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978-0-521-06687-7 - Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature

Santanu Das

Excerpt

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Introduction

‘touch is the spirit and rule of all’¹

Ten blindfolded soldiers move haltingly in a single file across the twenty-foot-long canvas in John Singer Sargent’s *Gassed* (1918–19), each touching the man in front (Figure 1.1).² What each soldier perceives is what the hand feels – rucksack, rifle or the rough uniform-clad body in front. The hand not only grasps or clutches; it enables the soldiers to think and plan the next step forward, gathering a cluster of disabled men into a neat line. The sense of touch defines space and guides the rhythm of their movement, as if new eyes have opened at the tip of the fingers. Sound is implicitly there, in the form of noises of the football match played in the distant background or the flock of aeroplanes whirring above the parallel file of soldiers towards the top right-hand corner of the painting. But rushes of sound are subsumed into the tactile continuum joining the figures in the file as well as those heaped on the ground. Painting, like surgery, requires a rare co-ordination of the eye and the hand. Every fresh brushstroke is a guiding and manoeuvring of touch on the canvas just as each little movement of the blindfolded soldiers in the painting is sensed through the hand. The interruption of the chain by the fourth soldier from the end as he temporarily falls out of line draws attention to the centrality as well as the nakedness of the hand. The gesture is raw: the human subject is cast as a set of anxious, vulnerable limbs, groping in a dark world.

In contrast to the leg of the player about to kick the ball in the army match, the third soldier lifts his foot far higher than is needed as he tries to negotiate the duckboard: blindness is inscribed most powerfully at a point where touch is anticipated as collision but is actually absent. The

1 Gordon Bottomley, ‘A Hymn of Touch’, *Poems and Plays* (London: The Bodley Head, 1953), 46.

2 John Singer Sargent, *Gassed*, oil on canvas, courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London.



Figure 1.1. John Singer Sargent, *Gassed*, 1919. Oil 2290×6100 mm. Imperial War Museum, London.

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exaggerated gesture dramatises the disjunction between our optical sense of space and the soldiers' tactile perception. In 'The Fleeting Portrait', Virginia Woolf recalls how "'Gassed" at last pricked some nerve of protest, or perhaps of humanity'. Referring to the raised foot, Woolf notes, 'This little piece of over-emphasis was the final scratch of the surgeon's knife which is said to hurt more than the whole operation'.³ In Woolf's evocative account – as she plays on the relation between the surface of the canvas and the surface of the skin – the body of the painting and that of the viewer meet and move under the artist's hand: the 'little piece of over-emphasis' acts like the Barthesian 'punctum', pricking the skin set between the viewer and the painting, and subjectivity bleeds.

Sargent was commissioned to do a large painting for the Hall of Remembrance depicting the 'fusion of British and American forces'.⁴ Trying to find a worthy subject, Sargent, along with his old friend Henry Tonks, travelled to France in July 1918 and, after spending some time as Earl Haig's guest, joined the Guards Division under General Fielding near Arras. On 11 September 1918, he wrote to his friend, Charteris, 'The nearer to danger the fewer and the more hidden the men – the more dramatic the situation the more it becomes an empty landscape'. Of the three night-scenes he goes on to describe, one engrosses him: 'a harrowing sight, a field full of gassed and blindfolded men'.⁵ The scene was the aftermath of a mustard gas attack in which the 99th Brigade and the 8th Brigade of the 3rd Division were caught. It is narrated in greater detail by Tonks: 'Gassed cases kept coming in, led along in parties of about six just as Sargent has depicted them, by an orderly. They sat or lay down on the grass, there must have been several hundred'.⁶ Later, while spending a week in a hospital tent at Ypres, Sargent was further exposed to 'the chokings and coughing of gassed men, which was a nightmare'.⁷ Yet, such horrors are largely absent in the painting. Sargent's emollient contours and colours aestheticise the soldiers: they are tall,

3 Virginia Woolf, 'The Royal Academy', in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, vol. III, 1919–1924, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth, 1988), 92–3. Also see Evan Charteris, *John Sargent* (London: William Heinemann, 1927), 213–16; Richard Cork, *A Bitter Truth: Avant-Garde Art and the Great War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 219–22. For a suggestive theoretical exploration of blindness in art, see Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

4 Alfred Yockney to John Sargent, 26 April 1918, John Sargent File, 1918–1924, First World War Artists' Archive, 284 A/7, 170, Imperial War Museum, London (hereafter abbreviated IWM).

5 The letter is quoted by the Hon. Evan Charteris in his biography, *John Sargent*, 214.

6 Henry Tonks to Yockney, 4 October 1918, Sargent File, IWM.

7 Sargent to Isabella Stewart Gardner quoted in Charteris, *John Sargent*, 216.

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blond and athletic, moving with solemn dignity, as in a sculpted frieze. The sky is strangely tranquil. The pinkish glow of the setting sun, coming from no particular direction, holds the soldiers, and stills them in our minds in a moment of numbed serenity. The most striking feature in the painting is the strange use of light: the spectacle of blindness is represented through the drama of chiaroscuro. The trance-like figures seem to be moving in an imaginary space amidst the scattered light, as if replaying a scene from one of the traumatic war-dreams that haunt First World War writings, and which Freud used as one of the starting points for *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920).

The sense of finale is particularly evident when compared to Bruegel's more macabre *The Parable of the Blind* (1568) to which Sargent's painting clearly refers. In Sargent's world, there is an eternal wait for the piles of bodies crowding the ground, for the casualty station can treat only a handful of them. Yet the sense of desolation is balanced by an Owenesque sense of community as the soldiers on the ground, 'leaning on the nearest chest or knees / Carelessly slept'.⁸ The homoerotic undertones of war that Owen evokes would not be lost on this society artist who painted portraits of fashionable women for his living, and often did nude studies of young working-class men for pleasure.⁹ If we look at the figures on the ground, we do not know where one figure ends and the other begins: the folds of colour and fabric hold within them the contours of the bodies as they touch and blend in a world of sensuous contact and comfort. The young boy in the right-hand corner gulps down water to alleviate the effects of mustard gas. Sargent's draft sketch (Figure I.2) shows the gentleness of the orderly through a double movement: he swivels round to clasp the elbow of the soldier behind him (this second figure is not in the sketch but is in the final painting) while supporting, at the same time, the limp figure in front of him in a gesture that recalls the taking down of the body of Christ. The world's first major industrial warfare ravaged the male body on an unprecedented scale but also restored tenderness to touch in male relationships. Instead of evoking the wasted landscape, as in Nash's *The Menin Road* (1919) or depicting horror, as in

8 Wilfred Owen, 'Spring Offensive', *Wilfred Owen: The Complete Poems and Fragments*, 2 vols., ed. Jon Stallworthy (London: Chatto and Windus, Hogarth and Oxford University Press, 1983), 192; hereafter abbreviated *CP&F*.

9 The most notable example is the *Nude Study of Thomas E. McKeller*. See Trevor Fairbrother, *John Singer Sargent: The Sensualist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), especially the album of figure studies (Folios 1–30), 181–212.

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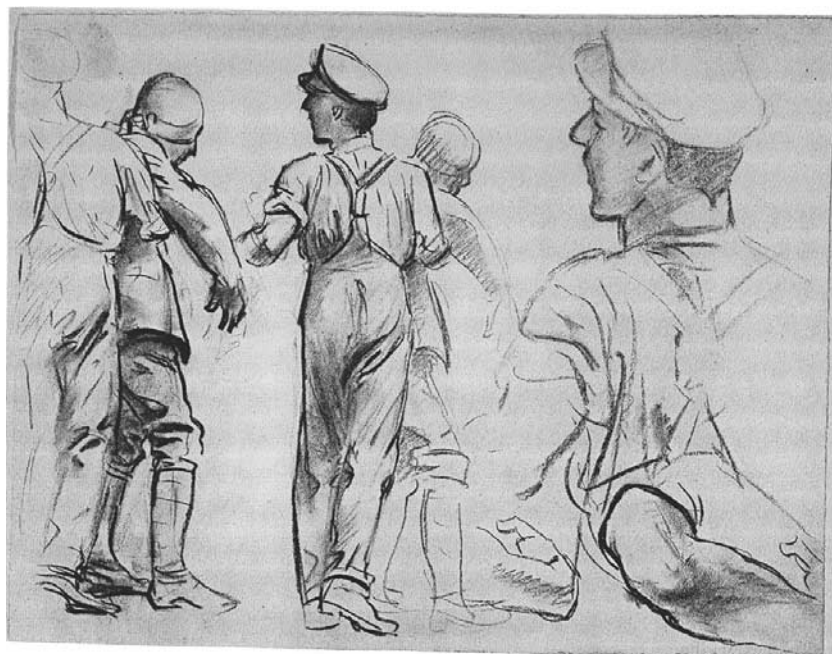


Figure I.2. John Singer Sargent, *Study for Gassed*, 1918–19. Imperial War Museum, Artists' Archives.

Otto Dix's *Dead Sentry* (1924), Sargent distils the pity of war into a moment of blindness and touch.

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This book examines the central importance of the sense of touch in the experience of the First World War and its relation to literary representation. The writings of the First World War are obsessed with tactile experiences: from the horrors of the 'sucking mud' that recur in trench diaries, journals and letters to the 'full-nerved, still warm' boys of Owen, Nichols and Sassoon to the ordeal of bandaging wounds described in memoirs of the women nurses. In the foreword to the *Collected Works* of Isaac Rosenberg, Siegfried Sassoon, singling out 'Break of Day in the Trenches' for special praise, notes, 'Sensuous frontline existence is there, hateful and repellent, unforgettable and inescapable'.¹⁰ The aims of

¹⁰ Siegfried Sassoon, 'Foreword', reprinted in *The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg*, ed. Ian Parsons (London: Chatto & Windus, 1979), ix; hereafter, Rosenberg, *CW*.

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my study are both recuperative and literary: it seeks to recover and analyse the 'sensuous' world of the trenches and the war hospitals as lived by the men at the front and the women nurses, and to show how the texture of such experience is fundamental to, and provides new ways of understanding, First World War literature and art. If, in some contemporary discussions, the body has become a linguistic trace in the maze of signification,¹¹ *Touch and Intimacy* draws attention to its physicality, to the material conditions which produced the literature. Vision, sound and smell all carry the body beyond its margins; tactile experience, by contrast, stubbornly adheres to the flesh.¹² At once intense and diffuse, working at the threshold between the self and the world, touch can be said to open up the body at a more intimate, affective level, offering fresh perspectives on certain issues that repeatedly surface in war writings and have become central to contemporary cultural thinking: ideas of space and boundaries, questions of gender and sexuality or the concept of trauma ('neurasthenia' or 'shell-shock', as it was known at the time). The immediate post-war years were also the time when touch was being conceptualised by men such as Havelock Ellis in *Sexual Selection in Man* (1920) and Sigmund Freud in *The Ego and the Id* (1923). Though tightly focused on the First World War, the larger intention of the book is to provide an intimate history of human emotions in times of crisis – to explore the making and unmaking of subjectivity through the most elusive and private of the senses.

The First World War is remembered and represented as a time of darkness. The eyes of the soldiers I write about are not gassed or bandaged but open and disorientated in the night. Burgoyne, in his diary, describes the world of the trenches as 'dark as Hades and wet'; David Jones, in *In Parenthesis* (1937), writes about 'the stumbling dark of the blind, that Bruegel knew about – ditch circumscribed'.¹³ The reference manual *British Trench Warfare 1917–1918* issued for the soldiers by the War Office stressed in a section titled 'Training in Night Work' how

¹¹ The classic instance is Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), a question that Butler herself addresses at the very beginning of *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (1993): 'What about the materiality of the body, Judy?' At the same time, there has also been a powerful impulse towards 'corporeal feminism', associated with Luce Irigaray, Adrienne Rich and Julia Kristeva.

¹² See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* trans. Colin Smith (1962; London: Routledge, 2002), 368–9.

¹³ *The Burgoyne Diaries*, ed. Claudia Davidson (London: Thomas Harmonsorth, 1985), 10; David Jones, *In Parenthesis* (London: Faber, 1937), 31.

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essential nocturnal duty was to trench life.¹⁴ In *The First Hundred Thousand* (1915), Ian Hay notes, ‘The day’s work in the trenches begins about nine o’clock the night before’; the French writer, Ferdinand Céline, corroborates, ‘Everything that’s important goes on in the darkness’.¹⁵ Amidst the dark, muddy, subterranean world of the trenches, the soldiers navigated space, as I argue in the first two chapters, not through the safe distance of the gaze but rather through the clumsy immediacy of their bodies: ‘crawl’ is a recurring verb in trench narratives, showing the shift from the visual to the tactile.

After three weeks at the front, Owen writes to his mother, ‘I have not seen any dead. I have done worse. In the dank air, I have perceived it, and in the darkness, felt’.¹⁶ Touch is considered to be the more apt register for recording the horrors than sight; the sense of violation is at once more acute and personal. And a month before his death on the Oise-Sambre Canal Bank, he writes to Siegfried Sassoon:

. . . the boy by my side, shot through the head, lay on top of me, soaking my shoulder, for half an hour.

Catalogue? Photograph? Can you photograph the crimson-hot iron as it cools from the smelting? This is what Jones’s blood looked like, and felt like. My senses are charred.

Owen tries to evoke the perilous intimacy of the moment by drawing on the eye (‘crimson-hot iron’) but soon the visual gives way to the tactile. The moment is recalled differently to his mother: ‘Of whose blood lies yet crimson on my shoulder where his head was – and where so lately yours was’.¹⁷ Horror, pity, maternity and a diffuse eroticism are fused and confused in that ‘half an hour’ of bodily contact, defying the established categories of gender and sexuality. On the other hand, Donald Hankey, who was killed on the Somme in October 1916, evokes the ideal of the Christian officer through a careful detail: ‘If a blister [on the foot] had to be lanced, he would very likely lance it himself. . . . It seemed to have a touch of the Christ about it, and we loved and honoured him the more’.¹⁸ Between Owen’s account of horror and Hankey’s idealisation

14 *British Trench Warfare 1917–1918: A Reference Manual* (1917; London: IWM, 1997), 11.

15 Ian Hay, *The First Hundred Thousand: Being the Unofficial Chronicle of a Unit of ‘K 910’* (London: William Blackwood, 1915), 245; Ferdinand Céline, *Journey to the End of the Night*, trans. Ralph Manheim (1932; London: John Calder, 1988), 62.

16 *Wilfred Owen: Collected Letters*, ed. Harold Owen and John Bell (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 429; hereafter abbreviated *CL*. The two words are underlined in the original letter.

17 *CL*, 581, 580.

18 Donald Hankey, *A Student in Arms* (London: Andrew Melrose, 1918), 60.

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of daily routine, a whole new world of physical contact was opening up between men. Owen's repetition of the word 'felt' also raises an issue that will confront us repeatedly in relation to its neighbour 'touch': though referring primarily to the sensation ('perceived'), 'felt' gathers its full significance in relation to the emotional world it contains, hovering at the threshold between the sensory and the psychic, bringing together the body and the mind.

Two broad questions will frame the argument of this book. First, I shall explore why the sense of touch seems to be so crucial to the experience of the First World War, and the profound, if at times necessarily oblique, ways in which it affects the subjectivities of soldiers and nurses. Second, I shall highlight the urgent need within war writings to find a literary language around this particular sense which gets charged with new intensities of meaning. Starting with a variety of archival and testimonial material – letters, diaries, journals, trench newspaper accounts – I move on to examine how imaginative writing of the period repeatedly dwells on moments of tactile contact and the ways in which these processes of touch – whether in a context of disgust, tenderness, pain – are gathered into the creative energies of a text, conceptualised within a novel, a poem or a short story. If such writing provides special insights into the phenomenological and emotional world of the First World War, its analysis will show literature's close engagement with the realm of the senses.

In the incomplete Preface to his intended collection of poems, Owen refashioned poetry as testimony. The relationship between touch and testimony is a particular concern of this study, especially in the case of the women who were called upon to nurse the men and whom Owen so uncharitably excluded ('for you may touch them not'). Yet, it is precisely in this forbidden zone of physical contact that Mary Borden, an American nurse who served in Belgium and France, would locate her work, establishing the authority and authenticity of her touch: 'My hands could instantly tell the difference between the cold of the harsh bitter night and the stealthy cold of death'.¹⁹ If Dr Elsie Inglis was famously told to 'Go home and be still' when she volunteered her medical services in August 1914, Borden would boldly lay claim to bodily knowledge, traditionally associated with the male experience of war. The book explores the pressures of memory and culture that underpin this kind of physical

¹⁹ Mary Borden, *The Forbidden Zone* (London: William Heinemann, 1929), 124; hereafter abbreviated Borden, *FZ*.

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testimony. At the outbreak of the war, thousands of women, trained to be genteel Edwardian ladies, ventured into France, Belgium, Serbia and Mesopotamia to nurse the war-wounded. The direct relation posed by Owen between combat experience and war knowledge has in the past privileged a particular construction of war that largely marginalised women and civilians. Over the last two decades, however, a number of feminist critics such as Higonnet, Marcus and Tylee have powerfully drawn attention to the war experience of women, fundamentally affecting the way in which we 'reconceptualise war – and therefore the vocabulary of war'.²⁰ *Touch and Intimacy* shows that women's writings are essential to an understanding of warfare and continues the process of recovery through examination of archival and literary material, shifting the idea of trauma, traditionally associated only with the figure of the shell-shocked soldier, onto the neglected figure of the nurse. However, as Trudi Tate usefully reminds us in *Modernism, History and the First World War* (1998), it is not always helpful to treat gender as the 'final point of inquiry'.²¹ Instead of viewing trauma exclusively through the lens of gender (which remains an important category of analysis), or solely as a representational crisis, this study also addresses the relation of gender to the witnessing of the body in pain and the 'charred' senses of the young nurses.

In 1929, John Brophy, while putting together an anthology of war writings, used as his criterion for inclusion accounts only 'by men who waged and suffered it, not vicariously, but with their own bodies'.²² The combat model, inherited partly from the war poetry of Sassoon and Owen ('except you share / With them in hell'), was elaborated in its most evocative and influential form by Paul Fussell in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975) and much subsequent war criticism has an oedipal relation to this grand narrative.²³ The chief problem with Fussell's

20 Margaret Higonnet, 'Not So Quiet in No-Woman's Land', in *Gendering War Talk*, ed. Miriam Cooking and Angela Woollacott (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 208.

21 Trudi Tate, *Modernism, History and the First World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 5.

22 John Brophy (ed.), *The Soldier's War: A Prose Anthology* (London: Dent, 1929), x. This view was aggressively advanced the same year in France by Norton Cru in his 700-page *Temoins*, published in a shortened English version as *War Books: A Study in Historical Criticism*, ed. and trans. Stanley J. Pincetl, Jr. and Ernest Marchand (San Diego: San Diego University Press, 1976).

23 Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975). Given the various and valid charges brought against it – its sexist and elitist bias, its formulation of too neat a rupture between a pre-war and a modern, ironic consciousness – it is worth noting that it still forms a point of return, described by one of its most astute critics, Daniel Pick, as 'compelling' and 'deeply evocative', in *War Machine: The Rationalisation of Slaughter in the*

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account, as has often been pointed out, was that it became the *defining* narrative of the First World War, confining it narrowly to the trench experience of a group of educated, mostly middle-class British officer-writers. This bias has been challenged in recent years by the 'second wave' of war criticism which has been marked by two important trends: interdisciplinarity and diversification of concern, with an emphasis on detail. 'There were others who suffered, whose voices we must also attend', notes Jay Winter whose *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (1995) has been seminal to the reconceptualisation of the First World War in recent years.²⁴ Over the last decade or so, scholars have uncovered further areas of interest: the experience of women and of male civilians; the war on the Eastern Front; the recovery of the colonial war experience; the ordeal of the conscientious objectors, military deserters, labourers, stretcher-bearers and medical staff.²⁵ This diversification has been a much-needed and welcome development. At the same time, it would be unfortunate if, as a hasty reaction against a previous generation of critics who laid an exaggerated emphasis on the soldier-writer as representing the 'truth of war', it led us to disparage or dismiss the trench narratives. The trench accounts, it is true, cannot be used as the only narrative of the war or turned into a metaphor for twentieth-century consciousness but, instead of simply challenging them, it is time that we try to understand and analyse 'why those repeated images persist'.²⁶ They have continued to inspire writers from Susan Hill and Jennifer Johnston in the 1970s to Sebastian Faulks and Pat Barker in the 1990s. On 4 August 2004, to mark the ninetieth anniversary of England's entry into the war, only four of

Modern Age (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 4. Two works to develop Fussell's thesis of 'modernist' consciousness are Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989) and Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: Bodley Head, 1991).

24 Jay Winter, 'Shell-shock and the Cultural History of the Great War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 35, 1 (2000), 10–11. In *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), Winter through a wide array of sources analyses a complex traditional vocabulary of mourning, powerfully challenging Fussell's modernist thrust.

25 Major works, relevant to my study, are mentioned in the respective chapters. For a survey of recent historical works, see Gail Braybon (ed.), *Evidence, History and the Great War: Historians and the Impact of 1914–18* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2003), 1–29; for an overview of literary criticism, see James Campbell, 'Interpreting the War', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the First World War*, ed. Vincent Sherry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 261–79; hereafter abbreviated *Cambridge Companion*.

26 Sharon Ouditt, 'Myths, Memories, and Monuments: Reimagining the First World War', in *Cambridge Companion*, 245.