

Editor's Choice

Caleb Carr on Elizabeth T. Gray, Jr's *Salient*

By now, most of the poetry world has been alerted to and electrified by *Salient*, Elizabeth Gray's utterly unique melding of battlefield investigation, military spiritualism, and Tibetan mysticism. That attention, and the accolades the book has garnered, are richly deserved, and it is to be expected and welcomed that poetry aficionados not only in this country but particularly in Europe, where the infamous Third Battle of Ypres (or Passchendaele) took place on the equally notorious Western Front of World War I during the fall of 1917, will continue to examine and praise Gray's monumental achievement.

But this review is not for them. Rather, I speak here to my fellow general readers, in order to offer them sincere reassurance: you don't need to be any scholar of poetry, you don't even need to be particularly literarily-minded, to become immediately absorbed in and affected by *Salient*. It is a triumph accessible to, and intended for, any and all readers of poetry and literature, as well as of history, and military history. It simply works on every level.

There may be those who doubt. Just look at the thumbnail description I myself gave of the piece: a *unique melding of battlefield investigation, military spiritualism, and Tibetan mysticism*. You could be forgiven for having the same reaction I did on first picking up the book: "I don't have the intellectual tools needed to undertake this journey." First of all, there is the structural question: what is it? *Salient* is presented as one book, one work—yet it contains some seventy pieces, separately labeled in almost every case. This is entirely different from the traditional memorial poem. True, there is something undeniably magnetic in the idea of an author who is deeply read in the official and personal accounts of Third Ypres (and who has

herself walked and studied the ground in minute detail) taking on the enormity of the spiritual as well as the physical costs of that battle. But the scope of the work and its structure can look, at first glance, daunting.

Similarly, the goal of elegizing in an epic narrative the “average” soldiers who moved into the mouth of infamously devastating machine gun and artillery fire with what will always seem inhuman courage, only to literally *disappear* so utterly that they no longer existed even as remains (a theme that obsesses Gray), should resonate with almost anyone; yet the thematic intricacies of *Salient*, its universe of emotional and spiritual impressions, may seem to make such usual heroic themes less rather than more accessible.

Finally, the third pillar on which the structure of *Salient* stands—its melding with Tibetan mysticism—may be the most forbidding notion for the readers who don’t usually visit what can seem the arcane (and, it may be fairly said, the too-often self-referential) world of modern poetry. After all—*Tibetan mysticism*? In an investigation, however poetic and spiritual, of one of the most violent engagements of the Great War? This is undoubtedly the element that will give the greatest number of potential readers pause.

But, having myself felt all these forms of trepidation on first encountering *Salient*, I can honestly say to all prospective readers: rest easy. The pieces that compose the whole may be many, but you’ll find they fly by at a remarkable clip: so remarkable that their full force may only hit you moments or even hours after you read them, calling you back to read them again and again. Similarly, the thematic devices of the poem may be many and varied, but there is real architecture, real coherence, to them, so that they are not at all confusing.

And finally, the Tibetan mysticism is not woven into *Salient* as an intellectual gimmick—a trip-wire, as it were, deviously placed to separate the real intellects from the rubes—but rather

as a sorely needed mystical tool with which to comprehend the magnitude, not simply of the *loss* of human life during the battle, but of its utter *erasure*. And the fact that it is a tool which has been deeply personal to Gray for most of her life means that she can employ it deftly; so deftly that, again, we quickly find it completely natural. In other words, Tibetan mysticism ends up being, in Gray's hands, utilitarian, in much the way that Carl Jung employed it to defy the often-grim confines of Freudian psychiatry: to expand the limits of consciousness and healing.

Gray is enormously clever (because "brilliant" is perhaps a too facile a word, in this context, even if it does apply completely) at winding these threads together. First, she provides a two-page preface to the work that recounts her own lifetime of fascination with each piece of the puzzle that becomes, in its whole, *Salient*; then, she further provides the full OED definition of the word itself. These few pages are more than mere supplements: they are enhancements. She is girding us with knowledge that will be useful, especially to the uninitiated, after which she presents us with the realms of the work. Again, there are three, generally speaking: the military/official, the deeply personal (not simply personal to Gray herself, but also and perhaps more to the men she has spent so many years studying), and finally the Tibetan mysticism. Only then do we arrive at the work's first real piece, "War Magic," wherein Gray shows how she will weave the three themes together into a new form:

Scaled up to the level of war magic, the violent repelling rites of the *tantras* became The Big Push, The Big Show, or a Schlieffen Plan....

In the last half of the female fire snake year of 1917 it was said that a great number of enemy were coming.

Almost before we know it, we have set out on a journey that is clearly not what—not *simply* what—we expected.

But the clever craftsmanship never permits predictability. Gray quickly announces her greatest preoccupation to us in the very next statement, “Taking Refuge,” a conjuring of the spirits of annihilated soldiers to be performed during the playing of “Last Post”:

Make the next notes hang in the air.

Make them say “Gather here!”...

Visualize them assembled
in the fields before you and imagine
that they inhabit for a moment
this song.

But the song is not simply “Last Post;” it is *Salient* itself.

Then the real business of interweaving begins, of presenting to us military assessments, personal reminiscences, and mystical incantations in a manner that steadily breaks down the walls between the three areas: their natural grouping, already mentioned, is not asserted, it is proven in trenchant imagery and verse. And by starting the process through illustrating her own (or was it an earlier woman’s?) almost desperate attempts to read the land and find the spots where “The Missing” became such, we steadily become aware that this is not only a place in which the geographic topography has become confused and confusing: the historical, the military, and the spiritual have, too:

The lines kept changing but not by much.

Because the land was flat it was hard to see.

The men may be hidden in that empty space.

The banks of the dykes are bordered with willows.

And what is the effect of searching for ephemera (a button, a shell casing, anything), as well as for spirits, in such a landscape? "When the sun came out I was surprised." This is not a place that can be navigated, in any sense, without help.

Military orders take on the dimensions of mystical and sometimes nonsensical chants; descriptions and definitions of Tibetan amulets take on the brilliant clarity of life-and-death orders. Title after title implies military accuracy, while the text beneath describes confusion, physical, emotional, and spiritual, until we arrive at the arresting title, "How a Mark VII Trench Mortar Fuse is Like Love." (Suffice to say that every sensually brutal word of that particular piece proves the assertion of the title.) Soon enough, in "The Summary of Intelligence," we are further presented with the blurring of realms, this time from another direction:

Patrols reported the goddess

Paldan Lhamo in the vicinity of D.28.d.2.3

at 0245. She is sometimes called

queen of the sickles or great life mistress...

The patrol saw *she* and *hell* arise

from the turquoise seed-syllable

shell and working parties tonight, despite
anticipated rain, will dig, linking
her deep, round footprints
across featureless terrain.

The footprints of death and hell? Or foxholes, or the deep, round craters of shell
explosions? Does it matter? We are not in a place for such dry distinctions.

And if you're still in doubt about the process that allows first the *you* that is Gray herself,
then *you*, the reader, and finally *you*, the missing soul, to bridge these realms (always with
careful guidance), listen closely to a piece that comes some halfway through *Salient*, "Actual
Things With Characteristics":

If individuals have no magical or psychic abilities
then actual things with characteristics,
such as the four elements, hail, poison, boils, precipices,
and so on, become obstacles....

Yesterday, when actual things with characteristics arose,
a detachment tried to integrate them into its path
as illusions, but the actual things with characteristics
were stubborn and well-led.

It's not, then, that mysticism—in whatever form, that of Tibetan magic or the spiritualism that overtook a grief-stricken British home front during the last years of, and then especially after, the War—is an unlikely feature of any complete investigation of so great a conflict and the men who literally ceased to exist during it: in fact, it's absolutely necessary. And those who try to deny that necessity will only find themselves more deeply imperiled in every dimension.

Consider only the tender and then suddenly hammering words of "Harm":

We strive to remain unattached,
without attraction or aversion
to material forms.

The way

Phillips and Mercer did,
who understand such distinctions.

Most of them is still missing.

But there are innumerable gentler moments in *Salient*, as well, moments not just of tenderness toward the dead but of real and imagined tenderness between those who fought and the women they thought, for at least a time, that they were protecting, as well as between the investigator and the experience of investigation. In *Night: Bedroom* we are told that we are in London in October of 1917; but given the magical forces at work, are we not in other places as well? Or, better, *simultaneously*? For consider the desperation:

Because you are missing I reach out in the darkness and touch another
man's body.

He is solid, and protection, and unaware of me weeping beneath him.
He remains very still, and this helps.

It is cold.

He is both a man and a desperation, here for a reason.

The aching is obvious; but so is the yearning to transcend it. The balm of the physical world
only herds us back into the mystical, the war zone, the dangerous. *Salient* is not a work about safety.

All this is perhaps most clearly stated in another piece that is startling in its tenderness
and simultaneous brutality, "The Guts of It." Certainly, it is the briefest and clearest statement of
Gray's own obsession:

I think I would prefer
to be killed in a railway
accident he said Why Because
well there you are

but

if you're killed by an exploding

shell he went on then

where the hell

are you

Gray has by now so thoroughly and effectively intermingled her themes into one stunning illustration of the horrors and fascinations of war, and especially of the Great War, that we aren't surprised when we quickly learn that a piece titled "In the Soft Parts of the Body" is about the infliction of wounds and the methods available at the time for their treatment at the front. After all, for many soldiers, such was their last (and in too many cases their only) experience of human intimacy. Nor does it confuse us to discover that one titled "That One Time, in December 1914" concerns the visit of an otherworldly entity to the battlefield:

the goddess came to the place of hell

and just by seeing her the hell-laborers

delayed their torture work, and sentient beings

on both sides, all of us, were instantly freed

Not freed by military movements, not freed by political wisdom, not freed even by human love; but because a goddess descended onto the field. And though the goddess here is Tibetan, the tale echoes the claimed sightings above the trenches of other supernatural entities, including angels, by both Allied and German soldiers. We have come to a universal experience, one by which even those unacquainted with combat can be touched, stunned, and haunted. Gray has taken us on a journey to, if not an underworld, an otherworld, where that intermingling

of the corporeal and the spiritual, the mundanely military with the magical, now makes perfect sense. In a real way, *Salient* has taught us—and again, especially taught those who thought they couldn't learn, who saw all the brief descriptions of this epic testament and believed it was too arcane for them—another language, the language needed to explore the realm of the obliterated.

In that sense as so many others, *Salient* is an enormously important work that cries out to the broadest possible audience. Take the word of this reviewer, who didn't believe that he could penetrate it; it turned out that he did not have to. He was guided into it, so much so that when the trenchant (and I use that word advisedly) series concludes with a prayer, I was not surprised—only grateful:

Mother, send down blessings on this haunted place

Where we tripped and fell over barbed wire....

Please hold us with unbiased compassion.

Hold with compassion the gods

and demons gathered here. Please stay here

and grant your blessings.

Salient is more than a "monumental" or "brilliant" achievement, then, though it is certainly all that. But it is also a doorway into a complex maze of horror, intimacy, the all-too-real and the visionary; a maze that may seem forbidding, even terrifying, but that the reader is

guided through, unalone, by a generous and accomplished hand. It is, in short, something wholly unique.

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