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Fateful Memories: Industrialized War and Traumatic Neuroses

The traumatic neuroses generated by industrialized war and life repay study by showing how past events act as causes in human history. They show us how our wars mark minds, how an unforgettable past becomes determinative even though the past has no existence outside human imagination and memory. Shell-shock, battle fatigue, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Gulf War syndrome are historical illnesses in the sense that they are rooted in particular contexts, times and places: the trenches across northern France between December 1915 and March 1918, the exhausting journeys and devastation of mechanized warfare between 1 September 1939 and 15 August 1945, Vietnam (1968–73), Iraq in 1991. Though a product of a particular time and place, the neuroses of war transcend the context of their generation, continuing through some kind of inertia to frame the perceptions, judgments and behaviour of those who suffer from the past. Through the lens of war neuroses we may see how events become ideas that determine and define subsequent actions. The neuroses of war reveal how ideas of injury arise from fatal events and generate a causality — the faith and fear that what happened before is happening still and will happen again.

In human history, unlike the purely physical universe, events do not directly affect each other like billiard balls bumping into each other on a table. There are considerable delays between causes and effects. If you agree with A.J.P. Taylor’s observation that the first world war ‘explains the second and in fact, caused it, in so far as one event causes another’,¹ you must also wonder what happened in the 20 years between the effect and the cause, about the medium that extends historical causations across such impressive temporal distances. Events do not cause events in human history. No event has consequences beyond itself unless it is remembered, and this takes time. Not events themselves but ideas of events shape future actions, providing frames of interpretation, judgment and justification. It takes time and work for an event to be re-imagined, reshaped in the cauldron of history — the human imagination — into an idea that is explanatory and useful. History is thus a universe that does not obey the law of physics separating meaning (mind) from motion, that forbids us to believe what we know: in human history meanings cause physical injuries, conditions and states. The war neuroses show how minds change human bodies. This is why the neurotics of war so challenge the categories of

those who deal with them: military medical men with their physiological model of causation and cure, intellectuals with their self-promoting Cartesian assumptions, even scholars gathered to discuss shell-shock who, at the end of a conference, turn with obvious relief to memories of the numbers of honourably, physically, visibly wounded men, away from those whose wounds are invisible, mental, somehow shameful and of doubtful legitimacy.

There is something about war neuroses that fundamentally invalidates our usual categories of historical understanding and interpretation, requiring us to look for something else to explain them. Those damaged by minds traumatized by war were set aside in veterans’ hospitals, where they occupied a special place. Leon Standifer, a private and rifleman in the second world war, remembers visiting the veterans’ hospital in Gulfport, Mississippi, as a boy, with his church group in the 1930s.

We would stop to visit with the physically crippled men who navigated their wheelchairs along the sidewalks, but there were also clusters of shell-shocked men who simply gazed out at the water. Their bodies were sound but they had no minds. The most severely shocked men were kept in a large building with barred windows. Dr McCann said that when they became violent, they were calmed down with electric shock or alternating hot and cold baths. These mentally crippled veterans both frightened and shamed me.2

In this article, those made neurotic by modern industrial warfare are not set apart or treated as a medical phenomenon. They have been afflicted by war, our chronically human illness. The sufferings they experience tell us about contemporary strains of our disease, about the ways histories are violently made and unmade in a process of forgetting and remembering.

Events become ideas and places in the mind through a process of forgetting and remembering. The way in which the traumatic events of war are forgotten and remembered makes the difference between abnormal and normal reactions to the experience of war, distinguishing those made neurotic by their experience from the many who survive it intact. Many traumatized by twentieth-century wars speak of their problem as an inability to forget, as an uncomfortable consciousness of being possessed, ‘haunted’ by a past they cannot put behind them, and which continually intrudes into their present lives, waking and sleeping. ‘Josh’, an American veteran of the Vietnam War diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: ‘It’s been fourteen years. I’d like to get this off my mind. It pops up in my mind all the time.’3 ‘Jonah’, a Vietnam veteran diagnosed as dissociative: ‘It’s like I’m never free at all, but locked inside a time bubble filled with bits and pieces of misery. I can’t quite put it together, yet I can’t forget either.’4 This inability to forget disturbed

4 Ibid., 188.
veterans of the first world war. Charles Edmund Carrington described his postwar existence as one lived in a ‘mental internment camp’.

The 1916 fixation had caught me and stunted my mental growth, so that even ten years later I was retarded and adolescent. I could not escape from the comradeship of the trenches which had become a mental internment camp. . . . At last the long convalescence ended with the breaking of a barrier. The inhibition was released in the years 1929–1931 when society was brought to its senses by the shock of the great economic depression. . . . In this disillusioned nineteen-thirties the ex-soldiers at last could speak and out came tumbling the flood of wartime reminiscences in every country which had sent soldiers to the war.5

Traumatic memories differ from normal memories. The traumatic memory recurs involuntarily against the wishes of the rememberer, in contrast to our studied efforts to remember what we have forgotten or dreaming reverie. In the traumatic memory the past defines and determines the present actions and thinking of the rememberer, whereas in normal remembering the needs of the present determine what is called up associationally from the past.

Erik Erikson came to the conclusion that the cases of war neurosis he dealt with in the South Pacific during the second world war were rooted in a discontinuity caused by combat. In the war some had lost their identity — ‘the ability to experience oneself as something that has continuity and sameness’.6

Look at this with another eye and it appears that many psychic victims of military events suffer from continuity, not discontinuity. They cannot separate themselves, as others do, from those events negating the characteristic continuousness of a living being. Their problem is an inability to establish the discontinuity creative of a ‘past’, the place where westerners put their finished matters, so that they may be taken out and used when needed as cautions, examples, models. What erodes the ability to forget war? What removes the characteristically human capacity to set aside the most recent disaster and dwell upon a happier past? John Locke suggested that an invisible force like gravity may be perceived and measured through the changes it makes in the substance upon which it acts. We might gauge the power of industrial war in terms of the changes it makes in the minds of those who have endured it, in terms of how it distinguishes the abnormal from the normal, of how it erodes in some the ability to forget and repress a near-death experience, distinguishing them from those who survive intact, who ‘soon forget their haunted nights, their cowed submission to the ghosts of friends who died, their dreams that drip with murder; and they’ll be proud of glorious war, that shattered all their pride’.7

Forgetting is obviously essential to a proper remembering. ‘In remembering we are being determined by events out of their precise order in a chronological series, and we are free from over-determination by the immediately preceding

event." But it is precisely forgetting that liberates us from the immediately preceding event, allows us to escape from the lock-step of the chronological series, from the one-way, one-damned-thing-after-another-ness of time. The repression of the immediate past liberates us from over-determination by it and makes time a two-way street, as we go back and select from the past the causes of our current condition. The ability to not know or accept what is experienced and witnessed, to repress what has just happened, is the source of our historical freedom, something which defines us as humans and makes human history characteristically dialectical, crooked and unpredictable. In this sense those deprived of the ability to forget have become creatures less free and human, more determined, predictable and instinctual.

The injunction to forget the experiences of war is a peculiar and defining feature of our twentieth-century industrial wars fought by citizen-soldiers in their millions. The professional soldiers, members of military societies, nations, castes, brotherhoods and classes who fought pre-industrial wars never ceased being soldiers when a war was over, returning to societies which provided a special, often honourable niche for them. Traditionally, successful warriors were enjoined to sing and boast of their killings or paid others to do it for them. This is a source of the richness of traditional war literature coming from a time when men killed each other without shame or guilt, without need or passion, solely for glory, honour, fame and recognition. The reason why forgetting is asked of men fighting our modern wars lies in the fact that they are fought by men who must change their identities, from civilian to soldier and back again. First the recruit must set aside for the duration his civilian life as a place of peace, women and comfort, a time when killing people was forbidden and punished as criminal. He must acquire in a few weeks or months techniques of repressing fear and guilt which professional armies instil in recruits over years. ‘Those thus incompletely trained have had to face strains such as have never previously been known in the history of mankind. Small wonder that the failures of adaptation have been so numerous and severe.’ Forgetting was also essential in the context of war, if it was to be endured. ‘The successful soldier forgets unpleasant experiences very quickly; if he doesn’t . . . he finds his way to hospital as a psychiatrist’s case. Brave men experience fear . . . but they forget it, forget it again and again.’ With the conclusion of a war the citizen-soldier needs to forget one more time, has to set aside his soldierhood and expunge the sites of his immanent death and survival from his mind. Because industrial societies define war as an abnormal state of emergency and presume that war and peace are distinct and separate realms of existence, those who adapt to these contexts are presumed to have changed identities, and are required to forget, again and again, or they end up in a psychiatric ward.

8 F.C. Bartlett, Remembering. A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology (New York 1932), 204.
10 Vladimir ‘Popski’ Peniakoff, Private Army (London 1950), 341.
This sequence of forgettings required of citizen-soldiers equips the survivors of war with a double past — a pre-war past and a wartime past — linked but incommensurate. This double past is the framework of postwar perceptions, the source of the dominant mood and voice of irony, scepticism and non-belief, originally explored by Paul Fussell in his pathfinding study. With this double past all postwar judgments are made in the consciousness that what was once presumed true was made false and became an illusion, then that disillusioning reality of war itself became a superseded past, a discrete duration full of things no longer true or remembered.

Forgetting and remembering are the same process, different names for opposite sides of the sieve that sifts daily experience, separating it out into short-term (the forgotten) and long-term (remembered) memory. Experimental psychologists and ancient practitioners of the memory arts learned certain home-truths about the process of forgetting and remembering. There is an order to forgetting. Tactile impressions — smells, sounds, visual details — are forgotten first, images and words last. Repetition builds memory, non-repetition does not. What is not repeated is quickly forgotten. As evidence of this, Bartlett observed that the subjects of his memory experiments remembered only the details they repeated of the stories they heard. There is much evidence that memory is not a reproduction of experience in mental images but a product of construction through repetition of images, words, communication.

We may learn how forgetting occurs collectively from the way the experience of the war was consciously forgotten in 1919 and throughout the 1920s. The events which had consumed the interest of Europeans, the whole world, for four years suddenly ceased to be publicly discussed. The war was denied words and forgotten. Robert Graves and Alan Hodge note that books and newspaper articles about the war became unfashionable with demobilization.

The propaganda habit of suppressing disgraceful events persisted. . . . Conversations about the war died down even before the Peace Celebrations. Among regular soldiers it soon came to be regarded as bad form. . . . Civilians were only too glad to suppress all memory of the nightmare from which they had just awakened.

Pierre van Passen, too, went with the majority: 'I was going to forget the nightmare, burn my uniform as soon as I would be finally discharged, throw away my badges and tokens into Lake Ontario, and efface every trace of my shame and humiliation.'

The injunction to forget the war was particularly powerful in defeated Germany, mired in revolution and counter-revolution. Rosie Grafenberg could not help noticing the returned veterans she encountered when going to college in Munich in 1918.

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The young men with whom I attended the lectures were all, more or less crippled. . . . At Fritz Strich's lectures on the German Romantics there was a young man in front of me whose head moved ceaselessly to and fro, as if in perpetual contradiction. He had had shell-shock.

The war was a forbidden subject between veterans and non-veterans.

I never mentioned the war to them. It seemed to me that the boys had had quite enough of it, and wouldn't want to talk about it. As a matter of fact they would have liked to talk about it, but were not able to. The scheme of things in which the war had taken an honorable place was destroyed. The ideas for which those who came home had suffered agonies — Fatherland, Nation, National Honor — were out of date. 14

Bley and Lansky noticed, in their study of the nightmares of Vietnam veterans, that their subjects were relieved by telling their dreams and reliving their battles.

In some way the battlefield scenario embodied the patient's wish to be out of their current unmanageable interpersonal circumstances and on the battlefield, where their affective storms, paranoia, rage and poor sense of their worth among intimates made more sense than in their current families or relationship systems. 15

Like the USA in the last half of the 1970s, the Weimar Republic in the 1920s wanted to forget a lost war and could offer no gesture of consolation and gratitude to men returning defeated. Rosie Grafenberg thought that the post-war silence about the war contributed to the success of those veterans' groups like the national socialists who rejected the peace and continued to remember the war, making it the core of their collective, political identity. 'We believed we could cut off like a pigtail, that glorious and painful past in which so many millions of witnesses and victims had their only abiding place.' 16

After 1919, the experience of the war was condemned to short-term memory by being denied the words, images and repetition that build memories out of experiences. The silence of the war generation was not so much a product of the war and what it did to the men who fought it as a result of what people did with the war experience. Silence is an essentially social act, not in nature. It presumes a non-response from another, a failure of communication. The tacit non-communication about the war after it was over created the gap between combatants and non-combatants noticeable to everyone after the war. This barrier of silence between veterans and civilians remained Herbert Read's longest-lasting impression of the first world war, as he remembered it in the context of the second:

Between us was a dark screen of horror and violation: the knowledge of the reality of war.

16 Grafenberg, op. cit., 43.
Across that screen I could not communicate, nor could any of my friends who had the same experience. We could only stand on one side, like exiles in a strange country. Twenty-six years have passed and we have experienced another war. My feelings have not changed.17

In the 1920s the war was officially forgotten by not being talked about. The wartime past was replaced by the consequences of the war: revolution and counter-revolution. ‘The war had been driven from the surface of the consciousness in German society during the first ten years of the Republic, and the Versailles Treaty had taken its place.’18

The exceptions to this general, collective repression of the war experience — those like Ernst Juenger and Franz Schauwecker who wrote about their war experience in the 1920s — are interesting because they show what was happening under the cover of public silence about the war. The war Ernst Juenger portrays in Stahlgiewittern (1920) is anything but the day-to-day routines of Materialkrieg and trench warfare. In this ‘honourable remembering’ of his war experience he chooses to portray an offensive battle, preparations of the assault troops, a description of the attack, being wounded, recovering, being decorated with the Pour le mérite, Germany’s highest decoration. For signification, Juenger selected from his war experience the moment of offensive battle when war was what he expected it to be, an heroic adventure and spectacle. Similarly, Franz Schauwecker’s Im Todesrachen (1921) denies the punishing isolation he felt as an intellectual among proletarians in uniform at the front, and re-imagines the front as a community enduring, though abandoned and betrayed by Germany. The German war literature of the 1920s had little of the realism to be found in the literature of the 1930s. It was dreamwork which transformed a deligitimated reality of war into something legitimate and legitimating, an aesthetic experience of intoxication and risk, an experience of community persisting. Carol Bley and Melvin Lansky noted that the dreams of traumatized Vietnam veterans were very different from their descriptions of the events that most troubled them. Veterans who were wounded, paralysed, dismembered by their war, had nightmares which ‘represent the dreamers as intact, honorable persons, albeit in danger, whereas their experience of self on the day preceding the dream was one of disorganization, disconnectedness and shame’.19 When a traumatic and destructive reality is forgotten and repressed it is freed from time and reality, evolving with the surreal freedom of a dream, mixing with other times, places and events heard and imagined. In the dreamwork of the 1920s the war experience was censored, fictionalized and fragmented, its most disturbing elements represented by their opposites or by a visual image. Freud thought that the ‘transformation of thoughts into visual images’ was an essential feature of dreamwork. I want to find out how the war experience was visually re-

18 W.K. Pfeiler, War and the German Mind: The Testimony of Men of Fiction Who Fought at the Front (New York 1941), 16.
19 Lansky and Bley, op. cit., 19.
imagined in the 1920s, in film, photographs, posters and paintings — how a four-year-long secular apocalypse could be condensed into an icon, the image of a single, blasted, leafless tree.

A thorough study of how the first world war was remembered would necessarily go into all the means used to forget it, and what happened to this experience under conditions of repression, while forgotten. Bley and Lansky note that repression seems to liberate traumatic events from their discrete temporal place, and break down the distinctions we use to organize our impressions. Veterans’ nightmares were ‘infiltrated with material from childhood or adolescence or with current concerns. . . . In some instances battlefield scenes were present in the nightmares even though the patient had not been in combat.’ It would appear from the exceptions that the repression of the experience of war breaks down the containments of time and fact, making experience into fiction, what should have been. Forgetting is thus not a process of deletion but of disordering, confusing and combining the elements of experience. ‘Forgetting is not a matter of an automatic loss of items over time but rather of an increasing difficulty of discriminating the representations of to-be-remembered items from other representations concurrently maintained in the memory system.’

The dead, the ceremonial gathering, burial and memorialization of the dead, play a central role in the process of forgetting and remembering traumatic war experiences. Mass and ceremonial burial in the early 1920s rectifies the situation that troubled veterans of trench warfare, where the living and dead were familiars, inhabiting the same ground. Modern war industrializes death, replicating bodies on a new scale, producing the situation described by Ernst Juenger.

What good does it do to cover them with sand or lime, or to throw a tent-half over them, in order to escape their black bloated faces? There were too many. Everywhere, shovels struck something buried. All the secrets of the grave lay open in a grotesquerie worse than the most lunatic dream. Hair fell in clumps from skulls like rotting leaves from autumn trees. Some decayed into a green fish-flesh, which gleamed at night through the torn uniforms.

This habituation to the presence of the dead is something which Wilhelm Reich found notable enough to mention in his diary entry for a day on the lines in 1918: ‘We rested in an abandoned dugout. In front of the dugout were barbed-wire fences, hung with bodies. They made no impression.’ The fact that the dead made no impression still makes an impression.

It is clear that in the actual context of war there is nothing sacred about the dead, for they are not separated from the living, put out of sight, signified with crosses and monuments. This work was done in the early 1920s when the dead

20 Ibid., 20.
21 Lars-Gordon Nilsson, Perspectives on Memory Research (Hillsdale, NJ 1979), 51.
22 Ernst Juenger, Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis (Berlin 1922), 15.
were collected, fenced, planted in their own cities, indexed and massed into numbers and statistics. As Modris Ekstein notes, the earliest tours to the front in 1919 and 1920 were sold as opportunities to visit the site of destruction and chaos, while through the 1920s touristic pilgrimages to the front were organized to visit the graves of the fallen. The memory of the dead replaced the memory of the war, the human relations, that killed them.

The organized and buried war dead played a key role in defining the consciousness of the survivors of war as a ‘lost’ generation. When the dead are buried and ceremoniously set aside from the living, they can be used as a means of moral comparisons with the living, a source of obligations to remember, a way of substantiating the fictions for which they are said to have ‘given’ and ‘sacrificed’ their lives. The postwar idealization of the dead is the source of the myth of a ‘lost’ generation, the counter-Darwinian belief that those fallen in war were morally superior to the survivors, who were lessened by their war experience. An Italian veteran, Adolfo Omodeo, cites the motifs of this myth in his description of a visit to the vast tomb of Schraussima below San Michele in spring 1917. ‘Those white graves seemed like the froth left over from many storms. We were to be the epigones without the secret of their strength. And my spirit knelled to ask the dead for their secret, their comfort, a liberation from the incubus of eternal war.’24 Now the site of war becomes the site of remembrance, a past, within which the present is judged. ‘With the help of the dead I seem to have come to understand the true soul of our war above the chatter and disgusting rhetoric of the journalists, and the heroes of the armistice.’25 In the 1920s the war experience was fashioned into a myth of negative selection, a devout belief that the best had died and the worst survived. Burial is thus not the denial of death but its assertion, an elaborate effort by survivors to disconnect their ongoing mental relations with the dead, to make the dead really dead.

In the 1920s the war experience was forgotten. In the 1930s, beginning with Erich Maria Remarque’s Im Westen Nichts Neues (1929), it was remembered in an outpouring of reminiscences and memoirs. Why was the hastily forgotten war so suddenly remembered? Normal remembering, unlike the intrusiveness of involuntary and traumatic memories, begins with a need to remember what has been forgotten. What needs did the remembering of the war in the 1930s serve?

Charles Carrington (p. 87) implies that his rich remembering of the war was triggered by the depression that broke down the barriers of silence between former combatants and civilians who now, again, suffered a crisis together. Remarque’s remembering of his inglorious war — three weeks at the front, over a year in a hospital — was generated by the need to explain a debilitating depression that struck him down in autumn 1928, confining him to his room and preventing him from working as an assistant editor of a sports magazine.

I suffered chronic attacks of anxiety and confusion. In order to overcome this I tried consciously and systematically to discover the cause of my depression. In this retrospective analysis I came back to my war experience. I could observe something similar in many acquaintances and friends: we all were — and are often still — restless, purposeless, sometimes exalted sometimes indifferent, but always, in the deepest sense, sad. The shadow of the war still hung over us even when we didn’t think about it. The same day I had this thought I began to write.26

He wrote his novel in six weeks and diagnosed his problem. Note the sequence of Remarque’s remembering of the war. First a pathology was felt, then a need to explain it. The war experience came to mind. It became the cause of Remarque’s sadness, which he shared with his generation. His expressed sense of failure to become the writer he wanted to be could not be the result of any personal shortcoming, because it came from ‘a secular apocalypse which had robbed not only him but his entire generation of the possibility of self-realization’.

This is the pattern in history generally. In history, causes come after effects and are deduced from consequences. Something has already to exist before its causes are needed; it has to be perceived as a problem before an explanation of it is required and looked for. In the depressed 1930s the war so quickly forgotten was needed as a source of causes for the collapse, a source of explanations, justifications and alternatives to a deflated capitalist system. The debates in literature over the nature of the war — as an experience of terror or community — recreated the war as an organized past which justified attitudes of pacifism and militarism, appeasement and aggression, through which the war was renewed in 1939, becoming the ‘first’ world war. In the course of the second world war the image of the first continued to function as a source of ‘lessons’ about what must be avoided at all costs, also as a frame of reference which participants constantly used to gauge the uniqueness of their own experience, its difference.

There is a consensus among all who observed, suffered, diagnosed and treated the symptoms of shell-shock and battle fatigue, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Gulf-War syndrome that these are conditions of chronic and persisting fear generated by particular contexts of war. The shaping and specifying of participants’ fears of death and loss render the events of war contexts of mind containing memories that determine, cause and justify post-war funks and precautions.

This essential character of war neurosis as the outward and visible sign of an inner terror was clearly recognized and described by J.F.C. Fuller in his testimony before the British War Office Committee on Shell-Shock in 1921.

27 Mueller, Der Krieg und die Schriftsteller, 48.
I have noticed that the normal, healthy man arriving from England showed definite signs of physical fear when first coming under fire. This fear very shortly wore off and was replaced by a type of callousness which sometimes increased until a man took very little trouble to protect himself. I noticed in several cases that when this condition was well advanced a man became liable to break down mentally, or to show a nervousness which may be defined rather as mental terror than a physical fear. What I noticed was that first of all the man was healthily afraid of what was happening then he became callous and after that he sometimes became obsessed with fear.28

Note that war neurosis is the product of a sequence of adaptations and responses to immobilized industrial warfare. At first, the courageous recruit is properly afraid of the shells. Then habituation sets in, the fear is repressed and the veteran grows ‘fearless’ and ‘callous’. This is a military mask of masculinity designed to contain fear and to suppress emotions contravening endurance of war. In growing careless with his life and suppressing fear the recruit becomes ‘tough’, ‘rugged’, ‘hard-bitten’, ‘cold’ — the terms veterans used in praising each other. This repression of fear and demonstration of fearlessness translates healthy fear into terror, a fear of one’s fear, an emotional state of inner dread, the precursor of nervous breakdown. As Freud put it, ‘In the case of the war neurosis the thing feared is after all an inner foe.’29

Moralists, psychotherapists and medical officers unfriendly to psychoanalysis, military officers and soldiers themselves all agreed that war neurosis was an evolved structure of fear, though they used different terms — ‘courage’ and ‘cowardice’ — to describe it. To many, shell-shock was the loss of courage — which Plato defined as the knowledge of what is rightly to be feared (the destruction of one’s community). E. Macpather, a medical officer in France during the war, thought war neurosis was nothing but a new name for old-fashioned cowardice. ‘Frankly I am not prepared to draw a distinction between cowardice and “shell-shock”, cowardice I take to mean action under the influence of fear, and the ordinary kind of “shell-shock” to my mind was chronic and persisting fear.’30 Squadron Leader W. Tyrell thought that the victims themselves were not to blame for their loss of courage and that fatigue was a primary factor in reducing the energy available to repress fear, which a man must do to ‘save his self-respect and self-esteem at all costs’.31 Soldiers themselves talked about their fears in terms of courage and cowardice. Men who thought of themselves as and were considered courageous were particularly disturbed by the symptoms of shell-shock: trembling hands, startled reactions, hyper-awareness, insomnia, nightmares. Robert Desaubliaux was particularly concerned when he felt this new kind of fear spreading from within him when he returned to the line three days after suffering concussion from a shell: ‘But could I have lost my courage? Each shell gave me a chill and made

31 Ibid., 30.
me crouch down in a corner of the trench. Keep moving, coward! I was in a cold sweat, more nervous than I had ever been."32 André Léri shows how the moral terms of courage and cowardice were translated into quasi-medical terminology, 'emotional' versus 'commotional' disorders and 'moral shock'.

After a severe emotional shock, accompanied or not by physical commotion and wounds, the brave soldier becomes a coward. He is shorn of his warrior courage. When he hears the guns, he is afraid, trembles, and can neither hide nor conquer his confusion. He has been seized by a kind of emotive anaphylaxis; he can no longer victoriously resist the agony of the battlefield. He is a moral invalid, one wanting in courage.33

Psychoanalysts learned from their treatment of war neuroses that in certain situations, like modern warfare, fear replaces sex as the dominant human motive. The replacement of sexual desires by fear was much talked about and documented during the first world war. A soldier, John William Rowarth, describes his impotence and its source casually in a letter to a woman, complaining of his commanding officer who was going on leave and needed a souvenir.

I had . . . to go into no man's land and cut a bit of wire, so that our Major could show it to his old woman, and she would be so proud of his bravery, she would let him have a bit of grummet, that's what some Irishmen called the blow-through . . . I hoped he would be like me, and when she was on her back waiting for him to up her, he could not get a hard on.34

On the other side of the lines W. Lissman, a German medical officer, noted many cases of traumatic impotence among men coming back into the Etappe.

In the field not a few officers and men of previously sound nerves complained at the beginning of their leave an erection was either completely lacking or very often extremely defective. Indeed this phenomenon receded considerably by the second week . . . I have had occasion to see among stricken soldiers all phases of impotence from a weak erection to incapacity for erection, consequently a certain insecurity in regard to potency. These observations in the field received confirmation by a police-doctor in the small town behind our section of the front. I requested him, during the inspection of prostitutes, to ask about the potency of their patrons. The answers indicate that the men coming for a short time into the Etappe directly from the front did not show the expected sexual energy, but much more often lacked or had insufficient erections.35

Lissman did not know whether this effect was due to long abstinence, the time-limit with prostitutes, or 'psychic impotence' due to the war. F. Pick, who observed the curtailment of sexual functions in combatants, thought it was a consequence of 'nervousness and repressed fear of death'.

33 A. Léri, Shell-Shock, Commotional and Emotional Aspects (London 1919), 118.
34 Joanna Bourke, Dismembering the Male (London 1996), 146-7.
35 Magnus Hirschfeld and Andrea Gaspar, Sittengeschichte des Ersten Weltkriegs, 2 vols (Hanau am Main 1929), i, 168.
It is not clear, in these terms, whether fear replaces sexuality or whether these emotions simply cease to be distinguishable in the climate of trench warfare. This war produced many examples of orgasmic reactions to fear, given by Lissman, Block, Pick, Fehlinger and Southard. One of Lissman’s patients, a thirty-year-old man, otherwise neurologically sound, ejaculated, without an erection or excitement, during strong artillery fire.

During continued firing he would get two or three ejaculations, without showing any particular signs of . . . exhaustion. We had also come across another man of 25 who during the bombardment of a town, had taken refuge in a cellar, and, while cowering there in terror, had repeated ejaculations without erection.36

Southard reported the case of a soldier with a hysterical tic: ‘It is of note that this man’s dreams begin with a terrible incident in the trenches and then shift to sex acts. He wakes to find his clothes disturbed.’37 Perhaps these orgasms are not sexual so much as the terminal ejaculations seen in men who are dying, or think they are dying. Associations considered perverse in peacetime are commonly made in wartime between orgasm and death, pleasure and the instruments of wounding and killing. Southard describes the case of a young French artillery officer, normal and intelligent, who began to experience intense anxiety at the front which was gradually transformed into a vision of a turning object, a wheel or cam.

Gradually the fear was transformed into a genital excitation, though lascivious pleasures did not excite him. Seeing anything turning gave him a voluptuous feeling in proportion to the speed of the rotation. It seems that all sexual interest had been at a standstill for several months in the early part of the disease, when suddenly this new aberration appeared. It seems that . . . the man’s work in the artillery caused him to use screws and cogwheels every day. Attacks of vertigo occurred, with the appearance of an infinity of small, colorless spheres turning over one another, the whole forming a sort of animated system of rotation.38

Clearly these are examples of the way in which the terrors of war detach male sexuality from reproduction and channel it to other men, friends, enemies, the machinery of war.

According to Freud, pleasure and pain are the same phenomenon. Pleasure is simply the diminution of pain. This wartime wedding of sexual energy and fear appears in the theories of Wilhelm Reich, in which one may see how the constraining realities of the static, defensive trench warfare he experienced on the Asiago plateau in 1917 and 1918 continued in his definition of character as defence.

‘Sexuality’ could be nothing else than the biological function of expansion (‘out of the self’) from the center to the periphery. Conversely, anxiety could be nothing but the reverse direc-

36 Ibid., 187.
37 E.E. Southard, Shell-shock and Other Neuro-psychiatric Problems Presented in Five Hundred and Eighty-nine Case Histories (Boston 1919), 472.
38 Ibid., 259.
tion from periphery to center (‘back into the self’). Sexuality and anxiety are one and the same process of excitation, only in opposite directions. 39

Though all agree that war neuroses are about fear, about the ways traumatic experiences reform and for ever specify individual fears of death and loss, the terms of this agreement do not allow historical questions, permitting only opinions and positions, generating terminologies rather than knowledge. Was the first world war more terrifying than any previous war? Is modern war more mentally destructive than pre-modern war? Or are the number of mental breakdowns in modern wars due to the fact that citizen-soldiers fight them? It is difficult to answer these questions with the traditional terms for fear. Cowardice and courage, shell-shock, battle fatigue, anxiety, depression, terror, trauma, neurasthenia, identity-crisis are all terms presuming that fear is purely an inner state, invisible and hidden. The mind of another remains, as the Russians say, a dark forest. All maps of the mind — passionistic, moralistic, psychoanalytic, neurological, astrological — serve equally badly in this darkness of metamorphosing emotions and thoughts. As long as we treat fear as a purely inner matter we cannot know it except in ourselves, nor can we see why industrial warfare was so much more fearful than pre-industrial warfare.

One way out of these difficulties is to look at the causes of fear, the outward and visible source of the invisible effects we all feel and name with different words needing definitions. Few emotions are more obviously determined and cross-cultural than fear. People are made to fear, whether they want to or not, whether they come from the Bronx or Borneo, by the same phenomenon: a figure, roaring, springing suddenly from the darkness, swiftly enlarging, engulfing.

The causes of fear are finite, visible, audible and described in the history of wars, travels and human relations. Ethologists, who study the behaviour of non-human animals, distinguish two broad classes of threat postures among vertebrates: lateral (broad-side) and frontal display. These display strategies evolve the outlines of many different species. Side-displayers develop structures which give a massive appearance when viewed from the side: the dewlaps and humps of bison and cattle, the manes of horses and the crests of lizards. All primate species are frontal displayers concentrating visual intimidation structures around the head, neck and shoulders. Big hair, expansive ears, beards and moustaches, ruffs, sideburns, the jutting chins of hominoids and Hapsburgs, large noses, staring eyes with exposed sclera, enlarged penises and patches of pubic hair, dark skin or hair, swollen necks, greater height, hairy arms and flat chests, strong odours and scents are all means and methods which humans and other primates used to threaten, frighten and communicate with each other. It is strange, but apparently true, that human and other animal forms evolve in order to terrify each other more effectively.

Enlargement is obviously a primary topos of threat and violence that communicates across the boundaries of language and species. Officially, in the

39 Wilhelm Reich, Selected Writings (New York 1961), 185.
natural order, bigger eats smaller. It is in the interest of all animals to be large, but more efficient only to appear to be so. Largeness is the goal in many of the threat display organs noted above, and is clearly an objective in human armour, the construction of impressive fighting machines, the multiplication of identical units. ‘In a study of comparative threat devices one of the most commonly recurring themes is size increase, apparent or real, in the form of localized . . . structures used in displays, or simply a presentation of the entire body mass.’\(^{40}\) The effect of a frightening enlargement can be achieved by even a small animal rushing directly towards one or by opening one’s umbrella in the face of an attacking dog. In our own era, even more frightening effects of enlargement have been achieved by mechanical and chemical means, by diving Stukas, barrages of artillery shells, atomic and hydrogen bombs. Remarkably often, experiences of being blown up in explosive enlargements is cited as the most frightening experience by veterans of our twentieth-century wars. It remained the last image Ford Madox Ford retained of his war experience.

I have just one war picture in my mind. It is a hurrying black cloud, like the dark cloud of the Hun shrapnel. It sweeps down . . . over Mametz Wood . . . over the parade ground in the sunlight, with the band, and the goat shining like silver . . . a darkness out of which shine . . . white faces of the little, dark, raven-voiced Evaneses, and Lewises, and Joneses and Thomases . . . our dead!\(^{41}\)

A discussion of the techniques which humans and other animals have developed to inspire fear, a review of how these techniques were changed and augmented by industrialization, a compilation of the most frightening circumstances longest remembered by survivors of contemporary wars would be necessary in order to write a history of war neurosis through its outward and apparent causes. To turn from shell-shock as a display of human suffering and fear before which one can feel only pity is justifiable if we look into the causes of this suffering and examine the terrors humans have made for themselves throughout history.

Within a historical framework shell-shock tells us a great deal about how traumatic events are continued and translated into a persona, a state of mind. The effects of war visible in those mentally shattered by it are composed into an image popularly accepted: ‘shock’. Shock now functions as an image of the cause of this evident human suffering, a cause demonstrated in the shivering, shuddering, fainting, halting, ‘mincing gait’ seen in shell-shock victims. Through the display of the symptoms of shock the condition was contagious. A Bavarian police report attributed the unruly demonstrations of war widows and orphans in Munich in July 1918 to the presence of shell-shock victims, called ‘shiverers’. ‘The scene this morning could have been avoided had not a group of disabled veterans, including two so-called “shiverers”, repeatedly


simulated nervous attacks, and thereby excited the women."42 Shell-shock was a popularly sanctioned metaphor which crystallized the causes of mental breakdown in war, choreographed the symptoms and suggested the cure: electrical apparati, ferradic pencils and galvanic devices. In this metaphor an element is taken from a domain both mysterious and familiar in 1914 — electricity — and applied to the effects of a mysteriously immobilized war as a cause, script and cure of unexplained conditions incapacitating a soldier for combat. Here an image of an action — shock — is the primary means by which a condition of chronic terror caused by combat was defined. The image of injury acquired substance in effective rituals of diagnosis and cure. It defined the category within which particular veterans lived for the remainder of their lives.

In this article I have argued that causation in history proceeds through mechanisms of the mind and imagination. An event has consequences beyond itself insofar as it becomes an image which then provides the form and frame of subsequent action. It is by this means that tragic human causalities are created and new wars are caused, justified and explained by the last war. Thinking and feeling within an image of a vanished past is a good definition of absurdity, dissociation, historical determinism as we find it. Shell-shock tells us about the absurdity of our age, about how a chronic historical illness peculiar to a free species becomes acute in our unfortunately fated century with its fatal repetitions of wars that have produced so many memories we do not want to remember but cannot forget.

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