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Tradition v. Modernism in Mourning the Great War

The cataclysm of the Great War traumatized populations around the globe from 1914 to 1918. Grievous suffering plagued nations as the death toll passed twenty million and the total casualties exceeded forty-one million. The sheer number of dead bodies overwhelmed society. As a result, families sought various avenues of relief to mourn their loved ones. In *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, Jay Winter explored the Great War through a lens focused on the bereavement of lamenting families and so carved out a new area of historical discussion within the already well-documented cultural history of the Great War. Winter explored the then-unstudied cultural history of the “universality of bereavement in Europe of the Great War” that was caused by the scale of the losses which touched virtually every European family. He challenged the idea that the war represented a cultural break from the past as the literary historian Paul Fussell introduced in his groundbreaking 1975 study of Great War literature.¹ Winter posited that the “enduring appeal of many traditional motifs” meant that World War I looked backwards more than forwards.² In contrast to the earlier arguments advanced by Fussell and Princeton professor of literature, Samuel Hynes, the war did not create or hasten the arrival of a new modernist culture but instead largely represented a continuity that harkened back to traditional cultural codes.³ While Winter was not the first to address cultural memories of the Great War, he was a pioneer in exploring the comparative societal response to bereavement and finding a fundamentally traditionalist framework. Later historians have accepted much of his

¹ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 8.

² Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 5.

³ Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (New York: Atheneum, 1991), 1. Hynes advanced the idea that the Great War was a “gap in history” leading to modernism.

work but have critiqued his argument principally on two accounts. While they extolled the humanity and erudition Winter employed, they found methodological flaws in Winter's insistence on making his work comparative across European nations as this comparison hid important differences. Moreover, commentators found that he failed to define correctly "traditionalism" and "modernism," which led to confusion in his main argument.

Section I: Winter's Contribution

In a break with established understanding of the cultural impact of the Great War, Winter argued that English, French and German families who lost loved ones found solace through traditional and not modernist practices of mourning. Winter disagreed with conventional thinking that modernist literature and other cultural expressions in the 1920s adequately addressed the need for support and relief of grieving families. Modern writers such as TS Eliot, Ezra Pound, and James Joyce broke with past literary tradition by seeking new forms of literary expression. While important in certain circles, Winter rejected the idea that they achieved widespread influence among veterans, their families or the society at large in helping to cope with the aftermath of the war. Instead, Winter claimed that these families turned to traditional aesthetic expression as a way to preserve the memory of their dead fathers, husbands and sons. They sought comfort in the imagery of the past. These cultural expressions in film and poetry took, at times, the form of patriotic convictions and wartime propaganda and embraced 'traditional values' and romantic or historical themes. In addition, affected families turned to spiritualism and religious practice in a reinvigorated return to the sacred. Outpourings of war memorials and public commemoration reflected largely traditional themes and became a final avenue for society to express its loss. This harkening to tradition was not limited to popular expressions, but was

also important in elite opinion as the losses were so “universal” that distinctions between high and low culture were “much more difficult to uphold.”⁴

Families who lost loved ones wanted the bodies back. The “sheer chaos of the devastated areas” meant that many soldiers were hastily buried.⁵ That “half of the men killed had no known grave” made the process of verifying deaths difficult.⁶ Winter argued that the family's desire to bury their own was an inherently traditional practice as many in France, for example, wanted “to return them to the parish church.”⁷ Even the classical tradition sees the body as central to funerary rites, such as Priam’s pleas to Achilles to let the Trojans properly bury Hektor in the *Iliad*. While some French leaders argued against disinterring bodies as they did not want to “separate those whom death has united,” much greater numbers wanted to bring loved ones home.⁸ In response, the French government in 1920 established the right of families to bring the bodies of their loved ones home at state expense.⁹ By 1922, French officials transported around 300,000 bodies back from the frontlines at family request, which represented around forty percent of identified French dead.¹⁰

The chaos and scale of the war also caused havoc on families who were not able to obtain adequate information on their loved ones’ death from the government. Into this vacuum stepped numerous groups from the “voluntary tradition.”¹¹ These groups supported a wide range of support services to families of veterans. Some of these organizations expanded the bonds of kinship to strangers in a new formulation Winter called “adoptive kinship.”¹² For example,

⁴ Winter, *Sites of Memory*, 227.

⁵ *Ibid*, 22.

⁶ *Ibid*, 31.

⁷ *Ibid*, 26.

⁸ *Ibid*, 24.

⁹ *Ibid*, 26.

¹⁰ *Ibid*.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 30.

¹² *Ibid*, 36.

families of Australian soldiers killed in the Gallipoli campaign often received limited information long after the fact. The news of a death was communicated by a brief official communiqué from the state and typically a standard note from an officer in the dead man's unit. These messages were "not always true and always incomplete."¹³ To fill this void, consolation groups such as the Australian Red Cross Information Bureaux worked with soldiers within a dead man's unit to supplement the story around a soldier's death.¹⁴ Winter stated that families turning to such consolation groups represented a return to the older tendency of ordinary people "to face together ... the loss in war."¹⁵ Soldiers and families placed increased trust in individuals whom they had never met or from whom they would have never asked for help before. For widows, ex-soldiers in the husband's unit coalesced to support their comrade's wife and children.¹⁶ In an example of 'fictive adoption,' Mr. and Mrs. Semple cared with "unremitting kindness" for their nineteen-year old parentless neighbor, Charles Berg, for seventeen years after he sustained a shrapnel injury to his spine.¹⁷ These forms of consolation and adoptive kinship reflected a culture that leaned upon and expanded earlier forms of support and bereavement.

The colossal loss of the Great War also sparked increased interest in pre-war spiritualism. Spiritualism featured séances and other mystic practices to connect and speak with the dead. Spiritualism was well-established in the Victorian age.¹⁸ Winter regarded Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*, set in the Victorian era, as a "masterly literary account of pre-war spiritualism and its attraction for the European Bourgeoisie."¹⁹ The pre-war prominence of spiritualism was so great that it led to its denunciation by the Holy See in 1898.²⁰ The Great War increased the popularity

¹³ Ibid, 35.

¹⁴ Ibid, 36.

¹⁵ Ibid, 53.

¹⁶ Ibid, 49.

¹⁷ Ibid, 45.

¹⁸ Ibid, 76.

¹⁹ Ibid, 57.

²⁰ Ibid, 55.

of spiritualism. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the famous writer of the hyper-rational Sherlock Holmes, ironically turned to spiritualism to cope with the deaths of his brother, Innes, who died in the last months of the war and his son, Kingsly, who died of pneumonia after being wounded at the Somme.²¹ In a séance, Doyle recalled that his brother Innes appeared and said that he “regretted not the fact of his death, but rather that he had died before seeing the Allied victory at the end of the war,” which further suggested the blending of traditional visions of patriotism with the supernatural.²² Spiritualism also overlapped with conventional religious modes for the soldiers fighting on the front lines.²³ As established religion could not cope with the scale of the slaughter, European families sought private solace in an already-established spiritualism to cope with bereavement and mourning.

Public expressions of loss also played a role in bereavement. Several historians have analyzed the meaning of these public monuments before Winter’s work, such as Oxford historian Adrian Gregory,²⁴ as well as after his work, including the Australian historian Ken Inglis²⁵ and the Stanford literature professor, Laura Wittman.²⁶ Winter argued that one aspect of a war memorial’s importance lies in its ability to harken back to the past and as a site of ritual for mourning practice. In most respects, the memorials across the three countries remembered the dead and were designed to console and not valorize heroic victories or political ideas.²⁷ In 1920, the British government unveiled Sir Edwin Lutyens’ Cenotaph in Whitehall as Britain’s national war memorial to the dead of the Great War. The Cenotaph was an empty tomb and grieving

²¹ Ibid, 58.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid, 65.

²⁴ Adrian Gregory, *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day, 1919-1946* (Oxford: Berg, 1994).

²⁵ Ken S. Inglis, *Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1998).

²⁶ Laura Wittman, *The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Modern Mourning, and the Reinvention of the Mystical Body* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011).

²⁷ Winter, *Sites of Memory*, 78.

families could think of it as the tomb for their own dead. Winter noted the Cenotaph was “unabashedly ancient, recalling Greek forms” that stressed the importance Lutyens placed on earlier nonsectarian traditions.²⁸ Moreover, the Cenotaph was “geometric and mathematical” to represent the timeless and eternal part of ancient architecture.²⁹ The Cenotaph was originally a temporary exhibition but its popularity convinced the government to make it permanent.³⁰

Rituals and processions surrounding these monuments were instrumental for coping families. For example, in Germany, a “24-part ceremony...was outlined for school and other civic use” to accompany the small-scale “iron nail” memorials.³¹ These ceremonies featured hymns and poems where the “[g]lorification of sacrifice was expressed in a deliberately archaic language, the cadences of knights and valour.”³² Winter stated that these German war rituals glorified the dead through ancient language as a further example that the Great War did not break with tradition. These and other rituals represented the “public recognition, and mediation through ritual, of bereavement; and the appeal to the living to remember the dead.”³³ The war memorials allowed grieving individuals to find solace by looking into the past.

Winter himself noted that prior commentators, such as Fussell, argued that modernism, especially in graphic art and literature, essentially arose out of devastation of the First World War.³⁴ Many others saw the “modern memory” arising out of an elite avant-garde as a fundamental break from earlier and popular expressions of culture.³⁵ But when Winter explored art, both popular and elite, he reached the opposite conclusion. He argued that, while there was a range of artistic expressions and some undeniably modern, a large and influential body of work

²⁸ Ibid, 104.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid, 84.

³² Ibid, 85.

³³ Ibid, 97.

³⁴ Ibid, 4.

³⁵ Ibid, 5.

sought inspiration in the traditional. He cited popular posters, such as the French *images d'Epinal*, that overwhelmingly highlighted religious, romantic or patriotic themes.³⁶ During the war, these posters often set the war within a “wider historical sweep” that spoke to a common past.³⁷ Even the avant-garde participated in this backward-looking art as celebrated modernist artists, such as Pablo Picasso and Roaul Dufy drew *images d'Epinal* during the war.³⁸ The newly emerging cinema industry, as well, looked to traditional iconography, such as Christian themes. The French movie, *J'accuse*, which presented the mystical return of dead soldiers to accuse the villagers of betraying the fallen, ended with Christ on the cross.³⁹ The 1919 blockbuster silent movie, *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, dramatized the overtly Christian story of the end of times.⁴⁰ Winter marshaled the *Blaue Reiter* by Wassily Kandisky, Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, the sculptures of Kathe Kollwitz, the writing of Henri Barbusse and the poetry of Rudyard Kipling and Guillaume Apollinaire to show the “apocalyptic imagination” and the romantic mysticism inherent in their art.⁴¹ These cultural expressions sought inspiration in the past as a way to understand the losses of the war. Key to Winter's argument was that this art reflected both a high culture and a popular culture. Earlier commentators, such as Fussell, focused solely on elite art and prompted them to read modernism into the war. To Winter, the war upended a “pure distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low.’”⁴² Winter carefully noted that his interpretation was limited to art as a means of mourning the war. But in that regard, he argued that “far from ushering modernism” the war “reinforced romantic tendencies in poetic expression” and displayed a “complex process of re-sacralization.”⁴³ That argument was quite novel.

³⁶ Ibid, 123.

³⁷ Ibid, 129.

³⁸ Ibid, 131.

³⁹ Ibid, 136-7.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 139-40.

⁴¹ Ibid, 178.

⁴² Ibid, 227.

⁴³ Ibid, 221.

Section II: Winter's Argument within the Historiography

Winter viewed his work as starting a new conversation on bereavement in World War I. Winter wrote that “the many sites of memory and sites of mourning...have never been analyzed in a comparative framework.”⁴⁴ Within cultural history, he contrasted his work with historians, such as French historian Pierre Nora, who wrote a treatise on French cultural memory,⁴⁵ by stating Winter’s work was “international and comparative.”⁴⁶ Winter attempted to analyze all cultural expressions and not just the “canon of high culture.”⁴⁷ For Winter, the argument of Fussell, Hynes and others failed to account for the numerous traditional motifs in the expressions of mourning. Yet, he admitted that there is a danger of “eclecticism” or an unsystematic review of cultural comparisons with this form of history.⁴⁸ He saw his work as complimenting the work of historians on the meaning of the war by adding to the body of knowledge on “the universal problem of grief and its social expression.”⁴⁹ Winter acknowledged that his findings were “tentative” and so he anticipated that his work would start a dialogue.⁵⁰ By and large, critics agreed with Winter’s assessment of his work and appreciated the sensitivity and humanity he employed throughout his analysis. Nonetheless, historians noted that it was a long standing argument whether the war reflected a break with the past and Winter did not have the last word on the subject. While commentators agreed that Winter provided an important counterpoint to the standard narrative, they found two main sources of criticism with his work: methodological over-reach and definitional ambiguity.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 1.

⁴⁵ Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux De Mémoire," *Representations*, no. 26 (1989), <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928520>.

⁴⁶ Winter, *Sites of Memory*, 10.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 224.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

The first principal criticism of Winter's work addressed his method of a comparative approach. Winter covered Britain, France, and Germany and also noted Australian contributions on certain important topics. However, critics argued that Winter rushed across national boundaries and used individual examples to suggest what is true in other countries.⁵¹ Winter's forte was British history and critics viewed Winter as generalizing connections between Britain and other European countries that lacked grounding and consensus. Professor David Fitzpatrick of Trinity College Dublin wrote that "Winter seems to beg readers to judge him mercifully as a pioneer rather than a technician."⁵² Fitzpatrick argued that even Winter agreed that his reasoning is eclectic and not conclusive. Another review found his work "necessarily anecdotal" and his examples too narrow.⁵³ Winter's section on poetry, for example, only focused on works that contained examples of the dead returning, and not all poetry.⁵⁴ A further set of critics pointed out that Winter's strongest arguments related to Britain, Canada, and Australia, but not Germany or France.⁵⁵ Winter's attempt to universalize neglected to address important differences between cultures. Professor Modris Eksteins of the University of Toronto stated that Winter's point of making his work applicable to both the "losers and winners... neglects important differences and distinctions and, in the process, weakens some of his own argument."⁵⁶ Scholars viewed Winter's discussion on Britain as compelling yet hesitated at the parallels he drew to other nations.

Winter's book was "history in the making: inconclusive, uneven, but consistently exhilarating."⁵⁷

In a sense, scholars took up Winter's own plea that he was breaking new ground and so he

⁵¹ David Fitzpatrick, Review of *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* by Jay Winter, *Reviews In History*, (2022): 1, <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/25>.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Bullit Lowry, Review of *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* by Jay Winter, *The Journal of Military History* 61, no. 1 (1997): 180, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2953944>.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Modris Eksteins, Review of *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* by Jay Winter, *German Politics & Society* 14, no. 4 (1996): 102, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23726430>.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Fitzpatrick, *Reviews in History*, 1.

should not be judged as a technician.⁵⁸ Under this view, future works could correct any over-reach on the comparative analysis. Nonetheless, critics noted that the lack of support undercut the power of his argument.⁵⁹

The second critique of Winter's history concerned his sweeping definition of "traditionalist." Instead of a narrow and defensible definition, Winter provided one that was too general and intruded into the realm of "modernist." Indeed, scholars argued that Winter was confused about the actual differences between modern and traditional. Professor Peter Jelavich of the University of Texas at Austin provided a case in point. Winter stated that the Trench of the Bayonets was marked by an "austere avoidance of... ornamentation."⁶⁰ Winter argued that the monument is traditionalist in nature but Jelavich countered that "most scholars would consider these the hallmarks of modernism."⁶¹ Indeed, Jelavich pointed out that Winter's description of these neolithic tombs as "traditional" forgets that the "modernists' typical ploys was to make an end run around Western civilization to archaic and even prehistoric era."⁶² American historian Robert Wohl stated that Winter engaged in "oversimplification" and did not so much as refute Fussell's modernist argument as added another dimension in the focus on bereavement.⁶³ Jelavich further viewed Winter's distinctions between "traditionalism" and "modernism" as murky and confused. Drawing a second example, Winter wrote that popular culture looked to folk art traditions in both the low and high settings as an example of tradition. Jelavich disagreed and argued that Winter did not understand subtle distinctions in the use of folk art. While the rural lower classes employed folk art in a traditional manner, that was not the case for the elites

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Winter, *Sites of Memory*, 101.

⁶¹ Peter Jelavich, Review of *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* by Jay Winter, *Central European History* 30, no. 1 (1997): 129, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4546686>.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Robert Wohl, Review of *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* by Jay Winter, *The Journal of Modern History* 70, no. 2 (1998): 446, <https://doi.org/10.1086/235079>.

who sponsored modernist art that was influenced by folk art.⁶⁴ Modernists, Jelavich argued, “regularly turned to folk art precisely in order to explode the ‘traditions’ of bourgeois culture.”⁶⁵ Winter also misread artistic criticism when he “surprisingly” identified Kollwitz’s and Lutyens’ art as “timeless” as that descriptor did not allow for different generations to find different meanings in the same works of art.⁶⁶ Even Winter’s reliance on apocalyptic themes as evidence of traditional modes of thought did not persuade later critics. Jelavich argued that the Book of Revelations barely made it into the canonical Bible and the apocalypse has never been central to Protestant or Catholic teaching.⁶⁷ Because this imagery was not traditional, modernists were attracted to it. As such, Winter’s argument that many of the films and literature after the war were traditional due to apocalyptic images was, at best, confused.⁶⁸ The narrow definition of modernity prevented Winter from seeing significant scholarship on the pre-war and post-war folk art, spiritualism and apocalyptic connections with modernism. Modernism, in other words, did not reject everything that came before, but rejected the conventions of 1800s Europe, “such as the idealized realism of academic painting.”⁶⁹ This definitional criticism shared an aspect from the comparative methodology criticism: Winter was guilty of over-reach and his ideas were not supported fully by the evidence. Commentators found fault that Winter did not attempt to address contrary evidence, such as many contemporaries who saw the war as a tremendous disjuncture. One critic referenced Wyndam Lewis, the early 1900s British painter and writer, who said the war was “the turning-point in the history of the earth.”⁷⁰ To which Winter might have responded that history is not written solely by those who experience it. Nevertheless, scholars identified

⁶⁴ Jelavich, *Central European History*, 129.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Sarah Farmer, Review of *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* by Jay Winter, *Journal of Social History* 32, no. 2 (1998): 449, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3789687>.

⁶⁷ Jelavich, *Central European History*, 130.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 129.

⁷⁰ Eksteins, *German Politics & Society*, 100.

Winter within a tradition of cultural history and his innovative contribution to that history with his focus on bereavement even if they felt underwhelmed by the methodological and definitional rigor that Winter brought to the work.

Later historians expanded on Winter's novel study of mourning and its universal impacts. However, these historians typically focused on national responses to the war, such as British historian David Lloyd's study on British and Dominion post-war battlefield tourism,⁷¹ mourning practices in Australia,⁷² or even local responses, such as the University of Kent's Mark Connolly's study on commemoration in East London.⁷³ Few historians have taken a comparative approach with the exception of British historian Stefan Goebel's treatise about the medieval influences on British and German war remembrance practices.⁷⁴ Winter himself had earlier garnered a reputation in non-comparative British cultural history with his well-regarded volume, *The Great War and the British People*. As a result, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* represented Winter's push towards a comparative field of study. Critics uniformly lauded this attempt while noting the unevenness of his comparative methodology and problems with defining the traditional and modernist split. The book underlined two key tensions: one express and one teleological. Winter's treatise attempted to answer a long-debated question: Did World War I reflect a cultural break or continuity? For Winter with his focus on bereavement, the Great War reflected a largely steady transition of cultural expression from the past. This thesis broke with earlier thought that saw the 1920s as a more complete disruption with the past. The second tension involved the role of the historian and the search for knowledge. Winter's attempt at a

⁷¹ David William Lloyd, *Battlefield Tourism: Pilgrimage and the Commemoration of the Great War in Britain, Australia and Canada, 1919-1939* (London: Berg Publishers, 1998).

⁷² Joy Damousi, *The Labour of Loss: Mourning, Memory, and Wartime Bereavement in Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁷³ Mark Connolly, *The Great War, Memory and Ritual: Commemoration in the City and East London 1916-1939* (London: Royal Historical Society, 2001).

⁷⁴ Stefan Goebel, *The Great War and Medieval Memory: War, Remembrance and Medievalism in Britain and Germany, 1914-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

comparative analysis and cross-cultural argument ran into trouble with other historians as too general and lacking grounding in sufficient evidence. Should historians attempt ambitious cross-cultural studies or pioneer a new area if they knew that commentators will quibble with such a work's lack of comprehensiveness and definitiveness? Winter clearly thought that the risk was worth taking. The lack of more definitive studies in the twenty five years since publication suggested that Winter has made an enduring contribution to understanding the Great War.⁷⁵

Winter ended his work with a suggestion that World War II reflected a more complete “caesura in European cultural life.”⁷⁶ The aftermath of a second cataclysm, with the even darker undertones of the Holocaust and nuclear weapons, saw the emergence of artists and writers, such as Jackson Pollock, who turned to the “abstract, and thereby both more liberated from specific cultural and political reference and less accessible to a mass audience.”⁷⁷ These artists used only faint echoes of apocalyptic images, classical images, and the sacred that characterized the response to the Great War. At the same time, the manner in which nations commemorate the dead has endured. In designing the Vietnam Memorial, Maya Lin drew inspiration from Edward Luytens' Monument to the Missing at Verdun by inscribing the names of every serviceman killed in the war. The reflective nature of the Vietnam Memorial's granite panels allows each mourner to see themselves when touching the names and so creating a personal relationship with the dead similar to traditional rites — just as Luytens imagined and Winter suggested would resonate with grieving families.

⁷⁵ Stéphane Tison, "Commemoration, Cult of the Fallen," in *International Encyclopedia of the First World War* (2019), 2, https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/commemoration_cult_of_the_fallen.

⁷⁶ Winter, *Sites of Memory*, 228. Not every historian has accepted this suggestion. See Kim Munholland, Review of *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* by Jay Winter, *American Historical Review* 102, no. 5 (1997): 1471, <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/102.5.1470>.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

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