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*“We Will Remember Them”:
The Poetic Rewritings of Lutyens’ Cenotaph*¹

DURING THE MAY DAY DEMONSTRATIONS of the year 2000, the Cenotaph war memorial in the Whitehall district of London was defaced by anti-globalization protesters. Most of the day’s protests, organized by a variety of environmental and labor activists on a day traditionally associated with worker’s rights, were conducted peacefully, but at some point during the day, a small group splintered off from the main procession and spray-painted graffiti on the venerated monument. The writing that they left on it—a variety of anti-capitalist and anti-government slogans—was dominated by the query “Why glorify war?” scrawled in large letters above the other missives. The popular response to this act was one of public outrage. Prime Minister Tony Blair condemned the action, calling the protesters “mindless thugs,” and angrily declaring that “[i]t is only because of the bravery and courage of our war dead that these idiots can live in a free country at all.”² The politics of the matter were very quickly made manifest when Conservative leaders suggested that Ken Livingstone, at that time the leading candidate to become the new mayor of London, was more sympathetic to the protesters than he was to police trying to keep the peace. The only other large-scale property damage that was inflicted that day was on a downtown London McDonald’s, which had its windows smashed and its seating area severely vandalized.

One intriguing element of the events of May 1st, 2000 is the seeming anachronism between the object of the vandalism and the cultural and political antagonisms that prompted the act. Why should the Cenotaph, a memorial putatively commemorating the dead of World War I, be the epicenter of a conflict between activists and government agents about economic policy some eighty years after its

dedication? Clearly, the protesters saw the Cenotaph as an object that represented a set of ideals to which they were philosophically opposed, to the point where it was seen as embodying the same general credo as a McDonald's. Their painted message "Why glorify war?" seems to be a direct response to the inscription "The glorious dead" carved upon the Cenotaph. If the original builders of the Cenotaph had been present, they might have responded that the purpose of the monument was not to exalt war as a doctrinal ideal. But such a response would have not addressed a critical determinant of the protesters' actions: that the original "meaning" of the Cenotaph as it was initially intended by its commissioners and sculptor might not be the same meaning understood by onlookers, and certainly not by onlookers eighty years in the future when the epistemes that define society have changed so much. In his book *Written in Stone: Public Monuments in Changing Societies*, Sanford Levinson analyzes the process of how monuments engender different sets of interpretations at different times, and how new governments have sometimes modified existing monuments constructed by previous regimes in order to ideologically tweak these meanings. The London protesters did not represent an official regime change, but, having taken temporary control over the public space where the monument stands, they felt compelled to mark it with their own interpretation, an interpretation that they knew was different from the accepted "reading" of the Cenotaph.

A non-judgmental commentator might therefore see their defacing of the Cenotaph as representing some sort of rewriting, albeit a drastic and oppositional one, of the Cenotaph's original meaning. But monoliths are not monolithic. To ascribe a rigidly defined original meaning to the Cenotaph is to ignore some of the gradations of opinion about its meaning held by both its commissioners and those who originally interpreted it. We can see such nuances of interpretation in the poetry that is associated with the Cenotaph. Each of these poems—Laurence Binyon's "For the Fallen," which was read at the Cenotaph's unveiling, and Charlotte Mew's "The Cenotaph (September 1919)," Siegfried Sassoon's "At the Cenotaph," and Ursula Roberts's "The Cenotaph," which were inspired by the Cenotaph—rewrites the monument in a slightly different way, utilizing it to convey different shades of interpretation of both World War I itself and the way in which the conflict should be remembered. All four poems raise questions about the permanent unchanging mode of memory that the Cenotaph was intended to exemplify; in essence, they scrutinize the very notion of monumentality. The three poems specifically about the Cenotaph also enact the tension between the somber remembrance of the dead and the triumphant celebration of the British empire's victory, a tension that many have read within the Cenotaph itself. They depict the Cenotaph as a site of both retrospective and contemporary ideological contestation, and explore the implications of the monument's ability to engender such divergent interpretations.

The issue of how best to commemorate the Great War of 1914-18 was a complicated one for the British government. Nominally, the war had resulted in a Allied victory, but this victory had come at the cost of over two million killed or wounded British soldiers.³ In the wake of such inconceivable slaughter, purely triumphant displays of absolute jubilation seemed at best inappropriate. The degree to which the two distinct, yet not entirely disparate, impulses of celebration and mourning have shaped the structure and tenor of British World War I monuments has been debated by critics. Samuel Hynes has argued that the official government-sanctioned monuments of the Great War obfuscate the immense suffering experienced by the troops in favor of presenting a heroic exaltation of the Allied triumph.⁴ On the other hand, Jay Winter has identified the need to mourn as being the primary impulse behind post-war monumentality, contending that once time had healed the immediate desolation that mourners felt, the status of the monuments as facilitators of grieving receded and new meanings were read into them, and that the spaces in which they were placed were free “from expressions of anger or triumph.”⁵ Alex King mediates somewhat between these positions, and concentrates on examining the political processes through which these monuments were commissioned and constructed.⁶

The study of Great War monumentality permits such disparate approaches partially because of the fact that many of these monuments are not figurative. Traditional statuary of the type valorizing glorious battles or valiant heroes seemed ridiculous in the wake of a war that rendered such concepts irretrievably archaic. However, other existing forms were deemed more appropriate. Established funerary traditions such as inscribed wall-tablets and obelisks were popular choices for war memorials.⁷ As James Young reminds us, such abstract structures, with their lack of pictorial representation, cannot fail to garner a variety of sometimes conflicting responses, whether they be enraged popular reception from survivors of the memorialized event or distanced analyses from artistic and cultural critics.⁸ But this plurality of meaning was not necessarily the intention of the commissioners and artists who eschewed literal representation. In the teens and twenties, the vogue in public sculpture was to create designs that were as simple as possible, since simplicity was associated with forthrightness and clarity of meaning, and overly “artistic” creations were seen as obfuscating their purpose through elaborate artifice.⁹ Plainness was considered the most suitable attribute for Great War memorials, precisely because the average citizen respected the honesty connoted by an austere and unornamented structure. A simple monument, it was thought, would convey a simple meaning.

Such impulses towards simplicity and honesty were part of the defining aesthetic that influenced the building of the Cenotaph. The story of its construction, which has been told in detail elsewhere, begins less than a year after the Armistice was

signed.¹⁰ It was originally commissioned by the British government to be a part of the Peace Day celebrations of July 19, 1919. Prime Minister David Lloyd George wanted to have a object specifically commemorating the war dead, and suggested to the Office of Works, the agency organizing the parade, that this object be created by a recognized artist. There was a desire on the part of the government, who feared the infiltration of Bolshevism into Britain, to create a solid object that would inspire patriotic sentiments.¹¹ Lloyd George invited prominent architect Sir Edwin Lutyens, to perform this task. Lutyens had recently been knighted for his work on the Viceroy's House in New Delhi, and he was already active as one of the chief architects on the Imperial War Graves commission. His artistic options in creating the memorial were strictly controlled by the British government, who were very concerned that, in the hands of a temperamental sculptor, the final form of the monument might strike an inappropriate note for the celebrations.¹² The Cabinet specified that the monument must be in the form of a pylon, a basic form to which Lutyens added his own inspiration of building a cenotaph, the Greek word for "empty tomb."¹³ This temporary structure, hurriedly designed and constructed by Lutyens in the space of a few weeks, was a wood and plaster monument that was painted to make it resemble stone. The Cenotaph was roughly rectangular, tall and monolithic. Its apparent height was enhanced by having the upper part of the structure be slightly smaller than the lower part, a configuration Lutyens employed in order to convey a sense of recession.¹⁴ If projected upwards, the vertical planes of the Cenotaph would converge at a point precisely 1,000 feet above the level of the ground. The horizontal planes are sections of arc, the theoretical circle of which would be centered 900 feet below the ground. British flags were unfurled a few feet from the base, rather than from the top of the structure. The inscription a few feet above the base of the Cenotaph reads "The Glorious Dead" and "1914-1918." The permanent stone sculpture that stands today was commissioned after the Peace Day festivities had finished, and was completed and unveiled in 1920; this Cenotaph is almost identical to the previous temporary version.

Because there are two Cenotaphs—the almost impromptu wood and plaster version of 1919, and its permanent stone replacement—the process of commissioning, sculpting, and unveiling the monument was therefore repeated. While Lloyd George wanted the original structure to have aesthetic value, it was not originally foreseen as a permanent addition to the London landscape, and in fact was considered to be just a small component in the parade that took place for the Peace Day celebration. The Cenotaph's evolution from side attraction in a parade to a permanent architectural installation began on the day of its unveiling, the day before the parade. So many people laid wreaths and flowers around the base of the Cenotaph that they had to be cleared before the Peace Day festivities could start. During the parade, it struck most observers as being the centerpiece

of the preparations. The war veterans who passed the Cenotaph, including the Allied commanders Generals Haig, Foch and Pershing, saluted it. Even after the celebrations concluded, citizens continued to lay wreaths around the base of the Cenotaph. Newspaper accounts of the Peace Day activities were reverentially effusive about the Lutyens sculpture. The *Times* considered it to be the center of the day's activities, and said that its dedication "was the most moving portion of Saturday's triumphal ceremony.... Sir Edwin Lutyens' design is so grave, severe, and beautiful that one might well wish it were indeed made of stone and permanent."⁵⁵ A letter to the *Times* advocating a permanent installation of the monument praised the Cenotaph for being "simple and dignified," and praising its "absence of all ornament." The *Morning Post* of July 19th commented that the Cenotaph was "of an austere simplicity that is profoundly impressive."⁵⁶

It was because of this extraordinary response to the structure that the government commissioned a permanent replica of the monument. As the cabinet arranged this, the idea of having a centrally located war monument specifically dedicated to the memory of the dead struck some as being inappropriate; for instance, Commissioner of Works Sir Alfred Mond was concerned that the Cenotaph might "be of too mournful a character as a permanent expression of the triumphant victory of our arms."⁵⁷ Mond's words are a clear recognition not only of the discrepancy between the government's view of the war as a hard-fought victory and the perception that it was a meaningless slaughter, but also of the power that monuments have to shape what future generations perceive as historical reality. His comment also anticipates the debates to come about the monument's meaning. Ultimately, the popular press introduced a campaign to commission a permanent Cenotaph, and those in the government who were hesitant, such as Mond, acquiesced. The new Cenotaph was officially unveiled by King George V in November of 1920 as part of the Armistice Day celebrations; the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Westminster Abbey was also unveiled as part of the same ceremonies. Once again, the Cenotaph was praised for its simplicity. Commenting on the monument's aesthetics, the *Times's* art critic effused, "[i]t is the common sense of the design that has surprised us, used as we are, to anything but common sense in our monuments. It says simply and precisely what it has to say, like a Greek Epitaph: and people find that they prefer this to nymphs and wreaths and crowns and pilasters that say nothing in particular."⁵⁸ Lloyd George wrote back to Lutyens, thanking him for his labors and praising the permanent structure, telling him that it "fittingly expresses the memory in which the people hold all those who so bravely and died for the country. How well it represents the feeling of the nation has been amply manifested by the stream of pilgrims who have passed the Cenotaph during the past week."⁵⁹

If the overwhelming public praise of the temporary monument caught its commissioners by surprise, it is perhaps because they underestimated both the

power of Lutyens' completed design and the need of the general public for a location for collective mourning. Lutyens' choice of a cenotaph as a motif meshed perfectly with the experience of the friends and relatives of the dead. No bodies were brought back from France by the British government, and so the bereaved were not able to go through the normal funerary process to console them. The literal emptiness of the Cenotaph, and its corollary reminder that the body it was supposed to house was in a foreign land, allowed the viewer to recognize that emptiness and project his or her grief upon it.²⁰ Its use for this purpose was augmented by its stark simplicity and its lack of any sort of decorative ornamentation. The emptiness of the monument reflected the emptiness of the exterior; as Jay Winter puts it, "by saying little, (the Cenotaph) says much about the exhaustion and mourning that accompanied the hard-won victory."²¹ But the Cenotaph's simplicity and emptiness also permitted a considerable range of exposition of the monument's meaning. A note entitled "Symbols on the Cenotaph" in the December 13th edition of the *Daily Telegraph* provides a very early indication of this hermeneutic variability:

Lieut.-Colonel Malone asked the First Commissioner of Works whether his attention has been drawn to the fact that the only conspicuous symbols of religion on the cenotaph in Whitehall are the prominent Jewish triangles at the corners, and whether he will instruct the custodians to give equal prominence to the recognized symbols of other religions.

Mr. Parker, in a written reply, says: There are no religious symbols on the Cenotaph, and the reference to prominent Jewish triangles at the corners is, therefore, not understood....²²

It is impossible to discern precisely what element of the monument Lieutenant Colonel Malone perceived as a Jewish symbol, since he was looking at the first version of the Cenotaph, which was dismantled to make way for the permanent version. But his query indicates that from the beginning, people felt compelled to search for meaning in the stark and unornamented surface of the Cenotaph.

This compulsion is surely encouraged by the sheer monumentality of the object itself. While the surface of the monument may be silent, the monument itself is not; it towers above the street of Whitehall, and its design is such that, to an onlooker at the base of the monument, it seems taller than it actually is. Such an imposing edifice, thought onlookers, must surely mean *something*. Lutyens may have conceived the size of the Cenotaph as a way of expressing the enormity of the human loss in the Great War. But since one of the effects of large monuments is to awe, and given that it is geographically situated in the center of the buildings

in which the government operates, it is possible to interpret the Cenotaph as also embodying the political power held by Great Britain. This is certainly the interpretation that General Haig had when, in a message printed in the November 10th, 1920 Times, he called the permanent stone Cenotaph “sacred to something infinitely greater (than the honour of famous men). It is the symbol of an Empire’s unity.... If many now among us must look at this cenotaph in loving sorrow, all generations of British men and women shall look at it for ever with pride, for it stands for the Nation’s glory.”²³ Indeed this was the view of the newspaper itself, which tellingly referred to the monument “a permanent memorial of war in that thoroughfare of empire. Simple massive, unadorned, it speaks of the qualities of the race.”²⁴

And yet, the Cenotaph’s titular claim to functionality calls into question Haig’s sense that the Cenotaph connotes unity. A cenotaph is, by definition, an object whose specific function is not being utilized; a tomb without a body is ontologically meaningless, since nothing is being *entombed*. How can an object whose very identity is based on a literal dysfunctionality be a symbol of national unity? A reading of the Cenotaph that emphasizes this disunity perhaps demands that the object be considered in conjunction with that other famous memorial to those who lost their lives in the Great War: The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Westminster Abbey, which was officially dedicated at the same time as the permanent version of the Cenotaph. The tomb, which contains an anonymous soldier brought home from the battlefields in France, in many ways completes the Cenotaph; if they were combined, the Cenotaph, which supplies the magnificent sepulcher, and the Tomb, which supplies the body, would be one monument. The fact that they are not one whole monument, and that they are, in fact, separated by several hundred yards, can be interpreted in a few different ways. On the one hand, of course, this dislocation is emblematic of the actual situation in France. The bodies of the war dead were often interred in France rather than being brought home to their families for ceremonial burial. But the separation of the Cenotaph and the Tomb could also be read in a larger cultural context as being exemplary of their own modernist moment. The separation of crypt and body seems utterly appropriate at a time in which the dislocation and breakdown of traditional values and social systems is being mirrored in all arenas of art. Such an evaluation need not be despairing. The effectiveness of the Cenotaph as a conduit for grief is perhaps augmented by its own status as an icon of displacement. Were the empty tomb inhabited by a soldier, known or unknown, citizens would have perhaps found it more difficult to use it as a mourning site. The Cenotaph, a fractured symbol of a fracturing war, clearly was able through its disjuncture to act as a facilitating agent for people to heal their own breakages.

The plurality of meanings read into the Cenotaph is reflected in the poem read at the original Cenotaph ceremonies. This poem, Laurence Binyon's "For the Fallen," was already well-known, but in later years would become popularly associated with the Cenotaph because of the public reading of the fourth stanza, known as simply "The Ode." The choice of an already existing poem to accompany the unveiling of a piece of public statuary, indicates a desire to associate the monument with a work whose meaning was thought to be somewhat fixed. In effect, "For the Fallen," and in particular "The Ode," acts as a focalizing agent for the Cenotaph, taking an architectural subject with which the general public was not familiar, and anchoring it to a set of already established interpretations.

"For the Fallen" was originally published in the September 21st 1914 edition of the *Times*. A poet and an expert on Asian art, Laurence Binyon was working for the Red Cross in France, and wrote the poem when the war was only seven weeks old and enthusiasm for the conflict was still waxing brightly back home. As such, the poem, is extraordinary in its emphasis on the loss of human life; as Paul Fussell points out, "For the Fallen" stands as an eerily prescient indicator of the carnage to come.²⁵ Binyon conveys this sense of loss most poignantly in the fifth stanza, as he laments the deaths of the servicemen who have friends and families back home: "They mingle not with their laughing comrades again; / They sit no more in familiar tables at home;" (17-8). But the fourth stanza, the most famous and the one that is still read in Remembrance Day services, is perhaps the clearest indicator of the reasons for its selection to be read at the Cenotaph dedication:

They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old;
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn,
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them. (13-6)

Here, Binyon captures the essence of the monumentalizing impulse. The lives of the soldiers are something that will be remembered by those who are left behind. In the memory of the survivors, the dead will not age, remaining forever fixed at a point in the bloom of their full youth and manhood. This sense of timelessness is juxtaposed against the daily reminders of the passing of time that occur at sunrise and sunset. This juxtaposition captures the conception of remembrance as a representation of the past in the present that short-circuits sequential temporality; the remembrance of those who have died will be triggered by these regular astronomical events, but the memory itself cannot be touched by them.²⁶ Like the Cenotaph, the stanza remembers and, in doing so, immortalizes. But while Binyon's use of the future tense connotes an assurance, the negations in the fourteenth line are a reminder that this celebration and remembrance has not always taken place.

“The years condemn” soldiers when history judges the cause for which they fought not to have been morally justified. Thus, Binyon betrays an anxiety about both the mechanisms of the historical process that erase the sacrifices of soldiers, and the fact that, as he is writing this poem, the resolution of the current conflict is very much in doubt.

This invocation of the power of history to glorify or erase also reflects the poet’s keen consciousness of his work as an artifact that has an impact on this process. For while “For the Fallen,” with its emphasis on loss, anticipates the work of later war poets, the platitudinous patriotism of much of the rest of the poem harkens back to a tradition that celebrates warfare as noble, a tradition that would soon become completely obsolete. Bernard Bergonzi wrote that the poetry of Wilfred Owen would later make Binyon’s work “irrevocably anachronistic” in its conception of war as a glorious fight for king and country.²⁷ This patriotic element is introduced in the very first stanza:

With proud Thanksgiving, a mother for her children,
England mourns for her dead across the sea.
Flesh of her flesh they were, spirit of her spirit,
Fallen in the cause of the free. (1-4)

In the first three lines, Binyon establishes the common nationalistic device of personifying the home country as a mother.²⁸ The soldiers in France are her “children,” with a blood connection to the country for which they fight. Binyon also, in the fourth line, passes an explicit judgment on the justness of the war, ascribing to the Allied side “the cause of the free.” While Binyon commemorates the deaths of English soldiers, he simultaneously justifies the cause in which they met their ends. This effort is aided by the tone of much of the rest of the poem. The second stanza traffics in the clichés of martial glorification:

Solemn the drums thrill: Death august and royal
Sings sorrow up into the immortal spheres.
There is music in the midst of desolation
And a glory that shines upon our tears (5-8)

Here war is “solemn” and possesses a “music” and “glory,” while death provides an ascendance to the tune of celestial music. Such rhetoric obfuscates as much as is possible the horrifying reality of the trenches. Binyon’s soldiers are “[s]traight of limb, true of eye, steady and aglow” (10), they face “odds uncounted” (11), but are “staunch to the end” (11). In addition, the dead are fortunate in that they are able to gain access to a deeper truth:

But where our desires are and our hopes profound,
Felt as a well-spring that is hidden from sight,
To the innermost heart of their own land they are known
As the stars become known to the Night; (21-4)

Binyon's dead are able to achieve some sort of bodily transcendence through their brave self-sacrifice; they have access to an inner vision that the others do not have.

This sort of mystifying rhetoric might seem to be inappropriate for a ceremony conducted on a day designated Peace Day after a war in which half a million Britons died. The ideology of "For the Fallen" is sufficiently ambiguous for the average citizen to identify with it—the "cause of the free" is, after all, a crusade that almost everybody can see themselves as supporting—but it must have been difficult, in the wake of such inconceivable losses, for the veterans and bereaved listening to this oration to fully believe in the glory that Binyon describes. But from the perspective of cultural criticism, the poem's tension between the solemn remembrance of the dead, and the enthusiastic trumpeting of the country that sent them off to their fatal destiny makes it absolutely appropriate for being read at the dedication of the Cenotaph. Like the Cenotaph, it is possible to read "For the Fallen" as disguising its fervent nationalism beneath a veneer of hymnal reverence. The final stanza of the poem microcosmically reflects this larger relationship:

As the stars that shall be bright when we are dust,
Moving in marches upon the heavenly plain,
As the stars that are starry in the time of our darkness,
To the end, to the end, they remain. (25-8)

There are two currents of imagery here. The celestial motif of this stanza echoes the language of mythology in immortalizing the dead by fixing them forever as constellations. But even the stars in this scheme have a military component; they move in "marches," suggesting the well-ordered motion of trained soldiers. The over tonal language here memorializes the fallen, but it also quietly reminds us of their roles as defenders of the British Empire, an empire that, by association with these eternal soldiers, makes its own claims on a sort of immortality. In many ways, these two threads of "For the Fallen" reflect the time and place of its composition. Binyon wrote these verses at a time when the war had been going on for long enough to adequately convey its horrors, but not long enough to completely dissipate the memory of the jingoistic celebrations that greeted the news of hostilities. It would be left to a later generation of war poets to gravitate inexorably towards the former pole.

As its title alerts, the compositional moment is also essential to Charlotte Mew's "The Cenotaph (September 1919)." Mew dates her poem at a time after the original Cenotaph was displayed on Peace Day 1919, and before the permanent addition was installed a little over a year later; at this moment there is a letter campaign petitioning the government to commission the stone version. Her poem captures the public's need to have a centralized grieving space, and their attempts to cope with their bereavement without having the normal healing process of a funeral. It starts with an evocation of the French fields where the bodies lie:

Not yet will those measureless fields be green again
Where only yesterday the wild sweet blood of
wonderful youth was shed;
There is a grave whose earth must hold too long, too
deep a stain,
Though for ever over it we may speak as proudly as
we may tread. (1-7)

Mew commences the poem by focusing attention on the fields in which the battles were fought and the bodies were buried, the red blood of the soldiers staining the meadows. Their death is not the glorious ascension of "For the Fallen"—rather than heavenly ascendance, the imagery connotes the bodily, emphasizing the blood of the soldiers within the ground—but they still generate a sense of pride in those who survive. Her tone avoids the hackneyed celebration of militarism found in Binyon's poem, while retaining a sense of appropriate deference to those who gave their lives.

Mew then crosses the Channel back to England and explores the issue of grievance faced by those who were left behind:

But here, where the watchers by lonely hearths from
the thrust of an inward sword have more slowly bled,
We shall build the Cenotaph: Victory, winged, with
Peace, winged too, at the column's head.
And over the stairway, at the foot—oh! here, leave
desolate, passionate hands to spread
Violets, roses, and laurel, with the small, sweet,
tinkling country things
Speaking so wistfully of other Springs, (8-16)

Here, Mew considers some of the meanings the Cenotaph will take on upon its completion. She imagines the winged allegorical figure of Victory at the top, but

this is not a wholly triumphant act, for it exists side by side with a similar figure of Peace, emphasizing that victory should not be glorified for victory's sake. But her greatest emphasis is on the "desolate" foot of the Cenotaph, and how it should be left bare, so that citizens may come and leave their own memorials for relatives and friends. Mew's privileging of the base of the Cenotaph quite literally inverts the normal hierarchy imposed both by and upon monuments, which typically showcase the top of the monument as the focal point of attention. This refocusing on the base of the Cenotaph also creates a parallel with the dead soldiers buried in France, emphasizing the physical circumstances of their death and burial rather than glorifying them in a monumental display of celebration. In doing this, Mew also emphasizes the personal tragedy that the war brought to non-combatants. The flowers that the people will bring will be from "the little gardens of little places where son or sweetheart was born" (17). She also understands that for British women, the Cenotaph will, for all intents and purposes, actually be the grave site of their loved ones: "In splendid sleep, with a thousand brothers / To lovers—to mothers / Here too, lies he:" (19-21). Mew's imagined Cenotaph functions as surrogate grave, sign of victory, and testament to lasting peace.

But in the last lines of the poem, Mew imagines the Cenotaph's future in this space, and wonders precisely what its relationship will be to the next generation of passers-by in Whitehall:

Only, when all is done and said,
God is not mocked and neither are the dead
For this will stand in our Marketplace—
 Who'll see, who'll buy
 (Will you or I
Lie each to each with the better grace)?
While looking into every busy whore's and huckster's face
As they drive their bargains, is the Face
Of God and some young, piteous, murdered face. (25-33)

Mew's tone changes here in the last few lines of the poem in order to reflect a skepticism about the Cenotaph's role as the war slips further and further into the past. The imagery juxtaposes the sacredness of God and the dead with the crass commercial enterprises taking place around the monument. Her language could suggest a commercialization of the monument itself, a transformation of the piety of respect for the war dead into parleying that commemoration into commercial purposes.²⁹ But these final lines function in a broader fashion as a meditation on the commercial age and its relationship to sacred institutions. Mew expresses an apprehension that sanctification's influence on commercialism will come to nothing

more than making people lie with more “grace” (simultaneously connoting both holiness and artful ease). While Mew reminds us that something deeper and exalted literally overlooks these commercial operations, she also conveys anxiety that this reminder will be unnoticed by the vendors and customers around the monument. The gazes of the people in the Marketplace are self-directed, and notice neither the scrutiny of God nor that of the dead who the Cenotaph commemorates.

Mew’s poem was written at a time before the construction of the permanent stone Cenotaph in 1920, so her conception of commercial life around the Cenotaph is an imagined one. Ursula Roberts’s poem “The Cenotaph” was written in 1922, when the monument had become a permanent part of the Whitehall landscape. Like Mew’s poem, “The Cenotaph” pictures the Cenotaph surrounded by the hustle and bustle of regular London life, and considers the relationships between the spectators and the object itself:

The man in the Trilby hat has furtively shifted it;
The man with the clay pipe has pushed his fists deeper into his pockets;
Beparcelled women are straining their necks
To stare.
Through the spattered windows of the omnibus
We see,
Dumb beneath the rain,
Marshalled by careful policemen,
Four behind four,
The relatives of dead heroes,
Clutching damp wreaths. (1-11)

Roberts imagines the Cenotaph at a time when the act of mourning has become ritualized to the point of becoming a spectacle in its own right, carefully regimented by policemen. In her preface to the *Scars Upon My Heart* anthology, Judith Kazantziss describes the attitude Roberts conveys in this poem towards the Remembrance ceremony as being one of “contempt.”³⁰ But Roberts’s poem is more tonally complex than this. The speaker’s gaze is not directed at the mourners participating in the ceremony itself; rather, it is at the other passengers, whose displays of commemoration are far more ambivalent. The act of respect being offered by the man in the trilby is “furtive,” perhaps connoting insincerity or half-heartedness, but also perhaps indicating that such gestures no longer fall within the realm of social respectability, that they have to be hidden lest they too become a spectacle. The mourners have replaced the Cenotaph as the object of external gaze. But it could also be said that the crowds and bustle around the Cenotaph have become integrated within its landscape; or, using James Young’s terminology, the

crowds of onlookers in Roberts's poem have become a part of the topographical matrix in which the Cenotaph is situated.³¹

The speaker then overhears a "plump woman" who comments, "I wouldn't stand in a queue to have my feelings harrowed" (17), a word denoting both mental distress and being farmed (perhaps for the onlookers). She then adds:

'I often think it wouldn't do
For us all to be alike.
There's some as can't,
But then, again,
There's some, you see,
As can.' (23-8).

The speaker's response to the woman is tinged with both an annoyed irony and a recognition that her final words can be recontextualized:

Beautiful,
Plump woman,
(Plump of mind as well as of body)
Beautiful is your tolerance
Of human idiosyncrasy.
When my impatient feet would tap in irritation,
When my breath would break out in abuse,
When my scornful lips would frame themselves
(At the vices,
Or at the virtues,
Of my neighbours)
Into a sneer only half pitiful,
May I remember you
And murmur with serenity,
Without intensity,
Without virulence,
'I wouldn't,
Not myself,
But then, again,
There's some, you see,
As can.' (29-49)

The speaker is clearly irritated by the plump woman's callow dismissal of the mourners at the Cenotaph, an attitude that Roberts perhaps perceives as the

standard attitude of visitors to the monument. The suggestion here, in a poem entitled “The Cenotaph” that otherwise never actually mentions the object, is perhaps that few remember the Cenotaph’s “meaning.” But the speaker of the poem does manage to recover the monument by appropriating the woman’s final words in a way that resonates upon the sacrifice being commemorated. The plump woman’s final sentence does not have a real verb, but the implied missing word is “mourn”. The speaker’s recontextualization leaves the identity of that verb more ambiguous. It is possible that the speaker is also thinking of public displays of mourning, but another possibility for the lacuna is the verb “do,” allowing those final words to be applied to the soldiers being memorialized at the Cenotaph. In this reading, the speaker of the poem uses the plump woman’s words as a vehicle to better remember those who sacrificed their lives in the war, in effect, to better fulfill the purpose of the Cenotaph. But in casting the poem in such a way, Roberts seems to acknowledge that the meaning of the Cenotaph is as much determined by the reactions to it as it is by the inherent qualities of the monument itself—the meaning of the object has become so filtered through interpretation that the Cenotaph cannot be seen in any other way. Such an implied assertion draws notice to the sheer magnitude of attenuation in this poem. The speaker is now triply distanced from the soldiers who fought the war: she is observing an observer of observers of a memorial that eschews literal representation in favor of symbolic abstraction. This process of observation is quite literally muddled further by the filters through which the observations take place: rain-streaked windows and crowds. The plump woman is clearly comforted by this distancing process, but the speaker implicitly is unsatisfied, and is left to consider the plump woman’s epigrammatic final words as a sort of monument in their own right; like the Cenotaph itself, by saying very little, these words possess a certain universality that encourages remembrance. The same could be said of the poem as a whole. With its laconism and abstraction, Ursula Roberts’s “The Cenotaph” bears a not inconsiderable resemblance to the object from which it takes a name.

Like the narrator of “The Cenotaph,” Siegfried Sassoon’s short poem “At the Cenotaph” considers the evolving hermeneutics of the Cenotaph by focusing attention on a scene around the monument rather than the monument itself. This poem was included in Sassoon’s 1933 collection *The Road to Ruin*, a slim volume that dealt primarily with the theme of pacifism.³² In “At the Cenotaph,” he imagines a diabolical figure skulking around the base of the Cenotaph attempting to undermine its “true” meaning:

I saw the Prince of Darkness, with his Staff,
Standing bare-headed by the Cenotaph:
Unostentatious and respectful, there

He stood, and offered up the following prayer.
'Make them forget, O Lord, what this Memorial
Means; their discredited ideas revive;
Breed new belief that War is purgatorial
Proof of pride and power of being alive;
Men's biologic urge to readjust
The Map of Europe, Lord of Hosts, increase;
Lift up their hearts in large destructive lust;
And crown their heads with blind vindictive Peace.'
The Prince of Darkness to the Cenotaph
Bowed. As he walked away I heard him laugh.

Sassoon's imagined devil is a figure representing deceit; he appears "unostentatious and respectful" and is "bare-headed," so that he is indistinguishable from any other visitor to the Cenotaph. The way in which Sassoon describes the prayer this devil utters has significance to the study of monuments in general, and the Cenotaph in particular, for the Prince of Darkness prays for people to "forget... what this Memorial Means." On one hand, the devil's prayer seems to assume that there is a fixed meaning to the Cenotaph, and that this meaning is something that people can "forget," a verb which is, of course, antithetical to the supposed functionality of a monument. But outside of the inscribed narrative of the poem, there is a recognition on Sassoon's part that these meanings are not fixed at all times. Recognition of the instability of the meaning of memorials does not, of course, denote satisfaction with it, and especially not for an artist of Sassoon's temperament. The potential hermeneutic fluidity of the Cenotaph is an attribute that Sassoon clearly finds discomfiting. For Sassoon, the Cenotaph "means" the remembrance of the dead and the appreciation of the peace that they helped provide. Such a meaning can be hijacked by those who want to press a more bellicose agenda and to "revive discredited ideas" about the glory and triumph of war, or it can be just ignored altogether. Of course, this poem speaks exactly to the historical moment of 1933, a time when the storm clouds of a new war are just beginning to gather. Sassoon's reference to those who "[l]ift up their hearts in large destructive lust; / And crown their heads with blind vindictive Peace" seems to refer to the overly harsh terms imposed upon the Germans at the Treaty of Versailles, while his concern about the glorification of war seem to address the rise of fascism.³³ The threat of militarism is further conveyed by the ambiguity of the first line: the Prince of Darkness's "staff" suggests both a royal scepter and the retinue of a military commander. "At the Cenotaph" stands as a bitter rumination upon the then current political climate in Europe. Perhaps Sassoon regrets that the Cenotaph is not monumental enough,

that its very emptiness is insufficient to adequately sustain a useful “meaning” over a long period of time.

If there is a commonality between the poems associated with the Cenotaph in Whitehall, it is in their recognition of a dimension to the monument that extends beyond the original events and people it was intended to commemorate. Put another way, the epistemic continua encompassed by the Cenotaph—life and death, war and peace, celebration and mourning, aggressive nationhood and liberal pacifism—are universal enough so that its locus of meaning is never made irrelevant by the passage of time. Such universality is perhaps unintentionally abetted by the design of the monument itself. The very silence that attracted so many mourners to it in July of 1919 allows the monument to be invested with personal and political meaning by onlookers today. But that silence is not complete. The Cenotaph says just enough—that pesky and tendentious adjective “glorious,” for instance—to resist being transformed into a meaningless geometric abstraction by the forgetfulness of each new generation. And perhaps it is this very quality of taciturnity that encourages the textuality of so many of the responses to the Cenotaph. From the first effusive reviews of the Cenotaph published in newspapers after its unveiling, to the work of poets seeking meaning in both the monument and the four-year mass slaughter that begat it, to the very literal inscriptions written upon the Cenotaph by contemporary activists, the Cenotaph continually demands to be rewritten for different times and circumstances.

Notes

1. The author wishes to thank Guy Rotella of Northeastern University for his advice and encouragement. The introductory chapter of his book *Castings: Monuments and Monumentality in Poems by Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, James Merrill, Derek Walcott, and Seamus Heaney* provides an excellent analysis of the multivalenced relationship between poems and monuments.
2. White, Michael and Woodward, Will. “Blair Vents Outrage at Rioters.” *The Guardian*. Wednesday May 3, 2000.
3. Historians have disputed the precise casualty numbers, but most place the number of British war dead at around 700,000 and the wounded at over 1,500,000. See Chapter 3 of Winter’s *The Great War and the British People* for an informative discussion on the difficulties of obtaining accurate casualty figures.
4. Hynes, Samuel. *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture*. New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1991, 281.
5. Winter, Jay. *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*. Cambridge; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 94.

6. King, Alex. *Memorials of the Great War in Britain: The Symbolism and Politics of Remembrance*. Oxford: Berg Publishing, 1998, 6.
7. King 131.
8. Young, James E. *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993, 9.
9. King 145.
10. Many authors have described the history of the Cenotaph, for instance, see King, Winter's *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*; Katie Trumpener's "Memories Carved in Granite: Great War Memorials and Everyday Life;" and Michele Fry's "Counter-Attack" website (1998. 1 Oct 2006, <http://www.sassoonery.demon.co.uk/>). I am particularly indebted to Ms. Fry's informative site, whose posting of the three Cenotaph poems first gave me the idea for this paper.
11. Mosse, George. *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990, 95.
12. King 144.
13. Hussey, Christopher. *The Life of Sir Edwin Lutyens*. New York: Scribner's, 1950, 392.
14. King 144.
15. "At the Cenotaph: The Salute to the Dead." *The Times*, July 21st, 1919.
16. Quoted in King 145.
17. Quoted in King 144.
18. "Armistice Day 1920." *The Times*, November 11th, 1920.
19. Quoted in Hussey 394.
20. Trumpener, Katie. "Memories Carved in Granite: Great War Memorials and Everyday Life." *PMLA* 115 (2000): 1097.
21. Winter, Jay. "Remembrance And Redemption: A Social Interpretation of War Memorials." *Constructions of Memory*, #9, Fall 1999.
22. "Symbols on the Cenotaph." *The Daily Telegraph*, December 13th, 1919.
23. "Armistice Day 1920."
24. "Armistice Day 1920."
25. Fussell, Paul. *The Great War and Modern Memory*. London: Oxford University Press, 1975, 56.
26. See the first chapter of Richard Terdman's essential *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis* for a theoretical analysis of the textual dynamic of remembrance.
27. Bergonzi, Bernard. *Heroes Twilight: A Study of the Literature of the Great War*. London: MacMillan, 1965, 134.

28. See Fussell, pp. 19-23, for a famous discussion on the impact of the Great War upon the sort of rhetoric that Binyon employs.
29. Trumpener 1099.
30. Reilly, Catherine. *Scars Upon My Heart: Women's Poetry and Verse of the First World War*. London: Virago, 1981, xxii.
31. Young 7.
32. Sternlicht, Sanford. *Siegfried Sassoon*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993, 70.
33. Thorpe, Michael. *Siegfried Sassoon: A Critical Study*. London: Oxford University Press, 1967, 60.



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