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The Last Visitor: Idiosyncratic Bereavement in Julian Barnes' WWI Story "Evermore"

As news stories inform us of the deaths of the last surviving soldiers from World War One,¹ and as the centenary of the start of the war looms merely a few years from now, there is timeliness in asking these questions: how do we remember an experience we did not live through? What do our memories owe to the dead, especially when the dead were never known to us personally? Julian Barnes' short story "Evermore" depicts "a connoisseur of grief," Miss Moss, whose half-century-long response to the death of her brother in France in 1917 defines her identity.² Her annual visits to her brother's grave and the various war memorials and cemeteries in the region near Amiens punctuate her life. Barnes' use of free indirect discourse privileges Miss Moss's consciousness to the exclusion of every other character. The narrator displays a full range of her eccentricities, yet any aesthetic distance the reader might feel from this character collapses as Barnes provokes our reflections on the questions noted above. Using a character readers may find difficult to empathize with, Barnes raises and—tentatively—answers complex questions about memory, loss, and language.

Approximately half of the British soldiers killed in the war, over 500,000 men, left no identifiable remains.³ Bodies were buried too deep in the mud, dismembered beyond recognition, or exploded into nothingness. Miss Moss, though, takes much satisfaction knowing that her brother's remains were recovered and accorded their resting place with others identified with certainty: "She was glad he was at

Cabaret Rouge, with his own headstone. Found and identified. Given known and honored burial.³ The British war-dead were not returned to their families at home, even when their remains were identified. Loved ones who survived could not walk to their village cemetery to seek consolation by communing with (or feeling themselves in the presence of) those who died in the war. They needed to cross the Channel, enter a foreign space, and carry their grief into the tidy, solemn zones of the war dead, where headstones “were lined up like dominoes on edge; beneath them, their owners were present and correct, listed, tended.”⁴ The regimental quality of her brother’s gravesite proves in a number of ways to be both comforting to Miss Moss and distressing. She finds solace in the communal quality of her grief in the earliest years after the war’s end in 1918; over time, though, her grief becomes more of a solitary sense and her actions towards others who interfere with her habits of grieving grow more defiant.

Barnes identifies this shift in her attitude early in his narrative:

At first, back then, the commonality of grief had helped: wives, mothers, sisters, comrades, an array of brass hats, and a bugler amid grassy morning mist that the feeble November sun had failed to burn away. Later, remembering Sam had changed: it became work, continuity; instead of anguish and glory, there was fierce unreasonableness, about both his death and her commemoration of it. During that period, she was hungry for the solitude and the voluptuous selfishness of grief: her Sam, her loss, her mourning, and nobody else’s similar. She admitted as much: there was no shame to it. But now, after half a century, her feelings had simply become part of her. Her grief was a calliper, necessary and supporting; she could not imagine walking without it.⁶

Initially, the visits Miss Moss made to the cemeteries in France coincided with Armistice Day ceremonies. Whatever emotional security she may have derived from being part of a cluster of mourners proved to be irrelevant, and eventually she altered her visits to avoid the November commemorations. The story provides no evidence that either while at home in England or during her visits to France in the earliest post-war years Miss Moss even spoke with any other grief-stricken individual. Apparently, and paradoxically, she appreciated “the commonality of grief” in private. Her identity as a “connoisseur of grief” metastasized decades before the 1967 half-century mark.

The story's opening phrase—"All the time"—refers to her habit of carrying to France the final three field postcards her brother, Private Sam Moss, sent from the trenches to their mother, and on the anniversary of his death she habitually opens up the little bag she carries them in to re-examine the cards. These government-issued, pre-printed cards restricted the soldier's message to a claim that he was well or in hospital, had received mail recently or would be following up with a letter of his own. The soldier was required to draw lines through the statements that did not apply and was allowed to add only a date, address, and signature. The impersonality of the cards enhances Miss Moss's appreciation of them as fetish items: "For many years she had ached at what the cards did not say; but nowadays she found something in their official impassivity which seemed proper, even if not consoling." As the imprinting on the card warns, "If anything else is added the postcard will be destroyed."⁷ Yet on his penultimate card, Sam had written a few words, and the card still arrived. For half a century, Miss Moss has pondered these words as though they comprise a code to be deciphered: "50 yds from the Germans. Posted from Trench."⁸ Unable to reconcile her memory of the "cautious and responsible boy" Sam had been with the risk taken by adding this message (the risk that the card would be destroyed), Miss Moss raises and rejects the possibility that Sam expressed a premonition of his own death. "Perhaps it was simply excitement, a desire to impress. Look how close we are."⁹

Though uncertain about what Sam intended to convey with—as far as Miss Moss knows—the final words he composed, she avoids anxiety over what seem to be significant gaps in her understanding of her brother. She is not in pursuit of who Sam was; his sense of self, his individual identity, remains thin, nearly content-less. Untroubled by efforts to recover Sam's life in the trenches and prior life at home, Miss Moss concentrates her energies on tending to her private grief. As the object of her grief, Sam is dispersed into recollections notable for their vagueness. His physical appearance is recalled by her thinking of one photo of him so impressed on her memory that she does not need to view it again. Presumably taken in the summer of 1914 after his enlistment, the photo highlights his cocky boyishness, "his dark eyes, sticky-out ears, and the jaunty smile which agreed that the fun would be all over by Christmas."¹⁰ The narrator neither takes the reader to the trenches to witness Sam in uniform, with his company, under fire, nor recounts his final home visit, perhaps altered appearance, shreds of remembered dialogues: the body of textual evidence readers of war literature expect. No childhood scenes of the two siblings together play in her mind. Miss Moss does not dwell on her memories, which is especially peculiar as the story itself concludes with concerns

about succeeding generations' loss of memory regarding the war. Can there be grief without the mind returning over and over again to the individual whose loss provokes the grief?

Only one sentence weighted with ambiguity suggests Miss Moss's regret over comments made—or not made—to Sam. During her visits at Cabaret Rouge, “She no longer talked to Sam; everything had been said decades ago. *The heart had been expressed, the apologies made, the secrets given.* She no longer wept, either; that too had stopped. But the hours she spent with him at Cabaret Rouge were the most vital of her life. They always had been.”¹¹ What did her heart express, what apologies did she need to make, and what secrets did she share with Sam? The narrator even leaves ambiguous whether the reference is to actual dialogues shared before his death in January 1917 or her graveside monologues, either delivered or silently felt. The narrative presents no evidence that she articulates to others what she recalls. In addition to maintaining the siblings' privacy, Barnes effectively isolates Miss Moss from her parents, work colleagues, and other grieving survivors.

The three field postcards were addressed not to Miss Moss but to her mother. Yet her mother makes no appearance in the story (nor does her father). Both are mentioned in one sentence that begins, “When her parents died and she inherited a small amount of money,” and continues by describing the car she purchased with this money and that she drove in France on her annual visits after she turned fifty-three. The car supports her grief-hoarding inclination, as it allows her to avoid mingling with others at bed and breakfasts—she sleeps in her car—and disclosing what may seem to others in such potential encounters that hers is a case of an obsessive necro-tourist. Driving herself “saved money; but mainly it helped her be alone with herself and Sam.”¹² If Miss Moss traveled to France with her parents or in any way shared her grief with them, it is not noted. The narrator's exclusive focus on Miss Moss avoids even a glimpse of the sadness her parents endured.

No reference is made to any field postcard Miss Moss received from Sam. Earlier postcards “had been divided up, lost perhaps.”¹³ Who else received the postcards: other siblings (none are mentioned in the story), aunts, uncles, a lover or fiancé? No reference is made to any letter Sam sent, let alone any private correspondence directed to his sister. This heightens the suspicion that Miss Moss may be devoted as much to her grief as to any specific memories of her brother. While the narrator acknowledges that Miss Moss's grief is selfish, the fervent quality of it attempts to compensate for the cultural apathy, the diminished collective memory, that disappoints her so fiercely.

Visiting Thiepval provokes such thoughts for Miss Moss. Commemorating the dead British soldiers from the violence along the Somme River, the tall red brick memorial stands alien-looking above the tree-line and surrounded by the French countryside. One prominent feature is its multiple arch formation, and Miss Moss limits her interpretation of it to two possibilities: “An arch of triumph, yes, but of what kind, she wondered: the triumph over death, or the triumph *of* death?”¹⁴ Miss Moss could, but does not, take satisfaction in the fact that it is clearly not an arch of triumph over Germany. No British First World War memorial is boastful in that way.¹⁵ The memorial avoids both allegorical and figurative form, yet it achieves a profound response by visitors who do not share Miss Moss’s understandable personal sense of disappointment. Jay Winter asserts that Thiepval “is not a cry against war, but an extraordinary statement in abstract language about mass death and the impossibility of triumphalism.”¹⁶

The names of over 73,000 dead and missing soldiers are carved in stone, and Miss Moss must feel herself immersed in the tall columns of names, each listed in its own regiment. “73,367: beyond a certain point, the numbers became uncountable and diminishing in effect. The more dead, the less proportionate the pain. 73,367: even she, with all her expertise in grief, could not imagine that.”¹⁷ The number of dead commemorated at this one site defies comprehension, let alone the number of siblings, parents, and other loved ones who mourned the loss of these tens of thousands of men. In his study of the ethical conundrum of responding to statistical accounts of war deaths, Dominic Rainsford asserts a principle that seems to identify Miss Moss’s position:

[the survivor’s] trauma may constitute the world. It is entirely personal, and yet it colors every aspect of experience. The real theater of trauma, therefore, is within the individual sufferer; it cannot be distributed; it is unitary and absolute; it makes no sense, in terms that anyone can actually absorb, to talk of multiple cases of the same kind of suffering; it has already reached its maximum, once and for all, within the individual sufferer, which is the only place where it exists.¹⁸

The “horror” she feels over individual lives swallowed up into “the eternal regiment of the missing” she counteracts as best as she can by focusing on one name listed in the “Addenda,” one of the soldiers “hauled back tardily from oblivion.”¹⁹

‘Malcolm H. W. The Cameronians (Sco. Rif.) served as Wilson H.’ An addendum and a corrigendum all in one. When she had first discovered him, it had pleased her to imagine his story. Was he under age? Did he falsify his name to escape home, to run away from some girl? Was he wanted for a crime, like those fellows who joined the French Foreign Legion? She did not really want an answer, but she liked to dream a little about this man who had first been deprived of his identity and then of his life.²⁰

When older, after she has been employed for many years as a lexicographer, she avoids such imaginative questions and resolves the mystery to her satisfaction. His true name must be H. Wilson Malcolm, and initially it was transcribed wrong: “That would make sense: man is only a clerical error corrected by death.”²¹ This phrase, slightly modified and applied to Miss Moss in the story’s final paragraph, stands out for its emotionless, calculating quality.

Miss Moss does not foresee that her grief will prompt some eventual consolation or reward. Though of Jewish background, she does not anticipate an afterlife reunion with Sam. She does not adopt in the first decades after the war’s end an expansive political or moral sensibility and presume that the presence of so many memorials and graves may operate as a warning against a repetition of such mechanized slaughter. Nor does she look backward to the role of the war-planners whom others blame for the war. To appreciate the uniqueness of her position, consider these crucial contrasting perspectives on the meaning of First World War memorials.

Geoff Dyer states, “After the Great War people had little clear idea of why it had been fought or what had been accomplished except for the loss of millions of lives. This actually made the task of memorializing the war relatively easy.”²² Though this assumption does simplify somewhat the debates in England over the memorials, Dyer raises a relevant point about the construction of the memorials, and this seems to have affected their reception, too, as the meaning of the memorials themselves were contested. Immediately after the war’s end, the work of the War Graves Commission was temporarily stalled by a debate in Parliament. One side, favoring exhumation and repatriation of bodies to England, a request urged by some surviving family members able to bear the financial obligation, questioned the value of any kind of memorial, regardless of its specific design or the language inscribed on it. Philip Longworth summarized this appeal: “great deeds had been done by individuals and by armies, and those done by the British armies in France

and Flanders were imperishable.” MP Robert Cecil, implicitly championing archivists and the role of historians’ research to prompt the collective memory for generations, argued that the achievements of British armies “do not depend on memorials. Their memory remains and always will remain. [. . .] It is a delusion and a snare that you can affect the memory of deeds like these by anything you do in stone.” Winston Churchill responded in stirring, triumphal language, though with an over-confident degree of foresight: “there is no reason at all why, in periods as remote from our own as we ourselves are from the Tudors, the graveyards in France of this Great War shall not remain an abiding and supreme memorial to the efforts and the glory of the British Army, and the sacrifices made in the great cause.”²³

Miss Moss never consoles herself with thoughts shrouded in such inflated patriotic rhetoric as “the great cause.” Such a sentiment would flatten the specificity and intensity of her personal grief. Though she recoils from certain memorials, such as Thiepval, she fears handing over the task of memorializing to archivists. Her position remains distinct from both Cecil’s defiant plea and Churchill’s demand for conformity.

Nearly ten years after the war’s end, Siegfried Sassoon responded to the memorial outside Brussels, the Menin Gate, where the names of 54,899 men are engraved, with sarcastic anger fired in multiple directions in his poem “On Passing the New Menin Gate.” Through this gate, “tens of thousands of British soldiers marched to their deaths in the Third Battle of Ypres, popularly known as Passchendaele.”²⁴ Thus the site seems perfectly appropriate for visitors to remember the British war dead. Though in other poems Sassoon elevates the soldiers above all non-combatants (and in “The Redeemer” even adopts the conventional patriotic view of the soldier as Christ-like), in this poem the dead are “unheroic, [. . .] doomed, conscripted, unvictorious [. . .] dim defenders.” Though these terms sound like Sassoon has been drained of all comradely emotions, the poem attempts to mark the chasm between the dead and the inadequacy of this memorial: “Who will remember, passing through this Gate, / The unheroic Dead who fed the guns? / [...] Crudely renewed, the Salient holds its own. / Paid are its dim defenders by this pomp.” Implicitly, Sassoon’s contempt is directed at the War Graves Commission responsible for Menin Gate, the non-combatants who will visit this memorial, and the governments of both sides whose antagonisms provoked and continued the war, as the phrase the “sepulchre of crime” designates the blame shared by both British and German authorities: “Well might the Dead who struggled in the slime / Rise and deride this sepulchre of crime.”²⁵

Unlike Sassoon, Miss Moss avoids anger regarding motives for the war or the conduct of the war itself. Her self-assigned role prevents her from investing in such concerns: “she herself no longer had arguments to deploy or positions to hold. She valued only what she had experienced at the time: an outline of strategy, the conviction of gallantry, and the facts of mourning.”²⁶ If she were to travel to Menin’s memorial, she may feel the same revulsion that Thiepval prompts on her annual visits, with the dead named but their remains unaccounted for. While at Thiepval, only a hint of disgust similar to that Sassoon expressed over Menin Gate emerges in Barnes’ narrative of Miss Moss, and it is quickly suppressed: “Something about the way they had vanished and the way they were now reclaimed was more than she could bear: as if an army which had thrown them away so lightly now chose to own them again so gravely. She was not sure whether this was the case. She claimed no understanding of military matters. All she claimed was an understanding of grief.”²⁷ As the story unfolds, we learn that Miss Moss challenges the War Graves Commission with idiosyncratic demands. But, unlike Sassoon, she avoids criticizing from a philosophical position the purposes the memorial could serve. Also, unlike other veterans who disagreed with Sassoon, she avoids championing the memorial as a site that could serve a meaningful public function.

Sassoon’s fellow soldier-poet (and respected friend) Edmund Blunden, writing forty years after Sassoon’s harsh poetic complaint, avoided the grandiosity of Churchill’s argument, insisting only “that the dead still speak, not only through the fine memorials which have been offered them but—because they dared to die for their friends.”²⁸ Blunden promotes an a-political, purely personal motive that elevates the dead. In sharp contrast to Sassoon’s belief in his 1928 poem, a quiet heroism universal in its appeal, detached from its historical context, should impress all visitors of the British war cemeteries. Though Miss Moss makes a strained effort to connect with her brother’s best friend from the trenches, she does not presume, following Blunden’s generalization, that Sam died for his friend. Blunden also defined a more expansive moral value in the cemeteries and the ways in which the dead continue to speak: “a war cemetery, with all its inscriptions for youths in the main dead ere their prime, is the chief sermon against war.”²⁹ How could Blunden maintain his belief in such gentle goodwill decades after World War Two? Such an idealistic hope never was felt by Miss Moss, before or after the Second World War. Blunden does worry over declining interest by visitors to the cemeteries, and with this concern he echoes a fear that Miss Moss develops.

Jay Winter and Antoine Prost have evaluated crucial “debates and controversies” surrounding World War I; they urge that we not “ignore the thousands of veterans

who fervently commemorated war in order not to inflict it on their children.”³⁰ In regard to the overall purpose of memorials, Miss Moss maintains a neutral position between the disgust expressed by Sassoon over their inadequacy on both a literal and metaphysical scale and the corrective purpose other veterans like Blunden presumed they could achieve. Miss Moss never reflects on the loss of Sam in the wider political and moral context of the war as the ultimate in irrational conduct nor in the hope of “never again.”

Miss Moss clings to the possibility that the memorials will inspire grief to be handed down from one generation to the next, much like Christian cathedrals “provoke some response equally beyond the rational.” She hopes that the apathetic child she sees at Thiepval represents a generation who will grow up “to understand what those from whom they had gone missing knew, and to feel her loss afresh.”³¹ That is, Miss Moss does not presume that the 73,000-plus soldiers’ personalities will somehow be recovered but that her sense of loss will be understood and passed on. Her fervently held view is that the memorials will reinforce the very private function that they serve for her.

Remarkably, the passage just quoted is followed by a brief account of Miss Moss’s two year marriage to Denis, the best friend of her deceased brother. The opening sentence of this account alters the meaning of the quoted passage: “Perhaps this was one reason she had married Denis.” Note, though, that the previous passage offered two reasons: “to understand what those from whom they had gone missing knew” would be the first. But Denis tells her nothing. The description of him sounds like he may require long-term institutional care: he dribbles, has “fits,” and fails to comprehend either his past or present. Despite these inabilities, Miss Moss projects on him a meaning for his mental condition that she finds satisfying: “He had guilt and pain, but no specific memory of what he felt guilty about. She knew: Denis had been hit by shrapnel and taken back down the line to hospital without a farewell to his best pal Jewy Moss, leaving Sammy to be killed during the next day’s Hun bombardment.” Could she really have believed that Denis would be restored to health and capable of sharing with her his memories of Sam? From the brief description of Denis that we are provided that idea sounds preposterous. (Even if it did prove true, that is a thin foundation for a marriage.) The second reason, “to feel her loss afresh,” cannot be achieved, Miss Moss believes, if she remains married to Denis. So she “returned him to his sisters. From now on, she told them, they should look after Denis and she would look after Sam.”³²

Barnes’ narrative technique of free indirect discourse certainly challenges the readers’ ability to empathize with Miss Moss, perhaps more intensely in this passage

about her marriage than any other passage. Readers may very well comprehend the fierce grip grief has on Miss Moss. But how can a reader empathize with a character who resists human engagement? Miss Moss not only avoids intimacy with another but also friendship and its diluted cousin acquaintanceship. Blakey Vermeule defines the effect this technique has on character depiction: “Free indirect discourse holds the narrative voice somewhere in between the first and third person. But it is not benign. Writers use it to slice the heads off their characters. [. . .] No character ever comes off well when free indirect discourse tries to lend a hand.”³³ Miss Moss’s reasons for marrying are not examined further than the alleged explanation noted above. A measured degree of guilt for her unconsummated connection is acknowledged: “All she could say in her defence was that it was the only time she had behaved with such pure selfishness: she had married him for her own reasons, and discarded him for her own reasons. Some might say that the rest of her life had been selfish too, devoted as it was entirely to her own commemorations; but this was a selfishness that hurt nobody else.”³⁴ Will readers’ views divide at this point, with some emphasizing her selfishness and recoiling from her (mentally sending the character to the guillotine, in accord with Vermeule’s description)? Or will they excuse Miss Moss by placing her marital decisions in the context of her post-war grief?

The ability of readers to empathize with a character depends, certainly, upon identification with the character. In her thorough analysis of this complex issue, where psychology, aesthetics, and history intersect, in *Empathy and the Novel*, Suzanne Keen cautiously offers many hypotheses and few assertions. But note one of the latter: “Some studies suggest that people with very empathetic dispositions respond more positively to members of out-groups than less empathetic people do, but for most people, perceived similarity encourages empathy.”³⁵ Because “Evermore” was published 80 years after World War I, essentially no readers of Barnes’ story will have grieved over the loss of a brother in this war. While many readers would have experienced loss of a loved one, even a loved one who died relatively young, as Sam did, this would be minimal criteria for “perceived similarity.” Miss Moss has closed off her life from other human intimacies and shaped her identity around her grief: this should distinguish her from most readers. Though not literally a member of an “out-group”—even if in the first fifty years after the war ended there were hordes of isolated solitary mourners, their very solitariness disqualifies them from constituting any group—Miss Moss’s eccentricities operate like small barriers that readers must overcome to empathize with her.

Keen asserts that character identification serves as just one possible path a reader may take to empathize with a character: setting, genre, narrative techniques offer additional paths. Free indirect discourse, Keen concludes, is one technique that “overrides the resistance to empathizing often displayed by members of an in-group regarding the emotional states of others marked out as different.”⁶ Does Barnes’ use of this technique override readers’ resistance?

Denis’ speech is limited to one word repeated in his sleep: “*Hip! hip! hip!*” Denis provides the only directly quoted statement of anyone Miss Moss interacts with: Barnes’ narrative choice enfolded third-person into first-person while highlighting that Miss Moss’s devotion of her life to grief isolates her from others, by choice. Denis’ sisters view Miss Moss with “silent astonishment.”⁷ Perhaps as they take back their damaged brother they envy the “cleanness” of Miss Moss’ grief: she was spared the task of providing care for a brother so damaged in mind. No interactions are mentioned with the colleagues at the Press where she works on the publication of a Dictionary. Her grief-connected habits are not a subject of direct discussion with Miss Moss (though we may only wonder what is said by her word-loving colleagues about her). For the many years she took her holiday time to coincide with Armistice Day ceremonies in France, her boss “had the delicacy not to ask for details.”⁸ If Barnes succeeds in eliciting his readers’ empathy for this character who has shut herself off from others, his story may be an extreme example of the effectiveness of free indirect discourse.

Miss Moss spars with the War Graves Commission, a faceless bureaucracy that resists every one of her proposals. She urges that the inscription centered on the arch at Thiepval expressing a grateful attitude to the French and British armies be re-chiseled so the word “RECONNAISSANT” remains unbroken, not be divided so that NAISSANT appears alone: “it introduced the notion of birth on to this monument to death. She had written to the War Graves Commission about it, many years ago, and had been assured that the proper procedures had been followed. They told *her* that!”⁹ Three times she has requested that her ashes be spread at Cabaret Rouge. The Commission refused permission for her to sleep beside Sam’s grave on the eve of Armistice Day--or any other time. (Miss Moss seeks some degree of intimacy with her brother as well as a physical demonstration that she is not a tourist on holiday.) The yellow tulip bulbs she secretly planted on Sam’s grave were uprooted in her absence. Unhappy with the coarse French grass blanketing Sam’s grave, Miss Moss petitioned the Commission to spread English turf instead. Rebuffed again, she engaged in “transgressive gardening” after dark,¹⁰ replacing a square yard of French turf with English turf brought from home. This last effort

to individualize Sam's grave, to overcome the anonymity of the appearance of his gravesite, and to distinguish her own routines of grief, literalizes the sentiment of the octet opening Rupert Brooke's well-known sonnet "The Soldier."

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is forever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England's, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.⁴¹

One commentator refers to Brooke's "creepy brand of dirt-magic," to his fantasies of "patriotic composting."⁴² Miss Moss cannot bring her brother home, but she can bring a square yard of home soil to share with him.

At some point after World War II ended, on one of her very early morning visits, Miss Moss found her brother's grave and the graves of the only two other Jewish men buried at Cabaret Rouge desecrated by feces; she "gave the caretaker the rough edge of her tongue." Her accusations sound irrational, again making it difficult for the reader to empathize with her.⁴³ Though he's not quoted, the caretaker admits that other desecrations have occurred, "but he always tried to arrive before anyone else and remove the signs. She told him that he might be honest but he was clearly idle. She blamed the second war. She tried not to think about it again."⁴⁴ The reference to "the second war" relates not only to anti-Semitism but her hostility towards those who memorialize the dead of World War II at the sacrifice of remembering the dead from the war that has shaped her identity.

Memorials for World War II crowd the geographic landscape that the First World War's memorials had dominated, and acts of remembrance for World War II crowd the mental and emotional space that Miss Moss hoped would always be reserved for the dead of the First World War. Additionally, she excuses Sam and his comrades for any political complicity in fomenting World War II, as she knows some retrospective accounts have done. Various historical accounts assert that the Germans viewed their World War One memorials as incentives for vengeance. The British war memorial architect Fabian Ware spoke publicly of the large scale peaceful attitudes that cemeteries and memorials could serve. But his interpretation was not shared: "War cemeteries were reminders of German heroism and of a shame that

must be avenged; they were becoming expressions of a Nazi Wagnerian Valhalla mystique.³⁵ Historian George Mosse argued that both England and Germany adopted a cultural view of the “Myth of the War Experience” in which the violence of World War One was deemed both meaningful and sacred. Though its meaning and its sacred quality were corrupted in Germany “where it informed most postwar politics. Germany’s defeat, the traumatic passage from war to peace, and the stress on the social fabric, all worked to strengthen nationalism as a civic faith and with it the Myth of the War Experience.”³⁶ Winter and Prost contemplate the “shadow of 1933” falling on both the German and British cemeteries of World War One soldiers. “In Mosse’s hands, remembering the fallen was part of the cultural preparation for the second round.” But they are not convinced of this: “It is clear that veterans of the 1914-1918 war took very different positions on the meaning of commemorative activity. The stakes of this argument are high: for if we see the ‘brutalization’ of the Great War as a pathway leading from Verdun to Auschwitz, we ignore the thousands of veterans who fervently commemorated war in order not to inflict it on their children.”³⁷ Miss Moss defends her brother’s military service and unambiguously rejects any retrospective blame thrust upon him. She fears that the proximity of the two world wars both soils and erases the value of Sam’s death.

[S]he hated the way in which the Great War was held responsible for its successor, as if Sam, Denis and all the East Lancashires who fell were partly the cause of that business. Sam had done what he could—he had served and died—and was punished all too quickly with becoming subservient in memory. Time did not behave rationally. Fifty years back to the Somme; a hundred beyond that to Waterloo; four hundred more to Agincourt, or Azincourt as the French preferred. Yet these distances had now been squeezed closer to one another. She blamed it on 1939-1945.⁴⁸

With her life shaped by her personal rituals of grief, Miss Moss bitterly recognizes the failure of others to engage in, as she sees it, the less challenging act of occasional remembering. As a lexicographer, especially alert to changes in language, she desires that the “ubiquitous inscription” on First World War memorials—“Their name liveth for evermore”—derived from the passage in the Apocryphal work Ecclesiasticus that begins, “Let us now praise famous men” (chapter 44) be adopted by her culture literally. In her role as copy editor, she resists, without success, her Dictionary’s definition of the noun evermore, which deflates the term’s quality of long-lastingness and undermines, she thinks, the ubiquitous inscription, even

implying that collective memory is mutable: “she preferred sense I: ‘For all future time.’ Their name liveth for all future time. No morning dawns, no night returns, but what we think of thee. This is what the inscription meant. But the Dictionary had marked sense I as ‘*Obs exc. arch.*’ Obsolete except archaic. No, oh certainly not, no.”⁴⁹ With her conviction that language defines cultural attitudes, she fears that the dictionary’s definition contributes to the dilution of Britain’s collective grief response.

If Miss Moss’s grief is so private, so solitary, as the use of free indirect discourse indicates, why does she care what others remember? Why is she unable to accept that when she dies no one—presumably—will continue to mourn for Sam? Why is that inevitability regarding Private Moss so difficult to accept? The story implies that she has cut herself off from the grief of her parents and the grief of Denis’ sisters; she has refused to share her feelings with her work colleagues, and unfairly scolds the caretaker of her brother’s resting place. She has established no bonds with the living. She never confronts the emptiness of her own life, never thinks that her brother’s “sacrifice” created a future for her that she has misspent. Even so, readers disturbed by her, who feel superior to her, may find that her depth of cultural insight at the story’s end trumps their lack of empathy with her. Vermeule asserts that the free indirect style serves as “the mechanism through which personal and collective values are sorted out and aligned. It is subjective and objective, private and public.”⁵⁰ “Evermore” provides evidence of the truth of this claim.

Earlier in the story Miss Moss had been prompted by her reaction to a child visiting Thiepval to speculate on whether there is a collective memory passed down from one generation to the next. As the story closes, Miss Moss foresees a collective *loss* of memory. Reflecting on Cabaret Rouge and the other cemeteries she has visited so loyally for half a century, she presumes that soon they will be plowed up, despite assurances to the contrary from various government officials. She realizes that the last of the soldiers who served will soon be dead, and in another few generations anyone who ever knew anyone who served will also be dead. The grim foresight of Miss Moss runs parallel to Julian Barnes’ own closing thoughts on the nothingness of death as stated in his 2008 philosophical memoir *Nothing To Be Frightened Of*: “It doesn’t matter what they put on your tomb. In the hierarchy of the dead it is visitor numbers that count. Is there anything sadder than an unvisited grave?”⁵¹ If we refuse to take this as a rhetorical question, we might assert that what is even sadder would be to visit the cemeteries and memorials as a tourist unperturbed by the sheer weight of grief that survivors, like Miss Moss, carried through their lives.

Barnes' depiction of Miss Moss reminds us of the a-political and immediate pathos the burial sites provoked for those who were intimate with the dead. For later generations, the British soldiers from World War One who are settled in foreign soil will become disputed property in accounts of the motives for and strategy during the war. The national memory passed on through the twenty-first century may focus somewhat vaguely on the meaninglessness of such incomprehensible loss. As Miss Moss speculates that the cemeteries will eventually be ploughed up, she wondered, "What if memory-grafting did not work, or the memories themselves were deemed shameful?"³² The historian Dan Todman notes that by using various data banks, modern visitors to the cemeteries may determine at least the general location of their ancestors (whom they never knew): this "imaginative connection to the war through its long list of fatalities," these "half-formed or confusing" emotional links, ensures "a continued passionate engagement in controversies over how these men died." A conflict will remain between this "legacy of pride in individual accomplishment" by those who imagine the role of their ancestors in the war and feel a bond across historical eras and "the negative mythology of the war as a whole," the perspective of the war viewed through the lens of "regret, betrayal and failure."³³

Miss Moss predicts that within the next generation from our own today, with the aid of priests and politicians, the archivists will take over and the grief the war provoked will be forgotten. "Might there be one last fiery glow of remembering? [. . .] [E]ven as she pronounced herself an antique, her memories seemed to sharpen. If this happened to the individual, could it not also happen on a national scale? Might there not be, at some point in the first decades of the twenty-first century, one final moment, lit by evening sun, before the whole thing was handed over to the archivists?"³⁴ The story's final paragraphs do not adequately answer the question of what the living owe to the dead who were never known to us personally. But no adequate answer, no truthful answer, exists. The final paragraphs of "Evermore," though, do achieve an unusual degree of rhetorical and ethical force despite the reader's inability to empathize with the character whose life has been consumed by such crucial philosophical concerns.

Notes

1. See, for example, John Burns, "Harry Patch, the Last of Britain's Army Veterans of World War I, is Dead at 111," *New York Times*, July 26, 2009. >www.nytimes.com/2009/07/26/world/Europe/26patch.html<.

2. The narrator withholds the character's first name. This seems especially ironic considering that a number of the memorial sites she visits achieve their provocative power by the sheer excessive number of names of the missing and dead inscribed in stone. Knowing the names of the dead was considered a hedge against anonymity and a tribute.
3. Philip Longworth, *The Unending Vigil* (London: Constable, 1967), 56.
4. Barnes' story first appeared in *The New Yorker* (Nov. 13, 1995) and in his short story collection *Cross Channel* (1996). My quotes and page references are from the slightly revised and more accessible version in *The Penguin Book of First World War Stories*, eds. Barbara Korte and Ann-Marie Einhaus (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 345-361. This quote is from 347.
5. *Ibid.*, 347.
6. *Ibid.*, 348-349.
7. *Ibid.*, 345.
8. *Ibid.*, 346.
9. *Ibid.*, 346-347.
10. *Ibid.*, 345.
11. *Ibid.*, 357; emphasis added.
12. *Ibid.*, 355.
13. *Ibid.*, 345.
14. *Ibid.*, 349.
15. Jay Winter comments on the "relative freedom from expressions of anger and triumph" in war memorials. "[E]ven in the victorious powers, the faces of noble soldiers sculpted in stone in hundreds of village squares only occasionally express exhilaration. Fatigue, and a reflective acceptance of duty and fate, are etched into their features." Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge UP, 1995), 94.
16. *Ibid.*, 107.
17. Barnes, "Evermore," 350.
18. Dominic Rainsford, "Numbering Pain: Testimony, Quantification, and Need," *Discourse*, 25, no.1 & 2 (2003): 21.
19. Barnes, "Evermore," 349, 350.
20. *Ibid.*, 351.
21. *Ibid.*, 351.

22. Geoff Dyer, *The Missing of the Somme* (London: Phoenix Press, 1994), 11. The decades'-long efforts of the War Graves Commission, as documented in Philip Longworth's *The Unending Vigil*, would indicate that identifying the dead and missing, constructing the memorial sites, agreeing on the language to be used at the sites, and other key issues were never easy. Dyer's point, though, refers to the civilians' inadequate comprehension of the motives for war or, we might say, the inadequate justification for the war itself.
23. Longworth, *The Unending Vigil*, 54.
24. Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present* (Cambridge UP, 2005), 186.
25. Siegfried Sassoon, *The War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), 153.
26. Barnes, "Evermore," 348.
27. *Ibid.*, 349-350.
28. Edmund Blunden, "Introduction," *The Unending Vigil*, by Philip Longworth (London: Constable, 1967), xxv.
29. *Ibid.*, xxiv.
30. Winter, Prost, *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present*, 181.
31. Barnes, "Evermore," 353.
32. *Ibid.*, 353.
33. Blakey Vermeule, *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?* (Johns Hopkins UP, 2010), 72.
34. Barnes, "Evermore," 353.
35. Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (Oxford UP, 2007), 173.
36. *Ibid.*, x.
37. Barnes, "Evermore," 353.
38. *Ibid.*, 355.
39. *Ibid.*, 352.
40. "Holy Relics: Venerated Detritus," *Vortex* 3, 2001. 3/12/2010. >www.vortex.uwe.ac.uk/relics.htm<.
41. Rupert Brooke, *The Collected Poems of Rupert Brooke* (NY: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1961), 105.
42. Terry Castle, *Courage, Mon Amie* (London: London Review of Books, 2003), 72-73.

43. In light of Longworth's detailed accounts of cemetery caretakers working without any personal comforts in the earliest years after the war's end and risking their lives at the start of the Second World War, Miss Moss's antagonistic attitude towards the caretaker is remarkable. See *The Unending Vigil*, 62-64, 166-169.
44. Barnes, "Evermore," 359.
45. Longworth, *The Unending Vigil*, 158.
46. George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (Oxford UP, 1990), 7, 10.
47. Winter, Prost, *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present*, 181.
48. Barnes, "Evermore," 356.
49. *Ibid.*, 352.
50. Vermeule, *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?*, 190.
51. Julian Barnes, *Nothing To Be Frightened Of* (NY: Knopf, 2008), 241.
52. Barnes, "Evermore," 360.
53. Dan Todman, *The Great War: Myth and Memory* (London: Hambledon and London, 2005), 72, 219, 221.
54. Barnes, "Evermore," 361.



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