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## “For King and Country”: Nostalgia, War, and Canada’s Tomb of the Unknown Soldier

I ASK MY GRANDFATHER to remember the war, and he tells me about a pond. A small trout pond on his farm outside St. John’s, where he and his brother Leslie would swim in the morning after milking the cows, where they would fish in their spare time, and skate in the winter. His brother, six years older, ran the farm while their father worked at the margarine factory in town, and while my grandfather went to school and studied *Richard III* and doodled in the margins of his math book. He tells me of chopping wood for the stove, of the view from the farmhouse veranda of the sun setting over the pond. My grandfather was just eighteen when his brother left to fight in the Battle of the Atlantic.



In May of 2000, the remains of a young Canadian WWI soldier were repatriated from the Vimy region of France, and buried in a special service in Ottawa. Governor General Adrienne Clarkson delivered the eulogy to this Unknown Soldier, before the Prime Minister, veterans, RCMP dignitaries, and millions of Canadians on national television. In her speech, Clarkson tells of another boy who lost his older brother in WWII. “The sense of loss,” she tells us, “what this [Unknown] soldier’s family must have felt is captured in a poem by Jacques Brault, the Quebec poet who lost his brother in Sicily in the Second World War.”<sup>1</sup> She goes on to read

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<sup>1</sup>Adrienne Clarkson, “Eulogy for Canada’s Unknown Soldier,” *Canadian Literature* 179 (2003): 17.

a translated “interpretation” of this long poem for brother Gilles, called “Suite Fraternelle.” And as she reads it before the nation, we all are meant to feel and understand “the sense of loss.” The poem becomes a symbol of fraternal grief, and of every missing soldier. Gilles, and thousands of other brothers, sons, husbands and fathers, are gathered into the bones of the Unknown Soldier: “he has become more than one body, more than one grave. He is an ideal. He is a symbol of all sacrifice. He is every soldier in all our wars.”

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This evening at my mother’s kitchen table, my grandfather is engulfed in nostalgia, in his personal, intimate memories of youth and brotherhood. In her eulogy, Clarkson taps into a collective memory, drawing from common cultural narratives to create a national nostalgia, a nostalgia that conflates two wars a generation apart into a single memory of Sacrifice, a nostalgia for a time most of us do not remember.

How can these two moments be the same? How can the longing for the very personal and intimate moments of one’s own past, be the same as the longing for the imagined collective memory of a time before we were born?

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Nostalgia is an emotion; the *feeling* of it is the same whether it is generated by a family photo or a blockbuster movie. Because of its association with idealization and cliché, nostalgia has a bad reputation; I have seen it called a “social disease,”<sup>2</sup> “history without guilt,”<sup>3</sup> and an “abdication of personal responsibility.”<sup>4</sup> But nostalgia is more than just brainless sentiment. Nostalgia can take vastly different forms, influenced by a wide variety of contexts, genres, and desired effects. It is not only an emotion, but can emerge as various rhetorical strategies, with very different intentions.

My grandfather at the table, Clarkson before the nation—these two represent two main rhetorical positions of nostalgia: the grieving individual,

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<sup>2</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke UP, 1993) 23.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Kamen, quoted in Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001) xiv.

<sup>4</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* xiv.

and the memorializing nation. The processes of bereavement and commemoration following major wars are deeply entwined with feelings of nostalgia, which appears as both an emotion based on personal experience and as an emotion evoked by a cultural or community affiliation. Grief and nostalgia may at first seem antithetical, the former a negative emotion and the latter a positive one. But in fact they go hand in hand. Nostalgia often surfaces in times of mass trauma; as Svetlana Boym notes in *The Future of Nostalgia*, “in the twentieth century, with its world wars and catastrophes, outbursts of nostalgia often followed such disasters” (28). Nostalgia can be an important part of the healing process.

Nostalgia based on very personal memories, and nostalgia based on the cultural myths of a time outside of our lived experience, are different phenomena with extremely different emotional and cultural effects. They are both called “nostalgia,” because both evoke the same feeling of regretful longing. But it seems necessary to differentiate between these two forms, to distinguish between the *experiential nostalgia* of individuals, and the *cultural nostalgia* created by national memory, myth, and simulation.



My grandfather has so far outlived his elder brother by nearly sixty years. Leslie’s memory is entwined with my grandfather’s childhood, the family land where the gas station is now, the pond that has long since been drained. Leslie is thinning the turnips alongside him, and suggesting they take a quick swim before lunch.



Experiential nostalgia indicates nostalgia that is *based* on individual lived experience, but still may be influenced by elements of fantasy, the distortion of memory, and the impact of the present inherent in the nostalgic condition. While it is experienced on the personal level, this personal quality does not exclude elements of broader cultural symbols; it may in fact be mediated by familiar codes, even stereotypes.

Parents, siblings, spouses and comrades who lose their loved ones in war often exhibit this experiential nostalgia, nostalgia for the lived memories of the time before the death. While Jacques Brault laments the death of his brother and the terrible circumstances surrounding it, his grief goes hand in hand with nostalgia. In Clarkson’s version of his poem (translated and significantly shortened), the speaker continually emphasizes the fact that Gilles lives on in memory: “You live on in us as you never could in

yourself / You are where we will be you open the road for us.” Nostalgic memory has the power to keep the loved one alive in the imagination of the bereaved. The memory of the past becomes a *place* to which return is possible; Gilles is “*where* we will be.” But Brault also lingers on the horror of the death itself, and the rupture between Gilles’ spiritual existence and his physical body, writing “I know now that you are dead, a cold, hard lump in your throat fear lying heavy in / your belly I still hear your twenty years swaying in the blasted July weeds.” His nostalgia is focused on the impossibility of return to the past.

David Macfarlane’s memoir *The Danger Tree: Memory, War, and the Search for a Family’s Past* recounts his family’s experiences during World War One. Macfarlane’s Great-Aunt Kate is a central character in his narrative, and her seventy-five years of mourning for her brother Hedley killed in the war is a haunting image. Macfarlane writes:

It was possible, of course, simply to avoid talking about the First World War in her presence, but as I grew older I came to realize that it wasn’t just the war she cried about . . . . And when, sipping the sherry she always poured so liberally, I told her about a Shakespeare course that I was enjoying, she was reminded—and suddenly overcome by the memory—of a boy who loved Shakespeare and who, after reading *The Taming of the Shrew*, concluded that his spirited younger sister should be called Kate. If, while refusing another Peak Frean Cream, I mentioned a debate I had attended at Hart House the night before, she would start to tell me that Hedley had been a great debater; but her voice would falter, and that would be the end of it.<sup>5</sup>

Here, Kate’s nostalgia for her brother lingers on the positive memories of his life. But her fond recollection is inseparable from the pain of loss, the longing of nostalgia.

In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym distinguishes between what she calls “reflective” nostalgia and “restorative” nostalgia. Reflective nostalgia, she argues, is focused on the loss, the longing that is inherent to the nostalgic condition. Restorative nostalgia, on the other hand, is focused on what has been lost, and the restoration of that place or time (41). Brault, then, is a reflective nostalgic; he is focused on the loss of his brother, on the death itself and on the world without Gilles. Aunt Kate is also reflective; even her positive memories of before the war are inseparable from the grief caused by her brother’s death.

But others who have lost loved ones in war may become restorative nostalgics. Joy Damousi, in her book on war widows in Australia, notes that

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<sup>5</sup> David Macfarlane, *The Danger Tree: Memory, War, and the Search for a Family’s Past* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2000) 243–44.

many widows share feelings of nostalgia for their marriages, nostalgia that is preoccupied with life before the death, to the extent that the pain of loss is overshadowed or even forgotten. One widow notes that memories of life with her husband often return, to the soundtrack of old songs: "I like to watch all the films of the pre-war . . . I'm picturing myself at the Regent Theatre sitting watching them." Damousi notes that the widow continually fantasizes "about possibilities of life with Arthur," her deceased husband.<sup>6</sup> In her memory, her marriage is restored to the days before the war, and a future with the deceased is still imagined possible.

Often, according to Boym, reflective nostalgia emerges as a memory of individual experience, while restorative nostalgia emerges as part of nationalist and religious revivals. But while restorative nostalgia may tend to fall under the realm of the experiential and restorative nostalgia under the realm of the cultural, Damousi reveals that these tendencies have significant exceptions. While this distinction between reflective and restorative nostalgia may be useful, then, Boym's terminology does not fully address the split between nostalgia based on personal memories, and nostalgia based on cultural memories and myths. The case of post-war bereavement indicates that both reflective and restorative nostalgia can be based on individual experience, and that a more comprehensive distinction between experiential and cultural nostalgia is necessary.



While Brault's poem may be an example of experiential nostalgia, as Clarkson reads part of it before the nation, within the context of the eulogy to the Unknown Soldier, she transposes the lines into cultural nostalgia. The term "cultural" does not signify the cultural tropes that often characterize nostalgic remembering, but rather the phenomenon of a culture mobilized to remember a moment of public history *as a group*. This move from experiential to cultural is best exhibited as Clarkson says "our veterans, who are here with us today, *know* what it is to have been in battle and to have seen their friends cut down in their youth. That is why remembrance is so necessary and yet so difficult. It is necessary because *we must not forget* and it is difficult because the pain is never forgotten" (emphasis mine). Here, the direct knowledge and experience of veterans is subsumed by the remembrance of the broad "we." While the veterans *experienced* war, it is not

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<sup>6</sup> Joy Damousi, *Living with the Aftermath: Trauma, Nostalgia, and Grief in Post-War Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001) 79.

only possible, but necessary, for *all of us* to remember it, even if we were not yet born.

Other parts of the eulogy also express this cultural nostalgia. Very few of us alive remember the First World War, yet throughout the eulogy Clarkson evokes a cultural memory of what the war was like, as it has been imagined in history books, novels and films. Clarkson admits in an interview for the Canadian *Legion Magazine* that writing the eulogy began not by looking back on any personal experience—though her father was a soldier in Hong Kong and her husband’s father landed on D-Day—but by reading novels and memoirs, including Macfarlane’s:

I began to think about what the Unknown Soldier might have looked like and so I prepared by rereading Timothy Findley’s *The Wars*. I also reread Kevin Major’s *No Man’s Land* and dipped again into David Macfarlane’s *The Danger Tree*, about the Newfoundland Regiment. I also reread parts of Farley Mowat’s *And No Bird Sang*, but the book that really influenced me the most—and I don’t want you to laugh here—is L.M. Montgomery’s *Rilla of Ingleside*. The book tells the progress of the war as seen through the eyes of a very ordinary Canadian, living in the countryside in Prince Edward Island. I looked at my copy of the book and saw how the battles of World War One, including Ypres and Passchendaele, came up and that helped give me the feeling of what people felt then.<sup>7</sup>

Her reliance on these narratives rather than her family’s experiences may be due to the fact that the Unknown Soldier is a soldier from the First World War, not the Second. But this fact does not stop her from using Brault’s WWII poem later. Clearly the narratives that many Canadians have read, that are shared in collective memory, are more helpful in establishing what the Unknown Soldier might be like in the minds of the community. In relating her process, Clarkson does not distinguish between the non-fictional accounts and the fictional stories. For her, the result is the same: nostalgia based not on real experience, but upon the cultural memory of the type of young man who went to war, the ordinary Canadian (or Newfoundland) youth, the brave and idealistic hero. She claims that because we know this representation, we know the man, even though we do not know his name or the details of his life. The Unknown Soldier “is known in the hearts of all Canadians by all the virtues that we respect—selflessness, honour, courage and commitment.” For Clarkson, then, these common cultural assumptions and “memories” lead to a shared vicarious experience.

This phenomenon falls under what Aijun Appadurai refers to as “imagined” “armchair” or “ersatz” nostalgia, what he calls “nostalgia

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<sup>7</sup> Dan Black, “Sitting Down with the Governor General,” *Legion Magazine* <<http://www.legionmagazine.com/features/special/00-09.asp#4>>.

without memory.”<sup>8</sup> These terms, for Appadurai, always refer to a *collective* nostalgia, often manifested in commercialization and consumption. Today, nostalgia for the Great War is manifested not in personal longing, but in the cultural phenomena of movies and museums, and politicians’ speeches. But these terms—“imagined,” “armchair,” suggest that there is an opposite, not just based on individual experience, but a real nostalgia, a *factual* nostalgia. This assumption is clearly mistaken, as nostalgia by its very definition exists outside notions of fact and reality. The term *cultural nostalgia*, then, follows from Appadurai’s ersatz nostalgia, only its label emphasizes not its imagined quality, which suggests the possibility of a moral or factual judgment, but rather its collectivity, its cultural implications. While Appadurai calls it imagined nostalgia, this term is misleading—the nostalgia is not imagined, only the referent is, derived out of a multitude of cultural symbols and popular forms of media.

As Benedict Anderson has noted, tombs of unknown soldiers are always projects of nationalism; the unknown identity of the deceased is replaced by “ghostly national imaginings.”<sup>9</sup> Canada’s tomb is no different. According to Canadian cultural mythology, the First World War marked the moment of Canada’s maturation as a sovereign nation. This theme, expressed as nostalgia for the moment of the nation’s birth, recurs throughout Clarkson’s eulogy: “the wars fought by Canadians in the 20th century were not fought for the purpose of uniting Canada, but the country that emerged was forged in the smithy of sacrifice.” But as she expresses nostalgia for this “sacrifice,” there is almost a romantic longing for the horror of the loss itself: “we do not know if his mother or wife received that telegram with the words ‘Missing In Action’ typed with electrifying clarity on the anonymous piece of paper.” Though few of us today can relate to this once common experience, it is a vivid image that has become a common trope in war narratives. As she uses the oddly thrilling words “electrifying clarity,” we too are electrified as audience members, as though we are watching a juicy, tear-jerking drama on screen. Nostalgically recounted, this scene taps into a cultural framework of memory that exists outside of lived experience.



These terms—experiential nostalgia and cultural nostalgia—exist not as a simple binary, but rather on a spectrum, so that events experienced

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<sup>8</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996) 78.

<sup>9</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991) 9.

only through popular media, such as contemporary Canadian peacekeeping missions, fall somewhere in between the two poles. Certainly many people have experienced first-hand the impact of our peacekeeping efforts. But for most of us, we experience it only through various forms of media—footage on television, pictures on the internet, or descriptions in the newspaper. While most Canadians do not support the military actions of our neighbours to the south, most do stand behind our peacekeepers who waded in to wars around the world. For most Canadians, then, the experience of these wars is mediated through the rhetoric of Duty and Sacrifice, of Freedom, of a just cause—in other words, through the nostalgic longing for the heroism and the moral righteousness of the First and Second World Wars. This nostalgia, then, exists somewhere between a memory of the experience of the images of war, and a memory of a symbol and an ideal that exists only within a shared cultural framework.

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And my own nostalgia? As I listen to my grandfather speak, I am enraptured by his stories, not just of his brother and the pond, but of the German submarines outside the St. John's harbour, of spies and sabotage in the heart of the city, of his experiences as a wireless operator in remotest Labrador. I am thrilled upon hearing that when he went to enlist, just months after his brother's death, he was refused, told by the recruiting officer that "one in the family is enough." He always believed that his mother somehow convinced the service board not to accept him, and I am electrified by the possibility that if they had, I would not exist today. My images of war are based on my grandfather's personal experiences, and grounded in the romantic tradition of the novels on my shelf. Through nostalgia I persuade myself of my connectedness to the past, both on a personal and communal level.

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If experiential and cultural nostalgia are rhetorical strategies, what are their desired effects? How are they useful? And why do they emerge particularly in times of trauma?

Experiential nostalgia, as a primarily personal form of memory, can help to articulate what John Bodnar calls the "vernacular expression," the diverse and changing perspectives of individuals that make up small-scale communities rather than the imagined community of nations. Official culture, on the other hand, relies on the "restatement of reality in ideal



rather than complex or ambiguous terms. It presents the past on an abstract basis of timelessness and sacredness.”<sup>10</sup> Bodnar explains that, in eighties America, the official culture “preferred to commemorate the Vietnam War in the ideal language of patriotism rather than the real language of grief and sorrow” (14). While the First and Second World Wars are not remembered as being controversial in the same way that Vietnam was, the same tension between the vernacular and the official expression can occur here. While I am uncomfortable with Bodnar’s laudatory term “real” to describe the vernacular expression, in post-war societies personal memories are often erased in favour of a homogenizing national narrative. Nostalgia can help the individual to reclaim these personal, often “everyday” memories from the collective official discourse of Sacrifice and Glory. For Brault, then, an intense longing for his brother helps him to question the violence of war. In the first stanza, edited out by Clarkson, he writes:

je me souviens  
d’un matin d’été a Montréal je  
suivais ton cercueil vide j’avais dix  
ans je ne savais pas encore.<sup>11</sup>

The regretful memory of following an empty coffin as a child challenges the official expression of Honour and Dignity; it reveals the simple pathos of a child who does not understand why his brother is dead, and illustrates the pain of war on a personal level.

In her book on nostalgia and immigrant identity, Andréea Ritivoi notes a very different kind of vernacular expression. When it is used to revisit positive elements of the past, nostalgia can be a self-reinforcing tool.<sup>12</sup> In post-traumatic moments, like the aftermath of war, it helps one to locate a self that existed outside of that trauma, an identity that is not defined by the moment of pain or grief, but also by positive memories. Damousi notes that among war widows there is often “a desire to continue a connection with their deceased husbands in shaping their identities.”<sup>13</sup> While

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<sup>10</sup> John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992) 14.

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Brault, *Suite Fraternelle* (Ottawa: Editions de l’Université d’Ottawa, 1969) 1.2–5: *I remember / a summer morning in Montreal I / followed your empty coffin I was ten / years old I did not know yet* (my translation).

<sup>12</sup> Andréea Ritivoi, *Yesterday’s Self: Nostalgia and the Immigrant Identity* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002) 30.

<sup>13</sup> *Living with the Aftermath* 67.

the death of their husbands alters their lives and their sense of themselves, nostalgia helps them relive the time before their loss, thereby sustaining their identity.

Damousi is concerned by this role of nostalgia in the formation or maintenance of identity. She suggests that nostalgia suspends the mourning process by focusing on the past—it creates an inability to grieve. But other scholars argue that nostalgia can in fact be an important part of the process of recovery from trauma. As it affirms personal identity, nostalgia also affirms survival of a traumatic event. Ritivoi uses the example of surgery to explain this process: “I confirm my survival by observing the continuity and mental connectedness between who I was prior to the event and the person resulting from the operation.”<sup>14</sup> An important means of observing that connectedness is nostalgia for the time before the event; by remembering the past one asserts one’s ownership of that past. Memory confirms the continuation between the old self and the new self. In their article on memory in post-conflict societies, Hamber and Wilson note that “trauma and violence shatter individual cognitive assumptions about the self and the world,” destroying one’s ability to view oneself positively and to see the world as a meaningful place.<sup>15</sup> Damousi’s war widows, then, find comfort in their nostalgia as it restores their sense of self and recovers meaning in their lives. One of her case studies, Olwyn Green, was told by her counsellor that she had been idealizing her husband rather than remembering the real man. But this nostalgic idealization seems to have carried her through her grief. Green wrote a memoir about her post-war experience, and Damousi quotes it at length: “I feel content, and ... rich, even though I’ve never filled the gap you left. It wasn’t an empty gap. I’ve always had your love to sustain me.”<sup>16</sup> By privileging the positive aspects of the past, and allowing nostalgia to bring that past closer, she affirms that the trauma of her loss has not overshadowed the love and happiness of her former life. She persuades herself that it has not destroyed her cognitive ability to find meaning in the world. By privileging the positive aspects of post-traumatic memory, the nostalgic refuses to be solely a victim or to remember her husband with only pain.

Nostalgia as a tool for dealing with trauma is not restricted to the bereaved; veterans themselves can experience nostalgia, even for the war

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<sup>14</sup> *Yesterday’s Self* 128.

<sup>15</sup> Brandon Hamber and Richard A. Wilson, “Symbolic Closure through Memory, Reparation and Revenge in Post-Conflict Societies,” *Journal of Human Rights* 1.1 (2002): 5.

<sup>16</sup> *Living with the Aftermath* 95.

itself.<sup>17</sup> In her study of combat-related post-traumatic stress disorder, Jo Stanley notes that “remembering the good aspects of the war can give meaning to its other aspects. To no longer have the memory would be to make the past dead and to face maybe a still lonelier void.”<sup>18</sup> By recalling feelings of pride, comradeship, and contribution, veterans can begin to deal with trauma, rather than let it take over their memories, and their lives.



Nostalgic remembrance, then, is often driven by the need to heal, a drive that kept Jacques Brault writing to his brother for two decades. By publishing his *Suite Fraternelle*, Brault takes this nostalgia from the realm of the private to the realm of the performative. But this performance of grief and nostalgia does not diminish its therapeutic value. Brault in fact restores some of this intimacy to the poem by publishing it as he wrote it, in his own handwriting. Each page of the fourteen-page poem is printed in long-hand on the left, and then repeated in typeface on the opposing page.

Clarkson recites this poem in order to evoke this very personal connection between the bereaved and their loved ones. But as she repeats it, before a national audience, she takes it out of the domain of experiential nostalgia and transposes it into cultural nostalgia. The voice of the speaker is not the same as the voice of the reader, and the experience described is second-hand. Her audience, many of whom have not lost a loved one in war, may feel the nostalgia created, but feel it not because of direct experience, but rather through their connection with the group and collective memory.

The eulogy’s strong nostalgic tone is perhaps best established earlier, as Clarkson lists a range of questions about the soldier:

Was it the Prairies whose rolling sinuous curves recall a certain kind of eternity?  
 Was he someone who loved our lakes and knew them from a canoe?  
 Was he someone who saw the whales at the mouth of the Saguenay?  
 Was he someone who hiked in the Rockies or went sailing in the Atlantic or  
     in the Gulf Islands?  
 Did he have brown eyes?  
 Did he know what it was to love someone and be loved back?

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<sup>17</sup> Stephen Garton, “Longing for War: Nostalgia and Australian Returned Soldiers after the First World War,” *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration*, ed. T.G. Ashplant, Graham Dawson and Michael Roper (London: Routledge, 2000) 222.

<sup>18</sup> “Involuntary Commemorations: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and its Relationship to War Commemoration,” *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration* 245.

Was he a father who had not seen his child?  
 Did he love hockey? Did he play defence?  
 Did he play football? Could he kick a field goal?  
 Did he like to fix cars? Did he dream of owning a Buick?  
 Did he read poetry?  
 Did he get into fights?  
 Did he have freckles?  
 Did he think nobody understood him?  
 Did he just want to go out and have a good time with the boys?<sup>19</sup>

These images, strangely specific yet strangely universal, tap in to common experiences of a Canadian audience, even almost a century later. Even those who have never “played defence” or gotten “into fights” can recognize the trope of a young athletic Canadian man, perhaps misunderstood but with simple hopes for the future. Even those who have never dreamed of “owning a Buick” can internalize that feeling of a dream that has not been fulfilled. Yet the specificity of “Buick” also indicates a unique individual who cannot be duplicated, even as he comes to represent all Canadian soldiers. It is Macfarlane’s Uncle Hedley, who wanted to be a writer. It is Findlay’s Robert Ross, holding his sister on a pony. It is my Great-Uncle Leslie, cleaning a fresh-caught trout.

These specific details mimic the simple details of obituaries, or eulogies given by family members or close friends. These genres often emphasize the concrete achievements, careers, or interests of the individual, rather than more subjective traits, and often highlight place—the birthplace, the home.<sup>20</sup> Clarkson’s list does not describe an extraordinary individual, but rather a very ordinary one, who may have had any number of jobs, but certainly had a future, and who shared in some measure “whatever dreams we have” (17).

These details serve two purposes. First, they are designed to imitate the experiential nostalgia of the bereaved, in order to evoke the *feeling* of nostalgia in all who are listening. The particulars about his life, fictional or not, are details that we can see, hear, and touch. They make us feel closer to the deceased, make him seem more ‘real,’ and make us feel his loss more acutely. Clarkson asserts that “we come today to do him honour as someone who could have been all these things and now is no more” (16); we are meant to recognize that it is the possibility that he could have been a farmer or a father—his ordinariness—that makes him worthy of honour.

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<sup>19</sup> “Eulogy for Canada’s Unknown Soldier” 15–16.

<sup>20</sup> MaryEllen Gillan, *Obits: The Way We Say Goodbye* (Burnaby: Serious Publishing, 1995) x–xi.

Feelings of experiential nostalgia, for our own lost loved ones, are adopted into the cultural narrative, and nostalgia becomes a means of placing value on the object that has been lost.

Paradoxically, the second function of these nostalgic details is to emphasize the fact that we do not know him, that “we will never know the answers to these questions. We will never know him. We who are left have all kinds of questions that only he could answer. And we, by this act today, are admitting with terrible finality that we will never know those answers” (16). Here, Clarkson is nostalgic for the possibility of nostalgia; the horror of war prevents the natural evocation of nostalgia as a part of the grieving process. We are asked to recognize a familiar character in the nostalgic tropes with which we are presented, but because we cannot know him, we are left with an uncanny feeling. That which should be familiar—the deceased being eulogized—is unknowable; war has not only taken this life, but perverted the natural order of mourning.

Through this process, then, nostalgia becomes aestheticized; it moves from the realm of personal memory and grief to the realm of literary trope. It aspires to the *bildungsroman* or tragic forms of narrative, where the boy becomes a man, and dies a hero. The oratorical craft in Clarkson’s speech surfaces in repetition, intentional sentence fragments for emphasis, irony, and a rhythm established by long sentences separated by short and simple ones: “Whatever life he could have led, whatever choices he could have made are all shuttered. They are over. We are honouring that unacceptable thing—a life stopped by doing one’s duty. The end of a future, the death of dreams.” Nostalgia here has moved from the vernacular “messiness” of collective memory,<sup>21</sup> to a carefully calculated classic rhetorical style. It becomes performative.

As nostalgia is aestheticized, in Clarkson’s eulogy, it is an easy step to war itself being aestheticized. As Clarkson writes, “we have a wealth of witnesses in Canada to describe to us the unspeakable horror and frightening maelstrom that war brings. What that First World War was like has been described in our poetry, novels and paintings. Some of our greatest artists came out of that conflict, able to create beauty out of the hell that they had seen” (16). Thus the act of witnessing is the first step toward the creation of art. Clarkson attempts to soften the terrible impact of war by finding “beauty” in depictions of war. She goes on to quote Group of Seven artist F.H. Varley at length:

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<sup>21</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* 53.

You in Canada ... cannot realize at all what war is like. You must see it and live it. You must see the barren deserts war has made of once fertile country ... see the turned-up graves, see the dead on the field, freakishly mutilated—headless, legless, stomachless, a perfect body and a passive face and a broken empty skull—see your own countrymen, unidentified, thrown into a cart, their coats over them, boys digging a grave in a land of yellow slimy mud and green pools of water under a weeping sky. You must have heard the screeching shells and have the shrapnel fall around you, whistling by you—seen the results of it, seen scores of horses, bits of horses lying around in the open—in the street and soldiers marching by these scenes as if they never knew of their presence. Until you've lived this ... you cannot know.

(Letter to his wife, 1918. Quoted by Clarkson, 16–17)

Even as Clarkson reads the statement “until you've lived this ... you cannot know,” she suggests that we *can* know, by experiencing the art created out of it. After such an intensely graphic description—appealing to what Mark Seltzer calls “wound culture,” the titillation arising from the spectacle of death<sup>22</sup>—Clarkson makes a direct connection between lack of knowledge and the “good” that can come out of war. “In honouring this unknown soldier today,” she explains, “through this funeral and this burial, we are embracing the fact of the anonymity and saying that because we do not know him and we do not know what he could have become, he has become more than one body, more than one grave. He is an ideal. He is a symbol of all sacrifice” (17). The fact that we cannot know the horror of war is twisted into the assertion that we *can* know the beauty of “sacrifice.” Varley’s well-crafted description of war, with its repetition, guttural alliteration, and excess of haunting adjectives, creates a perverse nostalgia for war itself, for “torn and opened bodies and torn and opened persons,” and, ironically, refigures the horror into the “ideal” of Sacrifice.

According to Seltzer, the appeal of trauma results when the individual becomes part of a collective:

In short, the opening of relation to others (the “sympathetic” social bond) is at the same time the traumatic collapse of boundaries between self and other (a yielding of identity to identification). In this way, the opening of a possibility of relation to others also opens the possibility of violence: the mimetic identification at the expense of the subject and a violence in the name of a violated singularity and self-difference. The opening toward others is drawn to the collective spectacle of torn and open bodies and persons: a wounding and gaping toward others in the pathological public sphere.

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<sup>22</sup> Mark Seltzer, “Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere,” October 80.3 (1997) 15 Aug. 2004: <<http://toby.library.ubc.ca/resources/infopage.cfm?id=196>>.

When the individual suffering of soldiers or the bereaved becomes part of the collective memory of war, the result is a cultural fascination, even a nostalgic longing, for that trauma, a longing that emerges at the expense of individual identity and experience. Seltzer argues that “the notion of the public sphere has become inseparable from the collective gathering around sites of wounding, trauma, and pathology: sociality and the wound have become inseparable.” As Boym argues, this collective nostalgic gathering around the wound is crucial to modern nationalism. She notes that “the *nostos* of a nation is not merely a lost Eden but a place of sacrifice and glory, of past suffering . . . . In the national ideology, individual longing is transformed into a collective belonging that relies on past sufferings that transcend individual memories.”<sup>23</sup> In Clarkson’s eulogy, then, not only is suffering nostalgically eroticized, it becomes part of the national creation myth.

National memory differs from collective memory in that it is made up of a single teleological history that can trace its origin to a moment of creation. According to Boym, restorative nostalgia, as a form of national memory, is manifested in the restoration of those origins, or the conspiracy theory. “The conspiratorial worldview,” she writes, “reflects a nostalgia for . . . a simple premodern conception of good and evil”; the very existence of home is dependent upon the “single transhistorical plot” of a conspiring enemy (43). Nostalgia for an origin forged out of conflict with outside Others is essential to creating what Benedict Anderson has termed the “imagined community” of the nation. While Clarkson does not name the enemy of either World War, she does make it clear that, ironically, the war was necessary to preserve the peace of the nation: “we give thanks for those who were willing to sacrifice themselves and who gave their youth and their future so that we could live in peace. With their lives they ransomed our future.” Clarkson takes the “conspiratorial” stance that the imagined community of Canada was not only preserved, but created through war. The war was fought as a rite of passage, seemingly against war itself.

While Jay Winter argues that the “primary purpose” of war memorials, like Tombs of Unknown Soldiers, was to “help the bereaved recover from their loss,”<sup>24</sup> David W. Lloyd effectively disproves this point, revealing in *Battlefield Tourism* that what Winter calls the “needs of the bereaved” (95) were often initially ignored in favour of celebrating fighting forces

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<sup>23</sup> *The Future of Nostalgia* 15.

<sup>24</sup> Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* (Cambridge: U of Cambridge P, 1995) 96.

and national glory.<sup>25</sup> Eighty-some years after the First World War, Canada's erection of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier is clearly not designed to benefit the bereaved in their mourning process, but rather to "to remind all Canadians of the human cost of our country's commitment to the cause of peace and freedom in the past, in the present and in the future."<sup>26</sup> In Clarkson's eulogy, Brault's genealogical brotherhood becomes metonymic of the imagined brotherhood of the Canadian nation.

But perhaps we can learn the most about cultural nostalgia not from Clarkson's "interpretation" of Brault's poem, but rather from what she chose to leave out:

ils disent que tu es mort pour l'Honneur  
 ils disent et flattent leur bedaine flasque  
 ils disent que tu es mort pour la Paix  
 ils disent et suçent leur cigare long  
 comme un fusil. (1.6–10)<sup>27</sup>

Here, Brault questions the very "official expressions" of Honour and Sacrifice that Clarkson is promoting—we need not ask why she chose to omit this section. Her selection of only a few lines from this long poem co-opts its experiential nostalgia into cultural nostalgia and national myth.

It is important to note that there is not always a hierarchical clash here between appropriating officials and helpless ordinary citizens. Often the bereaved intentionally blur experiential and cultural nostalgia, locating their personal emotions within a cultural framework of common symbols and ideologies, and garnering comfort from the consubstantiation provided by the trope of the mourning nation. As Winter argues, the meaning of memorials in the aftermath of WWI "was highly personal. It used collective expression, in stone and in ceremony, to help individual people—mothers, fathers, wives, sons, daughters, and comrades-in-arms—to accept the brutal facts of death in war."<sup>28</sup> I would argue that the agency here does not lie in the "stone and ceremony," but rather in the mourners themselves; the mothers, fathers, wives, etc. map their personal experiences onto the collective memorial, in order to accept these "brutal facts of death." Rather than

<sup>25</sup> David W. Lloyd, *Battlefield Tourism: Pilgrimage and the Commemoration of the Great War in Britain, Australia and Canada, 1919–1939* (New York: Berg, 1998) 78, 167.

<sup>26</sup> "Tomb of the Unknown Soldier," *Veterans Affairs Canada*, 15 Aug. 2004 <<http://www.vac-acc.gc.ca/remembers/sub.cfm?source=Memorials/tomb>>.

<sup>27</sup> "They say that you are dead for Honour / they say and stroke their flabby paunch / they say that you died for Peace / they say and suck their long cigar / like a rifle" (my translation).



always standing in opposition to, or as victims of, a nationalistic argument, the bereaved sometimes find comfort in the rhetoric of nationalism. While the current “wound culture” may involve the eroticization of violence, in post-war contexts this violence is carefully framed within the rhetoric of Honour; the horror is evoked in part to titillate, but also to emphasize the magnitude of soldiers’ Sacrifice. When cultural nostalgia frames mourning within the preferred narrative of Sacrifice and Glory, the bereaved can transform memories of horror and suffering into collective memories of Honour. For both individuals and veterans, this nostalgic impulse is an attempt to persuade oneself that the war was not fought “in vain”; it is as much a form of forgetting as it is of remembrance.

It is easy to see why nostalgia has been considered such a dirty word—it is not just kitschy or overly sentimental—it can be very politically dangerous. But what I have revealed here is that while experiential nostalgia can express a resistive vernacular expression, this vernacular expression can also easily be co-opted by, or become a willing proponent of, the official rhetoric of nationalism. The danger lies, then, primarily in cultural nostalgia rather than experiential nostalgia, when very personal emotions are subsumed by mass-produced cultural frameworks. As Boym writes, “nostalgia is paradoxical in the sense that longing can make us more empathetic toward fellow humans, yet the moment we try to repair longing with belonging ... [we] put an end to mutual understanding.”<sup>29</sup> In other words, it is the drive to create cohesive imagined communities, where the nation is privileged over the individual lives of its citizens, that makes nostalgia dangerous. While experiential and cultural nostalgia certainly do overlap in many of the genres, symbols and rhetoric that they use, for me it is thus crucial to separate them, to separate the personal and therapeutic uses from the nationalistic, consumptive, aggressive temptations.

The potential impact of cultural nostalgia as a rhetorical voice of nationalism is evident from the Veterans Affairs online guestbook for the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. One man wrote passionately: “my son, will hopefully with GODS grace, may have a chance to serve his country as this young lad, so did” (sic).<sup>30</sup> I am sure that Clarkson would agree that this father has clearly missed the point. But while his entry is certainly an exception in its hope for war, it is not significantly different from the hundreds of other entries in its evocation of the nationalist terministic screens of Glory,

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<sup>29</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* xv.

<sup>30</sup> “Virtual Tomb Visitor’s Book,” *Veterans Affairs Canada*, 16 Aug. 04 <<http://www.vac-acc.gc.ca/remembers/sub.cfm?source=memorials/tomb/visitorbook>>.

Sacrifice, and, particularly, “Freedom.” The project to erect a Canadian Tomb of the Unknown Soldier was spearheaded by the Royal Canadian Legion as a millennium project. In light of how the first few years of the new millennium have unfolded, the Tomb is a chilling way to have begun the new century. The Veterans Affairs Canada website proclaims that the Unknown Soldier “represents all Canadians, whether they be navy, army, air force or merchant marine, who died or may die for their country in all conflicts—past, present, *and future*.”<sup>31</sup> A soldier killed in what was supposed to be the “war to end all wars” is remembered, unspeakably, as a symbol of future dead. By remembering war as part of cultural nostalgia, we threaten to forget its lessons.



In my grandfather’s bedroom is a picture of his brother in his navy uniform. On the back of the photograph, underneath the frame, someone has written:

W.L. NOSEWORTHY, RN.  
KILLED IN ACTION,  
IN TRAWLER ABERONIA  
WHILE ON PETROL DUTY.  
SEPTEMBER 7<sup>th</sup>, 1940.

At the top of the page, printed boldly in a determined font, are the age-old and self-persuasive words, “For King and Country.”

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<sup>31</sup> “Tomb,” my emphasis.