon Lover and Other Stories* and wartime London', *Elizabeth Bowen: New Critical Perspectives*, ed. Susan Osborn (Cork: Cork University Press, 2009), pp. 113-31 (p. 116).

⁴⁶ Vorticism was a British early twentieth-century response to Cubism. The movement came to prominence just before the start of the war in 1914 in the first issue of *BLAST* (edited by Lewis). The movement favoured a geometric style tending towards abstraction.

⁴⁷ Lewis, p. 25.

embodied and adaptable human eye, does this necessitate a rise in the hegemony of the other senses? How is the significance of sight impacted? Martin Jay has argued that sight was definitively devalued in the twentieth century by a 'violent interrogation of vision' that was heightened in its effect by the two world wars and resulted in an 'antiocular discourse'.⁴⁸ Jean Gallagher, in her study of the female gaze in both world wars, draws directly on Jay's premise to propose that the wars definitively disproved a 'complete or totalized visual apprehension of war, and, by association, the unified seeing subject'.⁴⁹ Claims, like Jay's and Gallagher's, showing sight to be less cohesive and privileged, the opposite of Hegel's aesthetic ideal, have contributed to a wider critical perception that sight, throughout the early decades of the twentieth century and especially during the two world wars, was displaced in the hierarchy of the senses by the 'proximity senses'.

Steven Connor, for instance, has highlighted disharmony between the ear and eye in modernist texts whilst Trotter has instead emphasised how vision was undermined by the all-pervading sense of smell during war experience.⁵⁰ Santanu Das's seminal study of touch in World War One has convincingly argued that the world of war is 'experienced as contact rather than through the eyes'; Rodaway has notably supported Das's claim by writing that 'whilst touch is perhaps the most truthful sense – within its range of accuracy – vision is perhaps the most easily fooled'.⁵¹ All of these critical observations suggest a reversal of the traditional hierarchy of the senses – perhaps even signifying a subordination of sight to the other various senses. Whilst this suggested reversal is valuable in understanding the changing place of sight in writing from the two world wars, a more variable

⁴⁸ Jay, p. 212.

⁴⁹ Gallagher, p.6.

⁵⁰ Steven Connor, 'The Modern Auditory I', *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 203-23; Trotter, p. 39.

⁵¹ Santanu Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 77; Rodaway, p. 124.

investigatory approach towards sight – reading it ‘in the round’ – is perhaps needed to allow us to think about sight from different perspectives. There is a tendency to position sight either at the top or bottom in the hierarchy of the senses aligning it with the axis of the human body. Standing upright suggests an elevated perspective; lying down in the trenches forces a horizontal viewpoint. By adopting this either/or approach, our understanding of the relationship between sight and the other senses, between sight and the body, and between sight and reality is perhaps restricted.

This destabilisation of sight, the idea that sight is brought down from an aesthetic summit to mix in the mire with the other proximate senses, has also resulted in a tendency to sometimes assume that war is an aesthetically reductive experience visually. ‘The War bled the world white’ said Wyndham Lewis, suggesting that war metaphorically resulted in a direct loss of colour and vitality rendering the eye effectively colour blind.⁵² Primary accounts like this, emphasising that the visual content of modern warfare is aesthetically arid, have impacted upon the way we see war and upon how the engagement of sight with war is understood; Chapter Five of this thesis, in particular, explores how this has affected our appraisal of visual war trauma. Walter Benjamin, for instance, used anaemic terms to describe the experience of war stating that witnesses, particularly soldier-writers who wanted to communicate their experience, returned from World War One with ‘not richer, but poorer’ creative material.⁵³ Bonikowski, in turn, references Benjamin’s quotation in his study and this seemingly influences his own conclusion that:

⁵² Lewis, p. 18.

⁵³ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (1955; London: Pimlico, 1999), p. 84.

The modernist imagination after the First World War is indelibly marked by the death drive, and [the creative response of the novelist was to find] a form that calls attention to the impossibility of repairing shattered illusions or of clinging to fantasises of a world before war, before the revelation of a destructive drive that exists not just in the field of battle but [...] in the movement of history.⁵⁴

Bonikowski draws attention to the creative imagination being impacted by the destruction of modern war but also, by using the phrase 'shattered illusions', links this to sight and its destabilisation.

Yet the collapse of visual boundaries, and the associated fragmentation of vision, does not necessarily result in a creatively reductive process. War is not wholly destructive. Edward Said reminds us that conflict is a multifaceted phenomenon: '[it is] complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings'.⁵⁵ Without diminishing the very real horror of war, Said importantly stresses how its destruction can initiate diverse and creative responses. Indeed, Larabee importantly argues that war, far from divorcing sight and creativity, actually results in an opportunity to explore the creative capacity of the eye: 'The circumstances of [...] war gave perceptive author-soldiers the opportunity to build something from the wreckage of the shattered [...] spaces of observation and representation'.⁵⁶ The destruction of prescribed visual boundaries in both world wars extended the range of sight. The challenge of visually representing war, of representing the unrecognised, expanded the possibility of the unseen being seen or comprehended. Sight crossing the internal/external divide, as illustrated by Lewis's dialogue with the sergeant major, resulted in this creative expansion. Gallagher expands on this further by suggesting that the 'alternative model of fragmented or indirect visual apprehension', which she believes resulted

⁵⁴ Bonikowski, *Shell Shock and the Modernist Imagination*, p. 173. Bonikowski does note that Virginia Woolf is an exception finding 'aesthetic sublimation' in the trauma of war (p. 174). See Chapter Five of this thesis for a more detailed discussion of Woolf's aesthetic engagement with sight and trauma in *Mrs Dalloway*.

⁵⁵ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 6.

⁵⁶ Larabee, p. 51.

from the world wars shattering the idea of totalized vision, offered marginalised viewers, like female observers, the chance to 'see' war 'through failures, gaps, or blockages in vision'.⁵⁷ Gallagher unconsciously echoes Quintillian's profound reflection on the representation of war: 'to state the whole is less than to state all the parts'.⁵⁸ This shared insight importantly suggests that fragmented vision should not necessarily be equated with partial, or inadequate, vision: to see war is, perhaps, to see through a multiplicity of viewpoints.

Methodology

As the Introduction has so far shown, this thesis examines the changing place of sight and vision in writing from the two world wars. It questions the extent to which discourses of vision were shaped and developed, in the early decades of the twentieth century, by war experience. It particularly focuses on the inherent difficulties of reconciling perception and representation in war. In doing so, it interrogates the boundaries of sight and the limits of representation: hierarchies, thresholds, frames, mirrors, and mapping are all central visual motifs and figures that are analysed as fundamental representative tools of vision.⁵⁹ The interrogation of boundaries is pursued through the structure of the thesis. Each of the six chapters are, generally, structured as a pairing of World War One and World War Two texts with the exception of Chapter Two which is a case-study of Ford Madox Ford's tetralogy *Parade's End*. Each pairing is a way of opening out the thesis's central questions and tracing the development of discourses of vision during the first four

⁵⁷ Gallagher, p. 6.

⁵⁸ Quintillian, *Institutio Oratoria*, trans. and ed. Donald A. Russell, 12 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), VIII. 3. 67-70. Quintillian was a Roman rhetorician from Hispania (c. 35 – c. 100), widely referred to in medieval schools of rhetoric and in Renaissance writing. This quotation comes from his attempt at describing the sack of a city.

⁵⁹ The term 'visual' is often employed because it encompasses both the act of seeing, through the eyes, and the representative tools of sight, such as mirrors and maps, which assist us with the process of seeing. The *OED* defines these two variant meanings of visual as 'of the eye' and a 'visual aid'. Rodaway also makes this distinction in his geographical exploration (Rodaway, p. 115).

decades of the twentieth century. The pairings have been chosen not primarily because they directly speak to, or obviously complement, each other – although this does occur, especially in the case of the pairing of Wilfred Owen’s poetry with Louis Simpson’s in Chapter One – but because the juxtaposition of their representations of war experience demonstrates similar cross-threads as well as obvious differences. The texts form a web of unlikely connections that disrupt critical and social paradigms: the demarcations between home front and front-line, between observer and observed, between seen and unseen, and between fantasy and reality are blurred.

The commonalities between the two wars are also illuminated on occasion by the pairing of a text from each war together. There is a deliberate attempt to identify common authorial responses to representing the visual experience of world war by highlighting similar representative difficulties and solutions that surface in writing from both wars. The logic of these pairings also lies in the need for a more cohesive critical approach to literature from the two world wars. Literary critics have a tendency to approach the written products of the wars separately thus maintaining a sometimes artificial distinction between them.⁶⁰ This contrasts with a more historicist approach, like that of John Maynard Keynes, which often advocates minimalizing the distinctions between both wars – essentially arguing that the Second World War was a result, if not a continuation, of the First.⁶¹ Hugh Haughton argues that the literary distinction between the two wars is bound up with the canon:

⁶⁰ Books, like Gallagher’s and McLoughlin’s, looking at literary works from both world wars are still unusual. My bibliography shows that the majority of literary criticism looks at either one or the other of the two wars.

⁶¹ John Maynard Keynes notably identified clear linkages between the two world wars arguing that the First inevitably led to the Second because of the repercussive economic consequences of the Treaty of Versailles (See *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (1919) for Keynes’s first articulation of this theory). In recent years the idea that the Second World War was a continuation of the First has become more prominent in economic and historical debates. Incidentally, a poll on the popular-history ‘1914 Discussion Forum’ reveals that 81% of participants think that the two world wars were to all intents and purposes one conflict. <<http://forum.supremacy1914.com/showthread.php?124045-Two-world-wars-really-one>> [accessed 31st August 2013].

In most people's minds 'war poetry' refers to the English poetry of the First World War, and the typical 'war poet' is Wilfred Owen or Siegfried Sassoon. In contrast, the poetry of the Second World War is much more shadowy. Indeed it has been largely overshadowed by that of the First. The names of Keith Douglas and Alun Lewis still figure as important poets of the 1939-45 war but their poems certainly don't circulate like Owen's, Rosenberg's or Edward Thomas's.⁶²

Haughton reveals how works of the First World War are wrongly thought of as more 'literary' than the Second by many readers and critics. McLoughlin also draws attention to this problem by acknowledging that the 'lyric poem' is often thought of as the 'First World War's natural form'.⁶³ This suggests that the lyric poem exclusively belongs to the First World War. Such ownership is hard to prove: it would be more accurate to understand the short lyric as typical of Great War poetry rather than typifying its literature collectively. The approach, as referenced by Haughton and McLoughlin, disregards the many other genres that contain the diverse body of literature from both world wars. The works selected in the following chapters are from inside and outside the canon; they also belong to many different genres – poetry, fictionalized autobiographical accounts, epic novels, and short stories. Letters, diaries, and other archival material are used to supplement or support these primary texts. The final chapter's unusual pairing of David Jones's *In Parenthesis* with Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* deliberately attempts to blur the frames of time and genre because it considers writing from the inter-war years. It also illustrates the complexities of categorising written material: Jones's text is often ambiguously referred to as a 'prose-poem' whilst Woolf's novel reads at times like a modernist medley through its combination of fragments from plays, poems, and music.

The chapter sequence of this thesis loosely emulates a decreasing proximity to the front-line. All the authors considered are united by their difficulty in seeing war as well as by the complexities of transcribing their visual experiences of world war

⁶² Hugh Haughton, *Second World War Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 2004), p. xvii.

⁶³ McLoughlin, p. 10.

from within war's various spaces; the mutability of the front-line is an essential focal point of this exploration. The first chapter (exploring the poetry of Wilfred Owen and Louis Simpson) and the second (a case study of Ford's *Parade's End*) examine how the front-line impacted upon the sight and perspective of soldier-writers. The third chapter (examining the sight of returning soldiers in Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* and John Prebble's 'The Soldier Looks for his Family') and the fourth (focussing on D.H. Lawrence's 'The Blind Man' and Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day*) explore the connection between sight and distance from the front-line. Chapter Five's pairing of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* with William Sansom's *Fireman Flower* exposes the ever-present front-line of war through its exploration of trauma. The vein of trauma runs through many of the chapters – in the work of Owen, Simpson, Ford, West, Prebble, and Woolf – and is fundamental to the difficulty of 'seeing' war. The fifth chapter therefore asks whether a fixed lens of trauma exists by examining how Sansom's and Woolf's two literary depictions of visual trauma differ from a more standardised representation of war trauma by aesthetically engaging with the traumatic visual experience of war. This exploration of the relationship between representing war and aesthetically engaging with war is furthered in the final chapter. This chapter, as discussed, focuses on two texts from the inter-war period (Jones's *In Parenthesis* and Woolf's *Between the Acts*) to see how the temporal ambiguity of these works impacts upon their surrounding visual frameworks and perceived distance from the front-line.

Essentially, these chapters collectively demonstrate the need for a more flexible understanding of, and approach towards, sight. The thesis questions the critical containment and categorisation of sight that often dominates readings of sight in texts from both world wars. In particular, it interrogates the widespread consensus

that literature from the 1914-18 and 1939-45 wars provides us with an index of a definitive shift in vision away from 'the eye of God' towards 'the gaze of the soldier'. Connected to this apparent destabilisation of sight, is the associated question of whether a revision of vision, and a reconfiguration of the hierarchy of the senses, necessitates a simultaneous rise in the hegemony of the other senses resulting in a loss of significance for sight? Is this true, or do the representative challenges posed by world war instead show sight to be variable, creative and thus resilient? Recent critical observations, like those of Das and Danius, have valuably suggested that early twentieth-century literature reveals a reversal of the traditional hierarchy of the senses. This thesis, though not advocating a re-reversal of that hierarchy, seeks to investigate sight as a variable construct, reading it 'in the round' rather than against the axis of the human body.

Chapter One

Sight uncontained: the poetry of Wilfred Owen and Louis Simpson

Transcribing sight

'The true Poets must be truthful'.¹ As the Introduction showed, the weight of Wilfred Owen's words hangs heavy on the shoulders of those trying to write about the reality of war. Representing war is a fundamental problem for witnesses of war. Can the reality of war ever be captured? Can war be seen? The World War Two soldier and poet Louis Simpson, in an interview about his work and the impact of war upon it, notably responded to this legacy of Owen's by drawing a direct link between representation and sight: 'I don't think [war] can be explained [...] All you can do is describe it. [...] The poems of Wilfred Owens [sic], though he does protest sometimes, mostly are just descriptions of the sheer horror of it. Just to see something is enough'.² Simpson's reply captures the complexity of representation. It assumes that the sights of war can be successfully transcribed. At the same time, Simpson makes a clear distinction between describing and explaining war. This suggests that transcribing sight into words is different from translating or defining it. The words do not necessarily have to make sense to the writer or reader. Seeing war, Simpson implies, is rather like reading an unknown language: it is identifiable but not necessarily understood.

Simpson also suggests that Owen's verse offers a correct literary frame through which to see and record war. He labels Owen's poetry as 'the most effective' writing to come out of war and, in a collection of his own poetry, Simpson admits that Owen's descriptions framed his witnessing of war as well as influencing his poetic

¹ Wilfred Owen, 'Preface', *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, ed. Jon Stallworthy, 2 vols. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1983), II, p. 535.

² Louis Simpson, 'An Interview with Louis Simpson' by Michael O'Siadhail, *The Poetry Ireland Review*, 29 (Summer, 1990), 15-28 (pp. 16-17).

processing of that experience: 'During the war [...] I remembered the lines of Wilfred Owen'.³ Simpson articulates these ideas more fully in the following passage and seemingly echoes Owen:

I wished to show the war exactly, as though I were painting a landscape or a face. I wanted people to find in my poems the truth of what it had been like to be an American infantry soldier. [...] I was trying to write poems that I would not be ashamed to have them read – poems that would be, in their laconic and simple manner, tolerable to men who had seen a good deal of combat and had no illusions.⁴

Like Owen, Simpson seeks to transcribe the exact truth or reality of war through a poetic form but, interestingly, the above passage is filled with uncertain verbs – 'wished', 'wanted', 'trying' – which undermine the certainty of Simpson's stated intent. Indeed, the shared desire of Owen and Simpson to write the truth of war seems more of a wish than an actuality. At times, they both appear acutely aware of the gap between the desire and the deed and often reveal the difficulties involved in transcribing the reality of war into poetry. In 1918, Owen notably wrote to his mother: 'I can find no word to qualify my experiences'.⁵ In *A Company of Poets*, Simpson likewise writes of the difficulties in streamlining visual experience into words. He notes how two particular lines of poetry he read as a boy continually haunted him throughout his adult life: "The night has a thousand eyes" [...] "The mind has a thousand eyes" [...] It haunts me to this day'.⁶ Simpson intimates here that sight evades easy description because it is multifarious, even obscure, and therefore defies easy definition.

³ Louis Simpson, 'An Interview with Louis Simpson' by Michael O'Siadhail, pp. 16-17; Louis Simpson, *People Live Here* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1985), p. 203.

⁴ Louis Simpson, *On Depths Beyond Happiness*, ed. Hank Lazer (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1988), p. 337.

⁵ Wilfred Owen, *Selected Letters*, ed. John Bell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 351.

⁶ Louis Simpson, *A Company of Poets* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1981), p. 6.

Significantly, both Owen and Simpson also suffered from war-trauma.⁷ This, we know, impacted directly upon their visual processing of war: distorted visions, visual disorientation, and nightmares afflicted them both. Stallworthy notes that the two poets suffered from almost identical traumatic symptoms: '[They] suffered from amnesia, eventually broken by dreams of battle'.⁸ War trauma results in sight being at once contained – forgotten – and unchecked as it surfaces forcefully in frighteningly realistic nightmares. *The Times* gives a very early description of war trauma in 1915 before the term 'shell-shock' was coined by Charles Myers in *The Lancet* later that year:

The soldier [...] may be so affected that changes occur in his sense perceptions; he may become blind or deaf or lose the sense of smell or taste. He is cut off from his normal self and the associations that go to make up that self [...] At night insomnia troubles him, and such sleep as he gets is full of visions; past experiences on the battlefield are recalled vividly.⁹

Although somewhat rudimentary in its observation of what was then an unrecognised medical condition, the description nevertheless effectively reveals the de-sensitised/sensitised paradigm that is characteristic of so many trauma cases in war. Simpson detailed this same sensory contradiction in his autobiographical article 'Views from a Window': 'I had amnesia; much of the war was blotted out, and part of my life before the war. Then memory returned [...] my memories of combat returned with vengeance. They still give me bad dreams'.¹⁰ The writer of *The Times* article and Simpson both show that there is no prescribed way to see war. Forcibly dissociated from any standardized frame of sensory reference on the front-line, the senses can

⁷ See Chapter Five of this thesis for a detailed discussion of the term 'war trauma'. Essentially it is a more inclusive, non-diagnostic term compared to 'shell shock' or 'post-traumatic stress disorder' and therefore arguably better suited to the realities of trauma sustained from war experience.

⁸ Jon Stallworthy, *The Oxford Book of War Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. xxix.

⁹ Anon. medical correspondent, 'Battle Shock', *The Times* (25th May 1915), p. 11. *The Times Digital Archive*

<<http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:2138/ttda/infomark.do?&source=qale&prodId=TTDA&userGroupName=oxford&tabID=T003&docPage=article&searchType=BasicSearchForm&docId=CS185140409&type=multipage&contentSet=LTO&version=1.0>> [accessed 1st January 2013].

¹⁰ Louis Simpson, *Selected Prose* (New York: Paragon House, 1989), p. 155.

become alienated from the soldier. The resultant diversity of sight during war impresses itself upon the reader: war makes itself known to the soldier through dreams, visions, and even blindness.

Both Owen and Simpson struggled with this multidimensional reality of sight and their attempts to disassociate themselves from the traumatic sights of war are documented. In 1917, Owen wrote to his sister Mary of his desire to be metaphorically blinded because the sights of war were too ungovernable: 'It is better to look forward than back, because that way one cannot see anything at all. It is a good thing'.¹¹ Owen's German tutor at Craiglockhart noted how Owen was unable to forget the appalling sights of war however much he tried to distance himself mentally from them: 'he did not enlarge upon them, but they were obviously always in his thoughts'.¹² This observation shares distinct parallels with a passage from Rudolph Binding's *A Fatalist at War* (1929) in which he describes a 'strangely silent' Captain who holds 'a picture inside his mind [that] was keeping him from speaking'.¹³ Of this observation, Bonikowski writes: 'Binding understands war experience as something that inhabits the soldier, the incommunicable picture attesting to a traumatic real that resists speech'.¹⁴ The gap that Bonikowski identifies between sight and speech perhaps explains, in part, why Owen and Simpson felt that written words were better able to transcribe the sights of war. Simpson directly alluded to this when he wrote: 'Through poems I could release the irrational, grotesque images I had accumulated during the war; and imposing order on these images enabled me to recover my identity'.¹⁵ Simpson interestingly introduces, perhaps unknowingly, the concept of a

¹¹ Owen, *Selected Letters*, p. 249.

¹² Frank Nicholson qtd. by Merryn Williams, 'Wilfred Owen's Photographs', *The New Welsh Review*, 20 (Spring 1993), 44-69 (p. 44).

¹³ Rudolph Binding, *A Fatalist at War*, trans. Ian F. D. Morrow (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1929), p. 43.

¹⁴ Wyatt Bonikowski, *Shell Shock and the Modernist Imagination: The Death Drive in Post World War One British Fiction* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013), p. 4.

¹⁵ Simpson, *A Company of Poets*, p. 16.

frame and barrier in this passage: the words impose order on the sights of war by containing them as a frame would a picture but they also act as a protective barrier shielding Simpson from direct contact with them.

Gaining control over sight is understood to be essential to a trauma victim's recovery. Sight uncontained is recognised as a fundamental trigger of war trauma. W. H. R. Rivers, the doctor who treated Wilfred Owen, noted that the catalyst of what he understood as shell-shock was usually 'some disgusting sight' that was overwhelming.¹⁶ Interestingly, this early psychological thesis prevails in modern medicine today highlighting the tenacity of sight and the strength of the visual image in war. Dr. Ian Palmer, a former soldier and professor of military psychiatry who works with servicemen in present-day conflicts, notes this: 'Re-experiencing isn't just remembering. [Traumatic] remembering is an emotional, intrusive, unwanted and vivid re-experiencing of events (sights, sounds and smells), which is very distressing'.¹⁷ Interestingly, treatment today, often involving a psychological desensitisation of sight as a means of regaining control over sight uncontained, has at its roots the basic components of frame and barrier that Simpson alluded to in his description of attempted self-help through writing poetry. NICE, for instance, recommends 'eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing' (EMDR) as an effective treatment for traumatised servicemen. EMDR involves patients looking at images that are connected to traumatic events and learning to disassociate themselves from the related negative emotions and sensations.¹⁸ By isolating the images, a hypothetical frame is effectively introduced around them so establishing a

¹⁶ W. H. R. Rivers, *Instinct and the Unconscious: A Contribution to a Biological Theory of the Psycho-neuroses* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920), pp. 215-16.

¹⁷ Ian Palmer qtd. in 'NHS report on Military Mental Health'
<http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Militarymedicine/Pages/Mentalhealth.aspx> [accessed 12th January 2013]

¹⁸ National Institute for Clinical Excellence, *Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD): Understanding NICE guidance – information for people with PTSD, their advocates and carers, and the public* (London: National Institute for Clinical Excellence, 2005), pp. 15-16.

protective barrier whilst the patients learn to distance themselves mentally from what they see.

Utilising an image to access sensory experience, whilst simultaneously using it to create a space of physical and mental distance from that same experience, is significant when considering effective representations of war – especially when taking into account the de-sensitised/sensitised paradigm of war trauma. Bonikowski writes that the most successful literary representations are those that do not ‘simply convert traumatic experience into narratable events’ but instead bear the ‘traces of war’.¹⁹ Bonikowski’s use of ‘trace’ is significant. In ‘Ellipsis’ (1967), Jacques Derrida defined a ‘trace’ as: ‘not absence instead of presence, but a trace which replaces a presence which has never been present’.²⁰ The statement has had profound implications because, as Mark Currie explains, Derrida’s concept of the ‘trace’ extends ‘to multiple discourses in postmodern thought, wherein a sign or word is recognised for what it cannot represent’.²¹ In other words, as McLoughlin clarifies, ‘a single individual or detail comes to stand for the many or the whole’.²² The following analysis explores how both Owen and Simpson repeatedly adopted a synecdochical approach when attempting to represent the reality of war in their poetry by using distinct figures or images to show the visual trace, imprint, or impact of war. It explores how the image of the eye and the motif of darkness specifically allowed both poets a way of engaging with the traumatic sights of war within a defined perimeter. These visual tools of representation seemingly allowed them to acknowledge the horrors of war whilst circumnavigating an absolute and traumatic engagement.

¹⁹ Bonikowski, *Shell Shock and the Modernist Imagination*, p. 15.

²⁰ Jacques Derrida, ‘Ellipsis’, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (1967; London: Taylor & Francis, 2005), pp. 371-77 (p. 372).

²¹ Mark Currie, ‘Traces’, paper for Goldsmiths, University of London, GLITS Literature Seminar 2013 <<http://glitstraces2013.wordpress.com>> [accessed 3rd August 2013].

²² Kate McLoughlin, *Authoring War: The Literary Representation of War from the Iliad to Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 53.

Wilfred Owen

The sensibility of sight

To avoid an absolute engagement with the traumatic sights of war, there is a conspicuous effort by Owen to impose order over sight in his war verse through not only representing the desensitisation of sight but also by further establishing a link between war and desensitisation.²³ Much of his poetry seemingly depicts war as a desensitising experience that negatively impacts upon sight resulting in muted or partial vision. In 'Elegy in April and September', written in 1918, Owen, for example, remarks how his poet's eye mutedly processes pastoral scenes that he would have praised pre-war: 'Gaze, daisy! Stare through haze and glare, / And mark the hazardous stars all dawns and eves, / For my eye withers, and his star wanes dim'.²⁴ Here, sight all but leaves the human eye and becomes abstractly removed as the seen object – the daisy – turns its gaze upon the unanimated seer. The human eye is irrevocably damaged, being physically removed from the body, in 'A Tear Song' (drafted 1917/18). The sight of an innocent boy is brutalised resulting in a graphic desensitisation, even hardening, of the senses. The boy is blinded; God is deaf. The boy is isolated in his blindness and he has no connection with an external world:

But his eyes jewelled were
Of his own singing,
God saw the sparkle there
On his lids clinging.

²³ Daniel Hipp's study of shell shock notes that psychologists have identified a state of sensory passivity as marking the onset of shell shock or PTSD. See Daniel Hipp, *The Poetry Of Shell Shock: Wartime Trauma And Healing In Wilfred Owen, Ivor Gurney And Siegfried Sassoon* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2005), p. 48.

²⁴ Owen, 'Elegy in April and September', *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, ed. Jon Stallworthy, 2 vols. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1983), I, p. 184. Unless otherwise stated, all of Owen's poems hereafter referenced refer to this volume. The etymology of 'daisy', playing on the 'eye' mentioned two lines later, is interesting.

God the boy's jewel took
 Into His casket,
 Flinging the anthem book
 On His waste-basket.

God for his glittering world
 Seeketh our tears.
 Prayers show as eyelids pearled.
 God hath no ears.²⁵

Yet Owen's attempted desensitisation is not wholly successful because the poem's logic is problematic. The phrase 'eyelids pearled' strikingly echoes the text of *King Lear* and its identical substitution of eyes and tears with implacably solid and smooth jewels: 'What guests were in her eyes, which, parted thence, / As pearls from diamonds dropped'.²⁶ In both texts, a miscarriage of sight occurs but it is unexpectedly revealed *through* the metaphorical blinding, the replacement of eyes with precious stones, and not because of it. The eyes of Cordelia and the boy are veiled in their innocence; they see but without comprehension; they are blind to reality. The shared punishment they endure – a symbolic blinding – raises interesting questions about the visual or sensory value we ascribe aesthetic beauty. Do the boy and Cordelia actually see more clearly after their exposure to reality? Is this why the blinding is symbolic, representing the inability of the boy and Cordelia to already see, rather than literally rendering them unable to see? Owen adopts a similarly contradictory approach towards sight in his poem 'Greater Love' where a traditional love poem praising objects of sensory appreciation – lips, eyes, and voice – is interwoven with comparative images of war. The resulting effect is that the images of sensory delight are revealed to be inauthentic: 'red lips are not so red' when compared with the blood of 'the English dead' and 'eyes lose lure' when the poet

²⁵ Owen, 'A Tear Song', pp. 142-43.

²⁶ William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, IV.2.77, ed. Jonathan Bate for the Royal Shakespeare Company's edition (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2009), p. 137.

sees instead 'eyes blinded in my stead'.²⁷ Again, surprisingly, the suggestion is that war has enabled visual clarity.

It is, though, in 'Insensibility' that Owen most explicitly engages with the theme of desensitisation: this entire poem seemingly details the desensitising impact of war upon combatants.²⁸ Soldiers are described as the living dead. 'Their veins run cold' (2) and they 'cease feeling' (12); 'their senses in some scorching cautery of battle' (28) are 'now long since ironed' (29).²⁹ This sensory numbness infiltrates the sight of combatants. They see through 'blunt and lashless eyes' (44) that no longer react to what is seen: 'Their eyes are rid / Of the hurt of the colour of blood for ever' (24-25). Simon Featherstone believes this poem shows Owen seeing war through an irrevocably fixed, and forever changed, perspective: 'The dystopia of war demands a new political vision seen through the "blunt and lashless eyes" of the survivor'.³⁰ He writes that poems like 'Spring Offensive' and 'Strange Meeting' similarly offer 'no vision beyond the sense of the apocalyptic consequences of the First World War'.³¹ This analysis, playing on the dual meaning of 'sense', implies that the senses are irreversibly damaged by war, resulting in, at best, limited vision and, at worst, 'no vision'. Featherstone suggests that Owen's poetry affirms a complete and total desensitisation of sight. But the reoccurring reference to blood in 'Insensibility' suggests otherwise. Far from being unreactive, the eyes are highly sensitive to blood: saturated by 'all things red' (23) to the point of oversaturation. The phrase bares a striking resemblance to Ivor Gurney's 'red wet thing' that dominates his failed attempt

²⁷ Owen, 'Greater Love', p. 166.

²⁸ Owen, 'Insensibility', pp. 145-47. All references to this poem hereafter show line numbers in parenthetical citations.

²⁹ This line echoes one in Owen's 1918 letter to Sassoon shortly after witnessing the blood of his comrade Jones spill over him. 'My senses are charred', wrote Owen. Owen, *Selected Letters*, p. 352.

³⁰ Simon Featherstone, *An Introductory Reader War Poetry* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 59.

³¹ Featherstone, p. 61.

at desensitisation in the First World War poem 'To his Love'.³² Here, we see, a shared motif – red thing – used by both writers to represent, but not define, a traumatic sight of war so that the unmentionable can be transcribed. Owen's poetry therefore demonstrates a distinct tension around his sensory involvement in witnessing war. His visual response, as well as his response to sights seen, is complex: it is not wholly desensitised. Whilst Featherstone correctly identifies an absolute, desensitised viewpoint articulated by Owen in 'Insensibility', the poem appears to suggest that Owen did not, in reality, experience this. It remains an ambition to be realised rather than an approach established. The deadened men that Owen speaks of in 'Insensibility' are men whom he appears to envy or wishes to emulate: 'Happy are men' (1), 'Happy are these' (19), 'Happy the soldier home' (31). Yet he is apart from them. Significantly, in the last verse, a distinct shift in tone labels these same men as 'cursed' (50) and 'wretched' (52) for not being able to feel and respond to war.

Alternative poems suggest that Owen's sensory response to war was, in fact, heightened and that he found it difficult to contain his intense visual, often traumatic, experiences. 'Spring Offensive', particularly its final verse, is dominated by a sensory exultation: the eyes 'lift and flare' towards 'the sun' (24), 'God' (37), and the 'superhuman' sights of war (42).³³ An almost identical response is recorded in 'Apologia Pro Poemate Meo'.³⁴ At the beginning of this poem, Owen sees the unthinkable in the full horror of war: 'I, too, saw God through mud' (1). Three verses later, he records how at the front-line he has strangely 'witnessed exultation' (13)

³² Ivor Gurney, 'To his Love', *War's Embers* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1919), p. 45. Drafted 1916-1918. *First World War Poetry Digital Archive*, <<http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/document/7511/6313>> [accessed 20th January 2013].

³³ Owen, 'Spring Offensive', pp. 192-94. All references to this poem show line numbers in parenthetical citations.

³⁴ Owen, 'Apologia Pro Poemate Meo', pp. 124-25. All future references to this poem show line numbers in parenthetical citations.

before ascending with 'spirit surging light and clear' (11). Owen's letters also describe this exultant, ecstatic state showing that it was a genuine, rather than poetic, response to war: 'I felt no horror at all but only an immense exultation at having got through the Barrage'.³⁵ Santanu Das writes that these glimpses of exultation are of paramount importance in Owen's poetry, especially in 'Spring Offensive', because they show the senses escaping any form of constraint:

Owen reconceptualises poetry as testimony to the senses as the body, going over the top, faces the 'SHEER' and chasms into 'infinite space'. The apocalyptic end-rhymes – 'last hill', 'beyond the ridge', 'end of the world', 'last high place', 'world's verge', 'existence's brink' – show not just traumatic repetition but the figuration of survival as chance in its purest form, the body 'up/On the hot blast' waiting to pause or to fall. Such testimony in effect becomes the principle of poetic insight in 'Spring Offensive' that makes sound and the sense race ahead of knowledge or thought.³⁶

Das's analysis is illuminating but he notably disregards the frame in which the content sits. Susan Stewart's interpretation of the word 'ecstasy' inspires an alternative reading to Das's. Stewart suggests that an exulted, or ecstatic, state offers a release *from* the senses through total surrender: 'An ecstasy is not something we have, in our usual model of sense impression; rather, an ecstasy has us. The ecstasy is profoundly detached from the reality of this world'.³⁷ In this state, Stewart importantly suggests that sensory detachment and absorption can co-exist. The framework of poetry, I suggest, allows Owen to replicate Stewart's described state of ecstatic detachment. It allows – especially because of its reliance on devices such as symbolism, repetition, and synecdoche – Owen a protected surrender to his visual engagement with the sights of war: again we see the effect of frame and barrier allowing Owen to reengage with traumatic sights, and the trauma of sight,

³⁵ Owen, *Selected Letters*, p. 510. Letter written to Colin Owen, May 1917.

³⁶ Santanu Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 163.

³⁷ Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 189.

through his writing whilst being simultaneously separated by it.³⁸ This sensory detachment actually runs throughout 'Spring Offensive'. What is being portrayed is a re-experiencing of an experience rather than a literal transcription of the experience. Owen is separated from the content of the poem both spatially and temporally. The men inside the poem are referred to consistently in the third person: 'They' (2), 'them' (30). Their story is also told in the past tense because Owen is recalling it. Furthermore, Owen, as the storyteller who retells, exerts an obvious control over what the reader is permitted to see. Owen's reliability as a narrator and poet is thus unsure and he draws our attention to the fictionalised element that is inevitably present in all story telling: 'Some say God caught them even before they fell' (37). The reader is most certainly not being given a complete picture of events. Apparent blind spots exist in the text: 'Why speak not they of comrades that went under?' (46). Either this is a question to which Owen does not know the answer or, more probable, this is a rhetorical question asked because Owen does not know how to answer: it is a question that defies a written answer.

The uncertainty between what is known and unknown to the traumatised mind is significant in understanding not only Owen's use of poetry as a way of revisiting traumatic material but also Owen's seemingly visual confusion when engaging with that material. Owen did not keep his reader fully informed because he did not fully recall, or understand, what he was describing. An obvious example of this difficulty can be found in the following letter to his mother:

³⁸ Stallworthy significantly notes that the exultation described in 'Apologia' appears to draw on Shelley's 'A Defence of Poetry': 'Poetry [...] marries exultation and horror' (Shelley qtd. by Stallworthy, *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, I, p. 125). This observation supports Stewart's belief that an ecstatic state can offer both sensory immersion as well as sensory relief. Indeed, horror and exultation do coexist throughout 'Spring Offensive': 'The few who rushed in the body to enter hell' (40) – and 'Apologia Pro Poemate Meo': 'I have perceived much beauty (25) / [...] where shell-storms spouted reddest spate' (28).

I thought of the very strange look on all faces in that camp; an incomprehensible look, which a man will never see in England [...] It was not despair, or terror, it was more terrible than terror, for it was a blindfold look, and without expression, like a dead rabbit's. It will never be painted, and no actor will ever seize it. And to describe it, I think I must go back and be with them.³⁹

In this letter we see Owen's difficulty in capturing the reality of war in words and also communicating that reality to those who had not experienced war first hand. But, importantly, we also see his uncertain understanding of the traumatic sights of war: Owen's need to go back to war and relive the experience again was driven by his desire to process fully what he had witnessed. His capacity to describe what he had already seen is only partial because he did not fully comprehend it. Cathy Caruth, in *Unclaimed Experience*, explores Freud's reference, in his third chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, to those patients, often previously combatants, who repetitively re-enacted traumatic experience:

What seems to be suggested by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is that the wound of the mind – the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world – is not, like the wound of the body, a simple or healable event, but rather an event that [...] is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. [...] Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event [...] but rather in the way [...] it was precisely *not known* in the first instance.⁴⁰

Caruth draws attention to the visual terminology Freud employs when describing trauma. Trauma, Freud suggests, resides not so much in the seeing of traumatic images but in the traumatic processing of those images that renders, through amnesia, the victim of trauma effectively blind or at the mercy of sight uncontained. This is why revisiting trauma, making traumatic images seen, visible and, therefore, known, is understood to be essential to the trauma victim's recovery because it establishes visual boundaries and re-establishes control over vision.

³⁹ Owen, *Selected Letters*, p. 306. Letter written to Susan Owen, December 1917.

⁴⁰ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), pp. 3-4. Caruth's italics. Das also references Caruth in his analysis of dreams (Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature*, pp.167-68).

Owen's poetic crux therefore lies in how to write about war when he was effectively blind to his own experience of it. This, perhaps, explains the multiplicity of viewpoint and variation of perspective in his poems. Two poems that noticeably demonstrate this are: 'The Show' and 'Spring Offensive'.⁴¹ In 'The Show', Owen looks 'down from a vague height' (1) before falling 'earthward like a feather' (24). Verse by verse, the poem tracks in closer to the earth below: the changing viewpoint levels with 'hills' (11) and then 'paths' (18) before finally joining the other combatants in the 'earth' (27) gazing upwards from 'hidden holes' (13) and 'foul openings' (14).⁴² In 'Spring Offensive', the trajectory of the poet's vision alternates consistently between differing viewpoints. It firstly lies at the foot of a 'hill' (1), and then ascends – 'topped the hill' (27) –, before plunging and falling away 'past this world's verge' (36). The final verse shows, almost line-by-line, a struggle between these alternating perspectives concluding with a seesaw panorama:

And *crawling* slowly back, have by degrees
 Regained cool peaceful *air* in wonder –
 Why speak not they of comrades that went *under*? (44-46)⁴³

Owen's difficulty with representing the reality of war is revealed as twofold: he does not want to engage fully with the sights of war because of their traumatic content but he also cannot fully engage with them because trauma has rendered them partly unknown. This perhaps explains the multiplicity of viewpoints in his poetry, the blind-spots or gaps in his verse, his engagement with fantasy and illusion, and his inability sometimes to articulate in words the visual experience of war.⁴⁴ It also explicates why

⁴¹ Owen, 'The Show', pp. 155-57. All future references to this poem show line numbers in parenthetical citations.

⁴² Owen writes in the fragment '[Cramped in That Funnelled Hole]': 'They were in one of many mouths of Hell. / Not seen of seers in visions; only felt'. (Owen, *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, II, p. 512).

⁴³ My emphasis showing the fluctuating perspective: low to high to low.

⁴⁴ Multiple examples of fantasy and illusion can be found in Owen's verse: 'Strange Meeting' is an obvious example. Das examines the role of dreams in Owen's work: see Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature*, p. 167.

a synecdochical approach towards representation was necessary enabling Owen to illustrate that which he could not otherwise describe.

The motif of darkness

Darkness in many of Owen's poems creates a visual path of access and denial. It fills the blind-spots, the sights of war that Owen cannot remember, and it houses the dark content of war – the sights that Owen does not want to remember but cannot forget. In 'The Unreturning', for example, war is shown as darkness invading light: 'Suddenly night crushed out the day'.⁴⁵ This results in visual disorientation and uncertainty: 'Then peered the indefinite unshapen dawn / With vacant gloaming, sad as half-lit minds' (9-10). In this single line, the unwanted sights of war are only glimpsed or traced ('indefinite' and 'unshapen'): seen sketchily but not seen fully. But sight is also impacted, flawed, by war. It is partial ('half-lit') and 'vacant': blind and unseeing. Vacancy is a weighted word in depictions of World War One. The painter Paul Nash, for example, entitled his 1918 exhibition of war paintings and drawings 'Void of War' referring in part to his painting of Passchendaele named *Void*. Wyndham Lewis explained that this void was not merely an artistic motif but a genuine characteristic of the landscape in the First World War: No Man's Land was literally vacant. Of it Lewis wrote:

But at this point civilization ended. At least so far, we could be sure of our bearings. Beyond this battery was a short stretch of shell-pitted nothingness – for we had entered upon that arid and blistering vacuum; the lunar landscape, so often described in the war-novels and represented by dozens of painters and draughtsmen, myself among them, but the particular quality of which it is so difficult to convey.⁴⁶

Lewis's reflection is particularly interesting because he muses not only upon the effect that this vacancy had on sight, sight becomes unreliable – he loses his

⁴⁵ Owen, 'The Unreturning', p.107. All future references to this poem show line numbers in parenthetical citations.

⁴⁶ Wyndham Lewis, *Blasting and Bombardiering* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1937), pp. 137-38.

bearings, but also on the difficulty of transcribing this visual vacancy into art or words: how to capture a perceived void? Paul Virilio writes that this vacancy necessitated a split in seeing: 'To the naked eye, the vast new battlefield seems to be composed of nothing – no trees or vegetation, no more water or even earth, no hand-to-hand encounters, no visible trace of the unity of homicide and suicide'.⁴⁷ Virilio draws attention to the naked or surface eye seeing nothing and, in doing so, shows the need for an underlying eye to see the traces of war and define a presence in the absence.

Das argues that under such conditions sight ceases to function adequately, becoming all but obsolete, as darkness operates to obliterate sight. He equates the empty, undefined void of darkness with an absence of vision:

The absence of vision is a recurring theme in war writings, for night was the time of movement and action. A number of trench narratives – from Sassoon's 'The Redeemer', Owen's 'Strange Meeting' or Gurney's 'The Silent One' to novels such as Manning's *The Middle Parts of Fortune*, O'Flaherty's *Return of the Brute* or Céline's *Journey to the End of the Night* – begin with, or have as their setting, scenes of darkness.⁴⁸

Das claims that absence of vision, as a recurring theme in Owen's poetry, results in touch becoming the dominant sense because it can perceive in the dark: it can feel the presence in the absence. He writes that touch is thus 'fundamental to understanding' Owen and his transcribed experience of war.⁴⁹ What Das is effectively describing is an annihilation of sight: sight becomes redundant, and therefore absent, from the landscape of war. But does darkness necessarily equate to a lack of vision or sightlessness? Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), a book that has the combined themes of darkness and emptiness literally at its core, is illuminating in this respect. Mark Larabee seemingly supports Das's reading of the impact of darkness upon

⁴⁷ Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (New York: Verso, 1989), p. 15.

⁴⁸ Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature*, p. 75.

⁴⁹ Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature*, p. 137.

sight when he writes: 'The entire narrative of *Heart of Darkness*, in one sense, records a pervasive inability to see and even a denigration of the power of seeing'.⁵⁰ Yet Larabee intriguingly implies that darkness can be read differently in another 'sense' although he does not elaborate what this might be. Andrew Thacker, in his analysis of darkness in Conrad's novel, offers a plausible alternative answer.⁵¹ Thacker draws our attention to the explorative visual opportunities that exist in the vacant spaces of the text: 'a blank space of delightful mystery'.⁵² A distinction is therefore made between the different forms of blank space and the variant shades of darkness.

In a letter by Owen to his mother in January 1917, he notably commented of conditions at the Front: 'It was of course dark, too dark'.⁵³ Sight is significantly not absent here; Owen, although disorientated, distinguishes between the differing shades of darkness. Darkness, then, does not necessarily result in absence of vision. This is shown in Owen's poem 'Nocturne', where he reveals the resistance, even flourishing, of sight in darkness. Owen expresses a wish that darkness and sleep could contain and obliterate the sights of war:

Let sleep expunge
The day's monotonous vistas from their sight;
And let them plunge
Deep down the dusky firmament of reverie⁵⁴

Yet sight, though unwanted, is relentlessly present. In this poem, it is shown as an irremovable, irrepressible sense: 'And aching hands amove / Interminably, / Beneath the light that night will not remove'.⁵⁵ Sight, under such conditions, becomes an uncontainable liquescent construct: 'Sunlight seems a blood-smear; night comes

⁵⁰ Mark D. Larabee, *Front Lines of Modernism* (New York: Macmillan, 2011), p. 182.

⁵¹ Andrew Thacker, *Moving through modernity: Space and geography in modernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), p. 37.

⁵² Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Owen Knowles (1899; London: Penguin, 2007), p. 9.

⁵³ Owen, *Selected Letters*, p. 213.

⁵⁴ Owen, 'Nocturne', p. 75.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

blood-black; / Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh'.⁵⁶ Owen's varying utilisation of the wound as an image here, when considering the relationship between sight, light, darkness, and sightlessness, is worth noting. A wound signifies presence and absence because its surface is seen – it is scabbed or bloody – but it can also contain unseen depths: a gaping hole. A wound can also be both physical and mental: it can refer to an actual bodily wounding as well as a mental scar.

Ben Shephard informs us that the Army Council in London during the First World War labelled soldiers 'Shell-shock W' (wounded) or 'Shell-shock S' (sick) because there was a conscious effort 'to impose on shell-shock the traditional military distinction between 'battle casualties' and sickness: between wounds [...] and simple breakdown'.⁵⁷ Shephard reveals an intuitive need to make the invisibility of trauma visible. This desire is explicitly depicted in Hilda Doolittle's semi-autobiographical novel *Bid Me to Live* (1960) in which she recounts the traumatic experiences of the Great War. Doolittle writes tellingly: 'If the wound had been nearer the surface, she could have grappled with it. It was annihilation itself that gaped at her'.⁵⁸ The anxiety that clearly existed around the invisibility of war trauma, and the associated desire to find a material or physical manifestation of this psychological condition, strongly suggests that the fear of the unseen lies not in the simple annihilation, or absence, of sight but in sight becoming uncontained, all-encompassing, and devouring. The nature of this fear is articulated in Owen's poem 'The Show': eyes look out from 'slimy paths' (10), 'hidden holes' (13), and 'deep wounds' (15). Everything, including men's bodies, lacks solid formation; they are likened to 'a manner of worm' (26), made up of 'bruises' (27), and indistinguishable from the liquid mud and 'earth' (27). Stallworthy notes that in this poem Owen draws heavily on Barbusse's account of

⁵⁶ Owen, 'Mental Cases', p. 169.

⁵⁷ Ben Shephard, *A War of Nerves: Soldiers and Psychiatrists in the Twentieth Century* (2000; London: Pimlico, 2002), pp. 28-29.

⁵⁸ Hilda Doolittle, *Bid Me to Live* (1960; Redding Ridge: Black Swan Books, 1983), p. 13.

war in *Under Fire* (1916).⁵⁹ Certainly, clear parallels can be seen between this poem and Chapter One of Barbusse's work entitled, significantly, 'The Vision':

Now, in the sinister light of the storm beneath black dishevelled clouds, dragged and spread across the earth like wicked angels, they seem to see a great livid [...] plain extend before them. In their vision, figures rise up out of the plain, which is composed of mud and water, and clutch at the surface of the ground [...] These men seem to be soldiers.⁶⁰

The spatial and visual scale of war in Barbusse's description impresses itself on the reader. In a letter to Sassoon, referring to 'The Show', Owen, like Barbusse, also labels his work a 'Vision' of war.⁶¹ These shared visions are without doubt apocalyptic but an apocalypse is revelatory as well as destructive. The vision given is not of sight annihilated but of sight uncontained.

The image of the eye

It is not surprising that the eye becomes a loaded image in Owen's poetry. War poetry frequently discloses examples of the eye being utilised by poets as shorthand, an understood signal, for the horror of war and for the fear of sight uncontained.⁶² Damaged eyes in many poems speak of the reality of war without the need for further detailed description. The most evident example of this is two stanzas found on the leaf on an International Brigade soldier's notebook:

Eyes of men running, falling, screaming
Eyes of men shouting, sweating, bleeding
The eyes of the fearful, those of the sad
The eyes of exhaustion, and those of the mad.

⁵⁹ Stallworthy, *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, I, p. 156.

⁶⁰ Henri Barbusse, *Under Fire*, trans. Robin Buss (1916; London: Penguin, 2003), p. 6.

⁶¹ Owen, *Collected Letters*, p. 298. Letter written to Siegfried Sassoon, 27th November 1917.

⁶² A significant relationship between 'seeing' eyes and representative eyes is established. Questions of perception can be addressed through the external appearance of an eye. The twentieth-century term 'thousand-yard stare' used to describe the unfocussed gaze of traumatised soldiers effectively illustrates this.

Eyes of men thinking, hoping, waiting
 Eyes of men loving, cursing, hating
 The eyes of the wounded sodden in red
 The eyes of the dying and those of the dead.⁶³

The poem, through its repeated use of the eye image, captures the scale of war's impact, the horror and the suffering of combat, without describing a single event of war. The object of perception – war – is strikingly never seen. Yet the unseen sights of war saturate this poem: the prolific eyes speak of sight uncontained.

The registering eye is an important motif in Owen's work; it likewise alludes to the unintelligible realities of war. Owen's letter to his mother, in which he mentioned the 'incomprehensible' look in combatants' eyes, shows how, for him, the traumatic sights of war came to be represented and concentrated in the eye. Indeed, similar descriptions appear in other letters: 'there is a harassed look that I have never seen before'.⁶⁴ The poem 'Exposure' illustrates the symbolic significance of the eye image for Owen and how he utilised it as a representative tool. Owen's consistent reworking of the line 'All their eyes are ice' is telling.⁶⁵ In the February 1916 early draft of this poem, Owen wrote: 'Men's bodies will be plaster, faces, bricks, and good eyes'.⁶⁶ Later pages of rough working show Owen repeatedly grappling with this line: 'Their feet are boots; their faces mould; their wide eyes ice'.⁶⁷ The final 1917/1918 revision shows Owen meticulously replacing the line 'All their eyes are red' with the line 'All their eyes are ice'.⁶⁸ Owen's de-cluttering of this final line, his selection, and his prioritisation of the eye image to symbolise the full horror of the poem is significant. The concentrated reworking of this one line shows that the image of the eye is not a

⁶³ Anon., untitled stanzas from International Brigadier's notebook found in the mid-1930s, *The Oxford Book of War Poetry*, p. 234.

⁶⁴ Owen, *Selected Letters*, p. 208.

⁶⁵ Owen, 'Exposure', *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, I, p. 186.

⁶⁶ Owen, 'Exposure', *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, II, p. 366.

⁶⁷ Owen, 'Exposure', BL I.28, *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, II, p. 367.

⁶⁸ Owen, 'Final 1917/1918 hand written draft of 'Exposure'', *First World War Poetry Digital Archive*, <<http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/document/5195>> [accessed 20th January 2013].

randomly selected symbol but a carefully chosen, dominant image of, and for, the sights of war.

Both Santanu Das and Daniel Hipp helpfully suggest that Owen's poetic fixation with images of eyes is linked to a specific traumatic event in the war where a sentry near him was blinded: 'one lad was blown down and, I am afraid, blinded'.⁶⁹ Das and Hipp focus on this sole event when analysing the importance of the eye image in Owen's work. Hipp concludes that the eye acts as a restorative or therapeutic image for Owen. In his analysis of 'The Sentry', he writes that the image of the eye is part of the poem's wider objective: a 'return to the source of the trauma'.⁷⁰ Das, too, suggests that the traumatic event 'shuttered behind the blinded eyes in 'The Sentry' and 'Dulce Et Decorum Est' is of greater significance than the actual eye image.⁷¹ For both Das and Hipp, the eye is a mere conductor between the cause and the conclusion of trauma. Hipp believes that the eyes in 'The Sentry' form part of a complete process of recovery and healing because Owen is allowed, through the poem, unqualified access to the cause of trauma: the blinding of the sentry.⁷² Similarly, Das suggests that the eye image reflects Owen's therapeutic engagement with traumatic material predominantly through dreams.⁷³ Yet Owen's use of the word blind in 'The Sentry' ('O sir – my eyes, - I'm blind, - I'm blind, - I'm blind") is compulsively repetitive which disrupts the poem's narrative and suggests an unresolved, incommunicable traumatic disturbance.⁷⁴

The intimated theme of blindness in 'Exposure', through Owen's specific substitution of red eyes for eyes of ice, therefore seems significant. The eyes that belong to the exposed dead fail to return the viewer's gaze; they are impenetrable

⁶⁹ Owen, *Selected Letters*, p. 214. Letter written to Susan Owen, January 16th 1917.

⁷⁰ Hipp, p. 52.

⁷¹ Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature*, p. 169.

⁷² Hipp, p. 52.

⁷³ Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature*, p. 168.

⁷⁴ Owen, p. 188.

blocks of blindness. In a draft of 'Exposure', Owen notes, alongside his description of the men's eyes turning to ice, how 'their throats will close up cramped'.⁷⁵ In this draft of the poem, Owen definitely links an inability to speak of war with an inability to see war: the mouth and the eyes are blocked by ice.⁷⁶ This blockage results in a cognitive disturbance much like the compulsive repetition of 'blind' in 'The Sentry': in 'Exposure', the macabre sights of war are only 'half-known' to the viewer because they prohibit total comprehension.⁷⁷ Owen similarly uses the eye image in 'Mental Cases' to symbolise the traumatic sights of war that have been internalised but not articulated or fully processed: 'their eyeballs shrink tormented / Back into their brains'.⁷⁸ These readings suggest that although the eye image allowed Owen to acknowledge his traumatised state, and to access partially the traumatic sights of war, it did not permit a total engagement or full resolution.

Louis Simpson

The deep image

As with Owen, Simpson's utilisation of darkness plays on its dual reality: darkness is sightlessness but it is also insightful. In his essay 'The Poet's Theme', Simpson showed an acute awareness of the inherent contradiction that darkness holds for the eyes. He wrote how darkness can be simultaneously empty and full, at once desensitised and sensory, both sightless and illuminating: '[it can have] a positive rather than a negative value – it is darkness visible'.⁷⁹ In an interview with Lawrence Smith, Simpson expanded upon this comment:

⁷⁵ Owen. 'Rough working hand written draft of 'Exposure''. *First World War Poetry Digital Archive* <<http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/document/5210/4611>> [accessed 20th January 2013].

⁷⁶ Hepburn notes that trauma often results from an inability to speak because of a perceived inability to see: 'war generally was perceived as an event beyond description, an ungrasped, ungraspable mystery'. Allan Hepburn, *Intrigue: Espionage and Culture* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 147.

⁷⁷ Owen, 'Exposure', p. 186.

⁷⁸ Owen, 'Mental Cases', p. 169.

⁷⁹ Simpson, *Selected Prose*, p. 413.

Smith: I have the feeling, in listening to 'Searching for the Ox', that when the 'tube of darkness' rises from the water and comes into the beam of the lighthouse, it is [the] 'deep image' coming back.

Simpson: Yeah, I think it's almost my definition of the 'deep image' [...] And that's a real image. It's been haunting me for years, that thing coming up to the surface.⁸⁰

The 'Deep Image' school of poetry, to which Simpson refers to, undoubtedly shaped Simpson's approach towards darkness, and affirmed for him certain truths and realities that had been revealed to him during his experience of war.⁸¹ In his semi-autobiographical 1962 novel *Riverside Drive*, Simpson wrote: 'I'm going to tell the story of the real war. There won't be anything but cold, rain, and men falling into tent walls in the dark'.⁸² Reality, then, resides in darkness. This is a central belief of the 'Deep Image' movement. Bly selected certain motifs like 'darkness' and 'snow' to emphasise how images embodied a 'twofold consciousness'.⁸³ He drew attention to both the interiority and exteriority of an image describing how the image is a 'body' mediating between conscious and unconscious material: '[an image can leap] outside of itself, and [do] battle with its double or shadow in order to vent the [...] inside – [...] Pure unconsciousness'.⁸⁴ This glimpse of unconsciousness, the bringing to the surface of the unknown, is, Bly suggested, an unadulterated 'moment of seeing'.⁸⁵ This is sight uncontained.

C.B. Cox notes that Simpson values the dark as a poet because it allows him to explore the perimeters of sight: '[it does] reflect his belief that no single mode of

⁸⁰ Simpson qtd. by Lawrence R. Smith, 'A Conversation with Louis Simpson', *Chicago Review*, 27.1 (Summer, 1975), 99-109 (pp. 107-08).

⁸¹ In an essay published in *Trobar* 2, 1961, the poet Robert Kelly coined the term 'deep image' in reference to a new movement in American poetry. Simpson was amongst the writers and poets influenced by Bly's insistence that images should be treated as a mode of thought rather than a decorative tool of poetic craft: these included James Wright, Galway Kinnell, W. S. Merwin, David Ignatow, Donald Hall, and William Stafford. For further information, see: Leslie Ullman, 'Deep Imagists: The Subconscious as Medium', academic paper for Colby College, Waterville, USA <www.colby.edu/~isadoff/cap/Ullman.doc> [accessed 16th August 2013].

⁸² Simpson, *Riverside Drive* (Michigan: Atheneum, 1962), p. 78.

⁸³ Robert Bly qtd. in 'An Interview with Robert Bly' by Joseph Shakarchi, *The Massachusetts Review*, 23.2 (Summer, 1982), 226-243 (p. 236).

⁸⁴ Robert Bly qtd. in 'Interview with Robert Bly' by Arun Nevader, *The Three Penny Review*, 11 (Autumn, 1982), 24-25 (p. 25).

⁸⁵ Robert Bly, 'Notes on the poetry of Deep Image', *Trobar*, 2 (1961), 14-16 (p. 14).

apprehending reality can ever be fully satisfactory'.⁸⁶ The fluid perspective that Cox describes is encapsulated in Simpson's epic semi-autobiographical poem 'The Runner'. The soldier Dodd, depicted in the poem, is a messenger in World War Two: he runs between combat troops to pass on messages and report what he sees en route. It is striking that Dodd's constant encounters are with darkness and he sees very little that is solid to report: 'He plunged into the darkness [...] A shape standing in the path / Snatched at him'.⁸⁷ The visual data Dodd collects for the military with his trained eye is of no value to Simpson: it is the disregarded, often unreported, 'uncensored' sights of war that have the most poetic value.⁸⁸ Simpson's poem 'The Foggy Lane', particularly the last verse, emphasises the poetic importance of minute visual details. The fog, like darkness, forces the viewer to disregard the superfluous surrounding material:

Walking in the foggy lane
I try to keep my attention fixed
On the uneven, muddy surface...
the pools made by the rain,
and wheel ruts, and wet leaves,
and the rustling of small animals.⁸⁹

In an interview with Kraft Rompf, about this poem, Simpson said that it was: 'a statement of my poetic belief. By the uneven surface I mean life; it's uneven and it's muddy, and I keep my attention fixed on it rather than on a dream'.⁹⁰ Again, the implication is that reality is something to be drawn out from underneath a ruptured surface. The split in seeing between a surface and underlying eye, as described by Virilio, is evoked.

⁸⁶ C.B. Cox, 'The Poetry of Louis Simpson', *Critical Quarterly*, 8 (Spring 1966), 72-83 (p. 74).

⁸⁷ Simpson, 'The Runner', *The Owner of the House* (New York: BOA, 2003), pp. 133-61 (pp.147-8). All future references to this poem show verse and line numbers in parenthetical citations.

⁸⁸ Kevin Bushell notes that Bly's Vietnam War poem 'The Teeth Mother Naked at Last' stresses the need for uncensored, authentic images in war poetry. Bushell, 'Leaping Into the Unknown: The Poetics of Robert Bly's Deep Image', academic paper for University of Illinois

< http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/bly/bushell.html > [accessed 16th August 2013].

⁸⁹ Simpson, 'The Foggy Lane', *The Owner of the House*, p. 231.

⁹⁰ Louis Simpson, 'An interview with Kraft Rompf', *Falcon*, 12 (Spring, 1976), 273-305 (p. 300).

This duality of sight, or 'twofold consciousness' of vision, is especially articulated in Simpson's arguably most famous war poem 'Carentan O Carentan'.⁹¹ The scale of world war is shown to result in a complete destabilisation of sight and visual disorientation. Multiplicity of sight dominates this poem. Ownership of sight lies with the many rather than with the individual. We are invited to see the soldiers 'through a glass' (17); the soldiers' vision is inhibited by 'smoke' (13) and a horizon that obscures 'towns we could not see' (16); enemy 'watchers' (21) observe the soldiers. The trajectory of vision also constantly changes with the differing viewpoints adding to a sense that sight is unstable and uncontainable. In the first verse, we are invited to look backwards to 'the old days' (1); the present moment is firstly described by the soldiers in close proximity to war; it is then observed by the reader beyond the page; finally, the enemy soldiers perceive it from a distance. As the enemy gaze climbs in harmony with 'the barrel' (24) that they are aiming at the soldiers, the poet soldier's gaze falls as he lies 'down at once' (25). Such destabilisation of sight results in a total loss of bearing: sight becomes unscalable. The poet asks the 'Master-Sergeant' (41) 'the way to turn and shoot' (42); the 'Captain' (45) is unable to show their 'place upon the map' (46); the 'Lieutenant' (49) cannot identify the poet's 'place in the platoon' (50). As Dodd's military intelligence becomes irrelevant in 'The Runner', so to does the mapping eye, similarly valued by the military, become effectively redundant under the conditions described in 'Carentan O Carentan'.

*Decentring the eye*⁹²

In 'I Dreamed that in a City Dark as Paris', Simpson intimates how the spatial perimeters of sight are disrupted by the chaotic presence of war: 'The night was

⁹¹ Simpson, 'Carentan O Carentan', *The Owner of the House*, pp. 103-04. All future references to this poem show line numbers in parenthetical citations.

⁹² *OED* definition of 'Decentre': 1. To remove the centre from. 2. The dislocation of the optical centre.

trembling with a violet / Expectancy. At the far edge it moved / And rumbled; on that flickering horizon'.⁹³ In 'The Runner', war moves from the horizon to the centre disrupting the stable core. Visual fluidity is shown to be all consuming as darkness blurs the contours of Dodd's body: 'Darkness without a moon / Surrounded him' (6. 13-14). The mutability of visual boundaries, as in Owen's poetry, means that sight is no longer concentrated in the human eye and therefore escapes the perimeters of the human form. The permeating fluidity of sight dissolves solid forms. Material matter loses its weight and density: in 'The Runner' 'shells' are described as 'fluttering' (6. 16) and Dodd 'felt he had no weight' on the 'long and dark' road (6. 35-38). Simpson clearly linked the visual instability of war with a loss of self-definition: an inability to see himself as a solid form. In his essay 'On Line', about his experiences in the war, Simpson noted how it seemed as if 'our bodies were dissipating [...] They seemed unreal. What remained? One's boots stepping over the pavements of foreign cities; one's [...] cap tilted at the right angle'.⁹⁴ Similar observations recur throughout this text: 'Our faces are nearly invisible under the rims of the helmets. We look all pockets, pockets, and baggy pants. The only visible human parts are two hands'.⁹⁵ Later, Simpson admits to feeling invisible in the vacuum of darkness and fluidity that is war: 'you are reduced to nothing; you're not a man, but a vacuum'.⁹⁶ Here, Simpson's fear of visual disorder, of uncontrollable sight, is bound up with the fear of being untraceable to the human eye.

This anxiety is articulated by his repeated return to images of bodily dissipation throughout his poetry. 'Memories of a Lost War', for example, illustrates

⁹³ Simpson, 'I Dreamed that in a City Dark as Paris', *The Owner of the House*, p. 121. All future references to this poem show line numbers in parenthetical citations. Cultural definitions of the colour violet vary: it is perceived widely as an in-between/twilight colour especially in Europe and the United States. Recent surveys show that violet is the colour historically most commonly associated with ambiguity. See Eva Heller, *Psychologie de la couleur: effets et symboliques* (Paris: Editions Pyramyd, 2009).

⁹⁴ Simpson, *Selected Prose*, p. 146.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 119.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 128.

the human form bursting through its bodily outlines including clothes: 'We go around burst boots and packs'.⁹⁷ But, in 'I Dreamed that in a City Dark as Paris', we learn that Simpson's real fear is not the revealing of interior content, seeing the hitherto unseen, but the possible realisation that there is nothing to see. He writes how he not only inhabits emptiness but that he himself feels empty. In the darkness, all he can perceive is a vacuous shell:

The helmet with its vestige of a crest,
The rifle in my hands, long out of date,
The belt I wore, the trailing overcoat
And hobnail boots. (11-14)

Similarly, in the darkness of 'The Runner' where men are mere 'shadows' (9. 108) 'Colliding in the dark' (10. 29), Dodd's identity is reduced to a 'line of olive drab, the overcoats, / Helmets, packs, the gloved hands holding weapons' (9. 149-150). He is no longer recognisably human: the army assess his usefulness to the war effort so determining his value. He is, like army uniform, army property. Ronald Moran writes that Simpson's apprehension of the vacuous is rooted in his wartime amnesia as shown in the novel *Riverside Drive*:

[The autobiographical narrator] Duncan Bell is unable to remember much because of amnesia suffered during his period of mental disability after the war. What Duncan does remember, however, provides a valuable chronicle of a soldier's response to an entity over which he has no control and of which he really does not understand any more than what the perimeter of vision and the range of his hearing allow.⁹⁸

In his analysis, Moran suggests amnesia produces gaps in both Simpson's sight but also his memory of sights. It is as if the reality of war is twice removed by the precariousness of visual processing: firstly through seeing something as a traumatic sight, and then by cognising that image through a traumatised mind. But Moran also draws attention to the perimeters of the human eye indicating its natural limitations.

⁹⁷ Simpson, 'Memories of a Lost War', *The Owner of the House*, p. 112.

⁹⁸ Ronald Moran, *Louis Simpson* (New York: Twayne, 1972), p. 164.

The inadequacy of the human eye to 'see' war is the fundamental realisation that Simpson's poetry communicates. His reality of war is constrained to what he can see in immediate proximity: helmet, rifle, overcoat, and boots.

The scale of world war, compounded by the trauma of war, results in a loss of control over vision: Simpson does not decide what he sees. The limitations of his eyes decide that for him. The human eye cannot contain sight; therefore sight is external to the eye. The resultant blurring of visual demarcations, particularly around the human form, ultimately means that Simpson struggles to distinguish between men and materials in the dark. In *Riverside Drive*, Simpson writes that the reality of war is a complete erosion of all defining boundaries. Alarming, he describes how he feels that the materials of war – 'the shovel, the mud, the hole in the mud' – have assumed a 'viewpoint' that is more important than his own: sight uncontained consumes him.⁹⁹ He is at the mercy of vision. It is interesting to note that many of Simpson's contemporaries, writing about the war, similarly connected a loss of self with the mutability of visual boundaries and an associated decentring of sight from the human eye. In 'The Shield of Achilles' (1952), for example, W.H. Auden writes:

Yet, congregated on its blankness, stood
An unintelligible multitude,
A million eyes, a million boots in line,
Without expression, waiting for a sign.¹⁰⁰

Here we see a clear link established between the vacuous vastness of war, sight uncontained, the multiplicity of sight, the mutability of visual boundaries, and the inadequacy of the individual eye. We also see the poet's dilemma in finding 'a sign' that adequately represents the 'unintelligible' reality of world war. The poet Tadeusz

⁹⁹ Simpson, *Riverside Drive*, p. 78.

¹⁰⁰ W.H. Auden, 'The Shield of Achilles', *Second World War Poems*, ed. Hugh Haughton (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), pp. 23-24.

Różewicz in 'The Survivor' writes of his desire for post-war sight to be contained, distinct, and identifiable:

May he restore my sight hearing and speech
 May he again name objects and ideas
 May he separate darkness and light.¹⁰¹

Różewicz intimates here that he wants a return, a restoration, of sight to the body and human eye. He craves visual definition: a solid, visible sign.

In 'On Line', Simpson writes that it was the eyes of men, and not their bodies, that bore the traces of war: 'In passing these sights [dead bodies], we devour them with our eyes. No visible wounds. The eyes left open – naked eyeballs, unshielded from the dust, and not feeling it!'¹⁰² This passage recounts the unnerving experience of a living eye examining a dead eye. The dead eye, empty of sight, is transformed into the object of perception. The living eye cannot contain sight: sight 'devours' the sights of war. Danius writes of autonomized eyes endowed with their own agency: 'new representational realms open up and the human body readily transforms into spectacle, including the eye itself'.¹⁰³ The eye is therefore shown as a representational tool: a symbolic image. In the above passage, the human eye no longer registers, or internalises, the sights of war but reflects them outwards thus transforming them into an external sign to be seen. In 'The Battle', a poem about freezing that has strong parallels with Owen's 'Exposure', Simpson again indicates that the trace of war can be located within the eye:

¹⁰¹ Tadeusz Różewicz, 'The Survivor', *Second World War Poems*, pp. 239-40.

¹⁰² Simpson, *Selected Prose*, p. 121.

¹⁰³ Sara Danius, *The Senses of Modernism – technology, perception, and aesthetics* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 159.

Most clearly of that battle I remember
 The tiredness in eyes, how hands looked thin
 Around a cigarette, and the bright ember
 Would pulse with all the life there was within.¹⁰⁴ (13-16)

It is the look of the eyes, the 'tiredness', which alludes to the registered sights of war that remain unmentioned. Bonikowski notes that this 'look' dominates war literature: 'This look is more than mere recognition; it is a communication that is a leaping 'horror' from one set of eyes to another'.¹⁰⁵ The eye is an effective image because it communicates the reality of war visually thus avoiding the difficulty of transcribing that reality into words. But in admitting that sight avoids transcription, sight is also shown to exceed the limitations of the eye: sight is not concentrated in the eye. Simpson's eyes are blank and unseeing. The eyes in 'The Battle', like the eyes in 'On Line', are transformed by him into reflecting vessels: they are illuminated by the 'bright ember' of the cigarette.¹⁰⁶

Sight uncontained

The poetry of both Owen and Simpson shows the experience of war to be resistant to representation. They reveal a shared difficulty in trying to describe in words not just the uncontainable sights of war but also sight uncontained in war. Their work acknowledges the limitations of the human eye and its partial capacity to see and scale world war. But their visual response to war is further complicated by war trauma, and the similar symptoms they shared, which directly impacted upon their visual processing of war. Their difficulty with representing the reality of war was

¹⁰⁴ Simpson, 'The Battle', *The Owner of the House*, p. 114. All future references to this poem show line numbers in parenthetical citations.

¹⁰⁵ Bonikowski, *Shell Shock and the Modernist Imagination*, p. 13.

¹⁰⁶ Critical readings of 'The Battle' tend to neglect the importance of the eye image by instead focussing on how the war has affected the soldiers. Thom Gunn, for example, writes: 'the soldiers have become things, or passive animals'. Thom Gunn, 'Younger American Poets', *The Spectator*, vol. 202 (27th March 1959), p. 443. <<http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=ndU9AQAAIAAJ>> [accessed 8th January 2013]. Ronald Moran, in contrast, disagrees with Gunn's reading of the soldiers as 'impersonal referents' arguing that 'humanity asserts' itself through them (Moran, p. 53).

therefore twofold: they did not want to engage fully with the sights of war because of the traumatic content but they also could not fully engage with them because trauma had rendered the content partly unknown.

Both poets found a solution to these representational problems by adopting a synecdochical approach in their poetry: their poems contain distinct figures, images, and motifs that show the visual trace, imprint, or impact of war. These visual tools of representation seemingly allowed them to acknowledge and refer to the horrors of war whilst circumnavigating a detailed and traumatic engagement. This approach lends itself well to poetry because poetry is not dependent upon explanation or description. Bonikowski writes that poetry is particularly effective at emphasising 'the shocks of experience', through various devices, without the 'need to explain or order experience'.¹⁰⁷ This is true of many of Owen's and Simpson's poems where the experience war is not related but is instead shown. War is, to all intents and purposes, concentrated in a specific visual trace: something seen but not necessarily understood. Simpson's utilisation of the 'deep image' in particular enables him to simultaneously disclose and enclose the disruptive reality of war.

The motif of darkness in the work of both poets effectively captures the inadequacy of the human eye to perceive the reality of war. War is portrayed as a vacuum too vast to see. But darkness also houses a visual fluidity that emphasises the mutability of visual boundaries in war and the destabilisation of sight. This is especially true of Simpson's work because of his utilisation of darkness as a 'deep image'. Simpson expands Owen's use of the darkness motif by drawing attention to the duality of sight, or 'twofold consciousness' of vision, that particularly operates in war. The surface, mapping eye is shown to be redundant in scaling world war; the reality of war lies in the proximate, partially seeing, eye. Both poets set up the eye

¹⁰⁷ Bonikowski, *Shell Shock and the Modernist Imagination*, p. 14.

image as a symbol bearing the traces of war but failing to contain its sights. They both speak of the 'look' of war being communicated visually by the eye rather than verbally. Simpson uses the eye image more brutally than Owen to show the impact of war: he repeatedly describes eyes as empty vessels and passive reflectors. Unlike the eyes in Owen's poems, the eyes found in Simpson's writing do not register or internalise sights; they simply reflect. They are mere tools of sight uncontained reflecting the sights of war.

Chapter Two

Ford Madox Ford: Sight and Scale in *Parade's End*

Ford and visual scale

Chapter One has demonstrated how literal sight can be directly affected by a war that resists scale and representation. Can the same be said of a writer's literary approach to vision? This chapter explores how Ford Madox Ford's on-going literary fascination with sight, scale, and reality was fundamentally altered by a war that dissolved perceived boundaries of space and time. Ford's literary relationship with visual scale, and the impact of the war years upon it, deserves considered analysis.¹ In order to arrive at a more complete comprehension of Ford's engagement with sight, this chapter examines how war, and particularly the scale of World War, impacted upon Ford's pre-war understanding of vision and how it contributed to the wider visual aspects of literary modernism and art that Ford was interested in. In the 1911 'Preface' to his *Collected Poems*, Ford probed the elusive nature of 'Modern life': 'so extraordinary, so hazy, so tenuous, with still such definite and concrete spots in it'.² This 'Preface' shows how visual content can affect and alter the way it is perceived: Ford intimates there is no single way to approach or capture the many variable components that make up modern life. Reality is depicted as inherently resistant to being seen entire. In *It was the Nightingale* (1933), Ford again uses the visual tension between opacity and transparency to emphasise the complexity of capturing the process, and result, of seeing: 'The work that at that time – and now – I wanted to

¹ Because of his artistic upbringing, and interest in the visual properties of art, critical explorations of sight in Ford's work understandably tend usually to situate his visual engagement within an artistic framework. Many of the contributions to the Ford Madox Ford Society's 2009 international study, *Ford and Visual Culture*, are obvious examples of this approach. Both Sara Haslam's 2002 book *Fragmenting Modernism: Ford Madox Ford, the Novel, and the Great War* and Laura Colombino's 2008 exploration *Vision, Visuality and Writing* emphasise the value of approaching Ford's interest in sight from alternative perspectives.

² Ford, 'Preface' to *Collected Poems* (1911) in *Critical Writings of Ford Madox Ford*, ed. Frank MacShane (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), p. 142.

see done was something on an immense scale, a little cloudy in immediate attack, but with salient points and the final impression extraordinarily clear'.³ The specific conjunction between sight and scale that Ford repeatedly explored as a writer is noticeable. Frank MacShane identifies this variable conjunction as a central crux of Ford's writing: '[Ford's work] related closely to the question of what truth really is, whether it is an objective reality, perceivable by all in the same way, or whether it is open to personal interpretation and subject to unconscious predilections'.⁴ Ford appeared highly conscious of this fluid framework surrounding truth and sight. He wrote: '[my work is] full of inaccuracies as to facts, but its accuracy as to impressions is absolute'.⁵ Reality is presented here as a malleable construct subjectively perceived.

But it was Ford's experience of serving in the First World War that focussed his interest in the variable relationship between sight and scale. Ford described the impact of war upon the collective 'Englishman' fighting: 'his entire view of life, if he had one, was smashed to fragments'.⁶ Ford clearly believed that a universal, all-seeing viewpoint was impossible to adopt after the First World War. The war was central to Ford's significant interest in sight and he clearly believed that it had directly impacted upon his vision. He wrote: 'No one could have come through that shattering experience and still view life and mankind with any normal vision' (*IWN* 48).⁷ Again, the emphasis here is on the 'shattering' of an objective, comprehensive point of view: the reality and scale of war disrupts an omniscient perspective. *Parade's End*

³ Ford, *It was the Nightingale* (1933), ed. John Coyle (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2007), p. 180. Hereafter referred to as *IWN* in parenthetical citations.

⁴ Frank MacShane, *Ford Madox Ford: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1972), p. 9.

⁵ Ford, *Ancient Lights and Certain New Reflections* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1911), p. xv. This fluid approach towards truth and sight initially generated a lot of negative publicity for Ford, especially when he published his 1924 tribute to Joseph Conrad. This appeared to many, including Conrad's wife, to be more fiction than fact. See *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance*.

⁶ Ford, 'From a Paris Quay', *New York Evening Post Literary Review* (13th December, 1924), 1-2.

⁷ Ford also writes in *The Marsden Case* of the effect of war upon the senses: 'the eyes, the ears, the brain and the fibres of every soul to-day adult have been profoundly seared by those dreadful wickednesses of embattled humanity.' *The Marsden Case* (London: Duckworth, 1923), pp. 143-44.

epitomizes Ford's struggle to write about the sights of war whilst simultaneously portraying the uncontainable reality of those sights. Although Ford was acutely aware that the Great War resisted scale, the introduction of a literary frame nevertheless inevitably resulted in an attempt to make the war scalable. Ford's notes on creating the tetralogy are illuminating in this respect. His intent to write about the war in 'an immense novel in which all the characters should be great masses of people' was hampered by the inevitability that writing about 'mankind in bulk' reduces the visual immensity of war to 'mere statistics' (*IWN* 195).⁸ The problem of how best to scale war visually therefore fundamentally underlies the tetralogy. Three elements in *Parade's End* (external perspective, the surface of sight, and mapping), which were crucial to Ford's engagement with visual scale, are the focus of this chapter's exploration.

Interestingly, Ford experimented with these visual elements in *No Enemy* (1929) where he attempted to distil the experience of war into a single poem by concentrating these three features to great effect:

To see the black perspectives of long avenues
 All silent;
 The white strips of sky
 At the sides, cut by poplar trunks;
 The white strips of sky
 Above, diminishing –
 The silence and blackness of the avenue
 Enclosed by immensities of space
 Spreading away
 Over No Man's Land....⁹

⁸ Ford makes a similar comment at the beginning of *The Soul of London* (1905) regarding the difficulty in containing the immensity of the city: 'A really ideal book of the kind would not contain "writing about" a town: it would throw a personal image of the place on to the paper. It would not contain such a sentence as: "There are in the city of ----- 720 firms of hat manufacturers employing 19,000 operatives."' *The Soul of London in England and the English*, ed. Sara Haslam (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2003), pp. 3-105 (p. 3).

⁹ Ford, *No Enemy – A Tale of Reconstruction*, ed. Paul Skinner (1929; Manchester: Carcanet, 2002), p. 147. Ford's fictional poet Gringoire notes he wrote the poem in Nieppe 1916.

However, the ability of these visual elements to capture effectively the scale of war is questionable. The poem's ellipses, dashes, and repetitions suggest war defies a literary framework. Furthermore, Mrs Carmody's recitation of the poem is hindered by verbal pauses as she struggles to accurately read it:

Mrs Carmody hesitated.
 ' "Then...a long way..."
 The voice of Madame Sélysette said slowly:
 ' "Then far away to the right..."
 Mrs Carmody said: 'Thank you!' and continued.¹⁰

Parade's End augments this tentative exploration of the uncertain conjunction between sight and scale; it is a central crux of the tetralogy.

External perspective

Parade's End relies on the eyes of an individual observer to capture the vast dimensions of war. Ford wrote: 'I knew that I should have to fall back on the old device of a world seen through the eyes of a central observer' (*IWN* 195). The term 'central observer' implies that the spectator has a complete view of events. Yet it also suggests the person is centrally placed and involved in unfolding events. Ford uses Tietjens, his 'central observer', to demonstrate fully this tension between objective and subjective sight. Does Tietjens's involvement in war render his visual processing inaccurate? Would an omniscient viewpoint be a more effective literary stratagem for capturing the immense scale of World War? These are the questions that Ford explores through Tietjens. It is important to note that Tietjens contrasts sharply with John Dowell, the male impressionist narrator of Ford's 1915 publication *The Good Soldier*. Dowell is the ultimate flâneur: he is a casual observer who wanders through life like a ghostly shadow observing and recounting impressions from the edges of

¹⁰ Ibid.

space and the 'distance of time'.¹¹ He is an unreliable individual who often does not realise the significance of his observations. Robert Green writes that Dowell's self-conscious distancing divorces him from 'hearing, touch, sight, and smell' and results in the senses becoming virtually defunct in the novel.¹² This of course contrasts with Tietjens whose senses are highly alert throughout *Parade's End*. Tietjens's sensations spill out over the pages of the tetralogy; this happens quite literally in a scene where he imagines the sight of his comrade's spilt blood running across the pages of a book: 'over the whitish sheet of paper on a level with his nose Tietjens perceived thin films of reddish purple to be wavering, then a glutinous surface of gummy scarlet pigment'.¹³ Sight in *Parade's End* therefore moves from the sidelines to become a central and crucial aspect in Ford's struggle to capture the magnitude of war; this is shown most explicitly through Tietjens's evolving comprehension of external perspective through the war.

We are told in *No More Parades* that Tietjens is 'always in the centre of his own picture' (*NMP* 142). But, as Dennis Brown notes, Tietjens's 'obsession' with remaining central is increasingly frustrated by war.¹⁴ The scale of war's disruption causes Tietjens's vision to fragment and this shatters his central viewpoint. However, it is actually not Tietjens's centrality that is shattered by the scale of war but, rather, it is Tietjens's visual stability that is rocked. At the start of *Some Do Not . . .*, Tietjens is a 'lonely buffalo' with 'exact' sight because he stands 'outside the herd'.¹⁵ Yet, as the war progresses, he engages with the herd and his sight is centralised rather than marginalised. Ford exposes a fundamental visual juxtaposition as Tietjens moves

¹¹ Ford, *The Good Soldier* (1915) (London: Penguin, 1946), p. 19.

¹² Robert Green, *Ford Madox Ford* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 118.

¹³ Ford, *No More Parades*, ed. Joseph Wiesenfarth, in *Parade's End*, 4 vols. (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2011), II, p. 85. Hereafter referred to as *NMP* in parenthetical citations.

¹⁴ Dennis Brown, *The modernist self in twentieth-century English literature: a study of self-fragmentation* (Michigan: Macmillan, 1989), p. 65.

¹⁵ Ford, *Some Do Not . . .*, ed. Max Saunders, in *Parade's End*, 4 vols. (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2010), I, p. 160. Hereafter referred to as *SDN* in parenthetical citations.

from the periphery to the centre; Tietjens sees wholly from a distance but this 'exact' vision lacks the small, fragmented details noted from the centre.¹⁶ Ford's reference to 'the herd' is interesting because the term had significance for other writers during the Great War who were also examining the impact that the scale of war had upon sight. Wilfred Trotter, for example, examined what he defined as the 'herd instinct' in *Instincts of the Herd in Peace and War* (1916). In this exploratory essay, Trotter writes that war intensifies an individual's loss of autonomy over the senses and makes external perspective all but redundant:

In most of his reactions [...] in times of peace, man is acting as a member of one or another class upon which the stimulus acts. War acts upon him as a member of the greater herd, the nation, or, in other words, the true major unit. [...] Corresponding with his dependence on [the herd] is his openness towards them, his specific accessibility to stimuli coming from the herd.¹⁷

Wyndham Lewis in *Blasting and Bombardiering*, his memoir about serving in World War One, articulates in detail his struggle to retain visual autonomy and external perspective amongst the war-crowds. Referencing Trotter's work, Lewis writes of his desperation to maintain an individual distinction from the crowd and thus be seen to act rather than react to war. He portrays the outbreak of war as an unseeing rush of unidentifiable, reactive citizens:

¹⁶ Ford writes of this visual juxtaposition in *The Soul of London*: 'For, almost, assuredly it will be some minute detail of the whole, we seeing things with the eye of a bird that is close to the ground.' *The Soul of London*, p. 16. Anna Snaith and Michael Whitworth comment: 'Dickens may have been able to take a bird's-eye view of London, but the great increase in its size, and the "change in our habits of locomotion", make such perspective unattainable. The only bird's-eye view which Ford will allow is that of a bird "seeking for minute fragments of seed", so close to the object that it cannot see the whole.' *Locating Woolf: the Politics of Space and Place*, ed. Anna Snaith and Michael H. Whitworth (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 17. It is important to note that war not only accentuates this shift from peripheral to centralised vision but also removes the element of choice for Ford as an author; the only perspective the war allows him is a ground-level view.

¹⁷ Wilfred Trotter, *Instincts of the Herd in Peace and War* (1916) (Washington, USA: Beard Books, 2003), p. 142.

The Crowd was still blind, with a first pup-like intensity.

The “great historical event” is always hatching; the Crowd in its habitual infantile sleep. Then the appointed hand releases the clutch, the “great event” is set in motion: the crowd rises to meet the crash half awake and struggling, with voluptuous spasms. It is the Rape of the Crowd.¹⁸

In *Parade's End*, Ford paints a similar picture of fear at the loss of visual autonomy. Sylvia, in a scene that predicts the violence of Lewis's rape metaphor, is shown fighting against a surging crowd: ‘She had to scream against the noise: she was no more responsible for the blasphemy than if she had lost her identity under an anaesthetic. She *had* lost her identity.... She was one of this crowd!’ (*NMP* 180; Ford's italics). Valentine is similarly subsumed by rising masses in Piccadilly: ‘there would be seething mobs shoulder to shoulder: she had never seen the Nelson column stand out of a solid mass’.¹⁹ Sight escaping measure and scale dissolves solid certainties. Nelson's column appears less solid than the mass of people; Valentine cannot distinguish herself from the surrounding crowds.

This loss of visual stability and autonomy, and the resultant struggle to not only visually define oneself but also the surrounding space, is a frightening revelation; Tietjens's concrete world with stable surfaces and optical boundaries is dissolved by war. Sylvia, temporarily at the centre of warfare, captures this horror: ‘It moved and moved, under your eyes dissolving, yet always there’ (*NMP* 178). Tietjens repeatedly shows a thwarted desire to escape the subterranean trenches and recapture his exact, peripheral vision in order to impose a visual authority over time and space. Distance, Tietjens believes, gives relief from the disordered sights of war. In *A Man Could Stand Up* –, Tietjens imagines that ‘if his head [...] were suspended by a process of levitation to that distance above the duckboard on which, now, his feet were, he would be in an inviolable sphere’ (*MCSU* 60). Tietjens's inner

¹⁸ Wyndham Lewis, *Blasting and Bombardiering* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1937), p. 81.

¹⁹ Ford, *A Man Could Stand Up* –, ed. Sara Haslam, in *Parade's End*, 4 vols. (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2011), III, p. 45. Hereafter referred to as *MCSU* in parenthetical citations.

need to escape war conflicts with his overt insistence on returning to the trenches. These conflicting desires mirror F. C. Bartlett's 1927 psychological analysis of modern warfare in which he examined the desire of trench soldiers with 'high ideals of [...] duty' to escape the front-line.²⁰ Bartlett described three practicable avenues of escape for a man with steadfast scruples. He wrote: 'the man may receive an incapacitating wound, he may be taken prisoner, or he may be killed'.²¹ Bartlett's description suggests an interesting framework through which to analyse Tietjens. It indicates that Tietjens's desire to escape, and his mental breakdown, is partly due to the duplicitous nature of sight and the continual conflict, during war, between what is visually public and private. The three avenues of escape, which Bartlett describes, can be applied to Tietjens's on-going visual dilemma.

Firstly, the incapacitating wound. A fundamental factor in Tietjens's breakdown, witnessed in *No More Parades*, is the sight of 'a Tommy putting his rifle to his pal's upper arm and firing....' (*NMP* 174). This is significant because, when Tietjens describes it, Ford replaces his speech with an ellipsis suggesting an unarticulated depth to this remembered vision. Furthermore, rather than reprimanding both soldiers, Tietjens turns a blind eye because he claims that lying on the ground 'rather obscured his sense of what he saw' (*NMP* 175). Ford's use of the word 'sense' here is intriguing because it draws attention not only to the uncertainty of sight but also the difficulty Tietjens has in making sense of sight; he is not only unsure of what he sees but also has difficulty processing such a disturbing image. Tietjens experiences 'a climax of mental torture' (*NMP* 175) over this moment because, in part, he sees an intensely private sight being exposed, through and by war, as a public spectacle; he would not have witnessed this intimate moment

²⁰ F. C. Bartlett, *Psychology and the Soldier* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927), p. 192.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

outside of war. Sylvia notes that such scenes hold an 'intimacy [...] more than [she (an outsider) can] bear' (*NMP* 175). Tietjens's reaction can also be attributed to his desire to escape not only that remembered moment but also the present reality of war. As Cowley explains: 'a man would do *that*, to get out of *'that 'ell'* (*NMP* 175; Ford's italics). These words ironically capture Tietjens's own unarticulated desire to escape.

Secondly, to be taken prisoner. Tietjens's constant fear of being taken prisoner – the 'thing that he dreaded most in the world' (*MCSU* 153) – hinges on the fact that it would result in a complete 'invasion of his privacy' (*MCSU* 69).²² In war, there is little seclusion for the individual. This fear constantly surfaces in Ford's uncompleted 1918/19 manuscript 'True Love & a General Court Martial' which was later reworked into *Parade's End*. In it, Ford makes apparent the tension between the fast eroding public and private domains of sight and space:

In the secret and inmost recesses of his soul he reproved himself for caring so much about the War. What was the war to him? What did it matter to him? Yet he knew he would have screamed out if he had heard that the Hun had broken through a bit of our line. Nay, more. He knew that he would scream out if he imagined it to himself – yes, at the mere thought, carefully imagined, of these people, bunching, lumbering, in field-grey, over one of our parapets, on their stomachs, shuffling in their great, hideous boots round so as to drop feet foremost into our trench.²³

Bodily distinctions are blurred here: it is hard to distinguish between the individual body, the body of men, and the enemy. Ford revises this passage in *Parade's End*, when Tietjens focuses his sight on the German Front, and, interestingly, the fear of vision uncontained is made much more explicit. Tietjens imagines 'eighty pairs of eyes surveying what he was going to survey' (*MCSU* 66) and his glasses are unable to focus upon the 'black shadows' and 'vast dimensions' (*MCSU* 68) of the enemy

²² In 'Shell Shock' from *Mightier than the Sword*, Ford recounts being blown up in 1916 in an experience that closely mimics Tietjens's own. Ford writes: 'The night-nightmare was worse, but the day one was as bad as was necessary. I thought I had been taken prisoner by the enemy forces and was lying on the ground, manacled hand and foot' Ford, *War Prose*, ed. Max Saunders (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999), p. 222.

²³ Ford, *War Prose*, p. 131.

camp. He describes this incalculable scale as ‘infinitely threatening’ and his most ‘intimate fear’ (Ibid.). It is significant that Ford describes this horror of the immense in terms that echo the intimacy which Sylvia notes between Cowley and her husband; the same intimate bond that existed between the wounded soldier and his comrade that deliberately shot him. Uncontrollable sight is described in terms of intimacy because it threatens to destroy the strict boundaries of Tietjens’s personal sight; war does not respect privacy.²⁴

Death, then, is the only viable escape for Tietjens. He cannot self-harm because it goes against his scrupulous sense of duty and he cannot be taken prisoner because he suffers something akin to anthropophobia. It is worth noting that Ford himself seems to have been plagued by agoraphobia and, in a wartime letter to his mother, revealed that he had a similar death wish: ‘It wd. be really very preferable to be dead’.²⁵ Death offers a release from the all-pervasive eye of war and Tietjens longs to halt, or at least cleanse, his overactive senses: ‘after that tremendous physical drilling what survived would not be himself, but a man with cleaned, sand-dried bones: a clear mind’ (*SDN* 230). Tietjens’s wish to be killed is manifested through his desire to leap above the parapet into the line of fire. Throughout *A Man Could Stand Up* –, Ford repeatedly uses this image to symbolise visual autonomy and it, in turn, literally provides the title of the novel. Tietjens, for example, describes seeing ‘the doctor, a slight figure, vault on to the parapet, like a vaulting horse for height; stand up in the early morning sun....Blind to the world’ (*MCSU* 65). Once again, the desire for escape results in sight being suspended. The doctor from this height can only see the sunlight; he is lifted above the squalid darkness of the

²⁴ The threat that the incalculable scale of sight in war poses to the individual is also shown in Ford’s 1916 essay ‘Arms and the Mind’: ‘For in the territory beneath the eye, or just hidden by folds in the ground, there must have been – on the two sides – a million men, moving one against the other and impelled by an invisible moral force into a Hell of fear that surely cannot have had a parallel in this world. It was an extraordinary feeling to have in a wide landscape.’ Ford, *War Prose*, p. 38.

²⁵ Ford, letter to Cathy Hueffer (15th December, 1916). House of Lords Record Office.

trenches. A similar moment occurs later in the novel when Tietjens marvels at a soldier standing on the parapet firing 'engrossedly into invisibility' (*MCSU* 108). Ford writes that this was the most impressive sight of the war for Tietjens.

Eric Leed, drawing upon Bartlett's analysis, states that aerial perspective carries a 'psychological potency' for the trench soldier linking it directly with the desire for death.²⁶ Leed connects this with Freud's analysis of dreams where the dreamer envisions his own death as a spectacle. Leed identifies a similar psychological split in World War One where 'the realities of war forced combatants to assume an observing relationship to themselves'.²⁷ Franz Schauwecker, a German officer who became a psychologist, wrote similarly about this need to observe oneself: 'above stands somewhere a meaning which orders the million bends and corners and slippery places into an organic whole [...] Only an eye which can gain perspective will survey the whole'.²⁸ Leed echoes Schauwecker in conceptualizing this aerial perspective: 'The sky is charged with intense significance: It *must* be the residence of the observer watching himself struggle through the nightmare of war, for only then will the eye survive the dismemberment of the body'.²⁹ It is important to note how Leed, Schauwecker, and Bartlett all speak of the eye as a separate entity abstracted from the body. It is an unnerving concept because, as Laura Colombino notes of external vision, it is as if 'vision seems turned inside out and coming back to [you] from the Other'.³⁰

This visual phenomenon fascinated Ford throughout his life. In *Ancient Lights* he wrote: 'I seem to be looking at myself from outside. I see myself'.³¹ The war with

²⁶ Eric Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War One* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 137.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Franz Schauwecker, *The Fiery Way* (Toronto: J.M. Dent and Sons Limited, 1929), p. 73.

²⁹ Leed, p. 137.

³⁰ Laura Colombino, *Ford Madox Ford: Vision, Visuality and Writing* (Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2008), p. 161.

³¹ Ford, *Ancient Lights*, p. viii.

its sense of vision uncontained appears to have sharpened Ford's interest. Max Saunders identifies what he terms 'the disorientating feeling of double vision' in much of Ford's war prose.³² In particular, Saunders notes that a passage in Ford's essay 'War and the Mind' shows 'how important [double vision] was to his activity as a novelist'.³³ The passage 'recounts a near-death experience, when shot at by a sniper. Ford imagines the German, then imagines the German looking at him through his gun-sight'.³⁴ The passage is disorientating because it reveals the multiplicity of sight operating in war through multiple eyes observing and being observed:

Curiously enough that sniper – if it was a sniper – is the most present in my mind of all the thousands of bluegrey beasts that, in one capacity or another, one saw out there.... And yet I, naturally, never saw him. I *do* see him. He has a black moustache, a jovial but intent expression: he lies beside a bit of ruined wall, one dark eye cocked against his telescopic sight, the other closed. And through the circle of the sight he sees me.³⁵

Ford does not literally 'see' the sniper but sees him in his mind's eye; the sniper does not directly see Ford but his 'sight' frames him across the distance of No Man's Land. In *Parade's End*, the immense scale of war allows Ford to explore further the uncertain relationship between sight and space through external perspective. We see Tietjens not just looking at himself from outside, transcending his own body, but, more unnervingly, abstracting himself from his sight. Sight becomes an autonomous concept and Ford uses the eye as a symbol of great importance; it takes on a life of its own. This is shown explicitly through Aranjuez's lost eye. The missing eye assumes titanic proportions for Tietjens who tells Valentine that he sees and thinks about it continuously: 'It's a sort of mono-mania. You see, I am talking of it now. It recurs. Continuously' (*MCSU* 199-200). Valentine experiences a similarly

³² Saunders, *War Prose*, p. 7. Mark Larabee also speaks of 'double vision' operating in Ford's *No Enemy* resulting in a blurring of the 'imagined' and 'perceived' Mark D. Larabee, *Front Lines of Modernism* (New York: Macmillan, 2011), p. 47.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Ford, *War Prose*, p. 46.

disproportionate reaction when she sees Aranjuez for the first time: ‘She nearly fell, stepping back. His eye-socket contained nothing’ (*MCSU* 206). Valentine is not ignorant of this type of injury; she comments earlier that soldiers are left ‘in bits: the nose gone...or both eyes’ (*MCSU* 27). Yet Aranjuez’s eye is unforgettably present through its absence. It exceeds the limits of scale and proportion whilst blurring the boundary between internal and external vision.

The surface of sight

Ford’s references to surface, before the war, were usually impressionistic. In *The Soul of London* (1905), for example, Ford intimates the importance of surface as a way of revealing deeper meaning beneath: ‘If we could see the underlying fineness of these things, the fineness that shall be on the surface’.³⁶ Ford’s 1914 essay ‘On Impressionism’ intimates a similar relationship between surface and depth: ‘Impressionism exists to render those queer effects of real life that are like so many views seen through bright glass – through glass so bright that whilst you perceive through it a landscape or a backyard, you are aware that, on its surface, it reflects a face of a person behind you’.³⁷ In his introduction to impressionist painting, *Beneath the Surface* (1995), Paul Smith argues that the creative focus upon surface sometimes undermined impressionism; the impressionist viewpoint and its obsession with relating surface impressions often ironically obscured any depth of meaning. Ford’s flâneur, John Dowell, in *The Good Soldier* typifies this marred translation of impressionist perspective. Successful impressionist painters, Smith writes, showed that ‘the surface of a painting is a vehicle which can carry [a] world’.³⁸ However, Smith identifies that Manet and other leading impressionists were aware of the visual

³⁶ Ford, *The Soul of London*, pp. 38-9.

³⁷ Ford, ‘On Impressionism’ (1914), *Critical Writings of Ford Madox Ford*, pp. 33-55 (p. 41).

³⁸ Paul Smith, *Beneath the Surface* (London: Prentice Hall, 1995), p. 7.

crisis that existed between surface and depth in Impressionism and that they related this directly to the increasingly indistinct boundary between public and private domains of sight. Smith writes that many impressionist works reveal an anxiety over the indeterminate 'gap between an empty, public experience and the more human, private experience that introspection can offer'.³⁹ The implication is that a subjective, partially seeing eye captures a more genuine, authentic visual experience.

Parade's End references surface with a greater awareness of this visual dilemma, or tension, than Ford's pre-war material.⁴⁰ It shows an evolved understanding of the relationship between sight and surface that reflects the impact of war, and the associated erosion of visual autonomy, upon Ford's impressionist viewpoint. There is little substance to the surfaces referenced in *Parade's End*. The relationship between sight and surface is almost one-dimensional; the emptiness of war is palpable. Ford captures this fear in his description of trench life: 'beneath Ordered Life itself was stretched the merest film with, beneath it, the abyss of Chaos' (*IWN* 49). In this sentence, not only is the stability of the surface shown to be fragile but, more troublingly, a void lies beneath. A change in perceptual understanding is shown in the contrasting opening scenes of *Some Do Not . . .* and *No More Parades*. Set before the war, the introductory passage to *Some Do Not . . .* describes a 'perfectly appointed railway carriage' (*SDN* 3). Ford focuses on the surface of the Edwardian interior: he describes 'the windows', 'the mirrors' and the 'upholstery' all of which are 'immaculate' (*Ibid.*). Robert Green writes: 'The railway carriage at the opening of the quartet is described in a series of associations with a world, stable

³⁹ Smith, p. 55.

⁴⁰ A rudimentary electronic search of Ford's work interestingly shows that *Parade's End* contains far more direct references to surface than Ford's pre-war work such as *The Soul of London* (1905) and *Ladies Whose Bright Eyes* (1911). Even allowing for the fact that *Parade's End* contains a larger volume of material, the results are telling: there are 32 references to surface in *Parade's End*, 2 references in *Ladies Whose Bright Eyes*, 6 references in *The Soul of London*. Interestingly, Ngram Viewer, the word count tool, shows that usage of the word 'surface' in published books slightly increased during the early part of the Great War. Usage peaked in 1915. (Search conducted on books published in English between 1900 and 1920).

and unquestioned, that both surrounded the compartment and, in a sense, supported it'.⁴¹ This scene contrasts with the opening passage of *No More Parades* which is 'desultory [...] and transfused with a brown-orange dust that was light' (*NMP* 9). Darkness surrounds the fragile hut in which the characters sit: we are told that the doorway is a 'parallelogram of black' and that beyond it is 'the black circle of the horizon' (*Ibid.*). Ford uses these two differing passages to examine how the scale of war changes the relationship between sight, surface, and space. His utilisation of the railway carriage also enables us to examine his changing relationship with these elements. A comparison can be made with the railway carriages that Ford describes with an interested, impressionist eye in his pre-war work. In *The Soul of London*, for example, Ford analyses the effect that the surface of windows in trains have upon human perception: 'One is behind a glass as if one were gazing into the hush of a museum [...] One sees, too, so many little bits of uncompleted life. As the train pauses one looks down into a main street – and all streets are hardly recognisable from a height'.⁴² A clear distinction is made between public and private sight. The glass acts as a literal and metaphorical boundary between the two. Because of this protection against the masses, Ford relishes the chance to observe others on a mass scale. He illustrates the flaneur's ability to distance himself from what he sees outside the window, in the exterior world, both mentally and physically; Ford links private perception with a sense of mental interiority.

A different, post-war jaundiced eye dominates *Parade's End*. The masses hold no visual interest or artistic pleasure: 'Tietjens, who hated no man [...] fell to wondering why it was that humanity [...] was, as a mass, a phenomenon so hideous'

⁴¹ Robert Green, *Ford Madox Ford*, p. 155.

⁴² Ford, *The Soul of London*, p. 40.

(*SND* 100). A similar revulsion at the mass scale of war is also captured in *No Enemy*:

I felt that, for thousands and thousands of miles, on the green fields and in the woodlands, stretching away under the high skies, in the August sunlight, millions, millions, millions of my fellow men were moving – like tumultuous mites in a cheese [...] training to live a little, short space of time in an immense long ribbon or territory, where, for a mile or so the earth was scarred, macerated, beaten to a pulp, and burnt by the sun till it was dust.... The thought grew, became an immense feeling, became an obsession.⁴³

It is apparent in these two passages that the scale of war, where men are squeezed into lines of trenches, has irrevocably altered perspective for Ford. In this environment, a sense of distance – both mental and physical – is no longer possible even though Ford is adopting an external viewpoint to give an overview of the scene before him. Alexandra Becquet likens the overview of the hut that Ford provides in the opening paragraph of *No More Parades* to a camera's perspective. Becquet suggests that this is because the human eye has failed to absorb the dimensions of war: 'it is as a camera that Christopher contemplates his environment in *No More Parades*, starting with a tracking shot of the landscape surrounding him, from right to left and from behind to in front of him, which his eye could not naturally perceive'.⁴⁴ The camera eye that Becquet speaks of, with its telescopic quality, is suggestive of the disembodied, or autonomous, eye that haunts Tietjens throughout the war from which there is no escape or privacy. The external perspective, which he craves, fails to bring him relief from the encroaching masses because he is one of the mass: 'But, somewhere in that view there are enormous bodies of men.... If you got a still more extended range of view over this whole front you'd have still more enormous bodies of men.... Seven to ten million....' (*NMP* 195). Ford's use of ellipses either

⁴³ Ford, *No Enemy*, pp. 64-65

⁴⁴ Alexandra Becquet, 'Modernity, Shock and Cinema: The visual aesthetics of Ford Madox Ford's *Parade's End*' in *Ford Madox Ford and Visual Culture*, ed. Laura Colombino (New York: Rodopi, 2009), pp. 191-204 (pp. 199-200).

side of this titanic total emphasises the challenge of capturing the size; the autonomous camera eye cannot zoom out far enough to capture this enormous body of men that keeps growing in size with distance. Is private vision rendered impossible under the eyes of so many? Tietjens encapsulates this concern succinctly when he reflects: 'A sudden sense of the publicity that that life was came over' (*NMP* 33). The glass boundary between public and private sight for Ford post-war is shown to be transparently thin.

Ford further examines in *Parade's End* the impact of world war upon mass and individual sight – and the associated shifting correlation between sight, surface, and scale – through his consistent references to the topical early twentieth-century subject of mirror-space.⁴⁵ Judith Ryan, in her study *The Vanishing Subject*, explicates the mirror-space visual crux. She writes: 'what the mirror shows us appears to be three-dimensional, yet the mirror itself is merely a flat surface'.⁴⁶ In other words, if we perceive everything on a single plane, then we are left with a surface impression. Yet, inevitably, on being presented with a surface, we are compelled to see beneath. The mirror thus has the capacity both to illuminate and distort.⁴⁷ Ford's references to mirrors and surfaces throughout *Parade's End* repeatedly emphasise the ambiguity of sight by accentuating its many layers. Ford, for example, augments the surfaces of the pre-war railway carriage in *Some Do Not . . .* to reveal the shallowness of visual comprehension. Everything in the carriage is 'gilt-edged' and 'smoothly' perfect (*SDN* 3). Surface even pervades senses other than sight: 'The compartment smelt faintly,

⁴⁵ D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth Bowen are amongst those other writers who explored this important visual crux in their wartime work. See chapters Four, Five, and Six for further detail.

⁴⁶ Judith Ryan, *The Vanishing Subject: Early Psychology and Literary Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 187.

⁴⁷ The film director Susanna White importantly drew attention to this in the BBC's 2012 adaptation of *Parade's End*. She employed a filming technique, similar to the Vorticist photographers' 'three mirrors' technique, to accentuate Ford's references to this mirror-space conundrum. The Vorticist photographer Alvin Langdon Coburn placed three mirrors in front of the lens to create a fractured image known as a vortograph. Rupert Ray, the graphic design team, which helped Susanna White develop a similar filming technique for the BBC's 2012 adaptation of *Parade's End*, explains how this was achieved on the following website: <http://vimeo.com/48143363> [accessed 9th November 2012].

hygienically of admirable varnish' (Ibid.). However, Ford notes that all of these surfaces 'reflected very little' (Ibid.). The surfaces of this earlier passage are set up very deliberately by Ford to be fractured by the coming war.

Ford's literary engagement with mirror-space is shown most effectively at the Duchemin's pre-war breakfast. The breakfast table is filled with an abundance of mirrored surfaces: 'silver chafing dishes, silver epergnes piled with peaches in pyramids and great silver rose-bowls filled with roses, [...] a congeries of silver largenesses made as if a fortification for the head of the table; two huge silver urns, a great silver kettle on a tripod, and a couple of silver cases' (*SDN* 102). The polished surfaces, instead of being illuminating, are blinding. The gleaming silver enchants and distracts the viewer's eye so that it does not notice the reality bubbling beneath the surface: Mr. Duchemin's violence towards his wife and her suppressed desire for Macmaster are shocking revelations for both Valentine and the reader. Ford provides us – as with the railway carriage and the hut – with a parallel image later in the tetralogy that reveals the true nature of Mrs. Duchemin's character and also our visual miscomprehension of the earlier scene: 'She [Mrs. Duchemin] felt at her amber beads with long fingers that turned very slightly at the tips. She had behind her all her mirrors, the drops of her lustres, shining points of gilt and of the polish of dark woods. Valentine thought that she had never seen anyone so absolutely impersonate kindness, tenderness, and dignity' (*SDN* 313). A perceptible shift occurs between these two contrasting scenes as the smooth surface becomes increasingly unstable revealing undesirable truths. As the war progresses, and sight becomes divorced from privacy, surfaces become roughened and the layers are peeled back revealing an unvarnished core. Valentine notably remarks upon this: 'In these days everyone was very much coarsened on the surface' (*SDN* 327).

Ford's continual use of mirrors exposes this visual shift and stresses the increasing publicity of sight as the war progresses. Macmaster and Mrs. Duchemin, for example, give in to their passion not just in front of the mirrors but *because* of the mirrors: they enjoy seeing themselves reflected in the 'eagle mirror' 'like a bejewelled picture with great depths' (*SND* 129). The mirror also allows Tietjens to see the reflection of this intimate moment. The multiple eyes operating in this scene – the reader observing Tietjens watching the lovers voyeuristically looking at themselves – expose the many surfaces of sight. The polish and beauty of the initial image is stripped away; there is no substance or 'great depths' beneath the exterior of this highly ambitious couple. Mirrors introduce similar instances of visual disparity elsewhere in the text; pre-war images are often tarnished by the war. Sylvia, for example, looks 'at herself for some time in the mirror of bluish depths' but acknowledges that her renowned beauty is 'mostly the mirror's doing' and is superficial (*SDN* 194). Ford thus uses the mirror-space conundrum to explore and accentuate the narrowing gap between internal and external spheres of sight. As the war progresses, the surface of sight becomes increasingly fragile and previously unseen realities are exposed beneath. It is increasingly hard to avert not just the public gaze but also the gaze of individual characters from the reality behind projected appearances. There is no visual reprieve from the inexorable propagation of sight. Robert Bly argues that a reflected image is deeply unsettling because it embodies external and internal vision; it is, he writes, the 'living face of the unknown'.⁴⁸ A mirror image is at once observed and observing; it not only returns the viewer's gaze but also seems to locate its source behind the eyes of the viewer. Bly explains this specific three-way visual process: 'We are quietly watching that face [and] all at once the face opens an eye unexpectedly, and we shudder [...] for

⁴⁸ Robert Bly, *American Poetry: Wildness and Domesticity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), p. 157.

somewhere inside, our feelings respond to that. An eye in us opens'.⁴⁹ Bly's observation interestingly echoes Ford's essay 'On Impressionism' and his description of the reflected face of a person behind.

Ford explicitly engages with this unnerving dimension of the mirror-space crux when he depicts Tietjens shaving in front of a mirror in camp:

An insolently calm man was looking at him, the face divided in two by the crack in the glass: a naturally white-complexioned double-half of a face, a patch of high colour on each cheekbone; the pepper and salt hair ruffled, the white streaks extremely silver. He had gone very silver lately. But he swore he did not look worn. (*NMP* 188)

Various dynamics operate in this passage between sight and surface. The single, reflected surface image that Tietjens sees marries illusion and reality; the whole is comprised of multiple fragments as visual illumination and visual deception are merged. Sight is a profoundly unstable construct and Tietjens's unsteady eye emphasises this. His sight operates at three levels in this passage. Tietjens's reflected eye looks back at him; his deceptive eye refuses to acknowledge that the surface is 'ruffled' by war; his illuminated eye registers the impact of war upon his exterior visage. Consequently, two images of Tietjens are shown in the mirror: the 'white-complexioned', silver haired soldier and the 'insolently calm man' who does 'not look worn'. The image's multiplicity is accentuated by the 'crack' in the glass that multiplies the image. The reflected image – Tietjens's double – becomes doubled again as the gap divides the face in two. War is shown here to rupture the surface and destabilise sight; the diminishing gap between surface and depth is again stressed.⁵⁰ This enables Valentine to see Tietjens properly; she sees not just the presentation of himself but also the person behind the facade. She notes, with

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ See Chapter Four for information regarding the use of the mirror as an emblem of truth in mimetic art. Joyce's *Ulysses* notably draws on this history of the mirror as an emblem of mimesis. Notably, Buck Mulligan and Stephen are shown to both look in a cracked mirror noting that 'the cracked looking-glass of a servant' 'is a symbol of Irish art'. James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1922; London: Wordsworth, 2010), p. 6.

positive appreciation, that Tietjens 'had seemed to grow less infallible' because of the war (*SDN* 283). Tellingly, she remarks: 'a man with doubts is more of a man, with eyes' (*Ibid.*). *Parade's End* unequivocally shows that no surface is visually impenetrable in war.

Mapping

This chapter has shown that an external perspective, fixed scale, and a stable surface were all rendered implausible by the scale of World War One. Mark Larabee argues that this visual crisis can be traced through an obsession with maps and mapping in the 1914-18 war. Larabee notes that the Western Front 'was, at its time, by far the most thoroughly [...] mapped battleground in history'.⁵¹ Records show that, by the end of the war, the British Ordnance Survey, War Office, and field survey units had 'published a combined total of thirty-four million maps of the Western Front, or about 365,000 maps per mile of front line from 1914 to 1918'.⁵² But mapping is dependent upon the human eye: upon sight. Larabee suggests that this obsession with mapping stemmed from a realization, and associated deep anxiety, that 'the conditions of modern warfare rendered the very act of observation suspect and revealed profound gaps between cartographic representation and the reality of the trench landscape'.⁵³ In other words, the limited human eye could not accurately map the rapidly changing surface of the war. How do you map world war if a self-contained perspective has been made all but redundant by a shifting landscape and an environment that does not respect private space? Elizabeth Bowen famously wrote that the significance of world war for a writer was that 'it ran off the edges of

⁵¹ Larabee, p. 13.

⁵² Larabee, p. 15.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

maps; it was uncontainable'.⁵⁴ In his essay 'Arms and the Mind' (1916), Ford similarly articulates the difficulty in giving a solid definition with words to the flood of war images:

Today, when I look at a mere coarse map of the Line, simply to read 'Ploegsteert' or 'Armentières' seems to bring up extraordinarily coloured and exact pictures behind my eyeballs – little pictures having all the brilliant minuteness that medieval illuminations had – of towers, and roofs, and belts of trees and sunlight; or, muddy ooze; or of aeroplanes and shells against the translucent blue. But, as for putting them into words! No: the mind stops dead, and something in the brain stops and shuts down.⁵⁵

The various images of war that Ford describes in this passage defy definition. He struggles to contain, condense, and chart, within an external frame, the innumerable 'extraordinarily coloured' sights that assault his eyes and mind in war.⁵⁶ The issue of mapping war was, for Ford, particularly problematic because, as Bonikowski reminds us, 'Arms and the Mind' 'describes [Ford's] duty as an 'official officer' checking the accuracy of maps and making marks in order to ensure that the lines on maps matched with the actual placement of trenches'.⁵⁷ Ford's interest in effectively mapping war was therefore practical as well as artistic.

The 1912 *Manual of Map Reading and Field Sketching*, the British Army's official textbook used by officers like Ford in the First World War, states that accurate mapping depends upon adopting an objective point of view: 'it is better almost that the artistic sense should be absent, and that instead of idealizing the landscape, it should be looked at with a cold, matter-of-fact military eye'.⁵⁸ However, as Ford's writing has shown, war necessitates the opposite conditions: the viewer, immersed in

⁵⁴ Elizabeth Bowen, *The Heat of the Day* (1949; London: Reprint Society, 1950), p. 298.

⁵⁵ Ford, *War Prose*, p. 37.

⁵⁶ It is interesting to note that Ford experienced a similar, though not such intense, visual frustration when attempting to map or chart London in *The Soul of London*. He wrote that London was 'a thing of bits' (p. 8) that would not mould easily into a whole. The whole, he wrote, viewed from a distance is 'a vast cloud' (p. 95).

⁵⁷ Wyatt Bonikowski, *Shell Shock and the Modernist Imagination: The Death Drive in Post World War One British Fiction* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013), p. 67.

⁵⁸ General Staff – War Office, *Manual of Map Reading and Field Sketching: 1912* (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1917), p. 75.

war, has to comprehend sights that make no sense and are untranslatable. *Parade's End* shows how the 'artistic' eye and the 'military' eye are not mutually exclusive. We see this when Tietjens, lacking external perspective and peripheral distance, creatively maps a detailed, fantastical response to uncontrollable sights as an attempt to process the incomprehensible. This happens quite literally when he imagines his dead comrade's blood illustrating the pages of a book: 'The whole map of the embattled world ran out in front of him – as large as a field. An embossed map in greenish *papier mâché* – a ten-acre field of embossed *papier mâché*: with the blood of O Nine Morgan blurring luminously over it' (*NMP* 239). This map purposefully makes no sense; it cannot be easily read or interpreted by an outsider; the sights of war – O Nine Morgan's blood – flow over the map blurring any distinct boundaries.

In this description we see a crucial conflict between an elevated eye and a proximate eye as Tietjens attempts to process mentally what he has literally seen. Mark Conroy, examining the significance of wartime mapping, writes of this visual tension in *Parade's End*: 'The map presents the viewer with a God's-eye view of a portion of creation; but the fact that he needs the map in the first place [...] indicated just how fictional that God's-eye view really is'.⁵⁹ He continues: 'As a result, the user of a map participates at once on two planes of existence: one that of a creature moiling along the surface [...]; the other that of a "contemplative person, looking at the land sloping down"'.⁶⁰ As the war progresses in *Parade's End*, an omniscient eye becomes an increasingly inadequate tool to see with. An elevated perspective becomes associated with hypocrisy and sightlessness in *Parade's End*. Ford derides Macmaster and Ethel for keeping their eyes 'fixed on the higher things' (*MCSU* 14)

⁵⁹ Mark Conroy, 'A Map of Tory Misreading in *Parade's End*', in *Ford Madox Ford and Visual Culture*, ed. Laura Colombino (New York: Rodopi, 2009), pp. 175-90 (p.175).

⁶⁰ Conroy, p. 176.

throughout the war; Ethel turns a deliberately blind eye to the realities of war – the ‘millions of men’s lives’ at risk – when she tells Valentine ‘“if you moved in the higher circles you would look at these things with more aloofness”’ (*SDN* 312). Tietjens encapsulates this visual realization when he reflects that:

Painter fellows doing battlefields never got that *intimate* effect. Intimate to them there. Unknown to the corridors in Whitehall....Probably because they – the painters – drew from living models or had ideas as to the human form.... But these were not limbs, muscles, torsi....Collections of tubular shapes in field-grey or mud-colour they were. (*MCSU* 68)

Ford’s italicizing of ‘intimate’ suggests that a removed viewpoint was no longer functional in wartime. He actively undermines the objective, mapping eye of the military, as detailed in the *Manual of Map Reading*, by attacking the ‘painter fellows’ of ‘Whitehall’. Later in the work, Ford similarly disparages the short-sightedness of the Whitehall civil servants reading maps: ‘hirsute, bespectacled creatures who peered through magnifying glasses’ (*MCSU* 152).

The shift away from an eagle eye towards a proximate eye during the war can be seen by the changing way Tietjens perceives the landscape of *Parade’s End*. Before the war, Tietjens sees the landscape through a painter’s eyes: ‘He loved this country for the run of its hills, the shape of its elm trees and the way the heather, running uphill to the skyline, meets the blue of the heavens’ (*SDN* 229).⁶¹ The eye sees the landscape as a whole, framed through an external perspective. Tietjens, we know, before the war is ‘an exact observer’ who sees ‘clearly, coldly, straight, not obliquely’ (*SDN* 230). However, the second half of this paragraph gives a premonition of the impact of war upon sight: ‘War for this country could only mean humiliation,

⁶¹ The painter Janice Biala, Ford’s last love, stressed that visual distance was essential to the successful interpretation of any work of art however abstract or impressionistic. She wrote that it was impossible to translate or make sense of art without distance: ‘In short you need a certain distance in front of any art [...] Colour works differently when the viewer is close to art from the way in which it works when you step back. One needs that gap, an objective distance, for the contents of that which is beheld to assemble and form themselves.’ Janice Biala qtd. in Sara Haslam, *Fragmenting Modernism: Ford Madox Ford, the Novel, and the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 196.

spreading under the sunlight, an almost invisible pall, over the elms, the hills, the heather' (ibid.).⁶² It is strange that Ford chooses to describe war – a very physical experience – in such opaque terms. This sentence possibly alludes to the gas used in the trenches but it also appears to show a perspective altered by war. *Parade's End* shows the impact of this alteration on both the 'artist's' eye and the 'military' eye. Traditional artistic forms fail to accurately represent the many fluid sights of war: the tubular mud-coloured shapes, that the Whitehall painters struggle to paint, escape the formal definition of the human form. In his 1916 essay 'War and the Mind', Ford wrote of a similar visual disparity between the representative symbols on a map and the sights of war: 'I know that the lines that I made with blue, yellow or red pencils, on the map that showed Pozières, Welch Alley, Bazentin le Petit or Mametz and High Wood those lines which represented Brigade and Divisional boundaries, new trenches, the enemy's new lines, MG emplacements and so on, represented nothing visual at all to my intelligence'.⁶³ Ford suggests here that the sights of war cannot easily be interpreted or represented. War defies logic so it resists being framed as a picture, charted within the confines of a map, or written onto the pages of a book. But Ford also seems to suggest that making sense of the visual sights of war is an essentially redundant act because it is sight uncontained that makes sense of war. His 'intelligence' relies on 'vision', sight not intercepted, rather than on making sense of, or interpreting, sight.

This revised reading of sight, and the implied mistrust of official representations of war, can also perhaps be related to Ford's involvement with

⁶² A similar transition is noted in *No Enemy*: 'The earth existed, of course. Extending to immense distances of field-grey; dimly coloured in singularly shaped masses, as if the colours on Mercator's projection had been nearly washed out by a wet brush. Stretching away, very flat, silenced, in suspense, the earth – *orbis terrarium veteribus notus* – seemed to await the oncoming legions, grey too [...] the green grass of the meadows is put to shame and obscured by clay, water pouring through a gap in a dyke. That was the earth.' Ford, *No Enemy*, p. 13.

⁶³ Ford, *War Prose*, p. 43.

wartime propaganda at Wellington House.⁶⁴ Despite being a ‘ferociously productive propagandist’, Ford complained of the ‘white spray of facts’ with which the popular press overwhelmed the British public.⁶⁵ Mark Wollaeger, in his study of twentieth century propaganda, connects its manipulation of the truth directly with an assault on the individual’s interior sphere. He writes: ‘propaganda is able to restructure [...] to such an extent that [...] the distinction between private and public no longer exists’.⁶⁶ In *Parade’s End*, a collapse of formal demarcations and distinct boundaries can be read in the changing landscape of war. The liquidity of the environment that Ford writes of seems to reflect the lack of visual solidity and certainty in war. The ‘white spray of facts’ and increasing visual opaqueness are manifested through the spreading vapour that envelopes the characters. References to mist increase as the war progresses and the landscape of France is moulded beyond recognition. When Valentine and Tietjens drive through the fog, he is effectively blinded by the impalpable mist, which closes in on them, and is unable to visualise his personal space. As Valentine jumps down into the mist, Tietjens fearfully reacts to the consuming vapour: ‘He couldn’t have faced jumping down into that white solidity’ (*SDN* 156). Indeed, Tietjens’s fear of the indefinable permeates the text. He reflects that it is ‘disagreeable to force the eye to examine that mist. His stomach turned over....’ (*MCSU* 67). Later, Ford writes that: ‘with dreadful reluctance his eyes went back to the spectral mists over the photographic shadows. He forced himself to put his glasses on the mists’ (*MCSU* 68). Tietjens’s fear is founded when Valentine

⁶⁴ The significance of Ford’s involvement in the British propaganda machine of World War One should not be underestimated. Wellington House, the centre of British propaganda during the First World War, recruited established writers to produce works of propaganda during the war that bolstered the moral of both British civilians and soldiers alike. Ford was one of Wellington House’s key recruits and he admitted in 1934 to writing ‘at least three hundred articles and two books [*Between St Dennis and St George* and *When Blood is Their Argument*] of propaganda’. Ford, ‘Que Pensez Vous de la France?’, *L’Intransigeant* (5th January, 1934), 1. Saunders questions Ford’s claim but admits that he played a central role in Wellington House’s propaganda campaign nonetheless. See Saunders, *War Prose*, p. 215.

⁶⁵ Max Saunders, *War Prose*, p. 215; Ford, *The Critical Attitude* (London: Duckworth, 1911), p. 125.

⁶⁶ Mark Wollaeger, *Modernism, Media, and Propaganda* (California: Sage, 1992), p. 155.

unwittingly notes how the mist has subsumed Tietjens when she describes him as 'a grey ball of mist; a grey bear', 'A grey problem!' (*MCSU* 29). As the couple search for a signpost, we realise that Tietjens is absolutely disorientated in an environment that cannot be mapped with external perspective.

Tietjens's mapping of the landscape changes definitively with the war. He learns to trust his visual instincts, his sight, rather than a map or another equally inadequate representation of sight. Larabee importantly notes a pivotal shift from 'maps' towards 'mapping' in literary works of the First World War.⁶⁷ Certainly, *Parade's End* appears to affirm this. Tietjens's eyes survey 'a dim, grey, repulsive landscape' that is filled with man-made markers that can only be seen from an immediate proximity: 'repellent posts, altogether too fragile entanglements of barbed wire, broken wheels, detritus, coils of mist' (*NMP* 72). These markers, rather than lines on maps, represent the visual reality of war. In 'War in the Mind', Ford noted an identical change in his own mapping of war. He increasingly came to observe war from a proximate viewpoint: 'when it was necessary to be observant, one saw the earth, brown, reddish-brown, sandy, dusty, veiled by thistles, or with the long shadows'.⁶⁸ Ford's sight, though, is not only curtailed by the surrounding 'long shadows' but he also struggles to navigate 'the blue-grey muddle of little hills [...] without features'.⁶⁹ Both this account, and Tietjens's description of mapping war, emphasise a sense of profound isolation because the individual's experience of war resists being visually processed in any standardized, communicable way. Ford, and his character Tietjens, both feel disorientated and bewildered by the constant renegotiation of the relationship between sight and space. Throughout books one to three of the tetralogy, Ford constantly augments the vast dimensions of the global

⁶⁷ Larabee, p. 15.

⁶⁸ Ford, *War Prose*, p. 42.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

conflict that he cannot conventionally chart. Valentine frequently references the 'immense spaces full of pain' (*SDN* 286); Sylvia projects her hatred at Tietjens 'over all that black land and water' 'across a country and a sea' (*NMP* 67); Tietjens finds himself baffled when thinking about 'the civilian population' 'outside all this engrossed and dust-coloured world' of the front-line (*NMP* 68). Consequently, Tietjens is divorced from his homeland and views it with changed eyesight. Isolated on the front-line, he comprehends how his role as an 'invisible', 'great English landowner' (*NMP* 96) – who previously had no need to be visible because his territory, so visibly marked, defined him visually – has become increasingly untenable throughout the war. Tietjens's controversial decision to let Sylvia's Catholic son inherit Anglican Groby illustrates this irrevocable change. The land once so clearly mapped, valued, and vital is altered forever in his eyes: it can no longer be seen as Tietjens's space.

Sight and scale in *Parade's End*

Parade's End shows how the war intensified and focussed Ford's literary fascination with visual scale. The mass scale of war challenges visual autonomy and liquefies the boundaries between public and private sight. Throughout *Parade's End* we see a conflict between the elevated eye and the proximate eye. Laura Colombino concludes that war results in a seismic perceptual shift between the two:

The eye, deprived of its former privileged viewpoint, undergoes a constant process of decentring and loss of meaning. Nothing here allows Tietjens to abstract himself from the 'spectacle' and observe it from without; instead, he is forced to penetrate the recesses of vision and struggle in its quagmire.⁷⁰

Parade's End captures this loss of control over vision but sight emerges as increasingly autonomous and remarkably resolute in its fluidity. This manifests itself in the changing way the landscape is perceived throughout the tetralogy. As the

⁷⁰ Laura Colombino, *Ford Madox Ford: Vision, Visuality and Writing*, p. 146.

characters realise that an omniscient eye ineffectively maps the landscape of war, and that the reality of war is inherently resistant to visual representation, maps no longer control and represent sight; rather, mapping is dependent upon and determined by the variability of vision. The war necessitates, what Larabee refers to as, 'an alternative form of mapping'.⁷¹ This, I have suggested, is flexible, incomplete, and subjective; it acknowledges that sight cannot be effectively contained or represented. At the conclusion of the tetralogy, the end of *Last Post*, Valentine looks 'into the distant future' and hopes to reclaim the smooth surface of external perspective: 'things would spread out... like a plain seen from a hill'.⁷² Yet this vision collides with the present and is prevented from being:⁷³ Tietjens desires that they should 'get into some hole together!' (*MCSU* 210).⁷⁴ The struggle between sight and space is thus resolved to be unresolved.⁷⁵ This inherent resolutive visual contradiction is evoked through the destabilised self or 'I' (*LP* 204) that Ford emblematically chooses to end *Parade's End* with. The future is faced with an uncertain eye.

⁷¹ Larabee, p. 52.

⁷² Ford, *Last Post*, ed. Paul Skinner, in *Parade's End*, (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2011), IV, p. 188. Hereafter referred to as *LP* in parenthetical citations.

⁷³ A similar moment occurs in *No Enemy* where Gringoire, rather like Valentine, longs for a return to a pre-war, stabilized, and constant viewpoint. He recognizes, however, that his desire is not to be realised. Ford writes: 'Nowadays one sits in a green field – any green field – and longs for more than just a little bit of loyalty. One longs, that is to say, that one may at last find the *hominem bonae voluntatis* that one has chased all one's life. Possibly one desires that, resting one's eyes in the green of the grass as [...] we used to rest our eye from the targets by looking into the trampled green blades [...] Anyway, one wants the country that is just country – not heaths, moors, crags, forests, passes, named rivers, or famous views. No – just fields [...] that have never heard and will never hear the crepitation of machine guns; hedgerows unwired.' Ford, *No Enemy*, p. 63.

⁷⁴ Of this line, Haslam writes that it reveals 'Ford's ultimate achievement in the literary imagination of Christopher Tietjens' because it shows him adapting to a constantly changing environment. (Haslam, *A Man Could Stand Up*, p. 1).

⁷⁵ Paul Skinner notes that the only certainty of Ford's conclusion is its uncertainty (*LP* xlv).

Chapter Three: A return to reality?

Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* and John Prebble's 'The Soldier Looks for His Family'.

The sight of the returned

The visual capacities of serving soldiers at the front-line excite the interest of many historians, critics, and readers.¹ In recent years, there has been greater recognition that the twentieth-century canon of literature from both world wars seems skewed in favour of prioritising the works and vision of those male writers who were active front-line soldiers. Phyllis Lassner, for example, writes that traditionally 'war literature' has been defined by 'combat experience'.² Nevertheless, the implication that front-line accounts of war are more real, noteworthy, and accurate prevails: the titles of many popular recent publications, which have war as their subject, play on this implied relationship between truth, sight, and active front-line service. Jon Lewis's 2009 publication, for example, is entitled *On the Front Line: True World War One Stories*. Similarly, Hugh McManners's 2010 exploration is called *Gulf War One: Real Voices from the Front Line*. Titles such as these imply that experience at the home front is seemingly less valid than sight on the front-line. But this critical focus upon the front-line is often the product of hindsight and distance. What was the reality for those soldiers returning from both world wars who looked away, both literally and figuratively, from conflict towards the home front? Was their experience of the front-line deemed as significant as it is today?

¹ See Chapter Four for a more detailed discussion about the critical prioritisation of front-line vision and the relationship between sight and distance from the front-line. Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* is one such exploration of World War One literature that notably prioritises combatant experience and sight over other wartime accounts.

² Phyllis Lassner, *British Women Writers of World War II – Battlegrounds of their own* (London: Macmillan, 1997), p. 2.

The focus and priority of many returning soldiers was, and is, upon home instead of war and this causes a marked tension with the prevalent notion that the front-line produces a more real experience or account of war than the home front. Forgetting the realities of war and constructing a stable future is usually equated with successful assimilation back into society. Peter Reese, in his account of the re-assimilation of discharged British Military Personnel, writes how many civilians, as well as returned soldiers, believe that war has no basis in everyday civilian life. This, he suggests, leads to the relationship between sight, reality, and the front-line being fundamentally questioned: 'After all wars the classic civilian reaction is that soldiers need to be brought back to the realities of life. At the end of the First World War there was a universal feeling, captured by Lloyd George's rhetoric, that the time for fighting was over and national reconstruction should be the first priority'.³ Reese intimates that the sights of war are consequently thought irrelevant, and often viewed with scepticism, by those rebuilding a home life. Soldiers are therefore often expected to forget the reality of war and construct, or buy into, an ideal of home life. Sarah Cole notes that returned soldiers often inhabit an undefined state of existence: '[they] seem arrested in states of painful stasis, simultaneously demanding and resisting cultural accommodation and change'.⁴ The French soldier Eudore in Henri Barbusse's account of the Great War, *Under Fire*, is typical of this transitory state. Returning home, on leave, he looks at familiar surroundings with an incredulous eye: 'I recognized half the countryside, and half I didn't. Here and there I could feel it remake itself and melt inside me as though it was talking to me. Then it shut up'.⁵ Sara Haslam writes of Eudore: 'He has become a modern Dipsychus, held in this

³ Peter Reese, *Homecoming Heroes: An Account of the Reassimilation of British Military Personnel into Civilian Life* (London: Leo Cooper, 1992), p. 5.

⁴ Sarah Cole, *Modernism, Male Friendship, and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 18.

⁵ Henri Barbusse, *Under Fire*, trans. Robin Buss (1916; London: Penguin, 2003), p. 94.

position by an inability to recognise more than half of the landscape, internal and external, at any one time. His narrative is his illustration of this inability'.⁶ This unresolved state, which both Cole and Haslam describe, can be traced to the vision of the returned that often reveals a profound disjunction between sight and reality.

This is partly rooted in the disconnection that exists between the sight of those at the front-line and those at the home front: returning soldiers often felt that their wartime testimonies had no place at home. The British signaller Leonard Ounsworth had some home leave in World War One but found there was little interest in discussing the war because his view differed so greatly from his family:

They were more inclined to be on the personal angle, you see. They weren't much interested in the progress of the war, just in how I'd been faring. They don't have the same point of view at home as you have in France, you see. Apart from anything else, they've got possibly a wider view, if less intense. In France you've only got a local view, but more intense, of your own particular section of the front, for say two or three miles either side.⁷

It is interesting that Ounsworth identifies two differing viewpoints operating in the war: he associates the front-line perspective with the partially seeing, proximate eye identified in the two previous chapters and the home front point of view with a more comprehensive but less detailed eye. The gap that Ounsworth describes between home front and front-line vision resulted in a verbal as well as a visual disconnect. Becca Macauly, a schoolmistress, wrote that she found returning men strangely silent on the subject of World War One. With hindsight, she realised that this was because they struggled to articulate verbally the sights of war to a civilian population: 'They had seen things we could not believe and therefore would not tell us about'.⁸ British Private Thomas Baker was one such soldier who struggled to describe the

⁶ Sara Haslam, *Framing Modernism – Ford Madox Ford, the Novel and the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 34.

⁷ Leonard Ounsworth (1916), Imperial War Museum's 'Voices of the First World War' Archive <www.1914.org/podcasts/podcast-17-home-on-leave/> [accessed 24th February 2013].

⁸ Becca Macauly, 'Interview with Reese' qtd. in Reese, p. 3.

realities of war: 'it was impossible to tell them really just how it was [...] You couldn't convey the awful state of things [...] They just didn't understand it'.⁹ Baker echoes Macauly's assessment of the visual disjunction that existed between the front-line and home front.

Recent criticism generally draws an interesting distinction between the First and Second World Wars when analysing the separation of serving men from their own societies. Charles Carrington articulates the critical consensus that the Great War resulted in a 'gulf that lay between civilians and soldiers who now lived in different worlds'.¹⁰ Peter Reese agrees with Carrington's observation of the First World War and writes that it contrasted with World War Two where 'there was never the same irredeemable gulf between the battlefield and civilian life'.¹¹ Sara Haslam further explains this difference between the wars:

Soldiers returned from this zone of obliteration [the western front] to an England virtually untouched by war. The Second World War left London and other cities cratered and ravaged by the Blitz. After the Great War, the architecture and landscape of England were unchanged except, here and there, for relatively slight damage from air raids. Apart from the injured, there was no sign of war having taken place.

What the soldiers who were returning lacked was an external and reciprocal echo of that which they had seen and done and felt. They could see nothing around them on their coming home that answered or balanced what they had experienced in France. They had been changed, irreparably. Where was the subsequent change in their external landscape? It was not there. The civilian population was a significant part of this problem.¹²

Haslam underlines the necessity for returning soldiers to have a visual trace, or 'sign', of war at home. As we saw in Chapter One, the visual trace is a significant means through which the incommunicable reality of war can be shown: it can externalise internally processed sights. Implicit in Haslam's observation is the

⁹Thomas Baker (date unknown). Imperial War Museum's 'Voices of the First World War' Archive <www.1914.org/podcasts/podcast-17-home-on-leave/> [accessed 24th February 2013].

¹⁰ Charles Carrington, *Soldier from the Wars Returning* (Hampshire: Gregg Revivals, 1991), p. 223.

¹¹ Reese, p. 206.

¹² Haslam, p. 33.

underlying anxiety that returning soldiers share about being seen. Their concern about the home front not 'seeing' war can be connected with their deeply rooted concern that they themselves will not be seen or recognised by those at home. If all traces of war are removed, is the returned soldier at risk of not being seen as well?

The returned soldier's concern of not being seen by a civilian population seems strangely augmented by the Second World War. Although, as Haslam notes, the front-line/home front divide was blurred by the intrusion of war into the home through the Blitz, the returned soldier seemed more visually disorientated at home than in the previous war. Visual traces of war were widespread across England during the Second World War but the returned soldier was at risk of being subsumed by these other traces. Whereas returning soldiers from the Front were noticed during, and after, the First World War, they lost this distinction in the Second because everyone, on the front-line and at home, had experienced war. In contrast to the Great War, where returning servicemen could not marry the sights of war with the sights of home life, many soldiers returning from World War Two found they could not marry their preconceived images of home with the sight of a home front scarred and altered by war. Kathleen Hasted wrote of her husband's return in March 1946 as a demobbed soldier and the difficulty he had in adjusting to the sights of his home environment grown strange with war: 'My husband carried my image in his mind of me waving him off at the station and six years later still expected me to be just the same, dressed in the same clothes etc. So it was a shock to him to find this other independent person'.¹³ An information sheet written by an anonymous, demobbed World War Two soldier signifies how widespread this visual estrangement was. Entitled 'A Soldier's Guide to Britain', it gives returning servicemen a light-hearted

¹³ Kathleen Hasted qtd. in Ben Wicks, *Welcome Home: True Stories of Soldiers Returning from World War Two* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991), p. 55.

impression, as seen from the standpoint of a visiting foreigner, of the United Kingdom during the immediate post-war period.¹⁴

It is thus unsurprising that the returned soldier, his ambiguous state, and associated disjointed vision are featured in the works of many writers from both world wars. Robert Graves in *Goodbye to All That* (1929) explored the returning soldier's visual disjunction with home life; Henry Green's fictional account of returned serviceman Charley Summers, *Back* (1946), notes that returning soldiers 'found everything different to what we expected';¹⁵ Elizabeth Bowen, in *The Heat of the Day* (1949), shows how conscious Stella's soldier son Roderick is about being seen to fit in when returning home:

He was at the beginning physically at a loss; until, by imitation of her attitudes he supplied himself with some way to behave, look, stand – even, you might say, be. His body could at least copy, if not at once regain, unsoldierly looseness and spontaneity. And he traced his way back by these attitudes, one by one, as though each could act as a clue or signpost to the Roderick his mother remembered, the Roderick he could feel her hoping to see.¹⁶

Yet, despite the multitude of literary examples such as these, critical explorations of war literature have tended to, as Cole suggests, ignore the sight of those fictional returned soldiers whose focus is on home rather than upon war. She writes of her concern that the fictional characters of returned soldiers, trying to assimilate into civilian life, have been 'all but ignored by literary critics'.¹⁷ This is partly because many observations of returned servicemen often focus on what can be seen and understood: physical disabilities, for example, often feature in descriptions of returned soldiers. Virginia Woolf's observation of injured veterans typifies this response: 'I sometimes see dreadful looking spiders propelling themselves along the

¹⁴ Anon., 'A Soldier's Guide to Britain', date unknown, Imperial War Museum's collection, Catalogue number: Documents.69, Category: private papers, Catalogue date: 1988.

¹⁵ Henry Green, *Back* (1946; London: Harvill Press, 1998), p. 25.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Bowen, *The Heat of the Day* (1949; London: Reprint Society, 1950), p. 45. (See Chapter Four for an analysis of sight in *The Heat of the Day*). Again, we see the importance of the visual trace: Roderick is shown to trace his way back from war.

¹⁷ Cole, p. 18.

platform – men all body – legs trimmed off close to the body’.¹⁸ Reflections such as these have meant that the sight, or spectacle, of returned soldiers has critically subsumed the significance of the returned men’s actual sight. Trudi Tate confirms this: ‘The wounded returned soldier became a spectacle in civilian society’.¹⁹ In Tate’s analysis, the wound comes to symbolise the wounded soldier.

This chapter focuses on returned combatants’ sight rather than the ‘sight’ of returned servicemen. It specifically explores Rebecca West’s first published novel *The Return of the Soldier* (1918) and John Prebble’s Second World War short story ‘The Soldier Looks for his Family’ (1944). Both these works feature returning soldiers who do not bear any visible traces of war. The chapter examines how writers from both world wars use fictional representations of returned soldiers to explore the interface between front-line and home front vision and the associated connection between seeing, fantasy, and reality. It also questions whether the profound association between sights real and imagined, which the vision of returned men often revealed, further destabilised sight in wartime so adding to the perception of the returned soldier as a critically unresolved figure. I have chosen West’s novel and Prebble’s short story because they both feature soldiers returning home, with a focus on the home front, mid-war. The distinction between returning and returned soldiers is, I feel, slight but significant. Both Barbusse’s account of Eudore’s leave during war and Bowen’s description of Roderick’s similar homecoming emphasise the heightened fluidity of their sight and the lack of distinction between reality and illusion: Eudore observes how solid sights melt before his eyes and Roderick describes a similar physical mutability to vision. Their uncertain state of transition

¹⁸ Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: 1920-1924*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell, 5 vols. (London: Hogarth, 1978), II, p. 93.

¹⁹ Trudi Tate, *Modernism, History and the First World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 97.

mid-war – neither returned nor departed – appears to heighten these unstable aspects of sight that adds an interesting dimension to this exploration.

The Return of the Soldier

Critical overview

Published at the end of World War One in 1918, Rebecca West's novel tells the story of soldier Chris Baldry's homecoming to his country estate in England. He is suffering from amnesia and cannot remember the war or his immediate past including his marriage to wife Kitty. The novel has suffered from a long history of critical neglect, mainly because readers dislike the seemingly miraculous psychological cure of Chris at the end of the novel and his return to war.²⁰ The returned soldier is often interpreted as a mere psychological tool for West: Allen writes that Chris and the novel 'reads like a dramatization of a case history'.²¹ However, the work has undergone something of a critical revival in recent years with the majority of criticism examining the female perspective of war shown in the text.²² This has led to the returned soldier often being side-lined from feminist readings of the novel. Victoria Glendinning's introduction to the Virago edition of the text is notably dismissive of Chris: 'It seems to me that he [Chris] himself [...] is not an interesting character; he is the epitome of English masculine fineness, virtue and charm, a love-object. The interest and the tension of the book lie in the three women who, in their crucially different ways, care about him'.²³ Glendinning suggests the returned soldier is an

²⁰ Walter Allen, Peter Wolfe and Motley F. Deakin all criticise the psychological cure of Chris which they see as a thinly veiled plot device. See Walter Allen's *The Modern Novel* (1964), Motley F. Deakin's *Rebecca West* (1980), and Peter Wolfe's *Rebecca West: Artist and Thinker* (1971). More recent criticism has also disregarded the novel. Bonnie Kime Scott's *Refiguring Modernism* (1995) and Bernard Schweitzer's *Rebecca West: Heroism, Rebellion, and the Female Epic* (2002) have concentrated on West's other work.

²¹ Walter Allen, *The Modern Novel* (New York: Dutton, 1964), p. 62.

²² Laura Cowan's article 'The Fine Frenzy of Artistic Vision: Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* as a Feminist Analysis of World War I' (1998) and Ann Norton's *Paradoxical Feminism: The Novels of Rebecca West* (2000) notably provide feminist readings of the novel.

²³ Victoria Glendinning, 'Introduction', *The Return of the Soldier* (London: Virago, 1980), p. 3.

inconsequential plot device and that the reader's focus should be on the female characters.

Yet Rebecca West's letter to the editor of *The Observer* in 1928, in which she made 'a clear statement about the genesis and development of the book', provides an insightful context for her characterisation of the returned soldier.²⁴ In the letter, West notes that the novel is based on an actual reported case of amnesia in a returning soldier from the front-line: 'It happened that in 1914 I heard of one of the first cases of amnesia the war produced'.²⁵ Obviously stung by the dismissive readings of psychoanalysis in the novel, West carefully emphasises that 'amnesia' and 'illusion' were real symptoms of the war's impact for many returning soldiers and highlights both effects as central to her story.²⁶ Two critics that notably focus on the returned soldier's traumatic symptoms of amnesia and illusion are Wyatt Bonikowski and Nicole Rizzuto. Both Bonikowski and Rizzuto agree that Chris can be read as a disruptive presence in the novel embodying the traumatic rupture of war through his amnesia. Bonikowski suggests that Chris brings war directly into the home and analyses what he terms 'the metaphors of penetration' that are present within the text: 'the external and the internal, visible and invisible, surface and depth, body and mind'.²⁷ These pairings indirectly draw attention to the destabilization of sight in the novel: Bonikowski describes their intercrossing as 'chiasmatic'.²⁸ Interestingly, Rizzuto, through her analysis of the disruptive act of witnessing in the text, which she suggests undermines 'continuity, stability, and stasis', implicitly focuses our attention

²⁴ G.E. Hutchinson, 'Prefatory Note', 'West on *The Return of the Soldier*', *The Yale University Library Gazette*, 57.1-2 (1982), 66-71 (p. 66).

²⁵ Rebecca West, 'West on *The Return of the Soldier*', *The Yale University Library Gazette*, 57.1-2 (1982), 66-71 (p. 67). Reprint of letter sent by West to the editor of *The Observer* 24th June, 1928.

²⁶ West, 'West on *The Return of the Soldier*', pp. 67-68.

²⁷ Wyatt Bonikowski, 'The Return of the Soldier Brings Death Home', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 51.3 (2005), 513-535 (p. 514). Bonikowski has expanded this article into a chapter in his recent book *Shell Shock and the Modernist Imagination*.

²⁸ Bonikowski, 'The Return of the Soldier Brings Death Home', p. 514. *OED* definition of 'chiasma': 'Intercrossing or decussation; the crossing or decussation of the fibres of the optic nerves at the base of the brain'.

upon the destabilisation of sight as well.²⁹ My analysis draws on these two articles by exploring fully the destabilisation of sight in the novel and showing its centrality in the text.

Chris's sight

Chris's sight is entirely absent from the novel. We see what he sees through the other characters; their observations and descriptions allow us both to see him and see on behalf of him. This absence of first person vision focuses our attention upon Chris's visual estrangement from his past and present home-life. There is a clear disjunction between his sight and the world around him. Multiple slippages occur constantly between what he sees and what he remembers as seen. For instance, we are told: 'Chris was looking at himself in a hand mirror' and the image reflected back forced him to realise he was 'not twenty-one, but thirty-six'.³⁰ Parallels can be drawn between this scene and Lady Ottoline Morrell's observation that her friend Siegfried Sassoon 'would look into a mirror' often during World War One and seem to watch himself.³¹ Robert Hemmings in his analysis of trauma and nostalgia writes of Morrell's reflection:

The image Morrell invokes [supports the idea] of a past self. In the mirror, Sassoon measures his actions in the tumultuous world of modern war against the calming stability of a reflected image he can associate with an authentic and whole self of the past [...] This fascination with his own image, then, is linked indirectly to his traumatic experiences and is not without its dangers.³²

The danger for Chris is that sights like the reflected image of himself in the mirror are not calmingly stable because they show a fundamentally altered self. This is

²⁹ Nicole Rizzuto, 'Towards an Ethics of Witnessing: Traumatic Testimony in Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier*', *College Literature*, 39.4 (2012), 7-33 (p. 8).

³⁰ Rebecca West, *The Return of the Soldier* (1918; London: Virago, 1980), p. 45. Hereafter referred to as *RS* in parenthetical citations.

³¹ Ottoline Morrell, *Ottoline at Garsington: Memoirs of Lady Ottoline Morrell, 1915-1918*, ed. Robert Gathorne Hardy (London: Faber, 1974), p. 183.

³² Robert Hemmings, *Modern Nostalgia: Siegfried Sassoon, Trauma and the Second World War* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), p. 118.

apparent in the taut exchange between Chris and Jenny where he finds it difficult to see her because she looks older:

I found his eyes on me, cold and incredulous and frightened. 'Jenny, is this true?' 'Why Chris, can't you see that I have grown old?' My vanity could hardly endure his slow stare but I kept my fingers clasped on my lap. 'You see?' (RS 69)

Such instances of visual confusion are marked by a contrast between what is expected and what is.

These moments of visual disjunction can be traced to the two distinct forms of seeing that Sara Danius identifies. She writes that visual perception stems from either the human eye or the camera eye. Of the human eye, Danius writes:

Marked by affection and tenderness, human vision is necessarily refracted by preconceptions; and such a lens prevents the beholder from seeing the traces of time in the face of a loved one. The beholder sees not the person, merely his or her preconceived images of the person, thus continuously endowing the loved one with a 'likeness'. Memory thus prevents truth from coming forward.³³

This of course explains why Chris is untroubled by Margaret's significant ageing: 'That he loved her, in this twilight which obscured all the physical details which he adored, seemed to him a guarantee that theirs was a changeless love which would persist if she were old or maimed or disfigured' (RS 78). The work of neurologists Oliver Sacks and C.A. Pallis give a scientific grounding to Danius's assertion that facial recognition depends on marrying literal, visual aspects with remembered, emotional associations: 'The recognition of faces depends not only on the ability to parse the visual aspects of a face – its particular features and their overall configuration – and compare it with others, but the ability to summon memories, experiences, and feelings associated with that face'.³⁴ Sacks also notes that the work of Michael Stephen Kosslyn and other scientists have shown that 'visual perception

³³ Sara Danius, *The Senses of Modernism – technology, perception, and aesthetics* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 15.

³⁴ Oliver Sacks, *The Mind's Eye* (London: Picador, 2010), p. 104. See also C.A. Pallis's article 'Impaired identification of faces and places with agnosia for colours', *Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery and Psychiatry*, 18.3 (1955), 218-224.

depends on visual imagery, matching what the eye sees, the retina's output, with memory images in the brain'.³⁵ Seen reality is therefore a variable construct: it is subject to the limitations of both the human eye and memory. This explains why Chris finds it hard to distinguish between sights real, imagined, and remembered.

It is important to note, though, that Chris is not just passively replacing a literal, current image with a preconceived image. His seeing involves remembering, imagining, and actively creating. We are told, for instance, that he has an enduring faith in 'imagination' and 'make-believe' which results in him gazing at 'good things as though they were about to dissolve into better' sights (*RS* 19-20). The text thus allows for a reconfiguration of Chris's, and indeed our own, understanding of memory. Memory is not a static phenomenon preserved in the past; West shows in this novel what Freud terms, in 'The disillusionment of the war', 'the plasticity of mental life'.³⁶ As Maggie Humm writes: '[memory can be] a site where past and present interact in visual representations which are constantly being modified'.³⁷ Through emphasising the plasticity of memory, West's novel also allows for a reconfiguration of sight: Chris shows sight to be an equally variable construct. As Rizzuto notes: '[what Chris sees] is not the world-as-it-is, without mediation, but the product of an interaction between mind and external phenomena. The senses, "eye and ear", do not passively receive images, "perceive", but also "half create"'.³⁸ Sight, then, can be understood as an active, even autonomous force.

Chris's sight, caught between the pressures of the front-line and the influences of the home front, is under profound tension: it emerges as unstable,

³⁵ Sacks, p. 230. His italics. See Michael Stephen Kosslyn's article 'Scanning Visual Images: Some Structural Implications', *Perception and Psychophysics*, 14.1 and his book *Image and Mind* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1980).

³⁶ Sigmund Freud, 'The disillusionment of the war' in 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death' (1915), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), xiv, pp. 273-303 (p. 286).

³⁷ Maggie Humm, *Modernist Women and Visual Cultures: Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell, Photography, and Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), p. 15.

³⁸ Rizzuto, p. 23.

unreliable, and untranslatable. His sight constantly fails him because he cannot reconcile civilian past images with a present changed by war: “He’s fallen down those three steps from the hall,” [Jenny] whispered. “They’re new....” (RS 57). We consistently see Chris trying to make sense of what he sees by searching for familiar sights and reassuring objects. Jenny narrates one such instance:

He did not see me, in my dark dress, nor huddled Kitty, and with the sleepy smile of one who returns to a dear familiar place to rest, he walked into the hall and laid down his stick and his khaki cap beside the candlestick on the oak table. With both hands he felt the old wood and stood humming happily through his teeth. (RS 50)

These above passages also emphasise the uncertainty of Chris’s sight – the difficulty he has in distinguishing between seeing and seeming – by drawing our attention to the fluidity of his sight. Darkness, twilight, and shadows constantly cloud Chris’s gaze:

He watched [Kitty] retreat into the shadows, as though she were a symbol of this new life by which he was baffled and oppressed, until the darkness outside became filled with the sound like the surf which we always hear at Harrowweald on angry evenings, and his eyes became distant and his lips smiled. (RS 52)

In this extract we can see that Chris is notably at ease in the darkness. In the darkness, Chris can choose what to see: he need not face the unsettling reality of seeing Kitty because she is obscured by shadows. Jenny notes the same soothing effect: ‘The dusk flowed in wet and cool from the garden as if to put out the fire of confusion lit on our hearthstone’ (RS 54). Victoria Glendinning also notes how Chris’s memory of an ideal past with Margaret is always recounted or seen against a fluid backdrop:

In the descriptions in this book it is always dusk on Monkey Island when the young man and the girl meet: ‘In the liquefaction of colours which happens on a summer evening, when the green grass seemed like a precious fluid poured out on the earth and dripping over to the river, and the chestnut candles were no longer proud flowers, but just wet lights in the humid mass of the trees’.³⁹

³⁹ Glendinning, p. 7.

Again, the mutability of Chris's sight is emphasised.

Chris's trauma is profoundly connected to, even rooted in, his mobile vision. The protection that darkness offers him is illusory. Because Chris's memory and sight are such fluid constructs, the line between past and present is undefined and the reality of war constantly intrudes. The halcyon image of Margaret embracing him in the dark is marred by her morphing into the horrific landscape of war:

Her warm body melted to nothingness in his arms. The columns that had stood so hard and black against the quivering tide of moonlight and starlight tottered and dissolved. He was lying in a hateful world where barbed-wire entanglements showed impish knots against a livid sky full of booming noise and splashes of fire and wails for water, and the stretcher bearers were hurting his back intolerably. (*RS* 86)

The above passage is carefully constructed to emphasise the inescapable reality of the front-line. West introduces a series of contrasts to highlight the proximity of the front-line even to a soldier returned from war. Chris hiding in the 'moonlight', magical 'starlight', and sheltering 'black' of night is exposed against the all seeing, all consuming, lit sky of war which is 'livid' and full of 'splashes of fire'. His protective fantasy of inhabiting sights past is cruelly dissipated when his visions melt to nothingness, totter, and dissolve against the indisputable solidity of war with its 'barbed-wire entanglements' and hard, inescapable 'knots'. Moreover, Chris's senses are saturated by a front-line bombardment: he cannot turn a blind eye to the sights of war, his ears are 'full of booming noise', and he is in intolerable pain.

The solidifying of Chris's sight into physical sensation is significant when we consider Jenny's claim that she feels Chris's unarticulated agony 'like a wound' (*RS* 60) on her body. As Chapter One showed, a wound can be read as a specific visual trace of unseen mental trauma. It disrupts the surface to reveal an underlying, otherwise absent, presence. But West is not just using the image of a wound as a visual tool of representation; she appears to suggest that sight is physically

wounding. Chris is inhabited with the pain of sight. Roland Barthes's writing on 'punctum' in *Camera Lucida* (1980) insightfully offers an explanation of how sight might be understood as corporeal.⁴⁰ Punctum, writes Barthes, is not 'a theme' but 'a wound': 'I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think'.⁴¹ In this state, sight comes before cognition: seeing before thinking. Sight unmediated not only assaults the body but inhabits it resulting in physical pain. Punctum punctures the skin: '*punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)'.⁴² This perhaps explains why Chris seemingly distrusts the visual appearance of perceived objects and constantly seeks a tactile relationship with them to confirm their presence in his eyes: 'Dipping his head he would glance side-ways at the old oak panelling and nearer things he fingered as though sight were not intimate enough a contact; his hand caressed the arm of his chair, because he remembered the black gleam of it, stole out and touched the recollected salt-cellar' (*RS* 59). The significance of punctum, Danius writes, is that 'perception, grounded in the body, is thus anterior to reflection'.⁴³ Chris sees beneath, or beyond, the unreliable, reflected surface of sight: his handling of objects offers him a direct, 'intimate' visual assurance. Sight is rooted in his body.

Even though Chris is safely returned home and thinking of the past sights of home, he is forever present at the front-line as a witness to the sights of war. Jenny describes how Chris seems physically present but mentally absent because his eyes constantly seek out the distant past in a futile attempt to make sense of his immediate, traumatic past and his even more destabilising present:

⁴⁰ 'Punctum', as described by Barthes, is a chance interaction between sight and body that resists habitual forms of perception. Barthes specifically relates this experience to photography but it provides a useful framework through which to view the corporeal notion of sight depicted in West's novel.

⁴¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Fontana, 1982), p. 21.

⁴² Barthes, p. 27

⁴³ Danius, p. 196.

That night [...] we sat about the table with our faces veiled in shadow and seemed to listen in quiet contentment to the talk of our man who had come back to us. Yet all through the meal I was near to weeping because whenever he thought himself unobserved he looked at the things that were familiar to him. (RS 58-59)

Steve Pinkerton importantly notes that French psychologists, Francoise Davoine and Jean-Max Gaudillière, have observed that trauma-induced madness, like that which Chris displays, is caused by a person being 'temporally displaced'; someone who has 'somehow stepped outside of time'.⁴⁴ Chris's body, like his sight, is effectively split in two: he is an absent presence at home because he inhabits the front-line. He is emotionally detached from his home life because he is rooted in the pain of seeing war continuously. Chris's irresolute state, and his underlying focus on the front-line, perhaps explains Rizzuto's observation that his witnessing of pre-war events seems deeply unreliable and cannot be easily translated:

The past is [...] haunted by uncertainty and fiction. Never verified as proof by an omniscient or third-person narration, or non-character-bound focalizer, the narrative of *Monkey Island* instead operates as a missive that undergoes multiple translation, from Chris's memory, to language, to Jenny's memory, to Jenny's visualization, and, finally to the words inscribed before us.⁴⁵

Chris's nebulous state, and his inability to turn away from war, is intensified by the fact that he has returned mid-war and is fully expected to return to war once 'recovered'. He is therefore neither defined as soldier nor civilian and his state of being, whilst seemingly estranged from the experience of war by his amnesia, is actually, contradictorily, framed by the war to which he must return.

Chris's visual disengagement at home and the fluidity of his sight are absolutely connected to his unresolved, mid-war state. West's text repeatedly reveals this. Chris is constantly seen as a ghostly presence hovering around the house: '[he emerged] ghostlike impalpable. And then he stood in the doorway, the gloom blurring

⁴⁴ Steve Pinkerton, 'Trauma and Cure in Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier*', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 32.1 (2008), 1-12 (p. 5). Francoise Davoine and Jean-Max Gaudillière ground their clinical theory in the work of Thomas Salmon, an American doctor working during the First World War.

⁴⁵ Rizzuto, pp. 15-16.

his outlines like fur' (*RS* 50); 'Through the blue twilight his white face had a drowned look' (*RS* 109); 'he sat like a blind man waiting for his darkness to lift' (*RS* 125). This is why Chris is unsure of how to see himself particularly in relation to others: he suffers great confusion when he looks in the hand mirror and sees someone different; he consciously inhabits the wood and perimeters of the estate because he does not want to be seen by his family nor does he want to see them; he lingers in darkened corners and doorways of rooms so he can observe others unobserved. Edmund Blunden's First World War poem 'Preparations for Victory' similarly describes a muddled boundary between home and front-line paralleled by a confused intersection between body and sight:

The tokens of dear homes that court the eye,
And yet I see them not as I would see.
Hovering between, a ghostly enemy
Sickens the light.⁴⁶

The returned soldier embodies a parallel state of uncertainty in being and in seeing at home. He is seen and unseen; seeing and blind; absent and present.

Sight in the home

How does the returned soldier's disruptive visual state, described as the anterior to reflection, impact upon the surface of sight at home? The home Chris returns to is, to readers and external viewers such as Margaret, seemingly untouched by the Great War. From the start of the novel, West establishes an important connection between the surface of sight and the physical surfaces, or defences, of the home. She highlights how the surface of sight is fundamentally important to the preservation of

⁴⁶ Edmund Blunden, 'Preparations for Victory', page 274 from a first edition of *Undertones of War* (1928). First World War Poetry Digital Archive <<http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/item/9051?CISOBX=1&REC=3>> [accessed 3rd March 2013].

the home and its separation from the war. Chris uses the smooth surface image he has of home as a physical shield against the horrors of war: '[Chris] desired to carry with him to the dreary place of death and dirt the completest picture of everything about his home, on which his mind could brush when things were at their worst, as a man might finger an amulet through his shirt' (RS 18). A direct connection is made between surfaces seen and the cultural, emotional, and physical value of the home and its occupants: 'We had made a fine place for Chris, one little part of the world that was, so far as surfaces could make it so, good enough' (RS 16); 'The whole truth about us lies in our material seeming' (RS 137).

West utilises various features – mirrors, light, water – to show how the surface of sight is constantly drawn upon by Kitty and Jenny to gloss over the realities of war and deny the war's presence at home. Kitty, for example, repeatedly looks at herself in mirrors and she, unlike Chris, draws great reassurance from the reflected image she sees that remains, on the surface, unchanged: '[Kitty] bent over her image in her hand-mirror as one might bend for refreshment over scented flowers' (RS 15).⁴⁷ The surface of sight also overshadows other forms of sight in the novel especially disruptive aspects connected to war such as darkness, internal perception, and fluid vision. This is most obviously illustrated by Jenny who, frightened by the tentacles of war that are reaching into the home through Chris and Margaret, takes great comfort in the sustaining surface of sight:

⁴⁷ Bonikowski notes that Kitty reinforces her denial of war with a 'narcissistic retreat into images.' Wyatt Bonikowski, *Shell Shock and the Modernist Imagination: The Death Drive in Post World War One British Fiction* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013), p. 113.

My mind refused to consider the situation any longer and turned to the perception of material things. I leant over the banisters and looked down at the fineness of the hall: the deliberate figure of the nymph in her circle of black water, the clear pink and white of Kitty's chintz, the limpid surface of the oak, the gay reflected colours in the panelled walls. I said to myself, 'If everything else goes there is always this to fall back on,' and I went on, pleased that I was wearing delicate stuffs and that I had a smooth skin, pleased that the walls of the corridor were so soft a twilight blue, pleased that through a far-off open door came a stream of light that made the carpet blaze its stronger blue. (*RS* 120-21)

Breaking down the various elements under Jenny's gaze in this passage shows how the soft surfaces of home-life are reinforced or buttressed by hard surfaces that offer protection against unwanted images. The delicate figurine of the nymph, for example, stands 'deliberate', controlling the circle of 'black water'; the solidity of 'oak' panelled 'walls' underlies the 'limpid surface' and 'gay reflected colours'; the 'stream of light' makes the soft fabrics of the home 'stronger'.

Hard images that contrast with Chris's fluid vision are of paramount importance to those characters at home seeking reassurance from the reinforcement of sight as a stable and solid construct. Rizzuto draws our attention to the reoccurring pre-war image of the hawthorn tree in the text. This image, she proposes, is, on the surface, a defined symbol that helps the viewer 'attain mastery over [...] the objective world'.⁴⁸ However, Rizzuto interestingly links West's use of the hawthorn image with Proust's earlier utilisation of an almost identical image that 'portrays the white hawthorn as a figure of disunification' which actually reveals the evanescent nature of the senses.⁴⁹ Proust captures this absolutely in the passage that Rizzuto effectively quotes:

⁴⁸ Rizzuto, p. 17.

⁴⁹ Rizzuto, p. 18.

But it was in vain that I lingered beside the hawthorns – inhaling, trying to fix in my mind..., losing and recapturing their invisible unchanging odour, absorbing myself in the rhythm which disposed their flowers here and there with the light-heartedness of youth and at intervals as unexpected as certain intervals in music – they went on offering me the same charm in inexhaustible profusion, but without letting me delve any more deeply, like those melodies to their secret. I turned away from them for a moment so to be able to return to them afresh.⁵⁰

West's use of the hawthorn image certainly questions the reliability of sight and reveals a tension between seeing as reality and seeing as illusion. The image of the hawthorn that Chris and Margaret cling to seemingly is a stable image and is symbolic of their enduring love; West notes how 'both of them [...] describe [the hawthorn] meticulously' (RS 102) in great detail suggesting the image is easily captured and grounded in reality. However, Jenny's observation of the hawthorn extensively undermines their presentation of it as a solid image and questions its actuality. Jenny notes that the hawthorn is associated with the illusory image of the island that is described by Chris and Margaret 'as though it were not a place, but a magic state' (ibid.). She also muses whether Margaret's and Chris's vision of the hawthorn is disturbed by their emotional attachment to it: 'I suppose that a thing that one has looked at with somebody one loves acquires for ever after a special significance' (ibid.). Once again, our attention is drawn to how the surface of sight operates in the novel: the image appears superficially stable but lacks certainty on a much deeper plane. It is interesting to note that Proust's description of the hawthorn also corresponds with West's presentation of Kitty: 'Kitty appeared to me at that moment a faceless figure with flounces' (RS 96). On the surface Kitty appears apparently self-assured and resolute but this security disappears under visual scrutiny.

West employs a similar technique – the visual frame – to further question the relationship between reality and sight. It is noticeable that both Jenny and Kitty

⁵⁰ Proust qtd. by Rizzuto, p. 18. The text she is quoting from is *Swann's Way: Remembrance of Things Past* (1913).

impose a solid frame around Chris when viewing him returned midst war. This, it seems, helps them to counteract Chris's fluidity of vision and impose control over his transitory state. A frame is introduced around Chris at significant points in the novel where the uncertainty of both his sight and being appears most challenging for Kitty and Jenny. On his arrival back home, Chris stands framed by a 'doorway' (RS 50); similarly, a 'window' frames his disturbing reunion with Margaret (RS 120); significantly, the same window captures Chris's return to the house as he transforms back into a soldierly figure at the end of the novel; it is also used at the opening of the novel when Kitty and Jenny discuss Chris's absent presence at the Front (RS 12). Bonikowski suggests that Baldry Court relies on the invisible being made visible and links this with Jenny's desire to neutralise the threat of Chris's visual and mental amnesia: 'Jenny's drive to know fills the blank space of Chris's amnesia with images in order to arrive at knowledge, since, in Baldry Court's world of surfaces, knowledge is equated with the visible'.⁵¹ Bonikowski notes how Jenny's nightmares in which she projects an imaginary image of the war 'into the blank space of her closed eyes' are suggestive of the war-films which Jenny is known to watch: 'While her nightmares reveal a desire to understand [Chris's] experience, they do not grant her access to it. She remains, like those watching the war films in the safety of the theatre, in the position of observer, distant from the experience of the war. The war, whether on film or in dreams, is still only an image'.⁵² The framing technique that West employs operates in a similar way to the cinema screen and act of projection that Bonikowski identifies. Framing sight lends a solidity and fixity to the viewed image, it also distances the viewer from the image, and, perhaps most importantly, it helps make visible what is sometimes invisible: it gives definition to the undefined.

⁵¹ Bonikowski, 'The Return of the Soldier Brings Death Home', p. 526.

⁵² Bonikowski, 'The Return of the Soldier Brings Death Home', pp. 533, 523.

Yet, just as the hawthorn at once affirms and undermines the stability of sight, so too does West's utilisation of the frame. Rizzuto examines the stylistic framing of Monkey Island and concludes: 'the framing of this section [...] questions [...] coherence, unity, and indeed reality'.⁵³ Rizzuto's analysis of this section does not focus on sight; it concentrates upon the novel's depiction of the past and the landscape situated within it. The framing technique she mentions is also not a literal frame, unlike a window or door, but a technical device.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, Rizzuto's observation is important to this discussion because it questions the premise of a solid frame: she focuses our attention on the instability of the frame's contents thus questioning the stable surrounding. At the end of the novel, it appears that Kitty and Jenny have succeeded in imposing a solid frame around Chris: they see him not as a soldier returning home but as a soldier returning to war. However, this seemingly fixed view of Chris is undermined by him eluding the framework of the window thereby escaping the fixity of their gaze: 'He stepped aside to avoid a patch of brightness cast by a lighted window on the grass; lights in our house were worse than darkness' (RS 187). Here, we see that Chris and his sight are ultimately aligned with darkness and fluidity; the returning soldier not only continues to undermine the stability of sight but also escapes visual definition.

'The Soldier Looks for his Family'

The mutability of sight

Prebble's short story, in contrast to West's novel, is articulated through the gaze of the returning soldier who is home for a short period of leave. He returns home mid-war to a British city that is being blitzed by German bombers. In this little known

⁵³ Rizzuto, p. 14.

⁵⁴ The Monkey Island section of the novel (Chapter Three), which depicts the past, is sandwiched, or framed, between two sections of text that depict the present.

story, Prebble exposes and explores the heightened tension that is evoked by the soldier's difficulty in distinguishing visually between the home front and the front-line.⁵⁵ This difficulty and tension is encapsulated by Prebble's choice of visual verb in his title, 'looks', which suggests a visual search or questioning. Throughout the story, the soldier's sight is surrounded by uncertainty and a sense of unresolvedness. The soldier feels dislocated because sights are at once familiar but unfamiliar: his home appears unfamiliar because it no longer looks like home but it is also familiar because it resembles the landscape of war from which the soldier has returned. This visual disjunction is emphasised on the first page of the story where the soldier's gaze confusedly alternates between looking towards the bombing and looking for home. He is consequently unable to focus properly: 'The soldier was in a hurry to get home to his family'; 'The soldier looked up at the sky'; 'with an eye on the vast darkness of the auditorium'; 'policeman and soldier watched it, heads turned toward it'.⁵⁶ The world that Prebble's soldier sees is engulfed in darkness and visual confusion.

Sight is fluid and resists formal definition: 'The guns began. They had not found the plane but were feeling for it. First, the rippling flash beyond the silhouettes of dark houses, and then the heaving belching noise of the discharge. It went on intermittently, flash, thunder, darkness, the leaping shadows of houses' (SLF 133). Prebble, writing of his experience as a soldier for six years during World War Two, noted: 'I do not remember the daylight hours, only the night'.⁵⁷ His novel *The Edge of Darkness* (1948), also about his World War Two experiences, similarly stresses the

⁵⁵ The story has received minimal critical attention apart from being included in Dan Davin's respected collection of *Short Stories from the Second World War* (1982) and a brief mention by Bernard Bergonzi in *Wartime and Aftermath* (1993).

⁵⁶ John Prebble, 'The Soldier Looks for his Family', *Short Stories from the Second World War*, ed. Dan Davin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 133-40 (pp. 1-2). Hereafter referred to as SLF in parenthetical citations.

⁵⁷ John Prebble, *Landscapes and Memories – an intermittent autobiography* (London: Harper Collins, 1993), p. 285.

impact of war upon sight and the resultant fluidity of vision. Indeed, in Prebble's 'preface' to the novel, he summarises the war, rather like in Owen's poem 'The Unreturning', as a collision between darkness and light and the interface between sight and darkness: 'There were roads that went forward, always forward [...] we knew that there was an end to them somewhere on the dark edge of the world where the infantry crawled forward and took the earth from the darkness'.⁵⁸ The visual perimeters of war are unclear; the 'end' is unseen; the demarcations between the home front and front-line, light and dark, are blurred.

This darkness and fluidity was intensified when Prebble took leave in Rhyl and entered back briefly into civilian life. He found himself completely visually disorientated by the black-out and a home changed by war: 'There were abandoned streets, and dark figures colliding in the black-out. And at its centre was a crowded bus station, seething with khaki figures'.⁵⁹ This experience profoundly affected Prebble who tried to capture it in a short review that remained unpublished:

The High Street was full. Its noise, the flashing of torches, the high screaming protest of girls' voices, came as a sharp shock to the soldier after the silence of the beach. The noise and the crowd thickened as he made his way to the bus station. There, lighting the long queues with red pin-points, the cigarettes glowed, and voices were singing [...] Torchlights shone on the cap-badges. Eyebrows, or the sharp tip of a nose, the dip of a side-cap, would appear suddenly here and there.⁶⁰

Reviewing this passage, Prebble reveals how disconcerting he found his experience of the fluidity of vision: 'The anonymity here is contrived, and perhaps unsuccessful. But lost, indistinguishable [...] we feared and distrusted our anonymity'.⁶¹ Prebble's anxiety about the destabilisation of sight relates not just to an inability to visually define space, home is not identifiable as home, but also an inability to define himself in his homeland. In 'The Disillusionment of the War', Freud explains the disorientating

⁵⁸ John Prebble, *The Edge of Darkness* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1948), 'Preface'.

⁵⁹ Prebble, *Landscapes and Memories*, p. 50.

⁶⁰ Prebble, untitled review, *Landscapes and Memories*, p. 51.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

effect war can have on an individual: ‘the individual [...] – a cog in the gigantic machine of war – feels bewildered in his orientation, and inhibited in his powers and activities’.⁶² Prebble linked this emasculating effect of war directly to sight. The visual anonymity he describes renders him all but invisible in the surrounding mass of people.

Strong parallels can be drawn between the above passage from Prebble’s review and the returning soldier’s encounter with a military policeman outside a train station in ‘The Soldier Looks for his Family’. Indeed, it seems that the short story is a later, more considered exploration of the interface between sight and darkness: it intensifies aspects of this relationship that Prebble examined in the review. In the short story, for example, the soldier’s anonymity in the darkness is emphasised by the military policeman’s inability to read his identity pass: ‘ “I can’t see the blasted thing” (SLF 134). It is, of course, ironic that the soldier should need an identity pass to be recognised at home. The policeman is also subsumed by the darkness. The fleeting impressions of individually defining characteristics such as cap-badges, facial features, and side-cap, all of which are mentioned in the review as well, cannot be assembled into one collective, meaningful image. Instead, the soldier looks at the policeman and struggles to make sense of the individual components that he sees:

The soldier looked at the man who had stopped him. Red light from the gun flashes caught the chiaroscuro of his features. He was very tall, the visor of his cap down over his nose, and the deep eye-holes behind it. The cap-badge shone from the sullen glow of his scarlet cap. He did not look human, thought the soldier. (SLF 134)

In this scene, Prebble shows how sight has become untranslatable. The normal methods of external visual communication – an identity pass and a military uniform – fail: both the soldier and the military policeman defy formal identification. In this passage, sight is a distorting rather than a clarifying agent. An almost identical

⁶² Freud, ‘The disillusionment of the war’, p. 275.

experience occurs later in the story where the soldier is unable to recognise a woman before him because her facial features refuse to mould into a defined image: 'There was someone in the cab. A white face. It might have been a woman there was so much hair. But the face seemed shapeless. There were no eyes, no nose, nothing familiar like that, and he looked at it for some time' (SLF 138). This description echoes a line in *The Edge of Darkness* which emphasises the ambiguity of sight in war. Prebble shows how definite outlines became blurred and concrete shapes dissolved before his eyes: 'Colourless shadows, they seemed to be a part of the rain until a flash of their white faces showed suddenly'.⁶³ These instances of visual mutability are especially disturbing because they show the human form escaping definition: as in the bus station, the overwhelming sense of visual anonymity prevails.

The blurring of sight, particularly the divide between internal and external perception, is highlighted by Prebble throughout the short story and can be linked to the home front/front-line divide: the ultimate internal/external division in wartime. The increasing mutability of this divide seems central to understanding the traumatic unravelling we witness in the returned soldier. Importantly, much of Freud's work on wartime trauma highlights the significance of this division by exploring its function as a protective mechanism. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, for example, Freud writes that an internal/external sensory divide is introduced to protect us against the flood of stimuli that we perceive. He notes that sense organs:

⁶³ Prebble, *The Edge of Darkness*, p. 4.

consist essentially of apparatus for the reception of certain specific effects of stimulation, but [...] also include special arrangements for further protection against excessive amounts of stimulation and for excluding unsuitable kinds of stimuli. It is characteristic of them that they deal only with very small quantities of external stimulation and only take in *samples* of the external world. They may perhaps be compared with feelers which are all the time making tentative advances towards the external world and then drawing back.⁶⁴

Thus, Freud significantly concludes, our consciousness assigns a protective 'borderline between outside and inside'.⁶⁵ In Prebble's short story, we see a complete destabilisation of sight when the borderline between the home front and front-line is visually blurred. During the soldier's walk from the train station to his house, he keeps his preconceived image of home firmly in mind just as Chris, in *The Return of the Soldier*, keeps the image of Baldry Court in his mind like a protective amulet: 'If he could get to his feet he would be able to walk home and find his wife; and she would have a cup of tea for him, and perhaps they could shut out the noise of the bombs and the waterfall of falling rubble' (SLF 135). In this sentence we see the internal/external divide between home front and front-line operating as a barrier against the flood of stimuli that the war is bombarding the returned man with: 'the noise of the bombs and the waterfall of falling rubble'. However, this protective barrier ceases to exist when the soldier reaches his home and finds himself caught in a complete visual impasse: he looks for his house but he cannot see it.

Prebble strips the soldier's house and street of any familiar, identifying features. It is literally stripped to the bone: 'the street was not there, or rather its skeleton watched him eyeless' (SLF 136).⁶⁶ Prebble's play on the house frontage as a human face is important. Ruth Miller, exploring the utilisation of windows in Henry James's writing and Virginia Woolf's work, writes that windows are often used by

⁶⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, ed. Anna Freud, Alix Strachey, Alan Tyson, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), xviii, pp. 7-66 (p. 28).

⁶⁵ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 24.

⁶⁶ Interestingly, Freud in 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death' writes of the war stripping away the surface of sight to reveal the 'nakedness' beneath. This he suggests contributed to the traumatic realisation of how 'ephemeral were many things that we had regarded as changeless' (p. 307).

writers as ‘an ocular metaphor’: they represent the human eye and its points of view.⁶⁷ Prebble’s street is ‘eyeless’ and the house, which the soldier stares at, is an empty ‘gap’ or shell. The windows appear to return the soldier’s own gaze: they seemingly reflect his own eyes. The windows, usually a boundary between the inside and outside, are noticeably shattered in Prebble’s story. Instead of protecting the interior of the home, they are unguarded openings allowing potentially disruptive elements to enter. Sight, far from being an affirmative sense, is transformed by the war into something sinister and disconcerting. Sight completely malfunctions during the soldier’s traumatic reunion with his home. The soldier responds to this fear of overwhelming visual stimuli by turning a blind eye to the changed reality before him: ‘it made little impression upon him. An invisible hand, as if flung in front of his face to ward off a blow, shut out of sight what was happening’ (SLF 136). A few paragraphs later, as the soldier sits in front of his destroyed house and dead family, Prebble again establishes a clear linkage between sight and trauma: ‘He felt as if nothing could touch him. He did not want to look behind him to the house in case there was something to be seen there that might make this tragedy real’ (SLF 137). This sentence echoes Prebble’s own wartime admission of how disturbing he found the collision between past and present sights of home:

You start into consciousness. You have been dreaming that you were standing by Marble Arch waiting for a 30 bus and you could see it as it turned into Oxford Street by Selfridges [...] It is agony to open your eyes. You keep them closed, hoping nothing will happen.⁶⁸

Prebble, like West’s soldier, feels literal pain through seeing. The reality of war shatters the body’s protective shields against the senses. Prebble’s soldier

⁶⁷ C. Ruth Miller, *Virginia Woolf: The Frames of Art and Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1988), p. 101. There is a long literary tradition of house frontages as faces with windows representing the eyes. See Henry James’s reference to windows in the ‘preface’ to *The Portrait of a Lady*.

⁶⁸ Prebble, *Landscapes and Memories*, p. 112.

experiences a puncturing of these defences: a moment of punctum when his body is inhabited by sight.

Seeing the undefined

In the short story, the soldier is isolated within the trauma of his own malfunctioning sight: caught between past and present, between home and front-line, he is unable to communicate the extent of his visual disorientation. Despite us following the story through the soldier's gaze, we are prevented from fully accessing the soldier's sight: it is narrated to us in the third person. His body, like Chris in West's novel, is rooted in sight. The soldier is unable to share the burden of sight with the other characters; they are wholly unreceptive, even resistant, to his distress. This is shown in the encounter between the soldier and the warden where, instead of speaking, the soldier dissolves into tears because he cannot verbally articulate the trauma of what he has seen: 'He looked at the warden quite calmly and began to cry' (SLF 137). The warden is horrified at this fluid outpouring: 'the warden, thinking that perhaps he [the soldier] had shock, ordered him away roughly' (ibid.). Similarly, the girl in the truck that he encounters at the end of the story refuses to make eye contact with the soldier and is afraid of looking at him: 'Automatically she pulled her steel helmet down over her eyes. She didn't look at him' (SLF 139). It is noticeable that both characters avoid looking at the returned soldier. He is an absent presence: unwanted and anonymous.

One point of human contact in the short story that runs contrary to the other visually estranged encounters is the soldier's interaction with the dying policeman. In this scene, the injured policeman is 'too weak' (SLF 135) to speak so he communicates with the dying soldier by directly looking at him. This visual interaction

revolves around the soldier trying to staunch the policeman's wound. The description of this incident is detailed and Prebble makes the wound a specific point of focus in the story suggesting it is symbolically significant:

The policeman was too weak to call again, but he opened his mouth and looked at the soldier. The soldier got up and stumbled across. He did not like looking at the blood but he fumbled along the mangled thigh and tried to put pressure on the critical point with both his thumbs. He could feel the blood knocking steadily, gently, and he pressed harder. The policeman groaned. The blood would not stop its flow, and the soldier raised himself on his toes until his body was arched, and he leant on the man's groin. (SLF 135)

This passage appears to portray literally the soldier's psychical wound as a physical wound. It is giving a definition to the soldier's traumatic encounter with the undefined: it makes the invisible visible. It is literally giving flesh to the eyeless skeleton of his home that is the source of his inner turmoil.

Freud, in his description of the traumatic breach of the internal/external sensory divide, interestingly portrays it in terms that also suggest a physical wound:

There is no longer any possibility of preventing the mental apparatus from being flooded with large amounts of stimulus, and another problem arises instead – the problem of mastering the amounts of stimulus which have broken in and of binding them, in the psychical sense, so that they can be disposed of.

The specific unpleasure of physical pain is probably the result of the protective shield having been broken through in a limited area. There is then a continuous stream of excitations from the part of the periphery concerned to the central apparatus of the mind.⁶⁹

This description of a traumatic breach very much parallels Prebble's description of the soldier trying to staunch the wound. Freud describes a flood of sensation; the soldier is witness to a flow of blood along with the feel and sight of it on his hands. Freud references the protective shield being broken; Prebble describes the mangled surface of flesh. Freud writes of the need to bind the psychical wound; the soldier is forced to press down on the literal wound. The wound is a physical manifestation of

⁶⁹ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, pp. 29-30.

the soldier's internal visual trauma: it externalises and projects the soldier's internalisation of war experience. The wound is a traumatic sight but it provides the soldier with a semi-cathartic release: a bloodletting. It makes 'the invisible visible'.⁷⁰ As Cathy Caruth, in *Unclaimed Experience*, writes of trauma: 'it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not always available'.⁷¹ The soldier, unable to give voice to his trauma, carries round the liquid mark of trauma upon him as a visible branding or exteriorized visual sign. The girl, for example, is terrified of the soldier because she can smell and see the blood of the policeman on him: 'She dropped her hands and shrank away from him. She was very frightened and he smelt of blood' (SLF 139). Through the policeman's wound, the complicated intersection between sight and body, interior and exterior, is traversed: the unseen becomes seen.

The sight of the returned

The returning soldier embodies parallel states of uncertainty in being and in seeing at home which often reveal a profound disjunction between sight and reality. This is partly rooted in the disconnection that exists between the sight of those at the front-line and those at the home front. The returning soldiers in West's novel and Prebble's short story are an absent presence at home, framed by war. But they are disruptive figures not only because they focus attention on the underlying presence of war – as Bonikowski suggests, they bring war directly into the home – but also because they force the realisation that sight, especially in times of war, is an unstable construct and a destabilising force. The mutability of sight on the front-line, as articulated and detailed in the first two chapters, is not exclusively a phenomenon of the Front: it is a

⁷⁰ Andrew Moskowitz qtd. in *Trauma, Dissociation and Multiplicity: Working on Identity and Selves*, ed. Valerie Sinason (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 23.

⁷¹ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 4.

characteristic of war. In both texts, visual boundaries are constantly renegotiated and sight is consequently shown to be mutable. This visual realisation results not only in a loss of visual orientation but also in a loss of visual definition. Visual anonymity for servicemen and civilians alike accentuates, as Prebble wrote, war's destabilising affect on sight: the characters in both texts struggle to define themselves visually. The returning soldier is seen and unseen; at once seeing and blind. In both works, the mutability of visual boundaries, the limitations of the human eye, and the autonomous nature of sight is played out in both the homes and the bodies of the returning men. In West's novel, the smooth surfaces of sight fail to reflect reality; the window frames fail to frame or contain sight adequately. In Prebble's story, the soldier's homecoming coincides with the war directly shattering the home's protective barriers. War makes itself witnessed. The shattered windows of the soldier's house in Prebble's story blur an internal/external divide that mirrors the soldier's inability not to see war. It is striking that in both works, the soldier's sight is associated with bodily pain and, in Prebble's story where the presence of war at home is much more visible, this is physically manifested by the soldier's encounter with the dying policeman and his open wound. Sight assaults and inhabits the body blurring its outlines: the division between psychological wounds and physical wounds is distorted. Sight becomes almost corporeal: the intersection between sight and body is blurred.

Chapter Four: Near or Far?

D.H. Lawrence's 'The Blind Man' and Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day*.

The boundaries of visual authority

As the previous chapters intimated, the twentieth-century canon of literature reflects a critical prioritisation of front-line accounts from the two world wars. By implication, the importance of front-line vision has also been accentuated. The writer Henry Green, who was a child in World War One and an auxiliary fireman in the Second World War, emphasised the value placed upon the connection between sight and place in war. He used the phrase 'out of sight is out of mind' to describe the widespread dismissal of non-combatant writing during, and after, the two world wars.¹ Remoteness from combatant action was often unfairly equated with a disconnection from the realities of war; as Maggie Humm observes, women writers were all too often relegated 'to the position of outsider'.² But, as the first two chapters have illustrated, a front-line perspective does not necessarily result in an ability to see war. Chapter Three has shown that the shifting boundaries of mass warfare, particularly during World War Two, resulted in a blurring of the front-line and home front divide. Joanna Bourke writes that this resulted not only in an anxious desire to reinforce the perceived division between fronts but also in a cultural confirmation of the significance attributed to sight and situation in war. The importance ascribed to front-line visual accounts meant there was an overt need, amongst combatants, to 'see' war. Bourke writes: 'Combatants used their imagination to "see" [...] to construct elaborate, precise and self-conscious fantasies [...]

¹ Henry Green, *Pack my Bag* (1940; London: Random House, 2011), p. 26.

² Maggie Humm, *Modernist Women and Visual Cultures: Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell, Photography, and Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), p. 12.

especially when the impact of their actions was beyond their immediate vision'.³ A tension is therefore established again between the omniscient eye and the proximate eye. When the object of sight is so far removed as to be out of sight, an all-seeing eye is rendered redundant. The blurring of the home front and front-line results in a parallel loss of definition between proximate and distanced perspectives: sight is revealed as a variable, adaptable construct crossing both binaries.

Sight, in reality, does not fit neatly into a home front and front-line categorisation; this prescribed division precludes an accurate consideration of sight. Mary Lee wrote, in the preface to her 1929 novel *It's a Great War!*, of the enormous variety of view-points involved in world war: 'To tell of the one man at the front alone, is to tell only one eighth of the story of War'.⁴ Taryn Okuma, exploring literary non-combatants, likewise concludes that to produce an 'account of [...] world war that strives for accuracy' one must examine 'the important, though overlooked stories of the men, women, and children who experienced the war'.⁵ In recent years, there has been a concerted effort by literary and historical scholars to illustrate the value of home-front writing and address the critical imbalance that has hitherto prioritised front-line accounts of war. Phyllis Lassner and Lynne Hanley, for instance, have consistently drawn attention to the importance of women writers in war. Lassner, for example, writes: 'we have only just begun to recognize that for women writers the World War II home fronts were fertile grounds for the production of a varied and powerful literature'.⁶ Such influential criticism nevertheless still utilises or refers to the home front and front-line categorisation, even when attempting to undermine it,

³ Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face to Face Killing in Twentieth Century Warfare* (London: Granta Books, 1999), p. 6.

⁴ Mary Lee, *It's a Great War!* (London: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1929), viii.

⁵ Taryn L. Okuma, 'Literary non-combatants: Contemporary British fiction and the new novel' (unpublished D.Phil Thesis, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 2008), p. 2.

⁶ Phyllis Lassner, *British Women Writers of World War I: Battlegrounds of their own* (London: Macmillan, 1997), p. 1.

and therefore the polarization of the war fronts persists.⁷ This chapter explores the connection between sight and distance from the front-line: does this important connection influence marginalised writers and impact upon their vision in wartime? D.H. Lawrence and Elizabeth Bowen form the focus of my exploration because they were both non-combatant writers whose uncertain positioning in relation to war – at once peripheral and central – challenged the spatial boundaries of war whilst accentuating the immense scale of world war. Their writing reveals a shared fascination with sight – they both considered vision through mirrored space and analyzed the figurative relationship between internal sight and external light – as well as a specific wartime interest in the relationship between sight and the front-line. How, then, did the concept of the front-line affect their sight and understanding of war and, in turn, inform their writing about war? This chapter, in seeking to understand better marginalised perspectives during wartime, also examines whether the work of Lawrence and Bowen reflects a heightened awareness of the relationship between sight and reality during world war.

D.H. Lawrence and the First World War

The question of where Lawrence stood – both literally and figuratively – in relation to World War One is complex. Unable to fight on medical grounds, Lawrence's seeming distance from the war extended beyond non-involvement; his opposition to the fighting was well known. Yet, unlike many of his literary associates such as Bertrand Russell and the other Bloomsbury pacifists taking refuge at Garsington throughout the war years, Lawrence was not motivated by pacifism. Indeed, his rather public quarrel with Russell stemmed, in part, from his opinion that Russell's championing of

⁷ Susie Hodge's 2013 publication, *The Home Front in World War Two: Keep Calm and Carry On*, is indicative of the persistent home front/front-line terminology.

pacifism was misguided and ineffectual; he called pacifist pamphlets ‘too squashy altogether’.⁸ Lawrence’s feelings about the war were indecisive. He frequently abhorred the violence of warfare but at the same time displayed violent tendencies himself: ‘I feel so bitter against the war altogether, I could wring the neck of humanity for it’.⁹ As Helen Wussow notes: ‘[Lawrence’s] desire for peace and the lust for murder frequently exist side by side’.¹⁰ Consequently, Lawrence’s position in the war years is often that of a marked outsider: he ticked none of the boxes as fighter, patriot nor pacifist.

Many of his contemporaries regarded him as a marginalised figure. Richard Aldington saw Lawrence, and his response to the war, as the actions of ‘a true Anarchist, living outside human society, rejecting all its values’.¹¹ The magistrate, Sir John Dickinson, who oversaw proceedings against *The Rainbow* on its publication in 1915 and who had lost a son at the front, quoted James Douglas’s review of Lawrence’s wartime novel to emphasise how disconnected Lawrence was from British society: ‘The young men who are dying for liberty are moral beings. They are the living repudiation of such impious denials of life as *The Rainbow*. The life they lay down is a lofty thing. It is not the thing that creeps and crawls in this novel’.¹² Dickinson and Douglas depicted Lawrence as a liminal figure or fugitive living on the margins. Douglas’s charge questioned whether Lawrence was in touch with the higher, more noble aspects of warfare connected to a pre-war chivalric discourse

⁸ Letter sent to Barbara Low, December 1916, on receipt of peace pamphlets. D.H. Lawrence, *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence*, ed. James T. Boulton, Andrew Robertson, 8 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), I, p. 56. Hereafter referred to as *Letters I* in parenthetical citations.

⁹ Letter sent to S.S. Koteliensky, February 1915. D.H. Lawrence, *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence*, ed. George J. Zytaruk, James T. Boulton, 8 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), II, p. 277. Hereafter referred to as *Letters II* in parenthetical citations.

¹⁰ Helen Wussow, *The Nightmare of History: The Fictions of Virginia Woolf and D.H. Lawrence* (London: Associated University Press, 1998), p. 44.

¹¹ Richard Aldington, *D.H. Lawrence: An Indiscretion* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1927), p. 11.

¹² Sir John Dickinson and James Douglas qtd. in R. P. Draper, *D.H. Lawrence: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1970), p. 95.

about combat. This accusation implied that Lawrence could not see war from on high: that his home front view of front-line events was uninformed.

Lawrence himself admitted that his observation of the war was distant and that this had a clear impact upon his vision and writing. When asked by the editor of *Poetry* to submit a war poem, Lawrence declined because he felt too distanced from events to write an authentic piece: 'The nearest I could get to it would be in the vein of "The owl and the pussycat went to sea / In a beautiful pea green boat"' (*Letters II* 219).¹³ Although his reply is humorous, it emphasises how adrift Lawrence felt during the war and how tenuous his position as a writer was; his visual comprehension of action was, at best, peripheral. Unlike many writers from the World War One literary canon, Lawrence's wartime accounts lack the authority of front-line vision. Lawrence's wartime status as a non-combatant writer situated far from the front-line undoubtedly added to the critical perception of him as a marginalized man. Lawrence scholars frequently suggest that he personally accentuated his perceived isolation from the front-line during the First World War. Wussow, for example, describes Lawrence as 'a marked man' and 'a maverick' who stood apart from society and war, and writes: '[Lawrence] adopted the perspective of the marginalized other while viewing the events of the Great War'.¹⁴ Such deductions appear to be supported by Lawrence's later admission in 1927 to a life of apparent self imposed ostracism: 'Yet here I am, nowhere, as it were, and infinitely an outsider. And of my own choice'.¹⁵

Yet Lawrence's isolation during the war does not seem straightforward nor a simple lifestyle choice. The very things that Wussow and others refer to, which seemingly set Lawrence apart from society, actually show how little control he had

¹³ Letter sent to Harriet Monroe, October 1914.

¹⁴ Wussow, pp. 45, 15. See also John Worthen's *D.H. Lawrence: The Life of an Outsider* (2005).

¹⁵ D.H. Lawrence, 'Which Class I belong to', *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of D.H. Lawrence: Late Essays and Articles*, ed. James T. Boulton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 38.

over his wartime status: 'Married to an alien, spied upon by fellow citizens, his writings censored officially and privately, his home raided and denied him'.¹⁶ Moreover, these aspects of Lawrence's life were surely responsible for intrinsically connecting him to the war rather than separating him from it: Lawrence was constantly being seized from the margins by the war machine. Paul Delany, in his exploration of Lawrence's life during the war years, shows how Lawrence's perceived isolation from society and the war was actually an illusion: he documents Lawrence's many moves around England between 1914 and 1918 and shows how the war and Lawrence never eluded each other. Even in Cornwall, where Lawrence was most profoundly cut off from social contact, the war came knocking in the form of a 'young army officer, two detectives, and the police sergeant from St. Ives' who issued the Lawrences with an expulsion order because of their suspected involvement in assisting enemy submarine attacks.¹⁷

Against such a backdrop, it is imprudent to assume that Lawrence's home front viewpoint was completely detached, distant, or removed from the impact of war. Indeed, despite Lawrence's often dismissive – even flippant – regard for the war, he nevertheless appeared acutely aware of its impact upon him and his writing. The double-edged sword of distance makes itself apparent in much of his wartime work. Even though physically removed from war, Lawrence cannot mentally remove himself and appears dangerously immersed in it: 'The war is just hell for me [...] I can't get away from it for a minute: I live in a sort of coma, like one of those nightmares when you can't move' (*Letters* II 8).¹⁸ Reading his wartime letters, one is struck by how personal Lawrence's response to the war is. This mammoth event is

¹⁶ Wussow, p. 45.

¹⁷ Paul Delany, *D.H. Lawrence's Nightmare: The Writer and His Circle in the Years of the Great War* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1979), p. 319. Their suspected involvement in the enemy attacks was totally unfounded.

¹⁸ Letter sent to Eddie Marsh, August 1914.

continually scaled down to an individual level: 'The war-atmosphere has blackened here [...] it is soaking in, and getting more like part of our daily life' (*Letters* II 234).¹⁹ As Lawrence's inability to escape war increases, and his associated depression intensifies, he comments how the war is affecting his vision as the invading darkness becomes literal: 'I am struggling in the dark – very deep in the dark [...] Sometimes I am afraid of the terrible things that are real, in the darkness, and of the entire unreality of these things I see' (*Letters* II 307). Significantly, Lawrence likens himself to a blind-man: 'so blind, so groping, so tongue-tied, so staggering' (*Letters* II 302).²⁰

It is surprising, given this context, how little critical attention has been paid to 'The Blind Man'.²¹ This awkward short story, and the perplexing questions it raises, has been largely overlooked in favour of Lawrence's more famous work. It was written towards the end of the war by Lawrence in 1918 and appeared in *England, My England and other stories* (1922). It is the story of Maurice Pervin and his wife Isabel awaiting the arrival of their friend the barrister Bertie Reid. Maurice has been blinded in Flanders during the First World War. The story explores the impact that Maurice's blindness has on these three main characters. There is, therefore, much scope for discussion about the obvious, but to date underexplored, parallels between

¹⁹ Letter sent to Amy Lowell, November 1914.

²⁰ Letter sent March 1915?

²¹ Linda Williams in her significant contribution to Lawrence studies, *Sex in the Head: Visions of Femininity and Film in D. H. Lawrence* (1993), notably explores a link between sight and power in the short story – this is discussed later in this chapter. Otherwise, critics that have examined the story usually attempt to trace the characters' origins: Sue Wilson, for example, states that Isabel Pervin is 'thought to be based on Catherine Carswell' and most critics, including Ray Monk, agree that Reid is a caricature of Bertrand Russell. Sue Wilson, *D.H. Lawrence – Selected Stories* (London: Penguin Classics, 2007), p. 333. See also Ray Monk's *Bertrand Russell: The Spirit of Solitude* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996). Delany concentrates his efforts on proving that 'the basic triangle of the story [...] is much closer to Cynthia Asquith's situation': he argues that Isobel is Cynthia, her husband is Maurice, and Bertie is Cynthia's employer Sir James Barrie (Delany, p. 372). Critics have also focussed on the story's latent homosexual content. Norman Fedder, Richard Beynon, and Paul Delany have all explored the story from this angle.

Lawrence's uncertain standing during the war and the blind man's position.²² The blind man is at once singularly present and absent in the landscape of war; he is, like Lawrence, the enigma that simultaneously frightens and fascinates. Most importantly, it is the blind man that questions and tests the boundaries of visual authority. The story also provides a useful frame through which to read Lawrence's other wartime work especially his poems that have recently attracted increased critical attention.²³ Santanu Das, for example, has explored Lawrence's 1923 publication of poems, *Birds, Beast and Flowers*, and identifies a definite shift in the poems towards a reliance on 'sense-words'.²⁴ 'Grapes', for instance, exemplifies this utilisation of sense-words but also illustrates how 'The Blind Man' could provide added value to Das's reading of this poem. Das writes of 'Grapes': 'we have a drama of deferral as the "invisibility" congeals and takes shape through the "globed" darkness into the "dark grape"'.²⁵ A notably similar complex interplay between sight and blindness, visibility and invisibility, darkness and light exists in 'The Blind Man'.

Blindness in seeing

War is the shadow in 'The Blind Man' that cannot be ignored. The characters, like Lawrence, cannot escape its darkness. The 'strangely serene', 'wonderfully happy' world that Isabel and Maurice occupy is a fantasy.²⁶ We know that Isabel feels 'anxiety', 'weariness' and 'a terrible *ennui*' (*BM* 200) because her husband's blindness is in reality 'a terrifying burden' (201) and she feels isolated and alone 'in

²² Both Gallagher and Barbara Bowen note that 'in many Western narratives, men are punished for inactive spectatorship of battle'. The Thracian king Herodotus, for example, blinds his sons for following their desire to 'see' the wars without participating in them. See: Jean Gallagher, *The World Wars through the Female Gaze* (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998), p. 3 and Barbara E. Bowen, *Gender in the Theater of War: Shakespeare's Troilus and Cressida* (New York: Garland, 1993), p. 9.

²³ Cambridge University Press published a two-volume edition of Lawrence's poems in 2013. This includes previously unpublished poems from the war period.

²⁴ Santanu Das, 'Lawrence's Sense-Words', *Essays in Criticism*, 62.1 (2012), 58-82.

²⁵ Das, 'Lawrence's Sense-Words', pp. 66-67. Das does mention 'The Blind Man' but only in passing.

²⁶ D.H. Lawrence, 'The Blind Man' in *D.H. Lawrence – Selected Stories*, ed. Sue Wilson (London: Penguin Classics, 2007), pp. 119-219 (p. 209). Hereafter referred to as *BM* in parenthetical citations.

that silent house' (200). Similarly, the reality of Maurice's blindness for him, far from having the beneficial compensations that he discusses with Bertie, actually induces 'devastating fits of depression, which seem to lay waste his whole being' and cause him to turn 'black and massive' with 'misery' (*BM* 200); the intense similarity with the descriptions we have of Lawrence's deep wartime depression cannot be ignored. The truth is that the haven described – the country idyll so seemingly removed from the horrors of war – actually revolves around the consequences of warfare.²⁷ Although Maurice and Isabel are removed from any 'connection with the outer world', their world is as fragile as the 'shallow, prattling' (*BM* 200) society that they shun. Lawrence likewise explores the insubstantiality of people through the character of Birkin in *Women in Love*: 'Not many people are anything at all [...] They jingle and giggle. It would be better if they were just wiped out. Essentially, they don't exist, they aren't there'.²⁸

Isabel's body similarly reflects this visual fragility. Despite being pregnant, she remains a shadowy figure in the first half of the story before almost completely disappearing. It is striking that the only detailed description we have of Isabel is when she catches sight of herself in a mirror.²⁹ This adds to the impression that Isabel is shallow because we only see 'her reflection' (*BM* 204) through her eyes; we never *really* see her. The mirror as an emblem of truth in mimetic art is accentuated. Isabel is shown as an imitative representation or a copy of an authentic image. Whilst studying her reflection, Isabel assumes different poses that emphasise the unreliability of literal sight. She tries the 'warm, maternal look', then the 'amused and

²⁷ Delany suggests that a story, which Lawrence began during the war in Porthcothan, about the oblivion of winter, was the basis for 'The Blind Man' (Delany, p. 196). The manuscript does not survive so it is hard to prove but I agree with Delany that the isolation of Cornwall mirrors the landscape of 'The Blind Man' and I suggest the circling shadow of war in the story emulates the increasing interest of the Cornish authorities in the Lawrences at that time.

²⁸ D.H. Lawrence, *Women in Love* (1920; London: Grafton Books, 1988), p. 17.

²⁹ A similar scene occurs in *Women in Love* where Gerald watches Gudrun examine herself in a mirror: they engage in visual combat as both characters struggle to dominate each other through the mirror's reflected image.

wicked' temptress before reverting back into a 'Madonna' like figure who has no significant signs of character beyond 'womanly patience' (*BM* 204). Lawrence's use of this term 'womanly patience' is significant. In *A Room of One's Own*, written a few years (1928/29) after 'The Blind Man', Virginia Woolf wrote that, throughout history, women have served as looking-glasses 'reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. Without that power...the glories of all our wars would be unknown'.³⁰ Woolf elaborates further that these female mirrors were 'essential to all violent and heroic action'.³¹ Both Woolf and Lawrence were apparently making direct reference to the problem of mirror-space and the inherent mimetic conflict between visual clarification and distortion.³² Jean Gallagher, building on Luce Irigaray's examination of mirrors, writes that there is a 'visual and epistemological tradition of speculation [that] is founded on sexual difference: women, or cultural constructions of women as 'woman', have been imagined as the medium, the mirror, that reflects the male gaze seeking its own reflection'.³³ Men are thus empowered and emasculated by the gaze of women: they are seen as powerful but this power resides in the gaze of another.

Certainly, Isabel serves as a magnifying mirror for Maurice through which we see the 'big fellow with heavy limbs' (*BM* 201). We are aware that without Isabel seeing him, Maurice ceases to have a bodily shape for us. This is apparent when Maurice goes upstairs to the bathroom to shave. He stands like any other man in front of the mirror but he cannot see his reflection. He is shaving a blank space and he has to be careful how he handles 'the razor' (*BM* 209) so he does not cut the surface of his skin. An identical moment occurs in *The Rainbow* when Will watches his pregnant wife Anna dance in secret in front of a mirror. Because Anna fails to see Will, and she is solely absorbed by her own visual reflection, he feels invisible: 'He

³⁰ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929; London: Penguin, 1945), p. 37.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² See Chapter Two for a more detailed definition of 'mirror-space'.

³³ Gallagher, p. 6.

waited obliterated'.³⁴ Ruth Miller writes that a mirror reveals the creative and destructive nature of sight: '[mirrors] reveal the extent to which people are their own artistic creations'.³⁵ A mirror can be life-giving by affirming visual content or obliterating it. Both Will and Maurice are dependent upon Anna and Isabel seeing them instead of themselves. In both instances, the creative aspect of the women's sight is emphasised.

However, we are also aware that Isabel's view of Maurice is incomplete: 'she did not look at his blindness' (*BM* 207). Isabel constantly omits this key fact from her descriptions of Maurice: 'he did not look blind' (207). She attempts to see him as he was before he went to war. Her grandiose descriptions overemphasise Maurice's masculinity mirroring the stereotypical figure of a 'powerful' (207) soldier: 'his hair was brown and crisp, his hands were large, reddish, intelligent...and his thighs and knees seemed massive' (207). Lawrence is clearly drawing attention to the presence of two different selves in this work: the fundamental or real self and our social presentation of ourselves. Henri Bergson, in *Time and Free Will*, explicated this division of self. Bergson's description of the externally projected social self is strikingly similar to Lawrence's unstable portrayal of Isabel:

The greater part of the time we live outside ourselves, hardly perceiving anything of ourselves but our own ghost, a colourless shadow which pure duration projects into homogeneous space. Hence our life unfolds in space rather than in time; we live for the external world rather than for ourselves; we speak rather than think; we 'are acted' rather than act ourselves.³⁶

Lawrence shows the collision in his text between the literal, visual impression of Maurice and the conception of him as an idea. Isabel actually sees, when she looks at Maurice, a damaged man. This image is completely different from what she wills

³⁴ D.H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow* (1915; London: David Campbell, 1993), p. 170.

³⁵ Ruth Miller, *Virginia Woolf: The Frames of Art and Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1988), p. 93.

³⁶ Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the immediate data of consciousness*, trans. F. L. Pogson (1910; New York: Cosimo, 2008), p. 231.

herself to see when looking at him: a powerfully strong man who is no different from other men. Throughout the story, the viewer sees the social self and the real self colliding and we get a fragmented impression of Maurice; we have a rough understanding from Isabel of what Maurice looked like before the war and what the war has made him. Lawrence constantly, and consciously, draws our attention to constraints imposed upon vision especially in wartime. In a letter to Ottoline Morrell, during the war, he likened humanity to a train rushing blindly into war like a blinkered horse: 'And I seemed to feel all humanity, brave and splendid, like the train, and so blind, and so utterly unconscious of where they are going or what they are doing' (*Letters* II 282).³⁷ Lawrence uses 'The Blind Man' to explore this sentiment fully: who sees clearly, and wholly, during war?

Seeing in blindness

Lawrence's attitude towards blindness and darkness is as complex as the tension surrounding his own visual authority during the war. Blindness, for Lawrence, is simultaneously disabling and empowering; a force that is at once feared and embraced. In considering the significance of blindness in Lawrence's short story, it is useful to read it against Santanu Das's analysis of John Singer Sargent's painting 'Gassed' (1919).³⁸ Of the painting, Das writes: 'Sargent distils the pity of war into a moment of blindness and touch'.³⁹ It is important to note, though, that that moment of 'blindness and touch' almost seems an achievement for the men. Collectively, they are moving forward in an orderly line like any other group of soldiers. As blind men, all wearing blindfolds, they are categorized together and this is reflected in their

³⁷ Letter sent to Ottoline Morrell, February 1915.

³⁸ The painting features ten blinded soldiers from World War One and stands colossal in the Imperial War Museum much as Lawrence's short story is dominated by the 'strange colossus' (*BM* 218) that is the 'The Blind Man'.

³⁹ Santanu Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 5.

movement as one solid mass; they no longer possess individual identities. The interface between sight and body in this picture is both complex and significant. What is perceived? What is the reality for these men? Das argues that with the sense of touch defining the space in the painting, it is 'as if new eyes have opened at the tip of the fingers' where blindness is most powerfully inscribed.⁴⁰ Yet it is possible to see this as an example of how these men challenge our assumptions about blindness. Through their 'new eyes', they can – albeit in a different dimension to us – see. Nevertheless, this remains a harrowing picture and I conclude that the pity, which Das believes this painting so acutely evokes, actually lies with, and is introduced by, the viewer who, through seeing, cannot forget that these men are blind. Virginia Woolf commented, in 'The Royal Academy' (1919), that she found her reaction to 'Gassed' significant: '[It] at last pricked some nerve of protest, or perhaps of humanity'.⁴¹ Woolf explores in her essay the interaction between the artistic surface of a painting that portrays a human subject, the viewer's perception of the subject's body, and the controlling gaze of the artist directed through his hand onto the painting. Here, Woolf exposes the critical dynamics that are in play between bodily surfaces and, in particular, between sight and skin.

For Lawrence, an artist himself, this intersection of the body and perception was a fascinating enigma and the boundaries of war intensified, for him, the significance between internal and external sight, light and darkness, blindness and sight. The nurse Mary Borden significantly noted, in 1929, that soldiers with eye trauma injuries made visible their interior selves through 'a strange expression of profound knowledge'.⁴² Borden is reflecting on the well-known sentiment that the

⁴⁰ Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature*, p. 1.

⁴¹ Virginia Woolf, 'The Royal Academy', *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Andrew McNeillie, 6 vols. (London: Hogarth, 1988), III, pp. 89-94 (p. 92).

⁴² Mary Borden, *The Forbidden Zone: A Nurse's Impressions of the First World War* (1929; Hutchison Hesperus Press, 2008), p. 26.

eyes are the 'window to the soul'. As Hegel said: 'In the eye the soul concentrates itself'.⁴³ Lawrence likewise believed in this inherent connection between the eyes and the soul: 'The eyes are the third great gateway of the psyche. Here the soul goes in and out of the body, as a bird flying forth and coming home'.⁴⁴ The eye acts as a mediator between the exterior visage and the interiority of the body or, as Lawrence wrote, the 'conscious vision [which] is almost entirely in the breast'.⁴⁵ Lawrence utilises our almost sacred regard of eyes to illustrate fully the realities of war and explore the intersection of sight and the body.

In 'The Blind Man', Lawrence keeps the true extent of Maurice's injuries hidden until the end of the story and the image of his destroyed eyes shocks profoundly. Far from having a mere mark on his brow, as Isabel suggests, we learn that Maurice has actually lost his eyes as well as his sight. When Bertie is forced to finger 'his disfigured eye sockets' (*BM* 217), and face the reality of Maurice's blindness, he too is horrified. Isabel remarks that Bertie's 'one desire' was to not be 'touched by the blind man' (*BM* 219). A similar moment of fascination and horror occurs in 'England, my England' when Lawrence describes how a German soldier is driven mad with fear because his 'blue staring eyes' look into the eyes of a dead English soldier that he has killed.⁴⁶ As a consequence, we are told, 'the German cut and mutilated the face of the dead man as if he must obliterate it. He slashed across, as if it must not be a face any more; it must be removed'.⁴⁷ During the war, Lawrence was plagued by thoughts of visual mutilation. Despairing at England's involvement in the war, and its seemingly blind determination to persist with trench warfare,

⁴³ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel's Lectures on Absolute Spirit* (Virginia: Thoemmes Press, 1999), p. 209.

⁴⁴ D.H. Lawrence, 'Fantasia and the Unconscious', *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious and Fantasia of the Unconscious*, ed. Bruce Steele (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 101.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ D.H. Lawrence, 'England, My England', *D.H. Lawrence – Selected Stories*, p. 140.

⁴⁷ D.H. Lawrence, 'England, My England', p. 180.

Lawrence wrote to Ottoline Morrell that he wished ‘the war would surgeon us [...] “If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out”’ (*Letters* II 318). Likewise, on hearing that Lady Asquith’s brother was killed, Lawrence wrote how he preferred to go blind rather than share vision with others who acquiesced with war: ‘my soul is sightless forever. Let it then be blind, rather than commit the vast wickedness of acquiescence’.⁴⁸ Lawrence’s brutal treatment of eyes, his seeming irreverence for sight, and his self-directed anger towards body and soul alludes to the complex feelings of vengeance and guilt that were associated with his uncertain engagement with the war.

Significantly, though, Maurice’s portrayal of himself and his blindness contrasts sharply with Isabel’s presentation of him as a blind man to be pitied or a war hero to be admired and feared. What is striking about Lawrence’s presentation of Maurice through Maurice’s ‘eyes’ is the absence of colour or light. Obviously, Maurice is blind so we expect his descriptions to be lacking in visual imagery. However, Lawrence’s use of light throughout the story is significant. Other authors at the time associated light with moments of revelation or understanding. Virginia Woolf, for example, often used light in her work to illustrate ‘moments of being’ or insight. Jinny, in *The Waves*, feels that lamp light adds a further dimension to the social scene that she participates in: ‘But evening comes and the lamps are lit...I am ready now to join men and women on the stairs, my peers. I pass them, exposed to their gaze, as they are to mine...Our bodies communicate’.⁴⁹ Similarly, Clarissa in *Mrs. Dalloway* silently communicates with the old lady in the opposite house as she passes by a lit window on the stairs. Yet Lawrence does the opposite: he uses light negatively. The lamps that are lit are no help to the blind man who cannot see them; the lit windows of the house throw no light into the darkness outside; Bertie’s lantern

⁴⁸ Lawrence qtd. by Delany, p. 153.

⁴⁹ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (London: Hogarth Press, 1931; repr.1980), pp. 72-73.

barely penetrates the 'very dark' (*BM* 205) barn where Maurice stays. It is significant that, when he is within the lit and socially controlled sphere, Maurice's 'bearing' (*BM* 207) changes from that of an able man to that of a blind man. Yet when he is in the darkened stable, Maurice moves with ease.

Darkness represents the truth for Lawrence. For him, real vision is found internally in the blood consciousness of the body: truth is the 'darkness which is never absent from the light' (*Letters* II 470). Isabel separates both the mental and physical aspects of her body. We are told that she wishes 'she could be snatched away off the earth' (*BM* 200) but we also know that she wants to 'luxuriate in a rich, physical satisfaction of maternity' (201). The sharp division between her mind and body, between her exterior and interior self, prevents her from seeing as a unified being. In 'The Five Senses', a chapter from 'Fantasia of the Unconscious', Lawrence explores the faculty of sight and suggests that there is more than one dimension to literal sight. He dismisses external sight as a distraction from the truth: 'we strain ourselves to see, see, see, – everything, everything through the eye, in one mode of objective curiosity'.⁵⁰ Lawrence clearly believes that clarity of vision is instead found within the darkness of the interior body:

The eyes have, however, their sensual root as well. But this is hard to transfer into language, as all *our* vision, our modern Northern vision, is in the upper mode of actual *seeing*.

There is a sensual way of beholding. There is the dark, desirous look of a savage [...] his eye is fathomless blackness [...] The savage is all in all in himself.⁵¹

The belief that the blind share this unadulterated way of seeing – that they are in sight because their mind, eyes, and brain are in a unified state – powerfully prevails and is commonly recorded in literature. John Hull's *Experience of Blindness* mentions layers of sight where deep blindness, for him, is 'an authentic and autonomous world,

⁵⁰ Lawrence, 'Fantasia and the Unconscious', pp. 102-103.

⁵¹ Lawrence, 'Fantasia and the Unconscious', pp. 101-102.

a place of its own [...] Being a whole-body seer is to be in one of the most concentrated human conditions'.⁵² The literary critic Susan Stewart, in her exploration of poetry and the senses, likewise calls the 'relation between invisibility and visibility' 'profound' and asks for 'the cliché of the blind poet' as a seer of truth to be taken seriously.⁵³ Both Trudi Tate and Linda Williams suggest that power resides in Maurice's blindness and Williams locates Isabel's weakness in her capacity to see: 'she is weak because she looks'.⁵⁴ Maurice's blindness rejects the social self; his intense physicality emits 'something wild' (*BM* 206) verging towards 'animal grossness' (207). Tate links this physicality directly to Freudian analysis: 'Maurice [...] challenges the woman's body as the basis of all sexual difference'.⁵⁵ Although Freud links blindness – in the story of the sandman – with castration, Tate writes that Maurice defies this Freudian notion. She interprets Lawrence's description of Maurice – 'a tower of darkness' (*BM* 207) – as a phallic symbol: 'Lawrence's injured soldier is erect, virile and powerful'.⁵⁶ Maurice's power results from his blindness and, because he cannot see Isabel, his wife is almost irrelevant; her female body – a symbol of castration – is no longer a threat to him. However insightful, this Freudian reading ultimately allows for a limited conception of Maurice's blindness and its wider consequences. Whilst Tate notes that Mark Spilka describes the richest kind of consciousness as the ' "bodily form of consciousness located somewhere beyond the scopical structure of sexual difference"', she does not probe this observation fully.⁵⁷

⁵² John Hull, *Touching the rock: an experience of blindness* (London: Vintage Books, 1992), p. xvii.

⁵³ Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 146. Interestingly, Rosamond Lehmann proposes a similar notion in her 1932 novel *Invitation to the Waltz* which also features a blind World War One veteran. Lehmann writes: 'blind people always know, you can't deceive them'. Rosamond Lehmann, *Invitation to the Waltz* (1932; London: William Collins, 1980), p. 248.

⁵⁴ Linda Williams, *Sex in the Head: Visions of Femininity and Film in D. H. Lawrence* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), p. 34.

⁵⁵ Trudi Tate, *Modernism, History and the First World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 117.

⁵⁶ Tate, p. 106.

⁵⁷ Spilka qtd. in Tate, p. 106. See also *D. H. Lawrence: A collection of critical essays and The Love Ethic of D. H. Lawrence* by Spilka.

Spilka's remark means that Maurice does not just challenge the traditional concepts of sexual difference; the exposure of his interior self makes such categorisation irrelevant.

Maurice, rather like the savage, is unified and at one with himself even though he is missing a crucial part of his body: his eyes. Yet, as Bergson writes, in order to reach our true interior self, we must 'grasp ourselves' from within: 'in order to view the self in its original purity, psychology ought to eliminate [...] certain forms which bear the obvious mark of the external world'.⁵⁸ It is the war that has made this possible for Maurice. Because Maurice has been to war and – most importantly – is blinded by war, he is unable to see his social exterior self anymore. 'The mind ought to find a way out, but the mind has lost all capacity to so much as look outward' noted the philosopher Simone Weil on the peculiarity of being inside a twentieth-century modern war with 'the marriage of technology with barbarism'.⁵⁹ Ironically, because the war has physically prevented Maurice from seeing outside himself, he is enabled by his blindness to perceive differently. It is the blind man's ability to transcend categorisation and boundaries that is markedly significant when we consider Lawrence's own wartime state. Indeed, Lawrence's situation during the war figuratively reflected the blind man's literal position. For both men, the front-line is inescapably present but increasingly irrelevant as their viewpoints are decisively transformed by war from that of partially seeing outsiders to fully seeing insiders. External sight thus becomes dispensable and inconsequential to them. In a letter to Lady Cynthia Asquith, shortly after her brother was killed in the war, Lawrence profoundly demonstrated this by writing of his desire to step, at least metaphorically, into the blind man's shoes:

⁵⁸ Bergson, p. 224.

⁵⁹ Simone Weil, *An Anthology*, ed. Sian Miles (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986), p. 181.

The conscious life – which you adhere to – is no more than a masquerade of death: there is a living unconscious life. If only we would shut our eyes; if only we were all struck blind, and things vanished from our sight, we should marvel that we had fought and lived for shallow, visionary, peripheral nothingness. We should find reality in darkness. (*Letters II* 455)⁶⁰

Elizabeth Bowen and the Second World War

Lawrence's latter meditation on blindness to Lady Asquith is also a meditation on sight.⁶¹ His reflection on the metaphorical darkness of war is strikingly similar to Elizabeth Bowen's observation of the literal darkness of war that she encountered in the Blitz:

Walking in the darkness of the nights of six years (darkness which transformed a capital city into a network of inscrutable canyons) one developed new bare alert senses, with their own savage warnings and notations. And by day one was always making one's own new maps of a landscape always convulsed by some new change.⁶²

Both Lawrence and Bowen discover, or re-discover, sight in blindness. Sight becomes something other in the visual chaos of war. Bowen shows that her sight physically had to adapt to the changing wartime environment. The clinical psychologist Melitta Schmideberg, working in Hampstead during the war, demonstrated the enormous spatial change that London witnessed as a result of the Blitz. Schmideberg, significantly, revealed the profound impact upon vision that this spatial change had: 'At dusk some of the big streets looked almost like a village street: at night they were dark and deserted. One became district and even street conscious'.⁶³ In this tapestry of change, vision became intrinsically connected to the

⁶⁰ Letter sent November 1915.

⁶¹ A similar moment occurs in Joyce's *Ulysses* where Bloom guides a blind man across a road. Of this, Danius writes: 'As Bloom speculates on the repercussions of blindness, he effectively rediscovers sight'. Sara Danius, *The Senses of Modernism – technology, perception, and aesthetics* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 175.

⁶² Elizabeth Bowen, *The Demon Lover and Other Stories* (1945; London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), p. 223. Hereafter referred to as *DL* in parenthetical citations.

⁶³ Melitta Schmideberg, 'Some Observations on Individual Reactions to Air Raids', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 23.1 (1942), 146-176 (p. 158).

destruction and reinforcement of boundaries. As Allan Hepburn astutely notes, the war caused Bowen to realize seeing as a perpetual confrontation with reality.⁶⁴

The war, for Bowen, therefore unquestionably heightened her awareness of spatial and visual frontiers. As Elizabeth Inglesby notes: 'During World War II, [Bowen] saw buildings – including her own London apartment – and their contents crumple under relentless bombing raids. [She recognised] that these events had profoundly affected the way in which she understood and valued the material universe'.⁶⁵ An Air Raid Precautions warden from the outset of war, Bowen was on the front-line of the home front.⁶⁶ Her wartime stance as an active civilian was therefore oddly undefined: she was within close proximity to the realities of war but still unable to claim officially a front-line perspective. Her own uncertain state reflected a wider state of uncertainty between the home front and front-line divide. Lois Clark in 'Picture from the Blitz' (1982) vividly captures this state of visual flux in her re-occurring flashback:

After all these years
I can still close my eyes and see
her sitting there,
in her big armchair,
grotesque under an open sky,
framed by the jagged lines of her broken house.⁶⁷

This poem allows us to see how the disintegration of the home front and front-line divide undermined visual certainty and stability. Shafquat Towheed notes this same disorientation when he writes: '[that] great definer, destroyer and creator of spaces,

⁶⁴ Allan Hepburn, *Intrigue: Espionage and Culture* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2005), pp. 154-155.

⁶⁵ Elizabeth Inglesby, "Expressive Objects": Elizabeth Bowen's Narrative Materializes', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 53.2 (2007), 306-333 (p. 306).

⁶⁶ Doody notes that Bowen's active involvement in the war as a warden 'enabled her to experience the immediacy of life'. Noreen Doody, 'Elizabeth Bowen: A short biography', *Irish Writers in their Time: Elizabeth Bowen*, ed. Eibhear Walshe (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), p.9. We also know, from a letter to Virginia Woolf dated July 1st 1940, that Bowen volunteered to report to the British Ministry of Information on Ireland during the war. Elizabeth Bowen, *The Mulberry Tree: Writings of Elizabeth Bowen*, ed. Hermione Lee (London: Virago Press, 1986), p. 218.

⁶⁷ Lois Clark, 'Picture from the Blitz', *Chaos of the Night: Women's Poetry and Verse of the Second World War*, ed. Catherine Reilly (London: Virago, 2007), p. 27.

the Second World War', presented for Bowen a 'relentless challenge to spatial certainty'.⁶⁸ Towheed interestingly presents war as an agent of creation as well as destruction.

The war forced Bowen to perceive differently therefore effecting a creative response. Bowen's authorial treatment of wartime boundaries is distinguished from many of her contemporaries by, as Susan Osborn notes, the multiple ways that the majority of Bowen's narratives 'stray across boundaries and resist neat identifications'.⁶⁹ In Bowen's work, the destabilisation of visual and spatial boundaries is connected not only to an emancipation of sight but also to an emancipation of the civilian self. This is most obviously shown in Bowen's 1945 collection of short stories, *The Demon Lover and Other Stories*, and her 1949 novel *The Heat of the Day*. Both depict life in wartime London and accentuate visual and spatial boundaries. Bowen did this with intent; her notes show that she equated the immense scale of world war with a creative reconfiguration of private and public sight. She captures this sentiment in her postscript to *The Demon Lover*: 'During the war I lived, both as a civilian and as a writer, with every pore open: I lived so many lives, and, still more, lived among the packed repercussions of so many of thousands of other lives, all under stress' (DL 217). 'Every pore open' emphasises the body's sensual receptiveness as well as vulnerability to the invasiveness of war.

A parallel description occurs in *The Heat of the Day* where Stella, incapable of distinguishing between internal and external divides because she is so visually disorientated by war, feels that her nerves are exposed externally: "outside' meant the harmless world: the mischief was in her own and in other rooms. The grind and

⁶⁸ Shafquat Towheed, 'Territory, space, modernity: Elizabeth Bowen's *The Demon Lover and Other Stories* and wartime London', *Elizabeth Bowen: New Critical Perspectives*, ed. Susan Osborn (Cork: Cork University Press, 2009), pp. 113-131 (pp. 114, 119).

⁶⁹ Susan Osborn, 'Introduction to Elizabeth Bowen: New Directions for Critical Thinking', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 53.2 (Summer, 2007), 225-237 (p. 228).

scream of battles, mechanized advances excoriating flesh and country, tearing through nerves and tearing up trees were indoor-plotted; this was a war of dry cerebration inside window-less walls'.⁷⁰ This quotation, with its inverted public and private boundaries, illustrates the totality of war: war breaks through national borders, invades domestic spaces, and assaults the body whilst impacting directly upon the senses. By placing the word 'outside' in single inverted commas, Bowen emphasizes how thin the boundary lines have become.⁷¹ In her essay 'Britain in Autumn', Bowen elaborates on the increasing daily exposure of internal sensation: 'This exchange of searching, speechless, intimate looks between strangers goes on all over the place. But virtually, there are no strangers now. We all touch on the fundamentals we are not speaking about'.⁷² Sight, before the war, was largely a private, internal, and controllable faculty known only to the individual seeing; during the war, sight becomes transparently public.

Bowen further references the concept of nerve damage – 'torn-off senses' (*HD* 86) – in *The Heat of the Day* to question rigorously the idea of visual containment. 'Torn-off' not only mimics the bombed buildings with their previously private interiors protruding through destroyed walls but also suggests similar damage to the nerve endings and the senses. Bowen suggests that cognition, during the trauma of the Blitz, had become divorced from the senses that, in turn, were increasingly uncontrollable and uncontainable. Throughout the novel, the senses, particularly sight, are increasingly shown to operate independently of thought and cognition.

⁷⁰ Elizabeth Bowen, *The Heat of the Day* (1949; London: Reprint Society, 1950), p. 136. Hereafter *HD* in parenthetical citations.

⁷¹ In *The Heat of the Day*, the security of being in England increasingly wears thin as the front-line merges with the home front. Structural, physical divides dissolve: '[Stella] began to feel it was [...] Europe that was occupying London. [...] The physical nearness of the coast! – became quite palpable. Tonight the safety-curtain between the here and the there had lifted; the breadth of danger and sorrow travelled over freely from shore to shore' (*HD* 120).

⁷² Elizabeth Bowen, 'Britain in Autumn', *People, Places, Things: Essays by Elizabeth Bowen*, ed. Allan Hepburn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), pp. 48-55 (p. 54). This essay was originally entitled 'London 1940'. It was an initial exploration of material later expanded upon in *The Heat of the Day*.

Stella, for example, reflects how ‘she could recapture that 1940 autumn only in sensation; thoughts, if there had been any, could not be found again’ (*HD* 88). Similarly, she later observes ‘the more one thinks [in war], the less there’s any outside reality’ (*HD* 185). Bowen elaborated further upon this cognitive short-circuiting when she wrote that many wartime civilians felt ‘emotionally torn’; she noted how they could not absorb or comprehend visually traumatic material routinely and that this resulted in visual ‘hallucination’, ‘fantasies’, and ‘strange deep intense dreams’ (*DL* 219). Bowen described how she too was unable to process mentally the overwhelming sensual stimulus of warfare: ‘The simple way to put it was: “One cannot take things in.” What was happening was out of all proportion to our faculties for knowing, thinking and checking up’ (*DL* 218-219). Bowen captures the vastness of war by showing it pervading the senses utterly.

Throughout *The Heat of the Day*, the immensity of world war is constantly reflected through the characters’ inability to process visually the scale of war. Robert, when justifying his treacherous actions to Stella, claims that the immeasurable scale of the Nazi dream visually seduced him. He suggests that because it cannot be visually contained, visualised, or explained through any usual discourse, it forces one to act rather than to contemplate or discuss: ‘It’s on altogether another scale. [...] For the scale it is on, there’s so far no measure that’s any use, no word that isn’t out of the true. If I said ‘vision’, inevitably you would think me grandeur-mad: I’m not, but anyway vision is not what I mean. I mean sight in action: it’s only now I act that I see’ (*HD* 259). Robert’s words couch a pragmatist discourse suggesting that reality, true knowledge or insight is found through action rather than through the senses.⁷³ This

⁷³ Pragmatism is a philosophical tradition that began in the United States in the late nineteenth century. Pragmatists contend that most philosophical topics—such as the nature of knowledge, language, concepts, meaning, belief, and science—are all best viewed in terms of their practical uses and successes rather than in terms of representative accuracy. See William James’s *Pragmatism, A*

scene shares similarities with Bowen's short story 'Summer Night': 'There's been a stop in our senses and in our faculties that's made everything round us so much dead matter – and dead matter we couldn't even displace. We can no longer express ourselves: what we say doesn't even approximate to reality; it only approximates to what's been said'.⁷⁴ By suggesting that it is reductive to transcribe sight into words, Bowen again draws attention to the ambiguity of vision: does sight mediate truth or distort reality?

Maud Ellmann writes of *The Heat of the Day*: 'this is a novel about leaks, about the porousness of architectural and psychic space, about the failure to keep secrets in, intruders out'.⁷⁵ But its derangement of the internal/external paradigm is also about the liberation of sight, the destabilisation of sight, and the resultant revision of vision. Hermione Lee says that Bowen's writing during the war was a 'form of resistance' against the displacement of reality, safety, and certainty. The 'fictions, ghosts, memories, and imaginary terrains' that haunt Bowen's works are, Lee suggests, a way of confirming reality: they are ironically, Lee writes, 'more real than the "real" world'.⁷⁶ In a sense, Bowen is fighting fire with fire. But the simultaneous destabilisation and confirmation of reality that Lee identifies also alludes to a concurrent displacement and validation of sight. Bennett and Royle argue that 'diplopia, double-vision [and] "hallucination"' are key to what they see as Bowen's attempt at structural dissolution.⁷⁷ However, Bowen actually suggests that true visual comprehension is found in visual uncertainty. In 'The Short Story in England', Bowen acknowledges this realization as a peculiar aspect of war: 'In peace time, our short

New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking, Popular Lectures on Philosophy (1907). James was notably influenced by the work of Henri Bergson.

⁷⁴ Elizabeth Bowen, 'Summer Night', *The Collected Stories of Elizabeth Bowen* (New York: Ecco Press, 1981), p. 590.

⁷⁵ Maud Ellmann, *The Shadow Across the Page* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), p. 153.

⁷⁶ Hermione Lee, *The Mulberry Tree*, p. 5.

⁷⁷ Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel* (London: Macmillan Press, 1995), p. 85.

story artist had for subject those uneasy currents beneath the apparently placid surface. In wartime, the surface being itself uneasy, he plumbs through to, and renders, unchanging and stable things'.⁷⁸ Bowen likewise reiterated this sentiment in 'English Fiction at Mid-Century': 'The salutary value of the exterior, the comfortable sanity of the concrete came to be realised only when the approach of the Second World War forced one to envisage wholesale destruction. The obliteration of man's surrounding, streets and houses, tables and chairs sent up, for him, their psychological worth'.⁷⁹ War, for Bowen, resulted in a complete re-evaluation of sight: the way people saw and the visual value ascribed things from a psychological perspective. In this sense, it was an enlightening process. As she writes in *The Heat of the Day*: 'war at present worked as a thinning of the membrane between this and that, it was a becoming apparent' (HD 188).

Layers of sight

One of the most intricate and memorable descriptions of *The Heat of the Day* is Stella's examination of the spy Harrison's eyes:

The pupils' microcosms, black little condensations of a world too internal to know what expression was, each mapped round with red-brown lines on a green-brown iris run to rust at the rim. Veins feathered the whitish whites. Fatigue, perhaps, reddened the insides of the eyelids; and it was in examining the start and growth of the lashes – irregular, neither short nor long – that she experienced a kind of pathetic shock. (HD 218)

Stella's shock is not simply caused by her awakening visual consciousness but by her first real visual connection with another human being: 'The shock she felt had [...] an echo of intimacy about it, as though transmitted from someone else' (ibid.). This critical scene portrays Stella's visual comprehension definitively moving from the

⁷⁸ Elizabeth Bowen, 'The Short Story in England', *Britain Today*, 109 (May 1945), 11-16 (p. 314).

⁷⁹ Elizabeth Bowen, 'English Fiction at Mid-Century', *People, Places, Things: Essays by Elizabeth Bowen*, pp. 321-324 (p. 322).

external and superficial to the internal and authentic. Bowen's post-war essay, 'The light in the Dark', interestingly echoes Lawrence in its description of authentic, genuine, internal vision: 'This reaching out, this signalling through the dark, is for something more than the communication of fears and loneliness; man joins man so that together, they may lift up their hearts'.⁸⁰ The war forces the majority of characters in the novel to see differently. Because the war is on their doorstep, seeing becomes a vital act, one that is essential to their survival. When blindness, laziness, and ignorance can ultimately lead to death, how to see, and what to see, literally saves lives.

It is significant that Bowen makes the traitor Robert ommetaphobic: he finds the human eye disgusting, he is haunted by 'every vein' of his father's iris, and he shudders at the 'jelly of the eye' (*HD* 113). He is noticeably drawn to Stella because she has 'a mothy way of blinking and laziness about keeping [her] eyelids open' (*ibid.*) and this prevents her from initially seeing his true hidden nature. Unlike Lawrence's blind man who is automatically in sight, Bowen's characters' insight comes from double vision: from reading underneath the surface and between the lines.⁸¹ This is most obviously shown in the humorous scene where Connie shows her friend Louie how to identify propaganda in the newspapers: '[Connie's] re-reading of everything was the more impressive because the second time, you were given to understand, what she was doing was reading between the lines' (*HD* 147). Whilst Louie believes everything she reads, Connie is instead suspicious of everything she sees.

⁸⁰ Elizabeth Bowen, 'The Light in the Dark', *People, Places, Things: Essays by Elizabeth Bowen*, pp. 37-41 (p. 38).

⁸¹ Elizabeth Inglesby makes a rare connection between Bowen and D.H. Lawrence suggesting that Lawrence's idea of allotropic character and references to 'a deeper sense' are traceable in Bowen's writing. (Inglesby, p. 323).

Bowen, like Lawrence, utilizes the mirror-space crux to consider and reveal the many layers of sight that exist in the novel. Bowen's characters are constantly seen to examine their reflections in mirrors that simultaneously emphasise their fluidity and visual abstractness whilst also confirming their existence on a visual plane. We are told that Louie, for example, 'formed the habit of dropping into a café [...] the place was mirrored – she had the satisfaction of seeing, in bright steaminess, herself, Louie, walk in, look round and sit down' (*HD* 141). Louie needs this visual confirmation through mirrors because she feels invisible 'in the shoal of indifferent shadows' (*HD* 139) which make up London's wartime, uniformed civilians.⁸² Bowen expounds that for Louie 'to be not seen was for her not to be' (*ibid.*). Anna Teekell, who explores the significance of the mirror image in Bowen's writing, notes of mirrors that they are 'non-places', spaces of undefined existence, which are peculiarly concealing and revealing:

The non-place asks the reader to imagine something at a double-divide – a reflection, already a distortion, of something non-existent – but demands at the same time that it be visible. After all, this is an act of 'looking'. To look, one must exist, must reflect – if not in the looking-glass sense, then in the thinking sense.⁸³

Teekell's non-place is also attributable to the home front where civilians occupy parallel states of uncertain existence, at once in and out of war. Louie's concern to be seen, to be defined by her mirror image is an expansion upon Bowen's earlier observation in 'Britain in Autumn' where she notes that, after surviving a night of blitzing, 'girls step further into the light and look in pocket mirrors' to check their existence visually.⁸⁴

⁸² This anticipates Bowen's 1967 essay 'Mirrors are Magic': 'The intellectual, lonely question, "what am I – am I? If so, what do I look like?" can be answered at any moment, at any turn. Do mirrors, possibly, mitigate city solitude? Does one not, in the crowded flow across mirrors, have a sense of the human tribe to which one belongs?' Elizabeth Bowen, 'Mirrors are Magic', *People, Places, Things: Essays by Elizabeth Bowen*, pp. 201-205 (p. 203).

⁸³ Anna Teekell, 'Elizabeth Bowen and Language at War', *New Hibernia Review*, 15.3 (2011), 61-79 (p. 79).

⁸⁴ Bowen, 'Britain in Autumn', p. 49.

Yet Bowen is acutely aware that a visual reflection is an insubstantial copy of the original image and warns against the thin line between seeming and seeing: 'The other dimension, this reflected existence [...] can be confusing. Can one always be certain where 'reality' stops and its reflections begin? To enter a much-mirrored room can be disconcerting'.⁸⁵ This concern manifests itself explicitly in the novel where, Stella, surrounded by mirrors, feels a horror that 'some sense in herself [is] missing' (*HD* 166). In this unnerving scene, Stella seemingly loses control or governance over her vision. Everything in the room, including Stella, is a mere reflection of what she sees in the mirrored surfaces. Desperate to refute this, Stella attempts to reassert dominance over her vision: 'She was proof against it' (*Ibid.*). Instead of looking at the objects in the room, she touches them, rather like Lawrence's blind man, to re-establish the boundaries, solidity, and reality of life around her: 'Constrained to touch things, to make certain that they were not their own reflections, she explored veneers and moulding, corded edges, taut fluted silk with the nerves of her fingers' (*HD* 166). A similar moment occurs earlier in the novel where Stella, once again caught in a moment of visual disorientation, seeks to confirm her vision through touch: 'Stella pressed her thumb against the edge of the table to assure herself this was a moment *she* was living through – as in the moment before a faint she seemed to be looking at everything down a darkening telescope' (*HD* 108). In an interview with the author Jocelyn Brooke broadcast after the war, Bowen told her that the novel resembled 'the convulsive shaking of a kaleidoscope, a kaleidoscope also of which the inside reflector was cracked'.⁸⁶ This kaleidoscopic terminology is certainly applicable to Stella's mimetic experience in the mirrored room; there is little distinction between the

⁸⁵ Bowen, 'Mirrors are Magic', p. 204.

⁸⁶ Elizabeth Bowen, interview with Jocelyn Brooke, broadcast 3rd October 1950 (Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin).

distorted lens of Stella's eye, the fragmented mirrored surfaces, and the cracked kaleidoscope's reflector.⁸⁷

Often the novel reads like a riddle or a Chinese secret box whose layers of seeing must be unwrapped. Harrison, for example, is first described as 'a face with a gate behind it' (*HD* 10) and Robert admonishes Stella for having a truth 'locked up inside' her that is 'always secretly being taken out and looked at' which he is 'blind' to (*HD* 184). Bowen importantly distinguishes between seeing and looking in the novel. The former verb is often used for passive, almost unconscious perception; the skimming of superficial, surface elements – light and colour – that make up an image.⁸⁸ The latter verb in contrast contains an element of governance and autonomy; it implies a deeper, searching gaze.⁸⁹ Bowen uses photographs to effectively illustrate this visual distinction. Louie loathes the photograph of her absent soldier husband, Tom, because it emphasises the different dimensions of sight: 'what the camera had recorded had been the face of a man already gone' (*HD* 152). Whilst examining this photograph, Louie captures the multi-dimensional nature of sight exactly: 'To see, however, is not to look' (*ibid.*). Roderick, when discussing photographs with Cousin Nettie, unconsciously echoes Louie and once again highlights this visual crux: ' "Everybody I know in the Army carries photographs round. They show them: but I suppose they look at them too"' (*HD* 202). At the end of the novel, we see Louie's sight, and understanding of sight, irrevocably altered as she is able to look beneath the surface of that same photograph: 'Louie found herself

⁸⁷ Neuroscientists Land and Fernald interestingly reveal that there are such things as reflector eyes which use mirrors instead of lenses: 'An alternative to a lens is to line the inside of the eye with 'mirrors', and reflect the image to focus at a central point. The nature of these eyes means that if one were to peer into the pupil of an eye, one would see the same image that the organism would see, reflected back out'. M.F. Land and R.D. Fernald, 'The evolution eyes', *Annual Review of Neuroscience*, 15 (1992), 1-29.

⁸⁸ OED's definition of 'see': 'To perceive (light, colour, external objects and their movements) with the eyes, or by the sense of which the eye is the specific organ'.

⁸⁹ OED's definition of 'look': 'To direct one's sight. To give a certain direction to one's sight; to apply one's power of vision; to direct one's eyes upon some object or towards some portion of space'.

looking constantly into that very photograph of Tom which had once forbidden her; she felt herself beckoned into that gaze of abstention and futurity –' (*HD* 316).

Learning to see

As the war directly impacts upon civilian life, the characters become aware of the limitations of sight: their vision is often myopic, limited, and misplaced. They increasingly look below the controlled surface of sight, a surface that is being destroyed by war, to reach a deeper state of visual comprehension that is untainted by the exterior world. Stella's 'blind-man' experience in the mirrored room is not an isolated incident. Many of the characters are forced to learn to see differently because of the invading darkness, which increases in parallel to the war's progression, that destabilises sight by dissolving perceptible boundaries still further: 'dark ate the outlines of the house as it ate the outlines of the hills and drank from the broken distances of the valley' (*HD* 301). The characters not only find it hard to find their bearings in the darkness but they also lose their sense of self. The home, as a home front, has been irrevocably altered by a war that does not respect boundaries. Whenever the characters in *The Heat of the Day* step outside the lit environments into the dark cityscape, their sense of vision diminishes and they also become all but invisible to others.

Harrison typifies this because he is a creature of the dark, the outside, and the unknown. Donovan's description of Harrison captures his lack of visual distinction: 'This was a chap or gentleman with a very narrow look, added to which he had a sort of a discord between his two eyes....' (*HD* 163). Not only is Harrison a slight figure who makes little impression on those who observe him – Donovan is not sure of his name or social status – but his one distinctive feature, his crossed eyes, make it hard

not only for people to focus on him but for him to focus on them. Throughout the novel, Harrison appears out of the darkness and then disappears back into it. Maud Ellmann additionally notes that Harrison has no concrete or fixed home which compounds his mutability: 'Harrison himself has no address: like a 'ghost or actor,' he goes 'into abeyance [...] between appearances'.⁹⁰ Similarly in Bowen's short story, 'The inherited clock', Clara, on walking in the 'black-out' 'at high speed into the solid darkness', is 'surprised all over her body to feel no impact: she seemed to pass like a ghost through an endless wall' (*DL* 45). The term 'black out' is important because it suggests a loss of sensation or consciousness both physically and spatially but also mentally and cognitively. This dual interpretation of the term is emphasised in the novel when Stella returns to her flat whilst walking in the dark. Stella is shown to be deeply nervous of the dark as she feels herself losing her ability to see and be seen. She wishes for 'the peace-time lighted windows and lamps of city autumn' because her sense of self and sense of place is failing in the 'muteness [that is] falling on London with the uneasy dark' (*HD* 120) to the point where 'she had so dissolved herself, during the walk home, into the thousands of beings' of wartime London (*HD* 121).

Traditional barriers or spaces of protection offer little reprieve. Stella attempts to block out the dark from her home by erecting barriers – blinds and curtains – against it. However, Stella finds herself as visually disorientated inside as she would be if in the darkness outside:

Inside it the senses were cut off from hour and season; nothing spoke but the clock. The day had gone from the moment Stella had drawn down the fitted blinds and drawn across them the deadening curtains: now nothing took its place. Every crack was stopped; not a mote of darkness could enter – the room, sealed up in its artificial light, remained exaggerated and cerebral. (*HD* 53)

⁹⁰ Ellmann, p. 158.

Stella is thus forced to reconsider and renegotiate the boundaries of vision and space. In a parallel scene, inside her London flat, Stella is shown to surrender herself and her home to the darkness by opening the curtains and then the windows:

She stayed where she was, letting go the curtains, glad to be walled away by them from that haunted room. Assuaging blankness out of the open window began to enter her through the eyes. The embrasure felt like a balcony; one stood projected, high up, into the unseen unsounding sentient world of rain. (*HD* 133)

In this passage we see Stella relinquish control over her senses in the darkness: she lets her vision go blank and she is all but blind. Stella, like Lawrence's blind man, begins to develop alternative vision or insight in the dark. She, like Bowen, finds 'new bare alert senses' because the traditional methods of seeing are blacked out. She learns to value, rather than fear, the darkness and enjoys the feeling of disembodiment and disconnection that she associates with it: in this scene, 'the total dark of the city' becomes 'unprecautionary' and 'natural' (*HD* 133). Stella's eyes adjust to the dark and she begins to see in it because she *looks* into it: 'The darkness by force of being so long looked into resolved itself into particles, some lighter; air and solids just lifted apart; rooflines took on an uncertain form' (*HD* 134). Rather like the scene in which Stella feels her way around the mirrored room, this passage shows her absorbing the details of her surroundings like a blind or visually impaired person as she perceives outlines according to their weight and density; sight becomes increasingly haptic. Tellingly, Stella likens herself to a blind person: 'She was not to know, even, whether, in keeping her by him by the window, he might not be banking on the effect of the dark, on the senses' harmony when there is one sense missing, some sort of harmony of the blind' (*HD* 136). Stella's other senses work collectively to enable vision or insight: she has learnt to see without constraint.

Near or Far?

The scale of world war makes the categorisation of front-line and home front irrelevant. Although their contact with, and experience of, the home front was profoundly different, the work of both Lawrence and Bowen questions who sees clearly, and wholly, during war. Their accounts of war may lack the authority of front-line vision but their writing illustrates the immense scale of war. Both authors are aware of the influence of war upon themselves and their writing. Even though physically removed from war, Lawrence could not mentally remove himself and appeared dangerously immersed in it. Bowen's writing constantly questions the polarisation of the fronts because she found herself living on an active, even combatant, home front. World war inverts public and private boundaries, breaks through national borders, invades domestic spaces, and assaults the body whilst impacting directly upon the senses. Physical and metaphorical barriers and borders are rendered meaningless: the interface between internality and externality is blurred. As Bowen wrote: 'The violent destruction of solid things, the explosion of the illusion that prestige, power and permanence attach to bulk and weight, left all of us, equally heavy and disembodied. Walls went down [...] We all lived in a state of lucid abnormality' (*DL* 218). This fear of impermanence in both world wars led, I suggest, to a re-evaluation of sight: civilians questioned not only how they saw, and the way they saw, but also the value they visually ascribed things from a psychological perspective. The relationship between surface and depth was radically revised whilst spatial and visual boundaries were consequently renegotiated and redrawn. Both Lawrence and Bowen considered vision through mirrored space and played upon the mirror as an emblem of mimesis. They also analysed the figurative relationship between internal sight and external light to expose the multiplicity of sight in war.

Their wartime writing explodes boundaries of all kinds and rigorously questions the idea of visual containment. By questioning and testing the boundaries of visual authority, their work reveals a cultural destabilisation of sight and ultimately a liberation of vision.

Chapter Five: The lens of trauma

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and William Sansom's *Fireman Flower*.

Trauma and sight

What is it like to see through the lens of trauma? The majority of descriptions and representations of those with post-traumatic stress from both world wars would convince us that trauma victims see differently by registering the exterior world as a visually blurred and de-sensitised wasteland. Medical accounts of traumatised soldiers throughout the twentieth century suggest a direct link between war, trauma, and the senses. The Professor of Medicine at Oxford, Sir William Osler, observed in July 1915 that shocked combatants seemed robbed of their senses: 'hysterical dumbness, deafness, blindness, anaesthesia galore! I suppose it is the shock and strain, but I wonder if it was ever thus in previous wars?'¹ In the same year, the psychologist Charles S. Myers, the British Army's 'Specialist in Nervous Shock' during World War One, who coined the phrase 'shell-shock', noted in *The Lancet* sensory changes affecting sight, smell, and taste in traumatised soldiers.² Interestingly, three decades later, medical observations of trauma in the Second World War differed very little. A study of one hundred soldiers by three psychologists in France showed that 12% were unable to speak, 8% were temporarily blind, 7% had lost their hearing, and 15% developed a stammer.³ Curtailed vision, subdued sight, and unresponsive eyes were particularly commented upon as notable symptoms of trauma in both wars.

¹ Sir William Osler qtd. by Harvey Cushing in Cushing's biography *The Life of Sir William Osler* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1925), p. 484.

² Charles S. Myers, 'A Contribution to the Study of Shell Shock', *The Lancet*, 185 (1915), 316-320.

³ C. Anderson, M. Jeffrey and M.N. Pai, 'Psychiatric casualties from the Normandy Beachhead – first thoughts on 100 cases', *The Lancet*, 2 (1944), 318-221.

Frederick R. Hanson, for example, who was a neurologist working in North Africa during the Second World War, noted that soldiers suffering from combat fatigue and neuroses were unable to process external visual stimuli: 'Their faces were expressionless, their eyes blank and unseeing'.⁴ Hanson's observation is one of many descriptions that contribute to the widespread conviction that the traumatized see in muted or monochrome tones. The television presenter Michael Parkinson, when recently asked to describe his experience of shock during the devastating World War Two Blitz in East London, stated that he recalls the scenes in depressing shades of 'grey': 'like a photograph in black and white which is how it was'.⁵ Fictional representations of wartime trauma also reinforce this belief. The novelist May Sinclair, who in 1914 volunteered to join the Munro Ambulance Corps, wrote about the direct experience of shell shock in both her prose and poetry. In her semi-autobiographical novel, *The Romantic* (1920), she describes visually processing war:

She thought of the war mostly in two pictures: one very distant hanging in the air to her right, colourless as an illustration in the papers, grey figures tumbled in a grey field, white puff-bursts of shrapnel in a grey sky: and one very near; long lines of stretchers, wounded men and dead men on stretchers, passing and passing before her.⁶

Sinclair illustrates how she distanced herself from the visual immediacy of warfare by transforming shocking scenes into subdued stills.

Descriptions such as these from both world wars, which emphasise the desensitisation of sight, have also led to the prevalent suggestion that trauma is concentrated within the eye. Photographs abound from both world wars depicting shocked soldiers blankly staring at the camera; Private Meek at Netley Hospital in 1917 cowering in a wheelchair with dazed eyes, as broadcast nationally by *British*

⁴ F.R. Hanson, 'The Factor of Fatigue in the Neuroses of Combat', *Bulletin of U.S. Army Medical Department*, 9 (1949), 147-150, (p. 148).

⁵ Michael Parkinson, 'Our 'Enry: a tribute to Sir Henry Cooper', BBC Two Production, broadcast 21st May 2011.

⁶ May Sinclair, *The Romantic* (New York: Macmillan, 1920), p. 49.

Pathé, is just one such recognisable example.⁷ Evadne Price, active as an ambulance driver in World War One and a journalist in World War Two, likewise wrote under the pseudonym Helen Zenna Smith in her novel *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War* how the traumatised soldier was easily identifiable through a lack of visual engagement and strained eyes: ‘the man [...] staring straight ahead at nothing...twitching, twitching, twitching [...] That’s shell shock’.⁸ Similarly, Henry Green’s soldier Charley Summers in *Back* (1946) reveals his trauma through his eyes: ‘There was something dreadful in his eyes. She saw that’.⁹ D. Eder’s 1916 observation of a sniper, who imagined he had gone blind in his right eye after nearly being hit there by counter fire, also suggests trauma can be located within the eye: ‘The unconscious [...] sets the eye watering, forcing [the soldier] to relinquish his post. Then the soldier’s instinct reasserts itself, the eye ceases to water and he returns to the loophole. But here the egocentric instinct, self-preservation, reasserts itself and the unconscious adopts a stronger attack. He is stricken blind in the shooting eye’.¹⁰ Eder not only identifies the eye as a symbol of the soldier’s trauma but also describes it as a passive, unresisting tool when subject to duress.

Vernon Scannell’s poem ‘The Great War’ (1962), written after his experience of serving in the Second World War, at once confirms and complicates these conventional understandings of the relationship between trauma and sight.¹¹ The first half of his poem reinforces the stereotype that the lens of trauma results in monochrome vision:

⁷ ‘Private Meek’, *War Neuroses*, British Pathé newsreel film (1917).

⁸ Helen Zenna Smith, *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War* (1930; New York: Feminist Press, 1989), p. 92.

⁹ Henry Green, *Back* (1946; London: Harvill Press, 1998), p. 59.

¹⁰ D. Eder, ‘The Psychopathology of the War Neuroses’, *Lancet*, II (August 12th, 1916), 264-268 (p. 266).

¹¹ Scannell fought in the Second World War from 1940. His father had fought in the First World War.

Whenever war is spoken of
 I find
 The war that was called Great invades the mind:
 The grey militia marches over land
 A darker mood of grey
 Where fractured tree-trunks stand
 And shells, exploding, open sudden fans
 Of smoke and earth. Blind murders scythe
 The deathscape where the iron brambles writhe.¹²

However, the closing lines of the poem suggest an alternative consideration of the boundaries between sight and trauma that remains not fully articulated: 'These things I see, / But they are only part / Of what it is that slyly probes the ear: / Less vivid images and words excite / The sensuous memory'.¹³ Here, the sensory containment implied in the opening of the poem is undermined. The sights of trauma, far from being passively constrained, have an agency and the capacity to 'excite'; they can, far from being subdued and desensitised, be 'vivid' and 'sensuous'. This anomaly is revealed in other literary representations of traumatised vision. Edmund Blunden talked about his mind being led to 'unbidden' traumatic visions, 'as birds are said to be lured by the serpent's eye', whilst Siegfried Sassoon acknowledged that traumatic images held 'an awful attraction' for him 'in spite of [his] hatred of war'.¹⁴ Both these writers from the First World War reveal the dangerous sensual fascination that can underlie traumatic visual experiences. Writers in World War Two also speak of a fantastical quality to sight and how the sights of war defy easy containment. For instance, Graham Greene's protagonist Rowe, in *The Ministry of Fear* (1943), feels his sight governed 'by some agency with surrealist imagination'.¹⁵ Sight, here, has become ungovernable and autonomous.

¹² Vernon Scannell, 'The Great War', *Collected Poems 1950-1993* (London: Robson Books, 1993), p. 68. Scannell's father served in the First World War.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Edmund Blunden, *The Bonaventure: A Random Journal of an Atlantic Holiday* (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1922), p. 65; Siegfried Sassoon, *Siegfried's Journey: 1916-1920* (London: Faber & Faber, 1945), p. 69.

¹⁵ Graham Greene, *The Ministry of Fear* (1943; London: Penguin, 2005), p. 3.

William McDougall, in the *Outline of Abnormal Psychology* (1926), suggested that this destabilisation of the boundaries between sight and trauma, when sight becomes not just a source of trauma but an active traumatic force, also disrupts the divide between reality and fantasy. McDougall uses the metaphor of a damaged tree, likening it to the body and nervous system, to show the power of traumatised senses bursting through physical and mental demarcations: ‘The sap and vital energy of the tree seem to tend towards the highest, most recently formed parts. If in a tree these most recently formed parts are injured, if in anyway, as by frost or fire [...] we may observe a new outburst of growth and vital activities in the older, more primitive parts, namely, we see buds growing out from those parts’.¹⁶ McDougall directly connects this inability to process sensations in a standardised way with a loosening of reality. In his chapter on dreams, he describes how the war dreams of anxiety patients were full of sensory imagery. He notes a failure in many former soldiers to distinguish between imagined sights and external reality.¹⁷ Nigel C. Hunt, in his recent exploration of war and trauma, explicates this psychological phenomenon effectively: ‘the traumatic moment becomes more real than reality’.¹⁸ McDougall’s and Hunt’s observations suggest that the boundaries surrounding trauma, sight, and reality are profoundly unstable: internal and external divides are blurred. Trauma resists containment because, writes Andreas Huyssen, it is ‘located on the threshold between remembering and forgetting, seeing and not seeing, transparency and occlusion’.¹⁹ But whilst trauma is an indefinable area of confused perimeters, seeing, through the lens of trauma, is not to see indistinctly. This distinction is important. All of the writers and their work discussed in the last four chapters show the far-reaching

¹⁶ William McDougall, *Outline of Abnormal Psychology* (London: Methuen, 1926), p. 294.

¹⁷ See Chapter Eight in McDougall. W. H. R. Rivers also noted this lack of distinction between real and imagined sights in soldiers with anxiety neuroses in *Instinct and the Unconscious: A Contribution to a Biological Theory of the Psycho-neuroses* (1920).

¹⁸ Nigel C. Hunt, *Memory, War and Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 7.

¹⁹ Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 8.

consequences of the world wars and the multifarious impact of war upon sight. Owen, Simpson, and Prebble – all front line combatants – clearly suffered from acute traumatic stress and their work reflects that. West, Lawrence, and Bowen, whilst perhaps not claiming the experience of trauma, all engage with the theme of wartime trauma. This body of work shows the diverse response of sight to trauma undermining the notion of a fixed lens of trauma; not all accounts fit the grey, desensitised stereotype that prevails in many literary, historical, and psychological discourses of trauma.

Kali Tal believes that an alternative reading of war trauma is dependent upon altering the social boundaries that are often imposed upon trauma: ‘if survivors retain control over the interpretation of their trauma, they can sometimes force a shift in the social and political structure. If the dominant culture manages to appropriate the trauma and can codify it in its own terms, the status quo will remain unchanged’.²⁰ Ben Shephard, in his informative account of the relationship between soldiers and psychiatrists (2000), similarly cautions against society drawing widespread assumptions and conclusions when discussing trauma. He argues that the clinical nature of literature on war neuroses prohibits a wider creative engagement with trauma. Shephard writes: ‘The clinical literature of the war neuroses is so rich that it is easy for the historian to pull together a collage of horror and pathos’.²¹ Shephard’s work articulates the need for an informed, all-encompassing discussion of trauma: ‘we have to look at the overall record, not just at the gripping psychopathology’.²² Crucially, Shephard writes against homogenising the visual experience of the trauma victim into ‘a collage of horror and pathos’ and boldly contends that ‘we must see the

²⁰ Kali Tal, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 7.

²¹ Ben Shephard, *A War of Nerves: Soldiers and Psychiatrists 1914-1994* (2000; London: Pimlico, 2002), p. xxi.

²² *Ibid.*

shell-shocked soldier not simply as a victim, silently suffering, powerless to help himself' but as an individual, empowered 'agent using his medical symptoms as a weapon'.²³ Nigel Hunt, in his equally impressive exploration of memory, war, and trauma (2010), likewise stresses the need for a more 'flexible, permeable, changeable' discourse of trauma because 'psychological reality is more fluid, social and malleable than we usually think'.²⁴ Hunt believes that we do not fully engage with 'the reality of psychological trauma' from a social, cultural, or scientific perspective; instead, we impose our own vision or version of reality upon the truth of traumatic experience. Hunt argues, far more than Shephard does, for a widespread recognition that trauma encompasses a wide range of experiences and that 'these experiences cut across the full range of traumatic experience'.²⁵ Hunt therefore shows that the medical or psychological terms that are often ascribed to trauma – post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), for example – do not take into account the breadth of traumatic experience and also the full range of traumatic symptoms. He convincingly argues that the more inclusive, non-diagnostic term 'war trauma' is better suited to the realities of trauma: 'many people who have experienced war talk about the excitement, the buzz [...] and these experiences are just as valid as the negative symptoms experienced by others. An understanding of war trauma must take into account this range of experience'.²⁶ Hunt's observations inevitably initiate a parallel discussion of whether a similarly inclusive understanding of traumatic visual experience – one that allows for an aesthetic engagement with the sights of war – is needed.

In recent years, the medical framework around visual reactions to trauma has expanded to house a binary psychological understanding. The latest edition of the

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Hunt, p. 2.

²⁵ Hunt, p. 59.

²⁶ Ibid.

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), for example, states that a traumatic visual response to war can consist of ‘recurrent and intrusive distressing [...] images’ or a ‘persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma and numbing of general responsiveness’.²⁷ But this tendency to define traumatic visual experience as either/or is not reflective of the full range of symptoms. In his article ‘The Consciousness of Sight’, the neurologist Adam Zeman shows how reductive it is to impose boundaries upon visual experience because ‘the visual world is mapped in as many as 30 visual areas beyond area V1, the primary visual cortex’ and that these areas are in turn subdivided. This, Zeman admits, ‘comes as something of a shock’ because ‘visual experience strikes us as being unified and orderly’.²⁸ Ramona Winkler, in her recent paper on optical illusions, states that it is this wish to impose order over traumatic material that leads society at large to deny the instability of sight. Winkler writes: ‘it is surprising to find out that the eye cannot see, [that] it merely perceives information which is passed down to the brain where innumerable processes of classification, comparison, and decision-making are initiated’.²⁹ She concludes that the destabilisation of sight through, for instance, visual hallucinations, has the ‘power to puzzle and bewilder because we have an implicit trust that what our senses tell us is a physical reality’.³⁰ Again, the boundaries between sight, trauma, and reality are revealed to be profoundly unstable.

This chapter follows Hunt’s lead in arguing for a more flexible critical appreciation of trauma by specifically questioning the assumed boundaries between trauma and sight because traumatic visual experience encompasses a diversity of

²⁷ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th edn. (Washington DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2000), p. 219.

²⁸ Adam Zeman, ‘The Consciousness of Sight’, *British Medical Journal*, 317 (1998), 1696-1697 (p. 1696).

²⁹ Ramona Winkler, ‘Optical Illusions’, ed. by Gerd Waloszek, *SAP Design Guild Resources*, 1.2 (2007) <http://www.sapdesignguild.org/resources/optical_illusions/index.html> [accessed 15 May 2011].

³⁰ *Ibid.*

symptoms. I therefore question whether the tendency to diagnostically define traumatic visual experience as either wholly alienating and desensitising or singularly alluring and sensual is a helpful or accurate representation of the relationship between trauma and sight. As Vernon Scannell's poem intimated, cannot our perceptual processing of trauma encompass both sensory states simultaneously? I examine two fictional representations of war trauma that engage directly with sight to further test this often assumed critical divide. Both the First World War soldier Septimus Smith in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and the World War Two fireman Flower in William Sansom's short stories of the same name (1944) extensively question how best to describe traumatic visual experience. In doing so, these works suggest that a more encompassing and creative approach towards the concept of sight and trauma is needed; one that allows for an aesthetic engagement with visually traumatic material. Diagnostic readings of trauma are helpful but only to a point; greater attention needs to be paid to the visual *experience* of trauma, the accurate transcription of this experience, and the anomalies of this experience. Does, for instance, a diagnostic paradigm of trauma allow for the recognition of an aesthetic, even beautiful, component to traumatic experience? By diagnosing and explaining trauma and traumatic symptoms, is the inexplicable consequently marginalised? Do medical frameworks and cultural conventions permit an accurate representation of the reality of psychological trauma or do they standardise and homogenise the traumatic visual experience?

Mrs Dalloway

Defining trauma and sight

Virginia Woolf's portrayal of trauma through the shell-shocked soldier Septimus Warren Smith has excited critics since the publication of *Mrs Dalloway* because, as Karen DeMeester states, the novel 'gave form and representation to a psychological condition' that was subjected to 'a culturally prescribed process' of silence and marginalisation.³¹ A large body of criticism is devoted to giving a specific diagnosis to Septimus's psychological condition. Suzette Henke, for instance, has written about Septimus's PTSD and schizophrenia whilst Beverley Schlack gives a Freudian reading of the text and diagnoses paranoia.³² Woolf's own psychological struggles and participation in various treatments for mental illness, such as the Weir Mitchell 'rest-cure' which she references within *Mrs Dalloway*, are partly responsible for this psychological focus. As Sue Thomas writes: 'critics [...] read Woolf's treatment of Septimus Smith's mental illness as a reflection of her anger at the rest cures prescribed for her during her own mental break-downs'.³³ Such diagnostic readings provide a helpful medical context in which to situate Septimus but nevertheless reinforce binary readings of his traumatic experience. Wyatt Bonikowski in his enlightening book, *Shell Shock and the Modernist Imagination* (2013), identifies a series of established oppositions in the body of literary criticism that surrounds Septimus: 'sanity over insanity, life over death, unity over pain, mourning over melancholia'.³⁴ Bonikowski questions the strict separation of these terms and argues for a realisation that they actually inhabit each other in the confusing reality of

³¹ Karen DeMeester, 'Trauma and Recovery in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 44.3 (1998), 649-673 (p. 649).

³² See Suzette A. Henke, 'Virginia Woolf's Septimus Smith: an analysis of "paraphrenia" and the schizophrenic use of language', *Literature and Psychology*, 31.4 (1981), 13-23 and Beverley Ann Schlack, 'A Freudian Look at *Mrs Dalloway*', *Literature and Psychology*, 23 (1973), 49-58.

³³ Sue Thomas, 'Virginia Woolf's Septimus Smith and Contemporary Perceptions of Shell Shock', *English Language Notes*, 25.2 (1987), 49-57 (p. 49).

³⁴ Wyatt Bonikowski, *Shell Shock and the Modernist Imagination: The Death Drive in Post-World War One British Fiction* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013), p. 136.

traumatic experience that 'insists on a meaning beyond the conventions and frameworks of Woolf's time and our own': 'not sanity over insanity, but insanity *within* sanity'.³⁵ This suggests that understanding the experience of trauma is of equal importance to diagnosing it.

Bonikowski, of course, echoes Woolf's statement of authorial intent whilst writing *Mrs Dalloway*: 'I adumbrate here a study of insanity and suicide: the world seen by the sane and the insane side by side'.³⁶ In October 1922, she reaffirmed this intention: 'Suppose [the novel] be connected in this way: sanity and insanity. Mrs. D. seeing the truth, S.S. seeing the insane truth'.³⁷ Woolf narrows the diagnostic divide between sanity and insanity and thus resists compartmentalising or labelling trauma: the boundaries between sight, trauma, and reality, as described by Woolf, are indistinct.³⁸ Throughout *Mrs Dalloway*, Septimus is shown to resist a normative framework. Jean Thomson notes that Septimus's madness is uncontainable because 'time has lost its boundaries' for him.³⁹ But this is just one of many symptoms that stem from Septimus losing control over his senses; time and space have consequently become meaningless for him because the defined sensory framework through which he processes interior and exterior stimuli has dissolved. Septimus is consequently able to 'see through bodies, see into the future'.⁴⁰ The medical specialist Sir William Bradshaw ironically comprehends this when he notes, whilst running through Septimus's various symptoms of trauma, that Septimus is not mad

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf 1920-1924*, ed. Anne Oliver Bell, 5 vols. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1978), II p. 207.

³⁷ Virginia Woolf, 'The Hours': The British Museum Manuscript of *Mrs Dalloway*, ed. Helen M. Wussow (New York: Pace University Press, 1996), p. 412.

³⁸ Interestingly, Rose notes that Leonard Woolf wrote of his wife's mental illness: 'she passed across the border which divides what we call insanity from sanity' suggesting, as Rose observes, that 'sanity and insanity are merely two points on the same continuum and not two radically different states'. Phyllis Rose, *Woman of Letters: A Life of Virginia Woolf*. (London: Routledge, 1978), p. 142.

³⁹ Jean Thomson, 'Virginia Woolf and the case of Septimus Smith', *The San Francisco Jung Institute Library Journal*, 23.4 (2005), 55-71 (p. 62).

⁴⁰ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, ed. Stella McNichol (1925; London: Penguin, 1992; reprint, 2000), p. 74. Hereafter referred to as *MD* in parenthetical citations.

but has lost his 'sense of proportion' (*MD* 106; my italics). It is interesting that Sir William, in attempting to define Septimus's trauma whilst absolutely failing to do so, categorises Septimus's manifold sensory responses under the constraint of one amalgamating term. Critical readings of Septimus's traumatic experience have a similar tendency to categorise his visions, oral delusions, and verbal tics together as mere symptoms of psychological illness. Karen DeMeester, for example, writes: 'Septimus's sensual and emotional paralysis illustrates the numbing effect so characteristic of traumatic injury and the obstruction of grief that contemporary psychologists recognise in their war-veteran clients'.⁴¹ By defining Septimus's senses under a diagnostic term – in this instance, 'sensory paralysis' – they risk being grouped as one without specific understanding or appreciation.

Woolf explicitly expressed her irritation at any attempt to straightjacket the heightened sensory experience of mental illness: 'It was a subject that I had kept cooling in my mind until I felt I could touch it without bursting into flame all over. You can't think what a raging furnace it is still to me – madness and doctors and being forced'.⁴² In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Septimus's senses burst through physical and mental demarcations. In Regent's Park, for example, Septimus feels as if 'scientifically speaking, the flesh was melted off the world. His body was macerated until only the nerve fibres were left' (*MD* 74). Woolf links this inability to contain trauma successfully with the inadequacy of language to describe it effectively. This was particularly true, she felt, of the Great War and its traumatic aftermath of pain and

⁴¹ DeMeester, p. 658.

⁴² Virginia Woolf, *Collected Letters 1923–28*, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, 6 vols. (London: Hogarth, 1977), III, p. 180.

suffering that she witnessed in the 1920s.⁴³ Woolf's writings reveal a preoccupation with not only containing but also transcribing the emotional impact of the war in words. In her essay 'On Not Knowing Greek' (1925), for example, Woolf wrote:

In the vast catastrophe of the European war our emotions had to be broken up for us, and put at an angle from us, before we could allow ourselves to feel them in poetry or fictions. The only poets who spoke to the purpose spoke in the sidelong, satiric manner of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. It was not possible for them to be direct without being clumsy.⁴⁴

The essay reveals a distinct disjunction between what is seen and what is said. Woolf suggests sight offers an immediate engagement with experience which language cannot effectively intimate. Her frustrated desire to capture in words the immediacy of experience, which vision instead offers, is repeatedly shown: '[to] march straight up, with [...] eyes open and thus fearlessly approached, emotions stand still and suffer themselves to be looked at'.⁴⁵ Woolf's utilisation of sight in this essay is significant. Whilst words are shown to be prohibitive because their mediation denies direct access, sight offers an effective means through which to engage with trauma. Sight is presented as an illuminating force because it is flexible; perspective provides multiple approaches to trauma. There is not one fixed way of seeing war: to see 'in the round' is not to perceive the whole. A changing perspective allows for a variety of viewpoints and interpretations. Emotions, which otherwise would be overwhelming and incomprehensible, can be spatially distanced, angled, and examined through sight.

⁴³ Incidentally, because of Woolf's anti-war views, as expressed in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938), there is a tendency to read Septimus Smith as a straightforward index for Woolf's pacifism. Deborah Martinson, for example, claims 'Woolf constructs Smith to announce an anti-war stature'. Deborah Martinson, *In the Presence of Audience: The Self in Diaries and Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2003), pp. 46-47). This chapter, whilst not challenging Woolf's anti-war sentiments, suggests that other underlying, sometimes conflicting, energies can be identified within Septimus. Septimus's engagement with traumatic visual material shows a fascination, as well as a horror, of war.

⁴⁴ Virginia Woolf, 'On Not Knowing Greek', *The Common Reader*, ed. Andrew McNeillie, 2 vols. (London: Vintage, 2003), I, p. 34.

⁴⁵ Ibid. See also Bonikowski's extended analysis on the significance of the essay 'On Not Knowing Greek', *Shell Shock and the Modernist Imagination*, pp. 141-145.

Sight therefore circumnavigates physical restrictions, such as space and time, because it allows one to be at once near and far, engaged and distant. Woolf explores the creative possibilities of this unrestricted state further in her 1926 essay 'On Being Ill'. In this essay, written a year after *Mrs Dalloway* was published, she likens the sensory experience of illness to the traumatic experience of war. Furthermore, she establishes a direct link between sight and trauma through identifying both as empowering agents. A disabling experience is transformed into a moment of artistic possibility. 'We [the victims of illness] become deserters,' Woolf wrote. She continues: 'They march to battle. We float with the sticks on the stream; helter-skelter with the dead leaves on the lawn, irresponsible and disinterested and able, perhaps for the first time in years, to look round, to look up—to look, for example, at the sky'.⁴⁶ Kimberly Engdahl Coates writes that the significance of this essay is its ability to show how physical and mental pain allows one to engage with 'the borderlands of consciousness' and thus 'radically alters perceptions of self, other, and world'.⁴⁷ Traumatic experience is therefore radically revised: rather than limiting or curtailing sight, it becomes full of visual possibility.

This is very noticeable in *Mrs Dalloway*. Septimus, in attempting to communicate his trauma to the exterior world, tries to make it visible. Instead of describing the experience in words, through writing and talking, he chooses to draw it. He pictorially illustrates his traumatic visual encounters through 'diagrams, designs, [and] zigzagging' lines (161-162). These are visual signs that will not be contained. Rezia, Septimus's wife, who appreciates their significance but fails to translate their meaning, attempts to 'tie them up [...] with a piece of silk' and 'put them away' (162) out of sight and out of mind. 'The problem with this act of

⁴⁶ Virginia Woolf, 'On Being Ill', *The Moment and Other Essays* (London: Hogarth Press, 1952), p. 14.

⁴⁷ Kimberly Engdahl Coates, 'Exposing the Nerves of Language', *Literature and Medicine*, 21.2 (2002), 242-363 (p. 244).

preservation', writes Bonikowski, 'is that it preserves beauty at the expense of meaning; tying the papers together may gather the fragments into an aesthetic form [...] but it also means that they will, like Septimus himself, remain unread and unreadable'.⁴⁸ But does the meaning of trauma depend on definition? Rezia appreciates meaning within the visual signs that Septimus makes even if she cannot define or understand what she sees. As Kimberly Engdahl Coates observes: 'pain refuses our entry into existing worlds and symbols, the person in pain must create new symbols and new worlds'.⁴⁹ Is making the experience of trauma seen therefore more important than it being understood? Elaine Scarry writes that pain, like trauma, is indefinable. Pain, whilst making visible the otherwise internal and invisible suffering of others, nevertheless resists definition. Scarry writes: 'pain comes unsharably into our midst as at once that which cannot be denied and that which cannot be confirmed'.⁵⁰ Does it matter, then, if trauma resists and escapes definition through conventional language? The treatment of sight and trauma in *Mrs Dalloway* suggests that finding a means to describe adequately the visual experience of trauma, and thereby engaging with that experience creatively, was more important to Woolf than being able to define it succinctly.

Describing trauma and sight

'Septimus Warren Smith, aged about thirty, pale faced, beak-nosed, wearing brown shoes and a shabby overcoat, with hazel eyes which had [a] look of apprehension in them' (*MD* 15). Woolf sets up Septimus as a visual stereotype of trauma only to write against it. Grey is interestingly reserved not for Septimus but exclusively for Sir William Bradshaw and his proportional, defined, and limited visual world:

⁴⁸ Bonikowski, *Shell Shock and the Modernist Imagination*, p. 158.

⁴⁹ Kimberly Engdahl Coates, p. 249.

⁵⁰ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 4.

Probably, Rezia thought, that was Sir William Bradshaw's house with the grey motor car in front of it. (The leaden circles dissolved in the air). Indeed it was – Sir William Bradshaw's motor car; low, powerful, grey with plain initials interlocked on the panel, as if the pomps of heraldry were incongruous, this man being the ghostly helper, the priest of science; and, as the motor car was grey, so to match its sober suavity, grey furs, silver grey rugs were heaped in it, to keep her ladyship warm while she waited. (*MD* 103)

Grey does not portray the shell-shocked soldier but is instead used to describe the man who would happily see Septimus 'drugged' into the 'stiff yet staring corpse of discipline' (*MD* 56). Woolf thus exposes how culturally misunderstood trauma is. Septimus doggedly refutes the categorisation of shell shock. He persistently states that 'life was good' (*MD* 164) and his 'tragedy' is the idea of 'Holmes and Bradshaw' and 'not his' (163-164). Trauma does not prohibit an aesthetic engagement with, or appreciation of, external stimuli. Septimus does not suffer from visual paralysis; instead of seeing the world as a grey wasteland, Septimus sees it bursting with intense colour and life. In Regent's Park, for example, Septimus's traumatic encounter with 'a man in grey' (*MD* 76) culminates in a sensuous feast. Woolf describes this experience as a sensory manifestation where all of Septimus's senses delight in a sublime, earth-shattering experience: 'the earth thrilled beneath' (*MD* 74) his touch; 'music began clanging' in his ears (75); 'beauty sprang instantly' 'wherever he looked' (76). Significantly, seeing is the prevailing action in this passage as a multitude of visual verbs dominate Woolf's description: 'He had only to open his eyes; but a weight was on them; a fear. He strained; he pushed; he looked; he saw' (*MD* 75). Sight subsumes and dominates Septimus's other senses: 'that music should be visible was a discovery' (*MD* 75). Traumatic visual encounters of this kind, which are highly sensory, challenge the conventions of description. The senses resist containment; the traumatic becomes beautiful; the unthinkable occurs.

Throughout the novel, Woolf shows Septimus not only continually engaging with traumatic material through sight but she also uses a language rooted in vision to describe his traumatic visual encounters: sound becomes seen rather than heard. Whilst hearing the motorcar, for example, Septimus is amazed how 'everything' is drawn together into 'one centre before his eyes' (*MD* 16) and, when listening to the aeroplane and Rezia's voice, he fears he will 'go mad' if he does not 'shut his eyes' and 'see no more' (*MD* 24). In 'On Being Ill', Woolf noted how the conventional use of language had failed to not only define but also accurately describe sensory experience: 'In health meaning has encroached upon sound. Our intelligence domineers over our senses'.⁵¹ She also proffered, in the essay, a possible creative solution to this dilemma that suggests her interest in authentically describing traumatic visual experience was not purely framed by her patient's perspective: her aesthetic interest in the descriptive conundrum as a writer is also revealed. Woolf's suggested solution anticipates Scarry's much later observation that pain, through resisting the established confines of language, forces a 'reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned'.⁵² In the essay, Woolf articulates the necessity of utilising pre-linguistic sound: 'Let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry. There is nothing ready made for him. He is forced to coin words himself, and, taking his pain in one hand, and a lump of pure sound in the other [...] so to crush them together that a brand new word in the end drops out'.⁵³ Here, through Woolf's use of the sculpting analogy, sound is predominantly tactile, malleable, and solid rather than heard. The artist is making the sound visible.

⁵¹ Virginia Woolf, 'On Being Ill', p. 19.

⁵² Scarry, p. 4.

⁵³ Virginia Woolf, 'On Being Ill', p. 15.

In *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf's embodiment of sight through words locates Septimus's trauma beyond definition and at the edge of description. As Gabrielle Myers aptly describes, Septimus stands 'on the edge of perception and speech'.⁵⁴ It is a phenomenon that Septimus shares with the singing beggar woman who is the only other character in the novel that, through her rejection of normal conventions, inhabits a liminal state of existence that remains indefinable. Elaine Showalter evokes Scarry's discussion of 'pre-language' sound by writing that the beggar's song is an 'archaic language'.⁵⁵ This unstructured, unreadable sound defines the beggar:

A sound interrupted him; a frail quivering sound, a voice bubbling up without direction, vigour, beginning or end, running weakly and shrilly and with an absence of all human meaning into

ee um fah um so
foo swee too eem oo –

the voice of no age or sex, the voice of an ancient spring spouting from the earth.
(*MD* 88)

The song mirrors the language that Septimus uses to describe his traumatic encounters. His words, like the beggar woman's, revoke both temporal and spatial boundaries:

The word 'time' split its husk; poured its riches over him; and from his lips fell like shells, like shavings from a plane, without his making them, hard, white, imperishable, words, and flew to attach themselves [...] in an ode to Time; an immortal ode to Time. [...] The dead were in Thessaly, Evans sang, among the orchids. (*MD* 76)

The language that the two characters share and embody is timelessly enduring as well as intrusive and confrontational. It is irrepressible and anarchic; it interrupts Peter Walsh and assaults Rezia; it bubbles over the pavements of Regent's Park Tube Station and pours through the railings of Regent's Park.

⁵⁴ Gabrielle Myers, "'Spread like a Veil upon a Rock": Septimus and the trench poets of World War One', *English*, 60.230 (2011), 212-228 (p. 224).

⁵⁵ Scarry, p. 6; Elaine Showalter, notes on *Mrs Dalloway* (London: Penguin, 1992; reprint, 2000), p. 221.

It is also intensely visual; as Danius notes of Joyce's writing in *Ulysses*, 'hearing is [...] rewritten in terms of sight, an imagery that suggests the pre-eminence of the language of the eye'.⁵⁶ Woolf's words have solidity and colour; are 'hard' and 'white'; are seen as well as heard. This is the language of sight. It shares many similarities with synaesthesia which intermingles sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. Diane Ackerman writes that the language of synaesthesia draws on the 'horizontal correspondences' of the senses to suggest the experience of sensation rather than straightforwardly communicate it.⁵⁷ The language of sight in *Mrs Dalloway* is essential in suggesting that which would otherwise remain overlooked. Catherine Lord notes how 'the homeless woman invades Peter Walsh's ocular space demanding his eye contact': 'she implored him (as she did now quite clearly) "look in my eyes with thy sweet eyes intently"' (*MD* 90).⁵⁸ It is the sound she makes that enables her to make this human connection. It bridges the gap between perception and words; it transmits an experience that is outside the frame of human reference (absent 'of all human meaning') to another human being. Peter Walsh does not understand what the beggar woman is saying but he nevertheless feels emotionally connected to the sound she makes: 'Peter Walsh couldn't help giving the poor creature a coin' (*MD* 90). Septimus enjoys a similar defining moment of human visual contact when he and Clarissa stare at each other through the florist's shop window in shock. In the novel, it is the backfiring motorcar that forms the focus of this scene, because the characters at that precise moment are unaware of their unconscious

⁵⁶ Sara Danius, *The Senses of Modernism – technology, perception, and aesthetics* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 172.

⁵⁷ Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses* (New York: Vintage, 1991), p. 291. Interestingly, Ackerman also writes that the language of synesthesia is rooted in an archaic context rather like the language that Septimus and the beggar lady use. Ackerman notes: 'the neurologist Richard Cytowić traces the phenomenon [of synesthesia] to the limbic system, the most primitive part of the brain, calling synesthetes "living cognitive fossils", because they may be people whose limbic system is not entirely governed by the much more sophisticated (and more recently evolved) cortex. As he says, "synesthesia...may be a memory of how early mammals saw, heard, smelled, tasted and touched"' (p. 290).

⁵⁸ Catherine Lord, 'The Frames of Septimus Smith: Through Twenty Four Hours in the City of Mrs Dalloway', *Parallax*, 5.3 (1999), 36-46 (p. 42).

bond, but, interestingly, in the 1997 film adaptation of the novel, the significance of this visual connection is expounded as the characters engage, unaware of time or space, on the indeterminate borderline between sound and sight.⁵⁹

Traumatic visual experience as a creative force

The encounter with the beggar woman in *Mrs Dalloway* seems to have originated from Woolf's observation of a homeless woman in June 1920. Woolf noted that her song 'was gay, & yet terrible & fearfully vivid'.⁶⁰ This aptly describes Septimus's traumatic visual experiences. At home, he is shown to shade 'his eyes so that he might see only a little' because he sees too vividly: 'real things' thus become visually 'too exciting', too 'exact' (*MD* 155). Such moments are reminiscent of Woolf's well-known articulation in her diary that 'as for the beauty, as I always say [...] too much for one pair of eyes'.⁶¹ An overwhelming visual experience can therefore be seductive as well as traumatic. The language that Woolf uses to describe Septimus's traumatic visual symptoms captures this duality. Septimus's articulation of sight, like the beggar woman's song, is vivid, gay, and terrible: he is horrified to see dogs morphing into men but he also sees 'truth' and 'beauty' in such visions (*MD* 74-76). Woolf was fully aware of this paradox. Writing in *A Room of One's Own*, she noted: 'beauty [...] has two edges, one of laughter, one of anguish, cutting the heart asunder'.⁶² Harvena Richter notes that Septimus's visual manifestations are deeply disturbing because they resemble 'the visions in De Quincey's opium dreams' being both 'terrifying' and 'beautiful'.⁶³ Woolf, in attempting to describe accurately the

⁵⁹Film adaptation of *Mrs Dalloway*, dir. by Marleen Gorris (First Look International Films, 8 minutes 38 seconds, on video, 1997).

⁶⁰ Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf 1920-1924*, II, p. 47.

⁶¹ Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf 1936-1941*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie, 5 vols. (London: Hogarth, 1984), V, p. 72

⁶² Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929; London: Penguin, 1945), p. 18.

⁶³ Harvena Richter, *Virginia Woolf: The Inward Voyage* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1970), pp. 90-91.

experience of sight, thus breaks a fundamental cultural taboo: she suggests the traumatic sights of death and war can be perceived as beautiful.

Woolf had no experience of life on the front-line but she did witness the devastation of death first-hand; the trauma of losing her mother when she was thirteen had a significant impact upon her.⁶⁴ In a 'Sketch of the Past', Woolf describes how the trauma of her mother's death directly affected her sight. Against the numbing backdrop of death, Woolf found herself visually processing external stimuli in an extreme and vivid manner:

It was sunset, and the great glass dome at the end of the station was blazing with light. It was glowing yellow and red and the iron girders made a pattern across it. I walked along the platform gazing with rapture at this magnificent blaze of colour, and the train slowly steamed into the station. It impressed and exalted me. It was so vast and so fiery red. The contrast of that blaze of magnificent light with the shrouded and curtained rooms at Hyde Park Gate was so intense. Also it was partly that my mother's death unveiled and intensified; made me suddenly develop perceptions, as if a burning glass had been laid over what was shaded and dormant. Of course this quickening was spasmodic. But it was surprising – as if something were becoming visible without any effort.⁶⁵

In this extraordinary passage, Woolf is not simply seeing; she is seeing the experience of seeing. Woolf sees afresh and with clarity; she sees formerly unnoticed colours and details in the most mundane of objects; she sees without mediation or restriction. Septimus, also traumatised by the deaths he has witnessed, is similarly in sight:

Wherever he looked, at the houses, at the railings, at the antelopes stretching over the palings, beauty sprang instantly. To watch a leaf quivering in the rush of air was an exquisite joy. Up in the sky swallows swooping, swerving, flinging themselves in and out, round and round, yet always with perfect control as elastics held them; and the flies rising and falling; and the sun spotting now this leaf, now that, in mockery, dazzling it with soft gold in pure good temper [...] – all of this, calm and reasonable as it was, made out of ordinary things as it was, was the truth now; beauty, that was the truth now. Beauty was everywhere. (*MD* 76)

⁶⁴ Roger Poole and Gabrielle Myers both note the similarity between Septimus's reaction to Evans's death and Woolf's reaction to her mother's death.

⁶⁵ Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (1976; London: Pimlico, 2002), p. 103.

Such aesthetically seductive descriptions profoundly challenge society's assumptions about the realities of trauma, sight, and war. Dr. Holmes's advice that Septimus be made to 'notice real things' – 'a music hall', 'cricket' (*MD* 27) – illustrates society's appropriation of the conventional aesthetic terms used to describe reality and trauma. Holmes suggests that his view of the world is more accurate, more realistic, and more truthful than Septimus's.

A disjunction is therefore revealed between Septimus's perception of reality and Holmes's. It is not that Septimus does not notice quotidian objects; rather, he sees them differently. As Septimus says: 'real things – real things were too exciting' (*MD* 155). DeMeester explains that:

Communication between a trauma survivor and untraumatized listener is diminished by a gap in meaning that to an extent exists in all attempts to communicate. Though the listener recognizes the words the traumatized person uses, she cannot comprehend the reality these words represent; there is an irreconcilable gap between the intensity of experience and emotion the veteran wishes to convey and the experience and emotion the listener can imagine and feel.⁶⁶

Elie Wiesel, having experienced trauma himself, reinforces the difficulty in communicating an alternative reality: 'What can we do to share our visions? Our words can only evoke the incomprehensible. Hunger, thirst, fear, humiliation, waiting, death; for us these words hold different realities'.⁶⁷ But our enduring resistance to acknowledging that wartime traumatic visual encounters can be seductive, if not beautiful, is not solely attributable to cultural ignorance or incomprehension of trauma. It is rooted, I would suggest, in a prevailing twentieth-century belief that we should not claim to share or communicate the experience of the traumatized: to do so, might diminish the gravity of their plight and our understanding of it. The strange connection made between Theodor Adorno's infamous, but much misinterpreted, statement, about the barbarism of writing poetry after Auschwitz, and Woolf's

⁶⁶ DeMeester, p. 655.

⁶⁷ Elie Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory* (New York: Summit, 1990), p. 33.

portrayal of traumatic war experience exemplifies this. Tammy Clewell takes Adorno's declaration that poetry aims to squeeze 'any kind of sense, however bleached, out of the victim's fate' and reads it against Woolf's articulation of trauma in her novels.⁶⁸ Clewell argues that Woolf 'looks ahead to a post-Holocaust vision of art theorized by Theodor Adorno' where art is stripped 'to soberly confront the horror [...] of death'.⁶⁹ For Clewell, there is no beauty in the trauma of war. There is just the 'bleached' lens of trauma. Lawrence Langer provides an insightful contribution to this debate when he asserts: '[i]n one sense, all writing about the Holocaust represents a retrospective effort to give meaningless history a context of meaning, to furnish the mind with a framework for insight without diminishing the sorrow of the event itself'.⁷⁰ It is a thesis that DeMeester agrees with as she suggests that Woolf 'seems to understand innately that, for the trauma survivor, telling the story of his trauma' is a personally and socially reconstitutive act.⁷¹

It can also be a creative act that acknowledges a sensuous underpinning of traumatic experience. Because there is a critical disinclination to acknowledge and explore the potential beauty within traumatic sight, Woolf's aesthetic interest in describing traumatic visual experience has been somewhat overlooked or misread. There is a critical tendency to see *Mrs Dalloway* as a novel that singularly affirms the bleak lens of trauma. Even DeMeester's insightful article on trauma and recovery in *Mrs Dalloway* concludes that: 'The modernist narrative form of Woolf's novel brilliantly mirrors the mind of a trauma survivor like Septimus. [The novel sits within] a literature of trauma: [its form replicates] the damaged psyche of a trauma survivor

⁶⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), p. 361.

⁶⁹ Tammy Clewell, 'Consolation Refused: Virginia Woolf, The Great War, and Modernist Mourning', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 50.1 (2004), 197-223 (p. 214).

⁷⁰ Lawrence L. Langer, *Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit* (Albany: New York University Press, 1982), p. 185.

⁷¹ DeMeester, p. 660.

and [its content portrays] his characteristic disorientation and despair'.⁷² Yet Kimberly Engdahl Coates suggests a refreshingly different way in which to read Woolf's engagement with traumatic material. In her analysis of 'On Being Ill', Engdahl Coates concludes that Woolf 'declares the body's symptomatology and experience as fundamental to art's creation and originality'.⁷³ Engdahl Coates points to other theorists writing on aesthetics during the 1920s and 1930s, who theorized aesthetics as a discourse firmly grounded in the body, to underpin her analysis. Charles Mauron's writing, in particular, appears to have had a direct interface with Woolf's work and it is possible to conclude that he directly impacted upon her aesthetic appreciation of pain and trauma.

During the 1930s, a direct link can be established between Woolf and Mauron because Woolf not only chaired a lecture by Mauron on aesthetics but the Hogarth Press also published Mauron's book *Aesthetics and Psychology* in 1935. His connection with Woolf, however, can be traced back earlier than this to the 1920s because of his involvement with Roger Fry and the Bloomsbury Group throughout the inter-war years. Engdahl Coates writes that Mauron's ideas were 'especially evocative for Woolf because his attention, more often than not, was absorbed by literature. Very much like Woolf, he believed that words themselves are living forms to be savoured and appreciated not merely for the meaning they convey but also for the sensations they arouse'.⁷⁴ Furthermore, Mauron suggested that 'aesthetic events occur on the boundaries between [...] two very distinct 'attitudes of mind' – the active and the contemplative – and that these boundaries should be our concern when exploring aesthetics'.⁷⁵ This, of course, read against *Mrs Dalloway*, has profound implications for how Woolf's portrayal of traumatic visual material is received. It

⁷² DeMeester, p. 650.

⁷³ Engdahl Coates, p. 242.

⁷⁴ Engdahl Coates, p. 245.

⁷⁵ Engdahl Coates, p. 255.

affirms that Woolf's interest in accurately describing a diverse visual response to trauma by using a language rooted in sight is partly aesthetic and can be understood as an artistic experiment. Indeed, a letter of Woolf's sent in 1923, whilst she was writing *Mrs Dalloway*, appears to confirm this: 'But how does one make people talk [...] so that one's hair stands on end, in a drawing-room? How can one weight and sharpen dialogue until each sentence tears its way like a harpoon and grapples with shingles at the bottom of the reader's soul?'⁷⁶ Woolf thus reveals that the task of creating a framework of words that would accurately describe internal sensation was of central importance to her. The traumatic visual material of *Mrs Dalloway* can therefore be read as both a creative force and a creative product.

Fireman Flower

Approaching traumatic visual experience

Woolf's underlying aesthetic interest in describing traumatic visual experience in *Mrs Dalloway* is framed by her specific engagement with shell shock and the First World War: war contextualises Septimus's trauma. In contrast, Sansom's interest in the relationship between sight and trauma and its literary portrayal is explicitly aesthetic and appears to lack a specific unifying context. Traumatic visual experience dominates his wartime collection of short stories *Fireman Flower* but war seems strangely peripheral and even absent: nine out of the twelve stories do not overtly mention World War Two. Many critics reading Sansom's work conclude that his interest in traumatic visual material is not just explicitly aesthetic but *singularly* aesthetic. Paulette Michel-Michot, for example, writes: 'Sansom's interests are

⁷⁶ Virginia Woolf, *Collected Letters*, III, p. 36.

neither psychological, social nor political, but aesthetic'.⁷⁷ Michel-Michot further claims that Sansom's aesthetic interest is rooted in sight: '[Sansom] is a seer more than a feeler; hence the numerous 'pictures'. [...] Sansom speaks to the reader's senses but mostly to his eye. He is concrete and visual; shapes, colours and movements are rendered in all their shades and frightening reality'.⁷⁸ It is this intensely visual response to events, which Michel-Michot stresses, that has led some critics to see Sansom's aesthetic interest in visual experience as part of a wider surrealist literary experiment. Peter F. Neumeyer is not alone in noting parallels between Kafka's writing and Sansom's.⁷⁹ He quotes a personal letter received from Sansom on the influence of Kafka to offer direct evidence of a shared interest in visual experience between the two writers: "[Kafka's] visual eye had the same peculiar clarity as the surrealists whose way of looking at things, of *isolating* objects or movements, etc., has always influenced me very strongly!"⁸⁰ The significance of sight in surrealist aesthetics has meant that trauma in Sansom's work is not specifically diagnosed; rather, the underlying presence of 'war trauma' is assumed.

The question therefore arises whether Sansom's work indicates an interest in war trauma per se or in the aesthetic possibilities of traumatic sight? Do surrealist aesthetics incorporate a traumatised, or pseudo-traumatised, perception? A surrealist reading of trauma in Sansom's work would imply that the war was more of a by-product of Sansom's interest in traumatic visual experience than the framing context. Leo Mellor's work on the relationship between World War Two and surrealism, in which he examines Sansom's writing, importantly suggests that the war should not

⁷⁷ Paulette Michel-Michot, *William Sansom: A Critical Assessment* (Paris: L'Universite de Liege Press, 1971), p. xix.

⁷⁸ Michel-Michot, pp. 27-28.

⁷⁹ Critics often draw a comparison between Kafka and Sansom. See, for example, Michael Kleeberg, 'William Sansom (1912-1976)', *British Short Fiction Writers 1945-1980*, ed. Dean Baldwin (London: Gales Research, 1994), pp. 199-202. Kleeberg writes: '[Sansom borrowed] heavily from the style of Franz Kafka [...] he created haunting visions [through] his direct appeal to the eye' (p. 199).

⁸⁰ William Sansom qtd. in a personal letter to Peter F. Neumeyer in Neumeyer's article 'Franz Kafka and William Sansom', *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, 7.1 (1966), 76-84 (p. 78).

be understood as merely creative material for surrealist artists. Mellor argues that the war, particularly the Blitz, produced unique conditions that helped to shape the surrealist movement. The unreal reality of wartime London, and its traumatic, often unspeakable, sights necessitated a refashioning of surrealist aesthetics. Surrealism, Mellor claims, transformed during the war from a formerly 'outlandish' and 'contrived' artistic mode to an important representative tool engaging with an altered reality.⁸¹ A quotation from Sansom, about his fascination with fire as both a London fire-fighter working in the Blitz and an artist writing about it, illustrates that his aesthetic approach to traumatic visual experience does not negate the significance of the war: 'Fire is so familiar, fire is everywhere to be seen. Fire needs no definition. [...] The difficulty lies in the translation of fire into the imagination through such normally expedient channels as canvas and the written word'. Here, war – Sansom's war was fighting fire – shapes the artistic form. It is almost as if the surreal sights of war threatened to exceed the aesthetic possibilities of surrealism. Hence, the necessary refashioning of surrealism that Mellor describes.

War can therefore be understood as an important part of the contextualising frame for Sansom's aesthetic engagement with trauma. N.H. Reeve has recently argued that the traumatic visions in Sansom's 1949 novel *The Body*, although not overtly referencing the war, can be directly linked to the traumatic sights of the Blitz that Sansom witnessed: 'There are moments in *The Body* when the visions that most animate it, the sudden exposures of things previously hidden, the adrenaline rush and the wary curiosity as walls and barriers start to collapse, are seen as if it was indeed bomb damage that made them possible'.⁸² Reeve's thesis is very relevant when read against passages from *The Body* that appear to allegorise the visually

⁸¹ Leo Mellor, *Reading the Ruins: Modernism, Bombsites and British Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 93.

⁸² N.H. Reeve, 'Away from the Lighthouse: William Sansom and Elizabeth Taylor in 1949', *The Fiction of the 1940s: Stories of Survival* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 152-168 (p. 156).

traumatic experience of the Blitz: 'Like a storm subsiding, the room abruptly grew quiet...only the smoke remained. Scattered sentences shot in and died on what was almost silence. I noticed people looking at each other as if they had never really looked before. Only the smoke hung still deeply clouding this extraordinary non movement'.⁸³ Passages like this, containing what Reeve calls 'hidden fault-lines' of trauma, run throughout Sansom's writing: although few of the stories in *Fireman Flower* reference war directly, the majority revolve around a deeply rooted fear or traumatic visual encounter.⁸⁴ Notably, the three most famous stories in the collection – 'Fireman Flower', 'The Wall', and 'The Witnesses' – powerfully describe the traumatic sights of fire fighting in the Blitz. All these moments of traumatic visual experience differ from quotidian fears. They are, as *Fireman Flower* reflects, 'terrors [that] embrace the whole idea of life' which are beyond all 'reason' as opposed to 'personal' fears that can be explained and articulated.⁸⁵ The constant collision between trauma and sight in the *Fireman Flower* collection can therefore be seen as a reflection of wartime traumatic encounters that Sansom witnessed: the war implicitly frames Sansom's material.

Sansom was particularly fascinated by the challenge of describing traumatic visual experience. In 'A Fireman's Journal', Sansom wrote that no-one outside the experience of 'modern battle' could know 'what it was like': 'the experience is too violent for the arts to transcribe; there will never be an adequate reportage to convey to posterity a living idea of the truth of such experience'.⁸⁶ Relating the experience of trauma accurately was of paramount importance. Writing of a wartime incident which inspired 'The Wall', Sansom noted his desire to transcribe that experience accurately:

⁸³ William Sansom, *The Body* (London: Hogarth Press, 1949), p. 58.

⁸⁴ Reeve, p. 156.

⁸⁵ William Sansom, 'Fireman Flower', *Fireman Flower* (1944; London: Chatto & Windus, 1952), pp. 196-255 (p. 234). Hereafter referred to as FF in parenthetical citations.

⁸⁶ William Sansom, 'A Fireman's Journal', *Leaves in the Storm: a book of diaries*, ed. Stefan Schimanski and Henry Treece (London: Lindsay Drummond, 1947), pp. 133-143 (p. 141).

'for the first time I said to myself: I must write down something absolutely true'.⁸⁷ Similarly, in *The Birth of the Story*, Sansom wrote that his descriptions of traumatic wartime experiences were 'not calculated to please people, but to please the truth'.⁸⁸ Sansom, like Woolf, intimates that the experience of war is too powerful, too traumatic to contain in conventional descriptive terms. Significantly, he links the uncontainable nature of trauma directly with the irrepressible experience of sight.

In 'The Wall', trauma is *seeing* trauma: 'In that simple second my brain digested every detail of the scene. New eyes opened at the sides of my head so that, from within, I photographed a hemispherical panorama bounded by the huge length of the building in front of me and the narrow lane on either side'.⁸⁹ The traumatic impact that the scale of World War Two had upon the senses, especially sight, is both explicit and distinct here. Sansom, rather than showing a desensitised shutdown of the senses or a fragmented, non-panoramic perspective, describes a hypersensitive, uncontainable, almost outer-body visual response. This struggle of both the senses and the body to contain traumatic experience is further elaborated upon by Sansom in 'A Fireman's Journal':

the thick of the battle [...] has become too violent, machines move too fast for the nerves' perception, the din outsounds the ear, movements and winds and lights strike with such a giant impact that this can scarcely be perceived and even then never, neither in the symbols of language nor in the tones of pain be recorded'.⁹⁰

He continues: 'the nerves are [...] stretched and battered, torn and bruised beyond sensibility' 'by the storm of noise and light sweeping around'.⁹¹ Like Woolf, Sansom shows that conventional use of language cannot contain the riotous sensory experience of war trauma. But for Sansom, the descriptive conundrum lies not just in

⁸⁷ William Sansom, *Coming to London* (London: Phoenix, 1957), p. 139.

⁸⁸ William Sansom, *The Birth of a Story* (London: Hogarth Press, 1972), p. 10.

⁸⁹ William Sansom, 'The Wall', *Fireman Flower*, pp. 167-172 (p. 168).

⁹⁰ William Sansom, 'A Fireman's Journal', p. 142.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

the difficulty of successfully communicating traumatic experience to others; it also lies in the challenge of communicating it to oneself. The reality of trauma resides in the unknown sensory experience. If war trauma saturates sight, outsounds the ear, confuses the nerves, effectively overwhelms all the senses as Sansom suggests, then trauma is a phenomenon misunderstood not just culturally but on an individual level as well. It is an obvious point but one that is too often forgotten. For Sansom, then, the creative process of effectively describing war trauma is also a means of unravelling it; *Fireman Flower* is an effort to make sense of unknown sensation.

Transcribing traumatic visual experience

How does Sansom articulate visual trauma? As in *Mrs Dalloway*, sight is celebrated as a fluid construct and reality is shown to be multifarious. Perspective is therefore of fundamental importance to Sansom. Neumeyer notes that Sansom's constantly changing perspective allows his readers to view 'from spheres of existence not susceptible to analysis': [...] we see through Sansom's eyes from high on crumbling walls, from low on the ground, or, hugely and distortedly'.⁹² A lack of rationale or, as Neumeyer notes, analysis underpins Sansom's handling of perspective. In 'In the Maze', for example, Sansom writes against the obsession of rationalising sight: 'Inside each brain there was a square and a straight line! Always a square and a straight line! Only rarely were there the beginnings of a circle! Always a square and straight line!'⁹³ Later in the story, Sansom elaborates on this point further by stating that over-analysis of the senses leads to a distorted viewpoint: 'the senses [...] first intentions were thus abandoned or diverted. They were wrenched from their natural part. Rightly, they should be not diverted – but absorbed' (M 119). The immediacy of

⁹² Neumeyer, p. 80.

⁹³ William Sansom, 'In the Maze', *Fireman Flower*, pp. 90-123 (p. 101). Hereafter referred to as M in parenthetical citations.

visual experience therefore cannot be explained; it can only be described. 'In the Maze' celebrates visual immediacy – ‘ “Press your eyes between the leaves and drink in a fine phenomenon!” (M 119) – whilst, in contrast, 'The Forbidden Lighthouse' warns against polluting the purity of visual experience: 'Their attitude had become tainted with false excitements and a natural disposition to view the lighthouse in wrong perspective, to exaggerate certain dimensions and imagine qualities that had never existed'.⁹⁴ Sight, therefore, unquestionably is.

Michel-Michot interestingly talks about the 'seeing eye' in Sansom's work.⁹⁵ She writes that many of Sansom's characters, the fireman in 'The Wall' for instance, are reduced to little more than an eye in action: 'the fireman narrator's mind, like a photographic plate, registers every detail of the scene [...] the nature of the moment has in a way lifted him out of time, reduced him to a mere eye fascinated by the sight'.⁹⁶ But it is traumatic sights, even the traumatic act of seeing, that dominates such scenes rather than the surrealist eye. As in Louis Simpson's verse, the eye becomes a mere vessel through which sight is conducted. Sight in *Fireman Flower*, as in *Mrs Dalloway*, gains a pre-eminence over the other senses. In 'Fireman Flower', the prevailing experience of sight dominates:

Sometimes when one of the senses is suddenly and overwhelmingly occupied, the other senses hang back on their perception. A man may awake in the strong sunlight at just the same time that a nearby gun is fired; he may for a few seconds perceive only the strength of the sunlight, so that he hears no more than the echo of the gunfire, completely overstepping the experience of its immediate explosion. It was like this with Flower. He had fallen into these new textures of light and water – and so fierce had been their impact that he had not perceived an overwhelming smell that clouded this new room. (218-219)

Instead of a visual shutdown in the face of war, vision shuts down the other senses.

Flower's hearing and smell are delayed because sight becomes the dominant sense

⁹⁴ William Sansom, 'The Forbidden Lighthouse', *Fireman Flower*, pp. 35-86 (p. 41). Hereafter referred to as FL in parenthetical citations.

⁹⁵ Michel Michot, p. 3.

⁹⁶ Michel Michot, pp. 4-5.

in this traumatic experience. Sight does not subsume the other senses through synaesthesia, as in *Mrs Dalloway*; instead, it marginalises them. Flower is transfixed by what he sees: the reflection of the fire on the water. His eye is not all-seeing; rather, it is focussed solely upon the fire. Traumatic experience therefore results in a complete sensory disturbance: the senses cannot distinguish between reality and fantasy because in trauma the unreal is framed by the real. War has its own reality.

Throughout his stories, Sansom presents the reader with a series of confounding images and asks that they be accepted, unquestioned, as a hitherto unknown form of reality now seen. Sansom insisted that all his stories were grounded in reality: 'if you start making things up, you get into very deep water'.⁹⁷ Sight, and particularly traumatic sight, therefore destabilises and questions the boundaries between reality and fantasy. This is an issue that Sansom explores in 'The Witnesses': 'That was what happened. But to this day we cannot be sure'.⁹⁸ Here, the fireman's eyes that narrate the story are shown to be fundamentally unreliable witnesses because they are unable to distinguish, in a 'moment's fear', between reality and fantasy. Stephen Spender, in his introduction to Sansom's 1947 account of the Blitz, *Westminster in War*, believes that it was Sansom's experiences of fire-fighting that specifically revealed and augmented his fascination with the strange, bizarre, or surreal: 'For Sansom, the spectacular fire is seen [...] as an almost privileged entry into an elemental world of a reality completely different from everything outside it, with laws of its own which involve the suspension of all the maps and time-tables of the world'.⁹⁹ Spender suggests that this lack of conventional

⁹⁷ Interview with William Sansom by William H. Peden qtd. in Peden's article 'The Short Stories of William Sansom: A Retrospective Commentary', *Studies in Short Fiction*, 25.4 (1988), 421-431 (p. 430).

⁹⁸ William Sansom, 'The Witnesses', *Fireman Flower*, pp. 124-132 (p. 132).

⁹⁹ Stephen Spender, 'Introduction' to William Sansom's *The Blitz: Westminster at War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. ix. The original 1947 title of Sansom's work was *The Blitz: Westminster in War*.

structure in the Blitz directly affected how Sansom transcribed the realities of war: 'there seems to be [in Sansom's stories] some collusion between the two, real and the fantastic, which weaves fantasy out of reality [...] as though the Blitz were the producer of tragic jokes which amused and even at times delighted him'.¹⁰⁰ The most obvious example of this is 'Fireman Flower' where the reader is presented with a series of visually traumatic sights that test the limits of reality and reason. Most notable is the scene where Fireman Flower describes the beautiful sight of a perfume factory on fire: 'It was a peculiar light, iridescent – mostly very white but interspersed with beams of pinkish orange and livid blue. It flickered over their helmets and buttons like the rotating spotlight that colours the dancers in a waltzing ballroom. It jazzed them up' (FF 216). As with Septimus's traumatic visions, which reveal a troublingly indistinct line between the beautiful and horrific elements of sight, this beguiling visual encounter contains at its core a deeply disturbing truth: the perfume is highly flammable and the fire it is fuelling is out of control.

Multiple instances occur in *Fireman Flower* where Sansom describes traumatic visual experience as sensuous, enticing, and even titillating. Fireman Flower reflects, as he bathes in the perfume surrounded by fire, that: 'this was like a most luxurious bath beyond all his dreams. In a sense, it was exhilarating' (FF 218). Is this fantastical description of fire grounded in actuality? Can trauma be this beautiful? Ernie Pyle, a correspondent in World War Two, argued that fire specifically initiates a particular traumatic reaction that encompasses both these sensory states. Describing a London night raid in 1940, Pyle echoes Sansom's articulation of horror and awe at the sight of fire: 'There was something inspiring just in the awful savagery of it. [...] the thing I shall always remember above all the other things in my life is the

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

monstrous loveliness of that one single view of London'.¹⁰¹ Pyle also noted, like Sansom, the complete distortion of reality rendered by previously unseen sights:

London stabbed with great fires, shaken by explosions, its dark regions along the Thames sparkling with pin points of white-hot bombs, all of it roofed over with a ceiling of pink that held bursting shells, balloons, flares and the grind of viscous engines. And in yourself the excitement and anticipation and wonder in your soul that this could be happening at all. These things all went together to make the most hateful, most beautiful single scene I have ever known.¹⁰²

Fire is therefore portrayed as a transformative element and, as Michel-Michot claims, 'transfiguration' [...] suggests the artist's creative power'.¹⁰³ Pyle's description of fire emphasises how fire can be at once destructive and constructive. Whilst it is capable of reeking widespread devastation, by stabbing, exploding, and bursting open solid constructions, it can also, simultaneously, create a unique aesthetic response and inspire mixed sensations of both fear and appreciation.

In his factual record of the Blitz (*Fire over London 1940-41*), produced for the London Country Council in 1941, Sansom records experiences that are clearly the source material for Flower's encounter with the perfume fire. The record affirms his belief that aesthetically beautiful sights do exist in visual trauma:

Your fireman will gloss over scenes of grandiose spectacle. He is used to them. Rather, he will tell you of a more intimate world turned topsy-turvy by heat and flames. He will tell you [...] of another sticky job at a toffee store, when a lava-like flow of freshly warmed toffee enmeshed his hose and brought again to his nostrils the old exciting smell, a hundred times magnified, of the toffee pan in his mother's kitchen.

Eccentricities will happen. A man who fought a fire at a paint factory found the next morning that his boots were beautifully varnished. [...]

Again, somewhere in Dockland a wharf housing whisky caught alight. A wide curtain of the precious spirit streamed down the outside walls from burst craters up on the top floor. As it descended the spirit caught fire. And thus the whole side of the building became one sheet of falling flame – as blue as the flame on a Christmas pudding.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Ernie Pyle, 'The London Blitz, 1940', Eyewitness to History Archive, (1940) <<http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com>> [accessed 15 May 2013].

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Michel-Michot, p. 26.

¹⁰⁴ William Sansom, *Fire Over London 1940-41* (London: Hutchison & Co, 1941), p. 26.

Sansom is not naïve; he acknowledges that such beauty does not refute the presence of pain: 'Your fireman will also remember less pretty stories'.¹⁰⁵ The majority of stories in *Fireman Flower* reveal a far darker and disturbing depiction of trauma than the one portrayed by Woolf in *Mrs Dalloway*. But, like Woolf, Sansom is also aware of the double-edged sword of aesthetic beauty with its capacity to evoke an ecstasy of horror and awe. As this chapter has argued, a true understanding of trauma should encompass and acknowledge the creative possibilities that exist within traumatic visual experience.

Shattering the lens of trauma

Although profoundly different works, *Mrs Dalloway* and *Fireman Flower* reveal a shared understanding of traumatic visual experience. They show that an authentic transcription of visual trauma can encompass an aesthetic engagement with traumatic material. This does not diminish the very real suffering and pain of trauma victims but an informed reading of trauma should acknowledge the variety of sensations and symptoms experienced. There is no fixed grey lens of trauma; victims of trauma do not just see a desensitised wasteland before them. After the war, Sansom bemoaned that its legacy had infiltrated Britain with a pervasive melancholy grey:

My main objection today is to the way in which a lot of authors are sneering at life, breaking down, without building up, writing about, for instance, continually washing up in the kitchen with the grey daylight coming through the window...on and on it goes. Always grey. Washing up can be pretty miserable, but in reality, the sunlight does come through now and again, strikes the bar of soap and illuminates the whole dreary kitchen with an absolutely glorious feeling.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ William Sansom, 'An Interview of William Sansom and Angus Wilson', *The Queen* (15th March, 1960), 143-144 (p. 143).

Sansom's frustration at an alternative perspective of reality being denied is apparent. Sansom's aesthetic interest in the relationship between sight and trauma and its literary portrayal is more explicit than Woolf's but both authors acknowledge that trauma can be aesthetically appreciated as a creative force. Woolf and Sansom, in different ways, contradict the widespread anaesthetised perception of trauma and destabilise established binary readings of sight. The unseen and seen, fantasy and reality, beauty and horror: these descriptive terms are rigorously questioned in both works. Woolf develops and utilises a synesthetic language of sight, which speaks to and engages all the senses, to transcribe traumatic visual experience. For Sansom, his aesthetic engagement with traumatic material overlaps with the wider surrealist literary experiment he was involved in. But the war, particularly the traumatic sights of war as well as the trauma of seeing war, is revealed as an important part of the contextualising frame for Sansom's aesthetic engagement with trauma. Indeed, the unreal reality of war forced Sansom to explore the limitations of surrealism. A crucial question that the *Fireman Flower* collection explores is how far beauty can be recuperated out of destruction? The two works effectively depict the multifarious experience of visual trauma and authentically transcribe a psychological condition of which we are still largely ignorant.

Chapter Six: Visual framing

David Jones's *In Parenthesis* and Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*

In between war

The question of how to see war is considered by all the writers analysed in the previous chapters. Their work collectively demonstrates how the two world wars transformed and revised steadfast notions of sight. The scale of modern warfare, the all-encompassing nature of world war, challenged notions of objectivity and distance; little visual reprieve or observational respite was offered for the witnesses of war. Thomas Dilworth, in his analysis of David Jones's 'Balaam's Ass', the poetic sequence that forms a coda to *The Sleeping Lord*, captures this:

there was no protecting barrier, no hiding place, no refuge from the hunter, no escape route, no blanket to cover your head, no shield for physical or mental 'trauma', no way to right the listing vessel, no 'dock' leaf to stop the sting of nettle, no reef to temper the storm, no apparent mercy of God for back and sides [...] No escape.¹

Dilworth's description makes explicit the loss of a concrete framework: barriers, sides, and shields – boundaries of all kinds – are exploded by the far-reaching scale of world war. A visual compass is sorely lacking: sight becomes unanchored. Sight uncontained, as the previous chapters have shown, results in a loss of control over vision and space. War can therefore blur the distinction between inside and outside: it is often unclear where a writer stands in relation to war. Is a writer's gaze in war directed inwards or is it outward facing? The uncertainty of sight in war confuses the writer's role: how are the sights of war to be treated? A writer can be both a touchstone, whose work can mediate the visual experience of war, as well as a creative editor of sight.

¹ Thomas Dilworth, *Reading David Jones* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), p. 225.

This is especially true for those writers situated between the world wars working not as war writers but with war in mind. Wyndham Lewis, writing about his experiences of the Great War just before the outbreak of the Second World War in 1937, noted in *Blasting and Bombardiering*: ‘They talk a lot about how a war just finished affects art. But you will learn here how a war *about to start* can do the same thing’.² Lewis interestingly suggests that the idea of war is as creatively important as the experience of war. Yet Lewis’s first-hand knowledge of the devastating impact of war underscores his aesthetic engagement with the concept of war. This tension appears heightened by Lewis’s in-between state as a writer situated between two world wars: he is at once looking backwards at the past war and forwards towards the impending war. He was oddly inside and outside war: in its centre and on the periphery. Framing, when considering the impact and significance of such spatial and visual ambiguity, becomes as significant as literary content. Nancy Mitford, in *The Pursuit of Love*, writes of the inter-war generation: ‘[we belong] to a lost generation. I’m sure in history the two wars will count as one war and that we shall be squashed out’.³ Mitford evokes the inescapable frame of the two world wars for those living between them. She also shows how framing can problematize as well as clarify content: in Mitford’s example, the dominating external frame appears to bleed into the internal content.

Jonathan Culler, exploring framing as a literary technique, writes of this paradoxical relationship between frame and content: ‘In theory signatures lie outside the work, to frame it, present it, authorize it, but it seems that truly to frame, to mark, or to sign a work the signature must lie within, at its very heart. A problematical

² Wyndham Lewis, *Blasting and Bombardiering* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1937), p. 4. Lewis’s italics.

³ Nancy Mitford, *The Pursuit of Love* (1945; London: Penguin, 2010), p. 199.

relation between inside and outside is played out'.⁴ He continues: 'this problem of the frame – of the distinction between inside and outside and of the structure of the border – is decisive for aesthetics in general'.⁵ Culler echoes Jacques Derrida's theoretical writings on the significance of framing in art and literature. In *La Vérité en Peinture*, Derrida writes that the friction associated with framing produces an essential aesthetic discourse: 'This permanent demand – to distinguish between the internal or proper meaning and the circumstances of the object in question – [...] presupposes a discourse on the boundary between the inside and outside of the art object, in this case, a discourse on the frame'.⁶ Far from being fixed, the perimeters of a frame are shown by Derrida and Culler to be negotiable and dependent upon viewpoint: the position of the frame changes in relation to the viewer's perspective.

In his 1909 essay 'An Essay in Aesthetics', the art critic Roger Fry wrote extensively on the interdependent connection between sight and framing. He argued that visual framing automatically induced an aesthetic split in seeing; with a frame present, we see abstractly with the aesthetic in mind. Fry wrote of the tension between active 'actual' sight and passive 'imaginative' sight and this is extremely relevant to the struggle that many writers endure whilst attempting to adopt either a distanced or proximate viewpoint to war.⁷ Indeed, the importance of the visual frame as an essential component of representing war was revealed in a 2008 interdisciplinary research workshop discussing various representations of war.⁸ Interestingly, the associated tension between active and passive elements of viewing was central to the debate. The general consensus in the workshop was that external

⁴ Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*, 25th edition with new material (1982; Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), pp. 192-193.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Jacques Derrida, *La Vérité en Peinture* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978), p. 53.

⁷ Roger Fry, 'An Essay in Aesthetics' (1909), *Vision and Design* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1920), pp. 11-25 (p. 12).

⁸ Roundtable Transcript: 'Representing War', moderated Elena Baraban, University of Manitoba (7th March, 2008).

viewing through a frame desensitises the viewer. Watching someone being injured in war through the internet, film or television, for example, largely removes the immediacy of war and the viewer consequently feels less engaged with war visually than if they were being injured bodily or literally observing inside the space of action.⁹ An important distinction is made here between the object of perception being seen together with space and time instead of in space and time.¹⁰

As Mitford's observation shows, writers between the two world wars were effectively caught in a temporal limbo that complicated this distinction: they occupied an in-between state. This chapter examines the work of two authors, writing about war in the inter-war period, whose works explore the ambiguity of sight, at once engaged and detached, and the associated impact of visual framing upon their representation of war. Rarely has a comparison of works by David Jones and Virginia Woolf been made in a single chapter or book.¹¹ Their different backgrounds, unequal literary standing, and diverse involvement in World War One (Jones as a serving Private in France and Woolf as a civilian bystander), make their texts an unlikely pairing for analysis. Even their interwar state in the late 1930s resists easy appraisal because Jones was recollecting events from the First World War whilst Woolf was focusing on the forthcoming war having witnessed, and been deeply affected by, the former world war.¹² Nevertheless, Jones's prose-poem *In Parenthesis* (1937) and

⁹ Fry too notes the desensitising impact of a frame upon an external viewer. Using 'the cinematograph' to explore the nature of passive sight, Fry wrote: 'This resembles actual life in almost every respect, except that what the psychologists call the conative part of our reaction to sensations, that is to say, the appropriate resultant action is cut off' (Fry, 'An Essay in Aesthetics', p. 12).

¹⁰ Auden notes that Wittgenstein first made this distinction. W.H. Auden, 'On *In Parenthesis*', *David Jones: Man and Poet*, ed. John Matthias (Maine: The National Poetry Foundation, 1999), pp. 43-45 (p. 43).

¹¹ Allen McLaurin briefly mentions both Jones and Woolf whilst examining repetition in Virginia Woolf. See McLaurin, *The Echoes Enslaved* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 129. Such a critical comparison is very much the exception.

¹² Woolf had also been profoundly moved by her sister Vanessa's grief at the loss of her son Julian Bell in the Spanish Civil War. In October 1937, after Julian's death, Virginia wrote: 'It seems still emptiness: the sight of Nessa bleeding: how we watch: nothing to be done. But whats odd is I cant notice, or describe. [...] the future without Julian is cut off. lopped: deformed'. Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf 1936-1941*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie, 5 vols. (London: Hogarth, 1984), V, p. 113.

Woolf's novel *Between the Acts* (posthumously published after her suicide in 1941) appear to speak to each other beyond their spatially informed titles. On the variable perimeter of war, the two texts share a discourse on the significance of the visual frame and use it, in different ways, as a 'vehicle of perception'.¹³ By exploring how frame and content are linked, how war can be both the framing context and framed subject, I underline how the two texts question the visual boundaries of war by showing the ambiguity of the visual frame: viewpoints are diverse and unfixed. I explore the various visual framing devices that are utilised by Woolf and Jones, both implicit and explicit, and trace how they order and disrupt their written representations of war.

In Parenthesis

Viewpoint

'I have only tried to make a shape in words, using as data the complex of sights, sounds, fears, hopes, apprehensions, smells, things exterior and interior' writes Jones in the Preface to *In Parenthesis*.¹⁴ From what perspective are we seeing war here? Is it through the eyes of Jones the writer drawing together sensual data after the war into a complete overview or is it through Jones the soldier witnessing events at ground level inside war through a limited lens? Many critics have decided that Jones adopted the latter position: that of abstracted artist. W.H. Auden, for example, quotes Wittgenstein to support this conclusion:

¹³ The term is borrowed from Wolfram Nitsch's essay 'Phantasmen aus Benzin' (1994). I use the term in this chapter to describe how the visual frame captures the flexible nature of sight where frame and content are reversible.

¹⁴ David Jones, *In Parenthesis* (1937; London: Faber & Faber, 2010), p. x. Hereafter referred to as *IP* in parenthetical citations.

'The work of art', wrote Wittgenstein in his *Note Books*, 'is the object seen *sub specie aeternitatis*. The usual way of looking at things sees objects as it were from the midst of them, the view *sub specie aeternitatis* from outside, in such a way that they have the whole world as background. The object is seen together with space and time instead of in space and time'.¹⁵

Jones, Auden decides, sees war *sub specie aeternitatis* which is both to Jones's literary credit and detriment: visual abstraction is, in part, why readers feel literally abstracted from *In Parenthesis*.¹⁶

Unlike many accounts from World War One that draw the reader into a first person narrative, *In Parenthesis* refutes that personal proximity. Edmund Blunden's first person account of his experience in the trenches, for example, begins with a Preliminary that sharply contrasts with Jones's stated intent in the Preface of *In Parenthesis*. Blunden apologises for the narrative's lack of shape, its sketchiness and 'very local, limited' viewpoint.¹⁷ Yet this shift in authorial vision from omniscient observer to active participant, and the consequentially limited, personal point of view that Blunden apologises for, is precisely why *Undertones of War* receives international praise for being a true and accurate account of warfare. D. J. Enright, for instance, wrote an appraisal of Blunden's autobiography praising it as 'an established classic [...] accurate and detailed in observation of the war scene and its human figures'.¹⁸ Jon Stallworthy is one of many notable critics who praise Blunden for adapting his literary style to capture the visual horrors of World War One. Stallworthy writes how Blunden's authorial viewpoint was not 'so much revised as shaken like a kaleidoscope' by war.¹⁹ The change in literary perspective is best captured, Stallworthy feels, by Blunden deciding to change the work's title 'from magniloquent Latin to the modesty of *Undertones*' because it emphasises the shift

¹⁵ Auden, 'On *In Parenthesis*', p. 43.

¹⁶ Approximate translation from Latin: 'under the aspect of eternity'.

¹⁷ Edmund Blunden, *Undertones of War* (1928; London: Penguin, 2000), xi.

¹⁸ D.J. Enright, critical appraisal of *Undertones of War*, <<http://www.penguin.co.uk/nf/Book/BookDisplay/0,,9780141184364,00.html>> [accessed 20th April 2012].

¹⁹ Jon Stallworthy, *Anthem for Doomed Youth* (London: Constable, 2002), p. 117.

from lofty author to humble communicator.²⁰ In contrast, Stallworthy, whilst examining *In Parenthesis*, writes that Jones adopts an impersonal standpoint as ‘a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and a significance to’ war.²¹ Bernard Bergonzi, in his analysis of Jones’s prose-poem, similarly criticises Jones for reverting to an elevated perspective, which, he implies, marginalises and trivialises the individual viewpoint and the humane perceptions it records. Bergonzi warns against the ‘dangerous order of myth’ that he feels Jones embraces when he seeks to ‘move towards the level of epic’ by reproducing ‘a sense of shared experience [that] transcends the limitations of the purely individual standpoint’.²² Stallworthy and Bergonzi both reach a critical consensus that Jones’s viewpoint is abstracted and that this temporally and spatially distances the author from the reality of war.

Can Jones’s visual stance be so definitively described as *sub specie aeternitatis*? *In Parenthesis* shows Jones to be at once inside and outside war; as he writes in the Preface, he is capturing sensations that are both ‘exterior and interior’. Furthermore, Bergonzi and Stallworthy belong to the group of critics that read *In Parenthesis* strictly as a war memoir in relation to other wartime accounts.²³ But this is a work concerned with the idea of war – particularly, the representation of war – rather than being a war book. ‘The distinction is important’ as T.S. Eliot, who wrote

²⁰ Ibid. *Undertones of War* was originally entitled *De Bello Germanico* in initial drafts.

²¹ Stallworthy, *Anthem for Doomed Youth*, p. 177. This sentence deliberately echoes T.S. Eliot in his 1923 essay ‘Ulysses, Order, and Myth’.

²² Bernard Bergonzi, *Heroes’ Twilight* (1965; Manchester: Carcanet, 1996), pp. 209, 194.

²³ John H. Johnston and Paul Fussell also notably analyse the poem in the context of other World War One literature. To date criticism of Jones’s work in general has been limited in its scope. The first generation of Jones criticism was largely produced by those that knew the artist and writer personally and consequently had a strong biographical focus: René Hague and Helen Sutherland, for example, produced views on Jones’s writing and art that were strongly influenced by their personal knowledge of Jones the man. More recently, criticism has largely sought to understand and appreciate Jones’s writing which is often dense and difficult. Manuals attempt to make this easier for the reader through contextual reading and line-by-line interpretation: Thomas Dilworth’s *Reading David Jones* (2008) is a perfect example. For *In Parenthesis*, this often means, as I mention, reading it as a war book in the context of the First World War alongside other war memoirs. Such an approach, although helpful up to a point, is restrictive and I think, in part, contributes to Jones’s continued absence from the canon.

an introduction for *In Parenthesis*, noted.²⁴ Jones, in the Preface to his poem, was definite that he 'did not intend [*In Parenthesis*] as a 'War Book' – it happens to be concerned with war' (*IP* xii). Because *In Parenthesis* is not strictly an autobiography or a war memoir, its intent is different from the work of Blunden and other war writers. Jones is not just recalling and relating what he saw during the war; he is attempting to engage with those sensations aesthetically as an artist by visually representing war through a literary form. In other words, a distinction needs to be understood between vision and visual, between seeing and seen, between the aesthetic representation and the unprocessed image.

Elizabeth Ward highlights that the war was sensually inspiring for Jones: 'In impressing itself so vividly upon his senses, the war [...] provided David Jones with his most valuable source of creative inspiration'.²⁵ As the previous chapter showed, the horrors of war can induce a paradoxical aesthetic appreciation of the kind that Ward references. Dilworth interestingly recalls a conversation with Jones where visual 'beauty and intended practical effect' were markedly categorised as separate by Jones who admitted that 'no-man's-land was one of the most beautiful sights he saw'.²⁶ Parallels can be drawn with Tietjens, in *A Man Could Stand Up* –, marvelling at the soldier firing over the parapet into No Man's Land as described in Chapter Two. In both instances, Jones and Ford reveal the significance of viewpoint: they describe the importance of distancing oneself from the proximity of war to process fully the complex visual data. Jones therefore seemed acutely aware of the dual nature of vision: sight is, as Rodaway writes, simultaneously 'the reaching out to the

²⁴ T.S. Eliot, 'A note on *In Parenthesis* and *The Anathemata*', *David Jones: Man and Poet*, pp. 41-42 (p. 41).

²⁵ Elizabeth Ward, *David Jones: Myth-maker* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), pp. 15-16.

²⁶ Dilworth, p. 67.

world as a source of information and an understanding of that world so gathered'.²⁷

The variability of viewpoint, the blurred internal/external divide, is problematic for the writer attempting to transcribe sight. T.S. Eliot, in his notes on *In Parenthesis* and *The Anthemata*, suggested that the war shattered a fixed perspective:

Every author of works of imagination is trying to tell us about the world as he sees it. Nowadays, the more such a writer has to communicate, the more difficulty he may have in communicating it. So he must endeavour to convey a sense of his own private world [...] he must turn that world inside out for you to look at, as if he was emptying his pockets on the table in front of you.²⁸

Eliot's quotation emphasises again the difficulty of framing sight when the internal and external visual divide is unclear. Throughout *In Parenthesis*, visual boundaries are accentuated to emphasise the difficulty of capturing sight that is simultaneously removed and involved.

We have seen how the aesthetic split in seeing – between active, proximate sight and reflective, distanced vision – was of great importance to Jones. Drawing back from the immediacy of war, and engaging with it through an extended viewpoint, allowed Jones to see the war clearly. Definite moments of objective visual clarity exist in *In Parenthesis* as the writer builds, for the reader, literary pictures that are visually complete: 'Extending fields spread flatly, far to either side, uninterrupted to the sight, not any longer barriered nor revetted in. It was a great goodness in their eyes, this expanse, they drank in this visual freedom gladly, and were disposed to linger' (*IP* 92). In this sentence, the viewpoint is clearly that of the abstracted artist interested in aesthetically engaging with war. Because the viewer's vision is distanced from war here, sight is not dependent upon action and time is consequently irrelevant: 'they [...] were disposed to linger'. Similarly, visual space operates independently from the action of war without 'barriers' or other physical

²⁷ Paul Rodaway, *Sensuous Geographies: body, sense and place* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 5.

²⁸ Eliot, p. 42.

restrictions and the mind and eyes are liberated by this spatial 'expanse' of 'visual freedom'. Under these conditions, the eye is able to concentrate on small details not normally apparent or made visually conscious: 'He [...] looked intently into the eye of a buttercup' (*IP* 142).²⁹ In this sentence, Jones extends this idea further by making the object of sight – the 'buttercup' – visually conscious: it has an 'eye' that observes the observer rather like Owen's daisy in 'Elegy in April and September'. Merleau-Ponty argues that it is the seer's visibility, the observer being seen, which not only creates profound tension between subjective and objective vision but also, ultimately, leads to the two otherwise distinct viewpoints becoming interchangeable: 'As soon as I see, it is necessary that the vision [...] be doubled with a complimentary vision or with another vision: myself seen from without'.³⁰ The reversibility of the seer and seen, of objective and subjective vision, which Merleau-Ponty describes, is a central crux of *In Parenthesis*.

Jones was acutely aware not only of the tension that exists between objective and subjective sight but also of the ethical problems with assuming an abstract view in regard to the war:

Our perception of many things is heightened and clarified. Yet must we [...] be attuned to many new-fangled technicalities, respond to increasingly exacting mechanical devices; some fascinating and compelling, others sinister in the extreme; all requiring a new and strange direction of the mind, a new sensitivity certainly, but at a considerable cost. (*IP* xiv)

There is a prevailing sense in this passage that, although objective perspective allows one visual freedom to observe with 'heightened and clarified' awareness, passive sight is somehow de-sensitised and mechanised. By circumventing how one actually sees in war – often limitedly, incompletely, and personally – does one

²⁹ In 'An Essay in Aesthetics', Fry writes that a removed viewpoint paradoxically liberates vision: 'we see the event much more clearly; see a number of quite interesting but irrelevant things, which in real life could not struggle into our consciousness, bent, as it would be entirely upon the problem of our appropriate reaction'. Fry, 'An Essay in Aesthetics', p. 12; (Fry's italics).

³⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), pp. 134-135.

bypass the realities of vision operating in war? As a front-line soldier, who had closely observed war first-hand, Jones seemed acutely aware of this problematic dilemma regarding depersonalised representations of war. In his autobiographical notes in *Epoch and Artist*, he admitted that he was unable to disengage himself or his work from the personal impact of war: 'As far as I am able to judge in my own case I should say that the particular Waste Land that was the forward area of the Western Front had a permanent effect upon me and has affected my work in all sorts of ways'.³¹ This concern was echoed in a letter Jones wrote in 1967 to Wyn Griffiths where he stated that the sights of World War One still had a permanent and profound effect upon him: 'It's interesting how these years made such an indelible mark on me; so that even now, whatever [one] thinks or writes about, is conditioned one way or another by those outward experiences and inward feelings of half a century ago'.³² It is significant that, in this letter, Jones characterises the effect of war as a visibly 'indelible mark' and intimates, through emphasising its impact both externally and internally, that war is not spatially containable.

Running in parallel, underneath the overarching detached viewpoint in *In Parenthesis*, is a contrary antithetical perspective of war. Immediately after Jones's description of the 'extending fields' seen through an expansive gaze, for example, we are given a contrasting view as sight is shown 'dropping one-down' into the trench below the fields which is described as a 'prison-house of earth closed-to' (*IP* 92). The restrictions that the conditions of trench warfare spatially impose upon sight are often referred to: 'They reached a place where the high walls of the communication trench considerably contracted at a turn, reducing the strip of sky above them. These reeking sack walls block all lateral view, and above, nothing is visible save the rain-

³¹ David Jones, *Epoch and Artist: Selected Writings*, ed. Harman Grisewood (London: Faber & Faber, 1959), p. 28.

³² David Jones qtd. in 'David Jones: Three Letters' to Wyn Griffiths, ed. Roland Mathias, *The Anglo-Welsh Review*, 61 (1978), 60.

filmed narrowing ribbon of sky' (*IP* 85). Occasionally, this shadowing subjective viewpoint of Jones in the text becomes disruptively evident. This is most apparent at the end of 'Part Two' where John Ball encounters a shell burst in immediate proximity:

John Ball would have followed, but stood fixed and alone in the little yard—his senses highly alert, his body incapable of movement or response. The exact disposition of small things—the precise shapes of trees, the tilt of a bucket, the movement of a straw, the noises, separate and distinct, in a stillness charged through with some approaching violence—registered not by the ear not any single faculty—an on-rushing pervasion, saturating all existence; with exactitude, logarithmic, dial-timed, millesimal—of calculated velocity, some mean chemist's contrivance, a stinking physicist's destroying toy.

He stood alone on the stones, his mess-tin spilled at his feet. Out of the vortex, rifling the air it came—bright, brass-shod, Pandoran; all-filling screaming howling crescendo's up-piling snapt. The universal world, breath held, one half second, a bludgeoned stillness. Then the pent violence released a consummation of all burstings out; all sudden up-rendings and rivings-through—all taking-out of vents—all barrier-breaking—all unmaking. Pernitric begetting—the dissolving and splitting of solid things. In which unearthing aftermath, John Ball picked up his mess-tin and hurried within; ashen, huddled, waited in the dismal straw. Behind 'E' Battery, fifty yards down the road, a great many mangolds, uprooted, pulped, congealed with chemical earth, spattered and made slippery the rigid boards leading to the emplacement. The sap of vegetables slobbered the spotless breech-block of a No. 3 gun. (*IP* 24)

Here, detached 'universal' sight, which is static and spatially 'precise', works in opposition to the engaged, pervasive, and 'saturating' sensual sight that destroys all 'solid things'. This extraordinary passage explicitly shows subjective and objective elements of sight operating simultaneously. Working within this mercurial framework, how does Jones reconcile these seemingly divergent viewpoints? Does Jones successfully create a literary frame that allows him to engage with war as both a former soldier and a post-war observer? The following analysis of the above passage attempts to answer these two questions.

Framing vision

In the passage, detailing John Ball's encounter with a shell burst, we can see that a careful structuring of space evokes tension between subject and object. The passage is carefully framed to reflect the opposition that is contained within. Its opening begins with the sturdy structure of John Ball's body, 'fixed and alone', and closes with the soft 'sap of vegetables slobbered'. Inside this frame of friction, resistance is unrelentingly maintained between active and passive components. Intervals, which should signal spatial and temporal moments for contemplation and reprieve, are instead disturbed by violent sensual disruption. Jones describes 'a stillness charged through with some approaching violence', 'a bludgeoned stillness', and 'air' that is filled with 'rifling' movement. The one seeming fixity – John Ball's body, 'incapable of movement or response', which is both subject and object – is ironically fixed because of its frozen reaction to the active, 'highly alert' senses that overwhelm it. In the final section of the passage, a sensual claustrophobia pervades Jones's writing. There is not only no sensory escape but, moreover, no escape from the senses that bombard reader and subject with a force that equals the exploding shell and mirrors its impact upon Ball's senses. The parenthetical em-dashes, containing no space between dash and letter, that punctuate this section, contain a stream of verbs: '–all taking-out of vents–all barrier-breaking–all unmaking'.³³ The repetition of 'all' emphasises the impact of this sustained action that erodes any formal divide between external and internal space. The senses are displayed as both receptors and conductors and sight

³³ It is difficult to ascertain from the manuscript and typescript whether the peculiar visual layout of these em-dashes is deliberate. Jones's written dashes are long. However, em-dashes with little space either side, shown in textual insertions and revisions, appear intentional. Jones appears to use them to bridge space between words or lines. Colin Wilcockson, who lived with David Jones for many years, noted in an interview with me that Jones paid great consideration to the visual layout of his work. The use of the em-dashes, therefore, seems intended. Personal interview with Colin Wilcockson conducted 17th March, 2012, Oxford. The manuscript and typescript of *In Parenthesis* can be consulted at *The David Jones Collection*, Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales (Manuscript Drafts of *In Parenthesis* 1932 – 1935, LP2) and also online via *The First World War Digital Poetry Archive* <www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit>.

is shown to be a two way process: the 'eyes' receive external stimulus to be internally processed.

This conscious structuring of space forms, in effect, a visual parenthesis that is a fundamentally important literary device used by Jones to create a distinct frame through which to engage with war. Throughout the prose-poem, Jones draws upon particular spaces from the landscape of war and uses space, in a very specific way as a creative device, to establish a bridge between the interiority of direct experience and the externality of observation. Significant examples of this, in addition to John Ball's encounter with the shell in the yard, can be found in the description of the Company's huts ('Part One'), in the observations of No Man's Land ('Part Four'), and in the wood ('Part Seven'). Each example has as its focus an ambiguous setting: an in-between space framed as a picture of war that is at once familiar and enigmatic. In the description of the huts, for instance, the soldiers' presence is powerfully evoked through their absence. The 'solitary', 'vacant' 'hutment lines' are filled, instead, with non-human movement: it 'rains' forcefully, the 'wind' lifts 'torn felt', and a 'chill gust slams the vacant canteen door' (*IP* 4). Familiar and personal images of trench-life – urinals, hutment lines, and canteens – are made unfamiliar when viewed through an external, removed lens. An almost identical scene occurs in 'Part Two' where Jones frames the men's exit from the 'farm out-buildings' (*IP* 15). Again, presence is seen, and examined, through absence: 'confused voices resonant in the walled darkness. The hinged gate noisily swung-to with the last departing' (*IP* 16). Jones sums up this uncanny effect well when he recalls the visual significance of the front-line: 'It had all the unknownness of something of immense realness, but of which you lack all true perceptual knowledge' (*IP* 15-16). Jones's visual parentheses have a similar impact

upon his reader. He guides our gaze onto the unseen: the unfamiliar is shown through the familiar and presence is defined through absence.

At the opening of 'Part Four', Jones details the 'Stand-to' and 'Stand-down' procedure. In his explanatory notes, Jones writes: 'Shortly before daybreak all troops in the line stood in their appointed places' facing No Man's Land and the enemy (*IP* 202). 'The same routine', he writes, 'was observed at dusk' (*Ibid.*). Jones writes that this routine 'was one of peculiar significance and there was attaching to it a degree of solemnity, in that one was conscious that from the sea dunes to the mountains, everywhere, on the whole front the two opposing lines stood alertly' (*Ibid.*). Here, again, we see the presence of both an overarching viewpoint and an underlying personal perspective of war. Jones uses these two commands – 'Stand-to' (*IP* 59) and 'Stand-down' (*IP* 63) – and the two opposing lines of men to frame No Man's Land. A combination of half-light and mist causes the precise spatial boundaries of the two fronts and the temporal restrictions of the procedure to blur: whilst 'the phosphorescent dial [of wrist-watches] describes the equal seconds', 'thinning night wraps unshrouding, unsheafing – and insubstantial barriers dissolve' (*IP* 59). All is seen is 'uncertain flux' (*Ibid.*). Men are seen but not seen: 'The flux yields up a measurable body; bleached forms emerge and stand' (*Ibid.*). The end of 'Part Four' closes with another sight of 'No-man's-land' in which the ambiguous nature of sight is caught exactly: 'Things seen precisely just now lost exactness [...] Your eyes begin to strain after escaping definitions' (*IP* 98). The enemy is at once seen everywhere and nowhere: 'Whether that picket-iron moved toward or some other fell away, or after all is it an animate thing just there by the sap-head or only the slight frosted-sway of suspended wire' (*Ibid.*). With this concluding section, Jones frames the whole of 'Part Four' within a visual parenthesis beginning with the observation of the enemy

at dawn, at the opening of the chapter, and finishing with the same observation as night descends at its close. Within this vast framework, smaller bracketed sequences – such as the stand-to/stand-down routine – are also described in detail. *In Parenthesis* is constructed of bracketed sights within bracketed sight.

An interlinked chain of bracketed space, showing John Ball's slow progression through woodland in an attempt to push forward the front-line, structures the final, climatic section of the book: 'Part Seven'. These parentheses often simultaneously contain and lack visual clarity: sight is amorphous within them. Illumination and confusion work hand in hand: 'when the chemical thick air dispels you see briefly and with great clearness what kind of a show this is' (*IP* 164). Invisibility and formlessness become highly valued. For Ball, wounded, his survival is dependent upon remaining unseen by the enemy: 'under the tree/reduce our dimensional vulnerability to the minimum – cover the spines of us/ let us creep dark-bellied where he can't see' (*IP* 177). But Jones draws further value from the invisible space he describes:

In the very core and navel of the wood there seemed a vacuum, if you stayed quite still, as though you'd come on ancient stillnesses in this most interior place. And high away and over, above the tree-roofing, indifferent to this harrowing of the woods, trundling projectiles intersect their arcs at the zenith – pass out of hearing, like freighters toil to gradients when you fret wakefully on beds and you guess far destinations. (*IP* 181)

Dilworth notes that woods have a historical significance in literature because they are undefined spaces, places between borders where 'people come to escape, to flee persecution, to celebrate forbidden ritual, to visit exiled or hidden princes'.³⁴ The World War One poet Edward Thomas references this literary context in his war poem 'Lights Out' (1916):

³⁴ Dilworth, p. 52.

I have come to the borders of sleep,
 The unfathomable deep
 Forest where all must lose
 Their way, however straight,
 Or winding, soon or late;
 They cannot choose.

Many a road and track
 That, since the dawn's first crack,
 Up to the forest brink,
 Deceived the travellers,
 Suddenly now blurs,
 And in they sink.

[...]

The tall forest towers;
 Its cloudy foliage lowers
 Ahead, shelf above shelf;
 Its silence I hear and obey
 That I may lose my way
 And myself.³⁵

The forest in Thomas's poem starkly emphasises the reversibility of visual and spatial boundaries in war. Sight is not fixed: visual clarity is illusive and elusive. The multiple layers of sight that operate in the poem, like the 'shelf above shelf' of foliage, confuse both the subject and reader. Pockets of illumination, 'the dawn's first crack', in the dense woodland are rare. Jones also makes deliberate use of the woodland, and its in-between spatial aspect, to maximum creative effect. However, unlike the forest of Thomas's poem, Jones's woodland offers sanctuary from the surrounding frame of war and moments of visual clarity. In the 'vacuum' of the wood stillness exists amidst the 'trundling projectiles' of active warfare and, in this space of 'ancient stillnesses', Jones can examine the landscape of war from a 'most interior place' whilst simultaneously seeing it from 'high away' through 'indifferent' eyes. Here, again, subjective and objective sight operates in a tense unison.

The American journalist Michael Herr, who has observed the backdrop of war for many years, uses visual framing devices to act as a bridge between passive and

³⁵ Edward Thomas, 'Lights Out', *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, ed. George Walter (London: Penguin, 2006), pp. 103-104.

active sight. He argues that such devices can successfully, albeit sometimes dangerously, blur ‘the connection [for the viewer/s] between what is seen and what is’.³⁶ However, does Jones use the visual parenthesis, as shown in this chapter, with a similar intent to Herr’s own utilisation of literary framing devices? Critics often suggest that Jones’s use of the frame is solely a distancing device. They argue that the frame is another means through which Jones compartmentalises war whilst giving structure to, and imposing order over, its disorder. Elizabeth Ward, in her important, though sometimes deprecating, analysis of Jones’s work, believes that Jones used the framing device as a means of distilling ‘an entirely “parenthetical” experience, the war seen as something distant, separate, emblematic’.³⁷ More recently, Kathleen Henderson Staudt has echoed Ward by suggesting that Jones’s use of ‘boundary’ and ‘margins’ in the poem marks a ‘place of separation’.³⁸ Both Ward and Henderson Staudt imply that framing devices result in a collective, unified mode of vision and that Jones, through adopting an abstracted viewpoint, is himself distanced from war. These similar critical approaches to Jones’s use of framing have their origins, I believe, in Jones’s sole explanation for his spatially informed title: ‘the war itself’, he wrote, ‘was a parenthesis – how glad we thought we were to step outside its brackets at the end of ’18’ (*IP* xv). The phrase suggests that the war was bracketed as a collective group experience; Jones’s individualism exists ‘outside’ the frame of war. A clear divide seems to have been made here.

However, Kathleen Raine, who knew Jones, reveals an alternative understanding of Jones’s interest in spatial boundaries that suggests Jones did, in fact, desire a literary means through which to establish a link between objective and

³⁶ Michael Herr in Aryn Bartley, ‘The Hateful Self: Substitution and the Ethics of Representing War’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 54.1 (Spring 2008), 50-71 (p. 63).

³⁷ Ward, p. 89.

³⁸ Kathleen Henderson Staudt, *At the Turn of a Civilization: David Jones and Modern Poetics* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 54.

subjective vision and also, as Herr writes of his own technique, blur the distinction between them. Whilst Ward and Henderson Staudt strongly suggest that visual framing devices helped Jones isolate his experiences of war and view them from a detached perspective, Raine argues that Jones instead strove to make his 'pictorial or verbal' images 'valid' and immediate for his readers.³⁹ Far from compartmentalising the senses and isolating sight, Raine argues that, Jones's overriding authorial desire was to 'enrich and deepen the experience of the senses' and speak to all 'levels of our being'.⁴⁰ Jones did not personally expand upon his use of the framing device in the prose-poem. However, in 'Art and Sacrament', he wrote that his interest in visually marking space, especially through symbolism, was fuelled by an 'intent' to successfully capture 'a 're-presenting' [...] an 'effective recalling'.⁴¹ This seems to support Raine's observation that Jones's symbols and images are not statically isolated but active agents; they re-present and recall. In much the same way, I believe Jones's visual framing, his 'space between' (*IP* xv) or visual parentheses, are not autonomous areas through which one can view war in isolation. They are, rather, part of a continuous pattern of interconnecting perspectives. This is intimated in the Preface; following his observation that 'war itself was a parenthesis', Jones completed this remark by writing that existence 'is altogether in parenthesis'. The war is not distinctly separate but part of a cycle; the visual frames that Jones introduces throughout the poem connect rather than divide.

³⁹ Kathleen Raine, 'David Jones and the Actually Loved and Known', *David Jones: Man and Poet*, pp. 59-71 (pp. 60-61).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, p. 155.

Between the Acts

The intrusion of war

Unlike *In Parenthesis*, *Between the Acts* is not a text obviously concerned with war. In contrast to *Mrs Dalloway* and *To The Lighthouse*, it obliquely references war. Nevertheless, the idea of war is aesthetically present because, as Gillian Beer notes, it is 'a striking evocation of English experience in the months leading up to the Second World War' because it was 'imagined, planned', and written 'through the last days of a peace that seemed at times like a national hallucination'.⁴² Anne Olivier Bell, in the Preface to the last volume of Woolf's diary that she edited, also noted the impact of the impending war on Woolf's writing: '*Between the Acts* was written under conditions of unusual stress: the approach of war, the actuality of war and, from the summer of 1940, the very present danger of death through war'.⁴³ Both Beer and Bell capture the uncertainty and tension of the inter-war period as well as demonstrating the creative significance of this time for Woolf as a writer. They reiterate Wyndham Lewis's suggestion that, for a writer, the idea of war is as creatively important as the experience of war. Indeed, the forthcoming war underlies the narrative of *Between the Acts*. The historical references to the Napoleonic wars, the violent imagery of a snake choking on a toad, the aeroplanes presumably in pre-war training flying overhead, the brief snippets of conversation that allude to the coming war – '“No one wants it - save those damned Germans”' (BA 109) –, are all indicative of the coming Second World War.⁴⁴

⁴² Gillian Beer, 'Introduction and Notes', *Between the Acts*, ed. Stella McNichol (London: Penguin, 1992), p. ix.

⁴³ Anne Olivier Bell, 'Preface', *The Diary of Virginia Woolf 1936-1941*, V, ix.

⁴⁴ Hussey notes that there is a definite parallel between the description of the choking snake in *Between the Acts* – 'it was birth the wrong way round' (BA 72) – and Woolf's reaction to Vanessa Bell's grief at the loss of her son Julian in the Spanish Civil War: 'Then I thought the death of a child is childbirth again.' Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts*, ed. Mark Hussey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 206. Hereafter, referred to as BA in parenthetical citations.

War's unacknowledged, disruptive presence constantly surfaces and this impacts on how sight operates throughout the text. *Between the Acts* emphasises visual disunity, visual disorder, and the uncontainable – even threatening – nature of sight. The tension between the visual frame and content is more intense than in *In Parenthesis*. A conventional frame, an abstracted viewpoint, is shown to be profoundly inadequate in disassociating sight from the pre-war context. Visual frames constantly react and respond to war rather than containing sight and imposing order. This is shown most explicitly when the characters observe the view as detailed in the ancient and unchanging 'Guide Book':

They looked at the view; they looked at what they knew, to see if what they knew might perhaps be different today. Most days it was the same. [...] Giles nicked his chair into position with a jerk. Thus only could he show his irritation, his rage with old fogies who sat and looked at views over coffee and cream when the whole of Europe – over there – was bristling like....He had no command of metaphor. [...] At any moment guns would rake that land unto furrows; planes splinter Bolney Minster into smithereens and blast the Folly. (BA 39)

In this passage, a conventional framework no longer effectively frames war because no sight – however neutral the viewer and view – is independent from the surrounding context of war. Giles's inability to capture war in words – 'he had no command of metaphor' – explicates Woolf's creative dilemma.

The aesthetic difficulty of how to see war was superseded, for Woolf, by the conundrum of how to see war before the outbreak of war. In 1939, for example, Woolf wrote to Ethel Smyth complaining of an overwhelming sense of dislocation and an authorial inability to shape pre-war fragments into a cohesive phrase: 'Then there's war – black outs: a man shot in the river where I walk; and the Labour party meeting here. I can't make a song of this, not a consecutive phrase'.⁴⁵ Words appear to fail sight here. Soon after, Woolf wrote to Vita Sackville-West about the 'intolerable

⁴⁵ Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, 6 vols. (London: Hogarth, 1975-80), VI, p. 352.

suspension of all reality' because the indeterminate atmosphere had left her unable to capture or isolate the reality of war: 'one can't fold it in any words'.⁴⁶ Woolf's use of the word 'fold' is interesting: it highlights an internal and external divide but at the same time blurs it. Folding is to enclose interior content but it is distinct from framing because it implies a softness and lack of definite structure. Rather contradictorily, in the years preceding the outbreak of war, Woolf also found refuge and visual clarity in the inter-war parenthetical state of existence: 'I lay awake so calm, so content, as if I'd stepped off the whirling world into a deep blue quiet space, & there open eyed existed, beyond harm; armed against all that can happen'.⁴⁷ This striking quotation further problematizes the interior/exterior divide of visual frames. What is the frame that seemingly encloses Woolf's sight and where is it located? Is it external, part of the exterior 'whirling world', or is located internally in the 'deep blue quiet space'? Woolf's choice of penetrating words, 'deep' and 'fold', in the above quotations evoke Derrida's use of the term 'invagination'. Derrida used this term on several occasions in his writings to show the complex relationship between internal and external divides.⁴⁸ Culler explicates the impact of invagination on the notion of the literary visual frame:

What we think of as the innermost spaces and places of the body – vagina, stomach, intestine – are in fact pockets of externality folded in. What makes them quintessentially inner is partly their difference from flesh and bone but especially the space they mark off and contain, the outside they make inner. An external frame may function as the most intrinsic element of a work, folding itself in; conversely, what seems the most inner or central aspect of a work will acquire this role through qualities that fold it back outside of and against the work. The secret center that appears to explain everything folds back on the work, incorporating an external position from which to elucidate the whole in which it also figures.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, VI, p. 355.

⁴⁷ Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, V, p. 78.

⁴⁸ For a detailed definition and summary of Derrida's use of the term 'invagination', see *The Derrida Dictionary* by Simon Morgan Wortham (2010).

⁴⁹ Culler, pp. 198-199.

Woolf's 'deep blue quiet space' can be understood as both internal and external: frame and content are shown to be reversible and differing perspectives interchangeable.

The ambiguity of the inter-war period, with the associated uncertainty of how to see war, heightened the instability of the visual frame. Woolf was undecided how best to frame reality in *Between the Acts* and linked this indecision directly to the approaching war. In April 1938, Woolf expressed a desire to create a work of unity through capturing whole moments in an initial draft that she was working on: 'Summers night: a complete whole: that's my idea'.⁵⁰ This suggested that an overarching, elevated viewpoint was to be adopted. Yet, a year later, Woolf noted how war had forced her to revise this idea because an aloof, distanced perspective was no longer possible: 'I should, if it weren't for the war – glide my way up and up in to that exciting layer so rarely lived in'.⁵¹ Ruth Miller, in her exploration of framing devices in Woolf's work, writes that the differing frames and discrepancies between frames found in Woolf's writing 'draw attention to the difference between the frames of art and those of life. The frame of a painting mediates between meaning and chance. The objects within it are chosen and arranged, while without they are dispersed and chaotic. The frames of life, in contrast, include some indication of the uncontrollable forces outside their perimeters'.⁵² The opposing frames are captured exactly by Woolf's introduction of 'two pictures' (BA 26) in *Between the Acts*. One is a picture of a lady and the other is a portrait of an ancestor. The portrait is infused with life and he looks at the viewer. In contrast, the lady is 'looked at' but does not return the viewer's gaze. She looks remotely 'over their heads, looking at nothing' (BA 36).

⁵⁰ Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, V, p. 133.

⁵¹ Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, V, p. 214.

⁵² C. Ruth Miller, *Virginia Woolf: The Frames of Art and Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1988), p. 95.

The frame of art houses an objective gaze whilst the frame of life is associated with subjective sight.

Woolf's struggle with finding a suitable framing technique during the inter-war period indicates the intrusion of life into art: of the uncontrollable force of war permeating the perimeters. A year into the war, months before her death, Woolf appeared to clear the technical impasse by deciding the best way to represent reality was through visual fragmentation instead of visual unity: 'It is the only way of getting at the truth – to have it broken into many splinters by many mirrors and so select'.⁵³ Although this sentence does not relate directly to *Between the Acts*, it is nevertheless strikingly significant because of the pageant scene in the novel where the audience are confronted with 'hand glasses, tin cans, scraps of scullery glass, harness room glass, and heavily embossed silver mirrors' (BA 133). McLaurin notes that the 'reflecting fragments, the form of which Virginia Woolf chose for *Between the Acts* itself, with its mixture of poetry, narrative and drama' shows Woolf's realisation that reality can only be successfully articulated if it is 'broken up in this way'.⁵⁴ McLaurin crucially suggests that the visual fragmentation in *Between the Acts* necessitates a wider revision, even explosion, of conventional literary frames.

Deconstructing the visual frame

Helen Southworth, in her informative exploration of gender and space in *Between the Acts*, follows McLaurin's line of argument when she concludes that the work 'entails a continual renegotiation of space. Breaking the threshold over and over again, [Woolf]

⁵³ Virginia Woolf, 'The Man at the Gate' [a review of Richard Armoor's Coleridge the Talker], *New Statesman & Nation* (19th October 1940) reprinted in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1942), pp. 104-111 (p. 109).

⁵⁴ McLaurin, p. 56.

marks the line separating inside and outside only to explode it'.⁵⁵ Southworth highlights the fragility of internal and external divides: again, frame and content are shown to be reversible. This is especially true when considering how sight operates and is treated in *Between the Acts*; particularly Woolf's invagination of the visual frame. The reversibility of the seer and seen, of objective and subjective vision, is, as in *In Parenthesis*, central to *Between the Acts*. In the silent and empty barn, non-human, animal sight duplicates and multiplies: 'all these eyes, expanding and narrowing [...] looked from different angles and edges' (BA 73). In this passage, it is almost as if sight, separated from human control, becomes an independent entity in its own right; the non-human eye, rather like Jones's buttercup, is shown to observe the unknowing observer. Maggie Humm, writing about the impact of photography on Woolf, suggests that Woolf's interest in photography provided her with the necessary creative framing device to explore and mediate this division between 'visible and 'invisible' vision'.⁵⁶ Humm establishes a direct connection between photography and the reassessment of visual framing in Woolf's writing: 'Woolf continually experiments with features of vision, radically reframing the visible world in her 'image/texts' – texts which display a concern for visual themes and images – as well as in her domestic photography'.⁵⁷ Moreover, Humm, citing Woolf's use of visible and invisible photographs in the anti-war polemic *Three Guineas* (1938), suggests that photography was instrumental to Woolf's exploration of how best to represent, and creatively engage with, the sights of war.

In this anti-war work, Woolf includes five photographs that sit alongside her descriptions of other photographs that do not literally feature. Humm argues that both

⁵⁵ Helen Southworth, 'Women and Interruption in *Between the Acts*', *Locating Woolf: the Politics of Space and Place*, ed. Anna Snaith and Michael H. Whitworth (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2007), pp. 46-61 (p. 48).

⁵⁶ Maggie Humm, *Modernist Women and Visual Cultures: Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell, Photography, and Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), p. 1.

⁵⁷ Humm, *Modernist Women and Visual Cultures*, p. 5.

sets of photographs are fundamentally important inclusions because ‘the visible photographs’ show a ‘visual history of institutionalized patriarchy’ to which ‘Woolf had no physical access’ whilst ‘the imagery in the absent photographs encourages us’ instead ‘to connect our private histories to those horrific public events’.⁵⁸ The photographs Woolf includes in *Three Guineas* are pictorial symbols of a confident, imperial Britain but they are also farcical stereotypes of war propaganda. The General, for example, is depicted ornately dressed and decorated with military honours but he is, simultaneously, old and rather ridiculous in his ostentatious attire overloaded with a multitude of medals. These photographs contrast, as Humm rightly notes, with the absent photographs that Woolf describes which capture the terrible realities of war: dead men, women and children in bombed buildings. The use of photography in this text draws the viewer’s attention to the difference between carefully crafted and distorted images of war versus real and spontaneous images of war.

Yet the division between the two types of photograph is not clear and the absent photographs in *Three Guineas* raise intriguing questions about visual authority and economy in war. The absent images do not decisively permit us better access to war, compared to the presented photographs, nor do they give us a comprehensive or detailed understanding of what is being presented visually to us. The absent photographs contain as many different levels of reality as the presented images. They are, for instance, propaganda shots too: we are told that ‘the Spanish Government sends them with patient pertinacity about twice a week’ to rally support for their cause in the war.⁵⁹ The images are not easily accessible: the photographer,

⁵⁸ Maggie Humm, ‘Memory, Photography, and Modernism: The ‘dead bodies and ruined houses’ of Virginia Woolf’s *Three Guineas*’, *Signs*, 28.3 (2003), 645-663 (pp. 648, 651).

⁵⁹ Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*, ed. Naomi Black (1938; Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p. 10.

without investigation, is unknown and so is the creator's intention.⁶⁰ Consequently, the viewer, and author, struggle to identify the content in the photographs: one 'might be a man's body, or a woman's [...] it might, on the other hand, be the body of a pig'.⁶¹ Aryn Bartley warns, in her article exploring the economy of vision that operates during wartime, that we cannot anticipate the reactions of viewers to wartime photographs.⁶² She argues that, in the name of visual economy, wartime photographers too often resort to shots that depict extreme violence or pathos: dead children feature in many twentieth-century wartime photographs and newsreels. Bartley writes that such 'images become impossible to connect to living, dead, and suffering bodies, to the history behind them. The marks of violence and cruelty become 'poses' and 'positions' like the bodies of moveable dolls'.⁶³ Bartley's reading further undermines, rather than strengthens, the imposition of any fixed visual frame around the sights of war. The photographs in *Three Guineas*, in this context, therefore problematize the issue of visually framing war rather than offering a decisive solution.

Woolf's other attempts at framing war were equally problematic. They constantly emphasise the duality of sight, the reversibility of internal and external

⁶⁰ Woolf, from 1931, collected photographs and newspaper cuttings. These can be located in three of Woolf's scrapbooks and the source material for some of the photographs referenced in *Three Guineas* is amongst them. Humm has reproduced some of this material in *Snapshots of Bloomsbury* (2006).

⁶¹ Woolf, *Three Guineas*, p. 10. Elena Gualtieri, who attempts to trace the source material for the absent photographs in *Three Guineas*, which are not in Woolf's scrapbooks, notes a tension between the photograph being a 'transparent signifier' and an 'opaque representation' in *Three Guineas*. Elena Gualtieri, 'Three Guineas and the photograph: the art of propaganda', *Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender, Politics and History*, ed. Maroula Joannou (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), pp. 165-178 (p. 175).

⁶² Bartley's article draws our attention to the economy of vision that operates during war and the associated prioritisation of certain images. In a conflict, visual economy becomes heightened as wartime images have different values placed upon them depending on whether certain photographs are seen to successfully represent war or communicate a particular aspect of wartime life to the viewer. She concludes that war results in a greater emphasis being placed upon surface in sight where 'all that is not apparent to the eye' is erased so that the image of a 'tiny boy and what might lie behind his gaze' may be considered 'less important' than 'the man-in-the-street' who can provide a better 'representative image' of war (Bartley, p. 54). Woolf's treatment of photographs in *Three Guineas* shows that she was acutely aware of this wartime visual economy.

⁶³ Bartley, p. 64. See also Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) for a similar analysis. Sontag analyses why images of horror often induce a numbed response and she constantly refers to the images that Woolf describes in *Three Guineas*.

divides, and the inadequacy of capturing war through conventional framing techniques. In *Jacob's Room* (1922), Woolf, much like Jones does in *In Parenthesis*, guides our gaze onto the unseen: the unfamiliar is shown through the familiar and presence is defined through absence.⁶⁴ The impact of war – the death of Jacob in the First World War – is revealed to us through his uninhabited room: 'Listless is the air in an empty room, just swelling the curtain; the flowers in the jar shift. One fibre in the wicker arm-chair creaks, though no one sits there'.⁶⁵ The unseen and the unsaid dominate this scene: we are presented, in the empty room, with an image of 'Jacob's old shoes' that are empty of his presence.⁶⁶ Edward Bishop, examining the literal blank spaces, gaps, and bracketed space within the typography of *Jacob's Room*, argues that Woolf's inclusion of these in the text was primarily motivated by war. Bishop suggests that the wider modernist issues surrounding space and vision were secondary to Woolf's overriding concern with representing war effectively: 'There are chasms in everyday life, and *Jacob's Room* makes us aware of those, but there is also the larger chasm underlying the novel: that of the Great War'.⁶⁷ Bishop concludes that the gaps or spaces in the work framed by, and/or framing, the text create a 'freeze-frame effect' that emphasises to the reader the unseen content.⁶⁸ Woolf forces us to consider war: it is unavoidably present through its absence.

Woolf adopts the same technique in *To the Lighthouse* (1927) where, in 'Time Passes', the war is presented as the absent content within a frame: '[Mr. Ramsay, stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched his arms out, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out,

⁶⁴ Allyson Booth writes that corpselessness in *Jacob's Room* and *To The Lighthouse* forces the reader to confront both war's casualties and one's distance from those casualties. See Allyson Booth, *Postcards from the Trenches: Negotiating the Space between Modernism and the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁶⁵ Virginia Woolf, *Jacob's Room* (1922; London: Hogarth Press, 1990), p. 173.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Edward L. Bishop, 'Mind the Gap: The Spaces in *Jacob's Room*', *Woolf Studies Annual*, 10 (2004), 31-49 (p. 42).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

remained empty]'.⁶⁹ This suggests that war resists representation or containment. Woolf uses 'Time Passes' to emphasise how war blurs the divide between frame and content. Although the two other sections of the novel, 'The Window' and 'The Lighthouse', sandwich the war, 'Time Passes' actually acts as a framing device to these two other sections. The whole content of *To the Lighthouse* is shaped by the wartime action in 'Time Passes'. This is revealed in Woolf's notebook where, in 1925, she drew the letter 'H' to depict the structure of the novel: 'two blocks joined by a corridor'.⁷⁰ War is the central joining bridge between these blocks. Both the content of 'The Lighthouse' and 'The Window' is transformed by the irreversible changes articulated in 'Time Passes'.

Miller argues that to compare Woolf's approach towards framing in both *To the Lighthouse* and *The Years* (1937) is to chart the disintegration of structured boundaries in Woolf's writing. She suggests that *To the Lighthouse* reveals Woolf's apprehension over the adequacy of visual frames by constantly seeking to 'blur the edges that divide things from one another'.⁷¹ Miller cites the scene where Mrs. Ramsay's shawl is used to cover an image of death, the animal skull, as an example of this: 'Mrs Ramsay's shawl and cloak are images of the envelopment she desires. Her dislike of divisive lines leads her to toss her shawl "over the edge of the frame"'.⁷² Miller, in speaking of 'enveloping' or 'folding' images, implicitly suggests an invagination of the visual frame. Of *The Years*, Miller writes that the internal/external divide is not just blurred but dispensed with: 'In *The Years*, Virginia Woolf tried to dispense with boundaries. Viewed in this light, the novel [...] becomes one of her

⁶⁹ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (1927; London: Penguin, 1996), p. 192. In 'Time Passes', Woolf condenses a decade that is dominated by World War One into one night. Mrs. Ramsay's death symbolises the many deaths of World War One.

⁷⁰ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse: The Original Holograph Draft*, ed. Susan Dick (London: Hogarth Press, 1983), Appendix A, p. 48.

⁷¹ Miller, p. 29.

⁷² Ibid.

most experimental works'.⁷³ Whilst *The Years* certainly shows the war's explosive impact upon frame and perspective, I think Miller overstates Woolf's elimination of the frame in the novel: to explode is not necessarily to destroy.

At the beginning of each section in *The Years*, Woolf creates a distinct summary or visual overview of the content. The beginning of '1914', for example, opens with a literary long-shot.⁷⁴

It was a brilliant spring; the day was radiant. Even the air seemed to have a burr in it as it touched the tree tops; it vibrated, it rippled. The leaves were sharp and green. In the country old church clocks rasped out the hour; the rusty sound went over fields that were red with clover, and up went the rooks as if flung by the bells. Round they wheeled; then settled on the tree tops.

In London all was gallant and strident; the season was beginning; horns hooted; the traffic roared; flags flew taut as trout in a stream. And from all the spires of all the London churches – the fashionable saints of Mayfair, the dowdy saints of Kensington, the hoary saints of the City – the hour was proclaimed. The air over London seemed a rough sea of sound through which circles travelled. But the clocks were irregular, as if the saints themselves were divided. There were pauses, silences...Then the clocks struck again.⁷⁵

In this passage, the reader is shown details from on high: from 'the tree tops' and the church 'spires'. The passage contains abstract elements, as well, as if regarded through an impressionist eye: sound, for example, intermingles with sight to produce travelling 'circles' of sensation. The opening of the contrasting '1918' section shows the impact of the war. Although '1918' is similarly framed to the '1914' opening, the result is different:

⁷³ Miller, p. 33.

⁷⁴ The term 'shot' in a photographic/filmic context is thought to derive from the early days of film production when cameras were hand-cranked. Interestingly, these hand-cranked cameras were related to World War One because they operated similarly to the hand-cranked machine guns of that era. Film was 'shot' like bullets from a machine gun. ('Movie Speak', podcast, KCRW 89.9 FM (10 August 2009) <http://www.kcrw.com/etc/programs/tb/tb090810movie_speak_scissorh> [accessed: 13th August 2012].) The origin of the term 'long shot' is difficult to precisely date. The *OED* is unclear when this technique started to be used in filmmaking but notes its photographic use in the late nineteenth century. The *Routledge Companion to Film History* observes that the long shot was very popular with directors working before World War One because most early narrative filmmakers did not attempt to construct a plot but instead presented a series of dramatic scenes, views or tableaux from afar. Woolf, who often noted her visits to the cinema in her diaries, would probably have been familiar with this technique. William Guynn, *The Routledge Companion to Film History* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), p. 47.

⁷⁵ Virginia Woolf, *The Years*, ed. Jeri Johnson (1937; London: Penguin, 2002), p. 164.

A veil of mist covered the November sky; a many-folded veil, so fine-meshed that it made one density. It was not raining, but here and there the mist condensed on the surface into dampness and made pavements greasy. Here and there on a grass blade or on a hedge leaf a drop hung motionless. It was windless and calm. Sounds coming through the veil – the bleat of sheep, the croak of rooks – were deadened. The uproar of the traffic merged into one growl. Now and then as if a door opened and shut, or the veil parted and closed, the roar boomed and faded.⁷⁶

Whilst this scene is still captured through a long-shot, the clarity of vision present in '1914' is lost. A 'veil of mist' prevents the reader from seeing clearly: visual disorientation dominates. The senses, rather than operating in harmony, now act in discord: a door is heard to open and shut but cannot be seen. An elevated, all-seeing perspective is no longer possible. The conventional frame Woolf employs is effectively redundant: it cannot impose order over, or give structure to, this unsettling visual content.

Reinventing the visual frame

The visual fragmentation in *Between the Acts* that results in a revision, even explosion, of conventional framing is glimpsed in *The Years*. At the start of World War One, Kitty describes a transformative moment: 'this was the moment of transition'.⁷⁷ During this tumultuous time, Woolf describes how a barrage of visual fragments assault Kitty's eyes and defines this violent upheaval: 'The years changed things; destroyed things; heaped things up – worries and bothers; here they were again. Fragments of talk kept coming back to her; sights came before her'.⁷⁸ This sentence shows a loss of control over vision. Sight confronts Kitty: it becomes fragmentary and unpredictable. Throughout *Between the Acts*, sight is also portrayed as confrontational and unstable. The characters wince collectively at being shown a fragmented, distorted reflection of themselves in the mirrored ending to the pageant:

⁷⁶ Woolf, *The Years*, p. 221.

⁷⁷ Woolf, *The Years*, p. 198.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

‘And the audience saw themselves, not whole by any means’ (BA 133). Sight is inescapably present and hostile. Isa, for example, is aware of: ‘Dodge’s eye upon her [...]. Always some cold eye crawled over the surface like a winter blue-bottle!’ (BA 126). Death and destruction – in this instance, the ‘blue-bottle’ – constantly shadows sight. Miss La Trobe, for example, forced into a ‘stooping position’ ‘to avoid attention’ from constant, watchful eyes, feels encircled by ‘death, death, death’ (BA 129). As in *In Parenthesis*, the seer becomes seen. The duality of sight, objective versus subjective vision, literally plays out in *Between the Acts*: a visual duel occurs. Woolf utilises the theatre and mirrors, two devices that embody looking inwards and outwards simultaneously, to capture this visual conflict and draw attention to the underlying violence – the approaching war – in the novel.

Anna Teekell, analysing the use of the theatre in Elizabeth Bowen’s wartime work, writes that it ‘collapses difference – and also her characters’ inner and outer worlds, their safe and unsafe spaces – into something else, something blitz-riven: a no-place’.⁷⁹ Teekell shows the disintegration of the internal/external divide and the impact that this fragmentation has on space. The theatre of war is especially relevant when considering Woolf’s position before the war: she was forced into the position of spectator whilst waiting for the advent of war. Yet she was not a disengaged viewer. This is translated into the staging of the play in *Between the Acts*. The characters find themselves forced to watch a play but the play’s seen content is unimportant. Notably, war is absent from the play’s summary of British history. Colonel Mayhew asks: ‘“Why leave out the British Army? What’s history without the Army, eh?”’ (BA 113). Again, the coming war is defined through its absence. It is the unseen content that is significant. Often the characters watch a blank stage: ‘Could they move? No,

⁷⁹ Anna Teekell, ‘Elizabeth Bowen and Language at War’, *New Hibernia Review*, 15.3 (2011), 61-79 (p. 78).

for the play was going on. Yet the stage was empty; only the cows moved in the meadows; only the tick of the gramophone needle was heard. The tick, tick, tick seemed to hold them together, tranced. Nothing whatsoever appeared on stage' (*BA* 60). The blankness houses the elephant in the room; sight is suspended, 'tranced', whilst the gramophone enacts a countdown – 'tick, tick, tick' – to the start of action.

Empty space is of central importance in *Between the Acts*. Hussey notes that in an early typescript of 'Pointz Hall', there is a passage headed '+Silence+' in which Woolf questions how best to observe empty, uninhabited space.⁸⁰ This passage preceded Woolf's description in *Between the Acts* of the empty dining room in which she stresses the significance of empty space as a vessel that successfully encompasses reality because it has no fixed frame: 'Empty, empty, empty; silent, silent, silent. The room was a shell [...] a vase stood in the heart of the house, alabaster, smooth, cold, holding the still, distilled essence of emptiness, silence' (*BA* 27). The prominence of the vase in this quotation assumes greater significance when read alongside Lacan's seminar on the *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1959-1960). Lacan asserts that a central absence structures all artistic products and uses the vase as an example of this structuring absence. Wyatt Bonikowski, writing on Lacan's seminar, explicates this further: 'The absence around which the vase is constructed represents for Lacan the lost object, the Thing, a 'hole in the real' [...] The aesthetic field is marked by this hole in the real'.⁸¹ Lacan's formula of structured emptiness helps make sense of Woolf's repeated experiments with visual framing when writing about the impact of the war. As we have seen, in her previous works, such as *Jacob's Room* and *To The Lighthouse*, Woolf uses empty space to frame the uncontainable force of war. In *Mrs Dalloway*, too, Clarissa speaks of the 'emptiness about the heart

⁸⁰ 'Pointz Hall' became *Between the Acts*. Hussey, p. 179.

⁸¹ Wyatt Bonikowski, *Shell Shock and the Modernist Imagination: The Death Drive in Post-World War One British Fiction* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), p. 156.

of life' – a quotation that is realised when Septimus's death centrally structures Clarissa's party: 'Oh! Thought Clarissa, in the middle of my party, here's death, she thought'.⁸² Significantly, in *Jacob's Room*, Woolf writes about the important structure that theatrical space specifically gives to chaotic visual content: 'The observer is choked with observations. Only to prevent us from being submerged by chaos, nature and society between them have arranged a system of classification which is simplicity itself: stalls, boxes, amphitheatre, gallery'.⁸³ In *Between the Acts*, Woolf develops her utilisation of the empty stage as the ultimate vessel containing an unnamed but unforgettable absence. Interestingly, the creative, as well as the destructive, impact of war is emphasised in the text. Sight, within this formless form of emptiness, this 'big hole', not only is unleashed but also becomes an abundant and disturbing force.⁸⁴

The empty stage thus draws attention to how sight operates within and around it. Writing in 1950, about the impact of war upon her generation, Elizabeth Bowen selected a stage analogy to aid her description: 'we are being deprived [...] as a generation, of what was outwardly attractive to the fancy, and [...] riveting to the eye. We remain, like personable, like passionate actors, on a scene or stage, from which the ordinary scenery has been removed and the surroundings are abstract – for the background is abstract, and casts very formidable shadows'.⁸⁵ Bowen emphasises the constant shift experienced between observing and being observed when a clear framework is 'removed' and boundaries become blurred. It is a strange visual transition that Woolf captures exactly in *Between the Acts*. The characters observing

⁸² Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, ed. Stella McNichol (London: Hogarth Press, 1925; Penguin, 1992; reprint, 2000), pp. 33, 201.

⁸³ Woolf, *Jacob's Room*, p. 63.

⁸⁴ Virginia Woolf, *Roger Fry: A Biography* (1940; New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), p. 278. The 'big hole' is a grave which Woolf refers to in this quotation.

⁸⁵ Elizabeth Bowen, 'The Poetic Element in Fiction' (1950 lecture typescript), Elizabeth Bowen Collection, Harry Ransom Center for Research in the Humanities, University of Texas, Austin.

the play describe themselves being trapped in endless vision as they in turn are observed from the stage: 'They were all caught and caged; prisoners; watching a spectacle' (126.). Ann Banfield writes of this visual paradox: 'One becomes aware that we are spectators and also passive participants in a pageant. And as nothing can interfere with the order; we have nothing to do but accept, and watch. The watching is both weightless and invisible'.⁸⁶ Banfield is, of course, echoing Roger Fry, whose work she explores, when he described how productive the stage's duality of vision is: 'When we are really moved at the theatres we are always both on stage and in the auditorium'.⁸⁷ Yet the act of observation in *Between the Acts* is both weighted and visible. Sight impresses itself fully upon the viewer.

This exposure of the eye is especially true when considering Woolf's utilisation of mirrors in the novel. Ruth Miller, studying mirrors as a central framing device in Woolf's work, writes that Woolf used them to invert the 'familiar notion – that the eyes are mirrors in which the emotions are reflected – and portrayed the mirror itself as an eye'.⁸⁸ Miller's observation is particularly relevant when we consider the end of *Between the Acts* where the characters are enclosed by a wall of mirrors that reflects their eyes: 'So that was her little game! To show us up, as we are, how. [...] Even Bart, even Lucy, turned away. All evaded or shaded themselves' (BA 133). Sight is overbearing and the vision is too real as the characters watch their own eyes observe themselves: they are made both viewer and subject. Miller identifies two types of mirror – the inward and the outward facing – in Woolf's work and concludes that the 'pageant concludes with an outward mirror' in *Between the Acts*. But although the mirrors of the pageant face outwards, reflecting the reflection of the audience back at themselves, it is hard to make an internal and external distinction because, as we

⁸⁶ Ann Banfield, *The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell and the Epistemology of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 159-160.

⁸⁷ Roger Fry, *Vision and Design*, p.18.

⁸⁸ Miller, p. 94.

have seen, the audience is both seen and seeing. The mirror, rather like the indefinite space of the stage where members of the audience are both passive viewers and active participants, collapses the difference between objective and subjective vision. Mirrors explicitly stress the simultaneous act of looking in and looking out. This effect is shown when William Dodge looks at Mrs Swithin in a mirror: 'he saw her reflected in the glass. Cut off from their bodies, their eyes smiled, their bodiless eyes, at their eyes in the glass' (BA 52). Mrs Swithin and William Dodge enjoy a moment of visual clarity and visual unity as the mirror dissolves physical and mental constraints. The mirror acts as the ultimate vehicle of perception: objective and subjective sight operate in harmony.

Visual Framing

The disintegration of a concrete visual framework in war resulted in sight becoming unanchored and uncontained with an associated loss of control over vision and space. This chapter has shown that the inter-war period exacerbated this phenomenon particularly by stressing the duality of vision: *In Parenthesis* is concerned with World War One but is framed by the proximity of World War Two whilst *Between the Acts* is underlined by the immanent war but Woolf's writing is underscored by her knowledge of the previous war. The two world wars became an inescapable frame for those who lived between them: Woolf and Jones in the late 1930s were effectively caught in a temporal limbo. The inter-war years accentuated what Bonikowski calls 'the traumatic temporality of war': war affects how we engage with both the past and the future by bleeding into both time frames.⁸⁹ The ambiguity of visual boundaries operating in this inter-war period heightened and contributed to both Jones's and Woolf's artistic experiments with visual framing. In both works an

⁸⁹ Bonikowski, *Shell Shock and the Modernist Imagination*, p. 74.

aesthetic split in seeing between active, proximate sight and reflective, distanced vision is evident. A conventional frame, an abstracted viewpoint, is shown to be profoundly inadequate in this context.

Both texts, in different ways, therefore seek to create a visual frame that encompasses these differing perspectives thus allowing a simultaneous engagement with content as participant and observer by blurring the internal and external divide of any conventional visual frame. For Jones, in *In Parenthesis*, this meant using space as a creative device to establish a bridge between the interiority of direct experience and the externality of observation. These visual parentheses guide our gaze onto otherwise unseen or unnoticed material: the unfamiliar is shown through the familiar and presence is defined through absence. In *Between the Acts*, the tension between the visual frame and content is more intense than in *In Parenthesis* perhaps because of Woolf's deep-rooted concern about the forthcoming war. Visual disunity, visual disorder, and the uncontainable – even threatening – nature of sight is made explicit. Woolf furthered her on-going utilisation of empty space in this text by employing both the theatre and mirrors as experimental framing devices. These two devices, which embody looking inwards and outwards simultaneously, not only capture the visual conflict between objective and subjective vision, and draw attention to the underlying violence – the approaching war – in the novel, but also ultimately acknowledge that frame and content are reversible and differing perspectives interchangeable. Interestingly, Jones likewise drew attention to the seer's visibility, so creating a profound tension between subjective and objective vision, by utilising, as in the buttercup scene, an abstracted eye. The reversibility of the seer and seen, of objective and subjective vision, is central to both *In Parenthesis* and *Between the Acts*.

Conclusion

Seeing, representing, and framing the world wars

All of the works analysed show the experience of the two world wars to be resistant to representation. Authors from both wars reveal a shared anxiety about seeing war. They struggle to describe in words not only the uncontrollable sights of war but also sight uncontained in war. Their differing perspectives of world war are variable, subjective, partial, multiple. Louis Simpson, for instance, draws attention to the 'twofold consciousness' of vision that particularly operates in war by stressing the tension between internal and external perspective. The writing of David Jones and Virginia Woolf was also affected by the duality of vision that was exacerbated by the inter-war period. But for them, this duality was temporal rather than spatial: the two wars bled across their past, present, and future. This multiplicity rejects the notion of complete, unified vision in wartime: there is no single, all-encompassing way to see war. The multifariousness of sight contributes to the visual flux and disorientation evident in many of the works examined. The reality of war is therefore affirmed as not so much unrepresentable or unseen but unfixed and indeterminate.

All of the texts examined challenge the possibility of a concrete visual framework through which to fix sight and the sights of war effectively. For instance, the framing boundaries of the window in *The Return of the Soldier* and the mirror in 'The Blind Man' fail to define or contain the disruptive sight of both Chris and Maurice. In *Between the Acts*, Woolf importantly draws attention to the division between the frames of art and the frames of life. Can this division be successfully made in wartime? Should war be placed into an artistic frame? Few of the authors discussed consciously approached the subject of war aesthetically as a creative

challenge; Ford's attack on the Whitehall painters of war in *Parade's End* intimates that war should not be aesthetically appreciated and reveals the inadequacy of art in capturing the reality of war. But the difficulty in representing the variable reality of the world wars – for many, an entirely new reality – often necessitated a creative response and so blurred the boundaries between art and life. War profoundly challenged habituated perception: it demanded an innovative response. Some writers, especially those in the inter-war period writing with both wars in mind, explicitly experimented with literary techniques in an attempt to capture this new reality. David Jones's prose-poem *In Parenthesis* with its parenthetical framing technique exemplifies this attempt.

The scale of world war meant that traditional forms of framing and modes of representation either had to be abandoned, reinvented or reclaimed. Louis Simpson, for example, refashioned Bly's concept of the 'deep image' to simultaneously disclose and enclose the disruptive reality of war. In William Sansom's work, the altered reality of wartime London both critiques and transforms surrealist aesthetics; the perceived disconnection between surrealism and reality is challenged and minimized by the unreal reality of war. The limitations of modernist aesthetics, too, were constantly questioned and probed. Samuel Hynes suggests that the modernist method which before World War One 'had seemed violent and distorting was seen to be realistic on the Western Front'. 'Modernism had not changed', Hynes writes, 'but reality had'.¹ But modernism did change: Woolf's *Between the Acts* with its riot of genres, literary modes, and representational forms shows a self-conscious awareness of the modernist form and its limitations. The text not only reveals the disruptive presence of war but also intimates Woolf's frustration with finding a

¹ Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (New York: Atheneum, 1991), pp. 195-196.

suitable form or literary structure to articulate the disturbed reality of the inter-war years. The mirror scene at the close of the pageant raises particularly intriguing questions about the ability of modernist art to frame the forthcoming war.

The two world wars pose an aesthetic challenge to literary critics as well. How do we acknowledge an aesthetic engagement with war in literature without negating the horrific experience of war? How do we ensure critical readings of literature from both world wars reflect the gravity of war experience? Our enduring resistance to acknowledging that wartime traumatic visual encounters can be seductive, if not beautiful, exemplifies this critical dilemma. But an authentic transcription of visual experience in wartime can encompass an aesthetic engagement with traumatic material as both Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* and Sansom's *Fireman Flower* illustrate. This does not diminish the very real suffering and pain of war but an informed reading of sight in war, and particularly traumatic visual experience, should acknowledge a sometimes sensuous underpinning of that experience.

Sight, the human eye, and the body

Sara Danius has argued that modernist texts trace a historical shift in seeing away from a God-like 'infallible, transcendental eye' towards an eye embedded 'in the physical and anatomical functioning' of the body.² Many critics agree that the two world wars accentuated this shift in perspective. Indeed, as the introduction noted, the University of Manitoba's 2008 roundtable discussion on the representation of war concluded that twentieth-century warfare resulted in 'the aesthetics of warfare' – the way war is artistically perceived and presented – definitively shifting away from 'the

² Sara Danius, *The Senses of Modernism – technology, perception, and aesthetics* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2002), pp. 62-63.

eye of God' towards 'the gaze of the soldier'.³ Concurrent with this critical understanding of changing viewpoint, is the critical suggestion that sight became concentrated in the body rather than the human eye during the two world wars. Santanu Das's assertion that war is experienced 'as contact rather than through the eyes' typifies this.⁴ Das has extended this line of argument to conclude that touch, rather than sight, was the dominant sense of World War One. Sight, to date, has therefore been largely read against the axis of the body.

Certainly, in the poetry of both Owen and Simpson, the mutability of visual boundaries means that sight is no longer concentrated in the human eye; in West's *The Return of the Soldier* and Prebble's 'The Soldier Looks for His Family', the intersection between sight and the body is blurred in the figure of the returned soldier so that sight becomes almost corporeal; in Lawrence's 'The Blind Man' and Bowen's *The Heat of the Day*, sight is depicted as increasingly haptic. But, whilst these examples illustrate sight escaping the perimeters of the human eye, they do not show it to be constrained, in turn, by the body. In Owen's and Simpson's writing, sight escapes the perimeters of the human form entirely. In the returning soldiers of both West's and Prebble's texts, sight is internal and external to the human body; it inhabits the bodies of both soldiers but it also assaults them. Similarly, both Lawrence and Bowen show that the interface between internality and externality is blurred in wartime rendering the body's boundaries irrelevant.

The disintegration of a concrete visual framework in both world wars contributed to sight becoming unanchored and uncontained with an associated loss of control over vision and space. This meant that the human body did not exclusively

³ Roundtable Transcript: 'Representing War', moderated Elena Baraban, University of Manitoba (7th March, 2008), p. 5.
<http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/arts/departments/german_and_slavic/media/transcript_workshop_roundtable_representing_war.pdf> [accessed 15th February 2013].

⁴ Santanu Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 77.

define sight. The blurring of the intersection between sight and the body seemingly accentuated the increasing mutability of sight. In many of the texts analysed, sight moves across, through, and around the human body; it is at once peripheral and central to it. Indeed, this analysis has revealed how sight is often described in terms of autonomy. Ford speaks of sight as an autonomous concept in *Parade's End* and in *The Return of the Soldier*, sight is likewise shown to be an autonomous force as images are not just passively perceived but actively created.

It is therefore difficult to trace a clear transition between 'the eye of God' towards 'the eye of the soldier' in both world wars. Certainly, an all-seeing, all-knowing eye is profoundly challenged, even obliterated, by the scale of world war. Ford, for instance, constantly augments throughout *Parade's End* the vast dimensions of the global conflict that cannot be conventionally charted. But throughout many of the works examined, a tension exists between a proximate eye and a distant eye that is not fully reconciled. In *Parade's End* and *In Parenthesis*, Ford and Jones consider a split in seeing between active, proximate sight and reflective, distanced vision. In works like *The Heat of the Day*, which focus on the significance of the home front and front-line divide, the split in seeing is heightened and complicated by this questionable divide. The two world wars narrowed the division between the home front and front-line: both non-combatants and combatants, especially after World War Two, could claim to have 'seen' the front-line of war but, more often than not, civilians and soldiers found that the object of sight – war – was so far removed as to be out of sight. This blurring of the home front and front-line divide resulted in a similar loss of definition between proximate and distanced perspectives: sight was revealed as a variable, adaptable construct crossing both binaries. It was at once proximate and distant to war.

Crossing the internal/external divide

The texts examined seek to, in different ways, create literary motifs or structures that encompass these two differing perspectives – proximate and distanced – thus allowing a simultaneous engagement with content as participant and observer. There is a conscious effort to blur the internal/external divide of any conventional visual frame. Both Owen and Simpson found a solution by adopting a synecdochical approach in their poetry: their poems contain distinct figures, images, and motifs that show the visual trace of war. The human eye, in particular, is set up as a symbol bearing the traces of war but fails to contain its sights. Owen and Simpson both play on the tension between the eye as a receptor and as a reflector of sight/s. Both Ford and Lawrence use the image of an empty eye socket to explore the eye further as a mediator between sight and the body. The missing eyes of Aranjuez and Maurice are unforgettably present through their absence. The empty socket exceeds the limits of scale and proportion whilst blurring the boundary between internal and external vision.

The mirror also emerges as a dominant tool for establishing a bridge between the interiority of direct experience and the externality of observation. Many of the chapters in this thesis show how the mirror is utilised to emphasise the ambiguity of sight in war by accentuating its many layers. Ford, West, Lawrence, Bowen, and Woolf, all reference the topical early twentieth-century subject of mirror-space and accentuate the mirror as an emblem of truth in mimetic art to question the relationship between reality, sight, and war. The mirror collapses the difference between objective and subjective vision: in a mirror, the viewer is seen and seeing. War results in a destabilisation of sight where differing perspectives are interchangeable. Windows are often utilised to explore the multiplicity of perspective

and undermine the internal/external divide. The windows in *Parade's End* and *The Return of the Soldier* draw attention, like mirrors and eyes, to the duality of vision and the unstable surface of sight. Depending on the position of the viewer, looking in or looking out, windows reveal an internal and external world. Perspective is again shown as unfixed. Prebble interestingly extends this ocular metaphor to fundamentally challenge the home front and front-line divide by using the windows of the house to represent the eyes of the soldier.

Sight

Sight was rendered profoundly unstable by the scale of both world wars. The multiplicity of perspective, the multifariousness of sight is illustrated by each chapter's analysis. The war poetry of Owen and Simpson jointly acknowledges the limitations of the human eye and its partial capacity to see and scale world war. The immense scale of war liquefied the boundaries between public and private vision affirming that sight, especially in times of war, can be an unstable construct and destabilising force. Both West and Prebble draw attention to this through the disruptive figure of the returning soldier around whom visual boundaries are constantly renegotiated so emphasising the mutability of sight in war. 'The Blind Man' and *The Heat of the Day* explicitly question the polarisation of the divide between the home front and front-line. In challenging the demarcation of the front-line, Lawrence and Bowen explode boundaries of all kinds and rigorously question the idea of visual containment as well as the associated prioritisation of front-line vision. Both Woolf and Sansom destabilise established binary readings of sight in *Mrs Dalloway* and *Fireman Flower*. the unseen and seen, fantasy and reality, beauty and horror are rigorously questioned in both works. The ambiguous temporal boundaries of the inter-war

period accentuated the disintegration of a concrete visual framework and associated loss of control over vision. Both *In Parenthesis* and *Between the Acts* demonstrate that a conventional frame, in this inter-war context, was profoundly inadequate. The tension between frame and content in both these works makes explicit visual disunity, visual disorder, and the uncontainable – even threatening – nature of sight.

Sight in literature from both world wars can be thus read as uncontainable, autonomous, unfixed, destabilising, liberated, active, overwhelming. Sight emerges as a significantly variable and adaptable force. Both world wars blurred internal and external demarcations which, as Danius writes of twentieth-century technological innovations, challenged not only the supremacy of the human eye but also the legitimacy of sight.⁵ But this challenge did not result in the denigration of vision; rather it necessitated, and contributed to, a radical revision of vision. Sight seemingly emerges from both world wars as remarkably resolute in its fluidity. In 'The Blind Man' and *The Heat of the Day*, for example, both Lawrence and Bowen, by testing the boundaries of visual authority, suggest a cultural destabilisation of sight and ultimately a liberation of vision. In Ford's *Parade's End*, the challenges that world war presents to the traditional mapping eye means that sight becomes increasingly autonomous. Sight was redefined in the first half of the twentieth century, in part by war extending the boundaries of visual possibility, resulting in a liberation of sight. Sight was no longer confined to the human eye, the human body or the constrictions of a map. The scale of world war stressed the inadequacy of these divisions.

Instead, sight explores the perimeters of reality in war. Jenny 'sees' Chris in No Man's Land; Sylvia projects herself mentally across land and water; Maurice 'sees' Bertie; Septimus 'sees' dead men; Flower finds beauty in destruction. Seeing in war becomes more about seeing what cannot be seen than what can be. The texts

⁵ Danius, p. 55

examined seemingly allude to, and acknowledge, the 'optical unconscious'; they represent what can be seen but they also suggest an invisible or absent presence.⁶ Owen and Simpson draw attention to sight through its absence; the absent presence of Maurice and Chris haunts 'The Blind Man' and *The Return of the Soldier*; in *The Heat of the Day*, a photograph of Louie's husband accentuates his physical absence; in *Between the Acts*, war is made conspicuous by its absence from the play's summary of British history. The terms of sight were rewritten by the unreal reality of war. In *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf explicitly shows this by using a language of sight that speaks to and engages all the senses. In much the same way, sight transforms into physical sensation in both *The Return of the Soldier* and 'The Soldier Looks for His Family'. In these texts, the importance of sight is suggested through the other senses. It is therefore possible to conclude that the reconfiguration of the hierarchy of the senses, which both Das and Danus identify, did not result in an associated loss of significance for sight during the two world wars.

⁶ The term is used by Walter Benjamin to describe how photography captures that which usually escapes perception by the human eye. See Walter Benjamin, 'A Small History of Photography' (1931), *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London: NLB, 1979), p. 243.

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