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'The pasture of rats': Verminous Bodies of the First World War

As I started this project, I became very interested in warfare as degenerative and the soldiers' body as the site of this phenomenon. Whilst any analysis of the First World War will be inevitably drawn to spectacular violence against the body in the form of bombs and bullets, my research explores the slower violence of environment, disease, and the effects of verminous animals. Bodies were explosively dismembered, but they were also worn down by disease, eaten away both alive and dead by vermin. This threat of consumption by nonhumans forms part of what I describe as "the metabolism of the battlefield": the general assimilation of bodies into the trench environment as they are sucked into mud, fed upon by lice, left to rot and their remains consumed by rats and flies. Whilst no-man's land and the trenches would be invested with a certain malicious character, I foreground verminous animals as the chief agents of degradation in soldier writing. They are presented both as a ceaseless, undifferentiated mass of irritation and destruction, but also frequently as malign or indifferent individuals, providing an object around which wartime anxieties could be expressed; foremost being the transformation and decomposition of the soldiering body. This recurrent concern marks what Sarah Cole describes as 'the body's devolution from idealized whole to broken ruin, from protected and nurtured to torn and abandoned'¹ under the forces of warfare. I suggest that this devolution of the body takes three distinct but overlapping forms: the sick and wounded, the dead, and the edible.

The sick and wounded

The first category was a significant object of fear amongst soldiers, with the threat of amputation looming particularly large. In Richard Aldington's

¹ Cole, Sarah. *Modernism, Male Friendship, and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) p. 8

Death of a Soldier (1929), the novel's central character Winterbourne ruminates on this fear:

Left hand or foot. Live a cripple. No, not that, not that, my God!
Come back whole, or not at all.²

Winterbourne exhibits both a contemporary disdain for the physically disabled and the very real anxiety surrounding post-war amputees and their place in civilian life. Joanna Bourke and Julie Anderson have written extensively on this issue:

Men could be able-bodied: fortified, forceful, vigorous. Yet, their bodies could also be mangled, freshly torn from the war and competing for economic and emotional resources with civilians.³

The amputation site – the stump - became the nexus for anxiety surrounding its failure to heal, its proneness to infection and the personal and social issues surrounding its acceptance by those forced to experience its altered function. [...] In addition to the issues brought about by their new physicality, and their vulnerable stumps, the ex-servicemen with an amputation had to come to terms with the way that they were viewed. They were looked upon, not as fine specimens of manhood, representing the British nation, but as patients, their bodies fit for being stared at by doctors, limb fitters and a curious public.⁴

Illness too was rampant due to both appalling conditions and the ubiquity of lice, fleas, ticks, and rats. The proliferation of the louse was a particular problem. Contemporary epidemiological studies would find that:

² Aldington, Richard. *Death of a Hero* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1929) p. 287

³ Bourke, Joanna. *Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War*. (London: Reaktion Books, 1996) p. 11

⁴ Anderson, Julie. "Jumpy Stump": amputation and trauma in the first world war' in *First World War Studies*, 6:1, (2015) pp. 9-19 (pp. 11-12)

[...] 95% of soldiers were infested with an average lousiness of 20 lice per man [...] 5% [had] 100-300 lice each.⁵

This ubiquity was accompanied by an acceleration in disease transmission, the ingestion of louse faeces and intestines were the chief means by which disease was transmitted, causing the general condition of trench fever.⁶ Louse-borne typhus would prove so destructive on the Eastern Front as to necessitate a six-month ceasefire in 1915.⁷

The Dead

The First World War would fundamentally alter the relationship of soldiers and civilians to corpses. Erin Edwards's *The Modernist Corpse: Posthumanism and the Posthumous* (2018) accounts for this change as an integral aspect of modernity:

[...] the early twentieth century's increasingly capacious media archives provided ways to reanimate the voices and images of the dead, troubling the boundary not only between the living and the dead but also between the human and the technical media forms that reproduced the voice and image with such fidelity.⁸

After a brief period of invisibility, dead bodies were back in the public eye. Photographic journalism would bring into view scenes of destruction and mass death in an unprecedented manner. For soldiers, the first-hand spectacle of mass death was transformative. From the moment of death through to total decomposition, soldiers witnessed and ruminated on the fate of their own bodies. In *Her Privates We* (1930), Frederic Manning

⁵ Pennington, Hugh. 'The impact of infectious disease in war time: a look back at WW1' in *Future Microbiology*, Vol. 14, No. 3, (Online January, 2019) pp. 165-168 (p. 166) Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.2217/fmb-2018-0323>> [Accessed: 09/06/2022]

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Edwards, Erin. E. *The Modernist Corpse: Posthumanism and the Posthumous* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2018) pp. 1-2

graphically describes the moment of death and subsequent decomposition:

A man dies and stiffens into something like a wooden dummy, at which one glances for a second with a furtive curiosity. Suddenly he remembered the dead in Trones Wood, the unburied dead with whom one lived, he might say, cheek by jowl, Briton and Hun impartially confounded, festering, fly-blown corruption, the pasture of rats, blackening in the heat, swollen with distended bellies, or shrivelling away within their mouldering rags[.]⁹

This passage evokes what I have earlier termed the “metabolism of the battlefield”. Rats and flies feast upon the flesh of dead men, but they are also broken down by environmental and bacterial forces. The process of staying alive itself is presented as a battle against a hungry landscape:

Nothing was solid in the oozing, wretched, ravaged, ragged landscape of which I too was a part, standing there like a beggar at the threshold of the world, soaked, slimy and coated with crap from head to foot[.]¹⁰

In Winterbourne’s hallucinated memories, where images and episodes met and collided like superimposed films, that Spring was mud. He seemed to spend his time plodging through interminable muddy trenches, up to the ankles, up to the calves, up to the knees[.]¹¹

They became almost indistinguishable from the mud in which they lived.¹²

⁹ Manning, Frederic. *Her Privates We* (London: Pan Books, 1967) p. 25

¹⁰ Cendrars, Blaise. *The Bloody Hand* trans. Graham MacLachlan (Pont-Aven: Vagamundo, 2015) p. 57

¹¹ Aldington, p. 344

¹² Manning, pp. 225-226

This preoccupation with mud was sourced in a legitimate fear, as Georgia McWhinney records:

[...] some men slipped into the deep mud and drowned, the weight of their kits sucking them down. [...] [mud] meant disease, drowning and death. It covered soldiers' boots and seeped inside them[.]¹³

These incidents serve as literal moments of what Erin Edwards describes as 'becoming-earth'¹⁴, a phrase borrowed from Rosi Braidotti, this being the process:

[...] through which the human decomposes and becomes part of the large ecological network of natural and technological forces within which it is embedded.¹⁵

It is through images of being consumed and metabolised that the process of becoming-earth is examined in war writing. I argue that, as discrete and conscious beings, verminous animals emerge as the agents of this process, linking the metaphor of consumption to the body's literal edibility.

The edible

In examining the edible body, there is a distinction to be made between being "eaten alive" and "eaten dead". The problem of being eaten alive is clearly associated with the louse, this is graphically narrated in the following passage from *Death of a Hero*:

One day when he entered he found another occupant, an artilleryman. This person was carefully examining his grey flannel

¹³ McWhinney, Georgia. 'Getting Cold Feet in the First World War: Leaky Boots, Trench Foot and Vernacular Medicine Among British Soldiers' in *Social History of Medicine* Vol. 34, No. 3 (August, 2021) pp. 895-915 (p. 896)

¹⁴ Edwards, p. 2

¹⁵ Ibid.

shirt; and such portions of his body as were exposed to view were covered with small bloody blotches. Some horrid skin disease, Winterbourne surmised. He attended to his own urgent private affairs. "Still terribly cold," he ventured.

"Muckin' cold," said the artilleryman, continuing absorbedly the mysterious search in his shirt.

"Those are nasty skin eruptions you have."

"It's them muckin' chats. Billet's fair lousy with 'em."

Chats? Lousy? Ah, of course, the artilleryman was lousy. So lousy he had been bitten all over, and had scratched himself raw.

[...]

Winterbourne departed from the lousy artilleryman with a new preoccupation in life - to remain one of the chatless as long as possible. It was not many weeks, however, before he too became resigned to the louse as an inevitable war comrade.¹⁶

Winterbourne's confusion of the lice with 'some horrid skin disease'¹⁷ betrays his ignorance, but also neatly links lice with their accompanying contagion. The inevitability of infestation establishes louse populations as an irresistible force; though a soldier might "chat" hundreds of lice a day, their numbers will always recover. Winterbourne's aversion to lice echoes a eugenic urge throughout *Death of a Hero*, with Winterbourne describing soldiers as 'a sacrifice to over-breeding'¹⁸ with warfare utilised as a means of population control. Faced with mass death, Winterbourne asks:

After all, did it matter so much? Yes, did it matter? What were a few million human animals more or less? Why agonise about it?¹⁹

Whilst the overlaying of human and nonhuman masses is an obvious eugenic strategy, Winterbourne's disturbing dialogues also betray a general aversion to "masses" common in modernist literature. The fear of

¹⁶ Aldington, pp. 325-326

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 277-279

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 297

being metabolised here takes on a new meaning, from the general fear of natural decomposition to the fear of becoming sustenance for breeding populations.

This iteration of metabolic anxiety is often revealed in moments of epiphany:

[...] a huge rat darted, or rather scrambled, impudently just past his head. Then he noticed that a legion of the fattest and longest rats he had ever seen were popping in and out of the crevices between the sandbags. As far as he could see down the trench in the dusk, they were swarming over parapet and paradoss. Such well-fed rats! He shuddered, thinking of what they had probably fed upon.²⁰

Winterbourne's speculation transforms the scene from one of general phobia to a recalling of the fate of the soldier's body. We are not given a graphic scene of consumption, but rather we witness Winterbourne's decoding of the rat mass. Well-fed rats stand in direct contrast to the ruined and malnourished bodies they feed upon. This disparity is well illustrated in descriptions of rat individuals and in Manning's *Her Privates We*:

[...] something separated itself from the mass, and the intaken breath escaped from him in a sigh of disgust, as a rat came hurrying, with a quick dainty movement of its twinkling feet, towards him. Seeing him, it stopped, a few yards from the parapet, its muzzle twitching sensitively, sat up, sleek and well fed, to stroke its whiskers with its forepaws; and then, avoiding the puddles and shell-holes, turning aside in a direction parallel to the trench, not taking a straight path, but picking its way delicately along the ridges, as though to keep its feet dry.²¹

²⁰ Ibid., p. 324

²¹ Manning, pp. 276-277

Another well-fed rat is presented here, moving in a delicate and dignified fashion. If the degraded bodies of individual soldiers provide a representative sample of army life, the plump rat is emblematic of the successes of ratkind. The eugenic purpose that Winterbourne ascribes to the war is inverted, it is a bad time to be a human, but a very good time to be a rat.

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