

The Olfactory Shift in the Literature of the First World War:

The Reawakening of Smell

Volume Two, Exegesis

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## Contents

Contents .....	2
Declaration.....	4
Acknowledgements.....	5
Abstract.....	6
Introduction.....	7
Part One .....	14
Introduction.....	14
The Shifting Sensorium .....	17
Representing Death.....	20
Remembering War.....	22
Upside-Down Sensations .....	25
Discussion.....	28
Part Two.....	31
Introduction.....	31
<i>The Middle Parts of Fortune</i> .....	32
<i>Testament of Youth</i> .....	35
<i>Mrs. Dalloway</i> and <i>Flush</i> .....	40
Discussion.....	44
Part Three.....	47
Inspiration for “One Sunday in Picardy” .....	47
Research Design .....	48
Literary Techniques .....	54

Self-Reflexivity.....	59
Discussion.....	64
Conclusion .....	66
Works Cited .....	70
Works Consulted.....	78

### **Declaration**

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Eleanor Ahern

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### Abstract

“One Sunday in Picardy”, the creative work presented in Volume One of this thesis, is set during the First World War and inspired by a family story. An Australian doctor returns to see his young French fiancée. Unable to remember his role in one fierce battle for which he was decorated, the doctor’s thoughts are plagued by traumatic images and sensations as the likelihood grows of an enemy attack.

The exegesis presented in Volume Two of this thesis positions my writing within the context of the literature of the First World War and suggests that modernist war writers gave special attention to olfactory representations due to an increased focus in the trenches on smells such as the stink of corpses. The sense of smell has been a neglected subject in literary criticism, yet it is proposed that in early-twentieth-century literature a dramatic shift in olfactory representation may have taken place. While Danuta Fjellestad advances the idea of an “olfactory turn” in the context of postmodernist works such as Patrick Süskind’s *Perfume* (Fjellestad 642), I situate it earlier, in First World War writing, where the representation of smell was a factor of both originality, as writers searched for new methods of depiction, and repression of traumatic memory. An analysis of four war texts was conducted with reference to Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of language, Jacques Derrida’s ideas on deferred meaning and immediacy, and Sigmund Freud’s theory of repetition-compulsion. A shift in olfactory representation was demonstrated both within and between the war texts; such features also emerged in my own work, written through a process of immersion in the war literature and historic settings. This combination of auto/biographical writing and historical and theoretical research may provide insights into why olfactory representations in literature changed in the aftermath of the First World War.

## **The Olfactory Shift in the Literature of the First World War:**

### **The Reawakening of Smell**

#### **Exegesis**

#### **Introduction**

In the novel *Regeneration*, Pat Barker's portrayal of the returned soldier Burns, who during a battle had been thrown head-first into the rotting gut of a German corpse, demands engagement from the reader:

Before Burns lost consciousness, he'd had time to realize that what filled his nose and mouth was decomposing human flesh. Now, whenever he tried to eat, that taste and smell recurred. Nightly, he relived the experience, and from every nightmare he awoke vomiting. Burns on his knees, as Rivers had often seen him, retching up the last ounce of bile, hardly looked like a human being at all. (19)

The doctor who witnesses this event is based on a real person, the neurologist and social anthropologist Dr W. H. R. Rivers, who treated traumatised soldiers at Craiglockhart Military Hospital during the First World War. At the end of the novel, Barker acknowledges an article by Dr Rivers published in *The Lancet* in February 1918, in which a case study is presented with a similar history to that of Burns:

Before he lost consciousness the patient had clearly realised his situation and knew that the substance which filled his mouth and produced the most horrible sensations of taste and smell was derived from the decomposed entrails of an enemy. When he came to himself he vomited profusely and was much shaken, but carried on for several days, vomiting frequently and haunted by persistent images of taste and smell. (Rivers "An Address on the Repression of War Experience" 174)

In this primary source written a century ago, the patient's attempt to purge the smell of the corpse and with it the memory of the traumatic event is a striking image which, like Barker's text, may evoke in the reader feelings of disgust or horror.

The characters in my creative work "One Sunday in Picardy" are also inspired by real people, namely my grandparents, who met in northern France in the First World War when my grandfather, an Australian doctor, was billeted to the family *château* of my grandmother. The story opens with Jack, a doctor, returning to his French fiancée after an experience in the trenches which has left him shaking and haunted by the smell of death. As for Rivers' patient and Barker's character Burns, an odour triggers a traumatic response, although in Jack's case the memory of the event remains suppressed.

The creative process for "One Sunday in Picardy" was fed by research into family stories and historical archives, together with an immersion in the war literature and historic sites in northern France, a technique I adapted from reading Lee Gutkind's *You Can't Make This Stuff Up*. Gutkind writes that a physical immersion in another's story – "watching and listening to a person you are writing about or being ensconced in a place you are profiling" (75-76) – enables the writer of creative nonfiction to recreate it "in a unique and vivid manner" (71). Yet my fictional story is set one hundred years ago: the subjects who inspired it are no longer living and the battlegrounds are largely redeveloped. Gutkind's immersion theory became the basis of an adaptive approach. I "ensconced" myself in the world of my grandparents in 1918 through the war literature and a visit to northern France in April when my story takes place. I wanted to feel the spring weather on my skin and sniff the daffodils, tread the paths around my grandmother's village and the ruins of the battlefields where my grandfather worked,



spend time with my relatives, absorb the inflections of the language, and eat local delicacies.

As a result of this immersion process – through reading and also in situ experiences – my writing became infused with sensory images and, as I will elaborate on later, in particular with those related to smells, both pleasant and unpleasant. In *The Times Literary Supplement* of 5 October 1933, a reviewer wrote of Virginia Woolf's *Flush: A Biography*: "Yet Flush is much more than a point of view, or a point of odour. The way to him lies through the smell of eau-de-Cologne" (Child 667). I hoped that through the sense of smell I might deepen my understanding of my characters and my forebears.

But did the unusual olfactory images – by which I mean what is conjured in the mind by the sense of smell – which emerged in my writing after the immersion process indicate the presence of such images in the war literature? If so, was the sense of smell already highlighted in pre-war texts, or did the stinking corpses of the First World War demand more intense modes of description?

In this exegesis I propose that the shocking trench environment of the First World War provided new and horrific sensory input which influenced the depiction of the sense of smell in early-twentieth-century literature. My analysis will centre on what is signified by the stench of a corpse, with reference to the work of thinkers of the modernist period, Ferdinand de Saussure and Sigmund Freud, and the postmodernist Jacques Derrida. I will demonstrate that a dramatic shift in olfactory representation took place as a result of the war which may have influenced literature forever.

The exegesis will be organised into three parts: the theoretical, analytical and self-reflexive perspectives.

Part One will present a theoretical analysis of the literary representation of death in the war texts, focusing on the sense of smell – a neglected topic in literary criticism.

In “Towards an Aesthetics of Smell, or, the Foul and the Fragrant in Contemporary Literature”, Professor Danuta Fjellestad suggests that after the clean-up of smells in the Enlightenment period, the olfactory sense emerges as a prominent feature of modernist literature (639-41). However, Fjellestad proposes that it is in the writings of postmodernism that the sense of smell is most richly deployed (650) and that Patrick Süskind’s novel *Perfume* may signal an “olfactory turn” in literature (642).

I will suggest, however, that writings which emerged from the First World War display many of the same features as the postmodernist “olfactory turn”, adding an aspect of time which entwines olfactory images with episodes from the past extending back before the war. These images, in which usually clichéd figures of speech are often reformed into shocking juxtapositions, reflect the experimentation of the modernist writers and may even have influenced it.

In the trenches, the sense of smell gained a new importance. The view of the battlefield was limited, so the focus shifted to the other senses in a manner explained by Walter J. Ong in “The Shifting Sensorium”. The inescapable cries and smells of dying young men came to signify, in the nomenclature of de Saussure, the passing of life. The postmodernist Jacques Derrida writes of the deferral of meaning inherent in all text, of the need for language to supplement itself, so that immediacy becomes derived (*Of Grammatology* 157), distancing the reader from the trauma as is the case in the postmodernist text *Perfume*.

But this exegesis will indicate that the deployment of vivid olfactory descriptions by modernist writers encourages readers to feel the sensations, conveying more a sense of presence and immediacy than one of detachment. Viewed in the context

of Sigmund Freud's work on repetition-compulsion (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 24), the soldier's unabsorbed trauma is brought forward into the present – a frightening proximity which I suggest modernist writers tried to capture through unsettling olfactory images.

Michael Hopkin suggests that the link between the sense of smell and the memory of episodes, seen in Marcel Proust's recollection of the tea-dipped madeleine in *Remembrance of Things Past*, continues to be of scientific interest. A recent study indicates that some odours may trigger special receptors in the nose that cause innate behaviour such as attraction or aversion (Yoon et al. E2403). If applied to the argument in this exegesis, the disgust and horror elicited by the odour of corpses in the trenches might be seen as an instinctive response.

In Part Two of the exegesis, four war texts will be searched for sensory images which demonstrate some features of the postmodernist "olfactory turn" described by Fjellestad in relation to Süskind's *Perfume*, together with experimental methods that reveal a significant shift in olfactory representation. The works selected include a range of forms: a novel by the Australian Frederick Manning, inspired by his work with the British Army on the Western Front; the autobiography of academic and Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse Vera Brittain, spanning Victorian times to the 1930s; and a post-war novel and a "biography" of a dog by Virginia Woolf.

The analysis will focus on modernist experimental techniques such as the subversion of the Enlightenment coding of smells, the reforming of usually clichéd figures of speech into unexpected alignments, and the use of olfactory metaphor triggering memory. In addition, discernible changes in olfactory representation within a work or between works will be recorded, as will gendered variances in the depiction of smell.

In Part Three, I will provide a subjective account of how my creative project developed from the unusual circumstances of my grandparents' meeting and my curiosity about their relationship. As mentioned above, the research design of the project included an adaptive process of literary and physical immersion, but I will also reveal how literary techniques derived from the models of Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and Barker's three novels *Regeneration*, *The Eye in the Door* and *The Ghost Road* helped me to work through the challenges of presenting a story of love in wartime, of framing and of difficulties in characterisation. Finally, I will reflect on how the exegetical work fed into the creative work "One Sunday in Picardy" and influenced its writing.

The most important limitation of the study was that my focus turned to the sense of smell as a result of the immersion and writing process, and hence late in my doctoral studies. I had already conducted the field trip, which would have been an opportunity to gather more olfactory data. My analysis of literature was confined to texts written during or just after the war and was thus only preliminary. In addition, little critical research was available on the literary depiction of the olfactory during the war, so I had to construct a theoretical framework with which to consider it. Yet these limitations open the way for future research into olfactory depiction which might, for example, include literature from the pre-war and postmodernist periods.

The implications of my study relate both to literary criticism and the writing of family stories. The most significant finding is that a major shift in the representation of the sense of smell is revealed in the literature of the First World War which may be linked to the abhorrent conditions of the trenches. These in-depth metaphors resound through the literature of the early twentieth century, commanding a more dramatic emotional response than the images of Süskind's detached, almost essay-like

postmodernist novel. The stark sensory images in the modernist writings may also provide profound insights into the war experience and embodied emotion.

On a personal note, the process of researching and writing “One Sunday in Picardy” lured me into the sensory worlds of my characters; I experimented with intimate depictions and drew closer to my forebears. Through the sense of smell I found a way to a story that had weighed heavily on my shoulders. It is hoped that my experience might encourage other writers of family tales to experiment with new methodologies.

The exegesis “The Olfactory Shift in the Literature of the First World War: A Reawakening of the Sense of Smell” thus considers the creation of “One Sunday in Picardy” from the theoretical, analytical and self-reflexive perspectives.

## Part One

### Introduction

Cramped in that funnelled hole, they watched the dawn  
 Open jagged rim around; a yawn  
 Of death's jaws, which had all but swallowed them  
 Stuck in the bottom of his throat of phlegm.  
 They were in one of many mouths of Hell  
 Not seen of seers in visions; only felt  
 As teeth of traps; when bones and the dead are smelt  
 Under the mud where long ago they fell  
 Mixed with the sour sharp odour of the shell.  
 ("Cramped in That Funnelled Hole", Wilfred Owen, 1918)

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Wilfred Owen's poem "Cramped in That Funnelled Hole", written from the poet's experience of the trenches of the First World War, draws on all the senses. The soldiers "watched the dawn" from the hole, which is "felt / As teeth of traps" around them, hear the "yawn / Of death's jaws", and taste it "stuck in the bottom of his throat of phlegm" (lines 1, 6-7, 2-3, 4). But it is the smell of those who died "long ago" (8) that remains lingering in the mud and conjures up the memory of the ghastly scene.

Jon Stallworthy suggests that Owen was influenced by a passage from Henri Barbusse's novel *Under Fire*, published in 1917, in which a soldier lies "cramped up ... at the bottom of the listening-hole whose ragged jaws showed in black outline all around whenever a gun hurled its dawn into the sky" (Stallworthy 245). The novel also includes arresting olfactory images such as the smell of the corpses in the wind, which, the narrator says, "enters our thoughts and capsizes our very hearts" (Barbusse 235).

The olfactory sense is well represented in the modernist literature that followed. Danuta Fjellestad, in “Towards an Aesthetics of Smell, or, The Foul and the Fragrant in Contemporary Literature”, writes that while references to smell in nineteenth-century texts were used mainly for the purposes of characterisation in the style of Dickens, it is in modernist times that “the olfactory first surfaces as an essential element of the plot in the novel”, such as in Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* and Faulkner’s stench-filled *As I Lay Dying* (Fjellestad 641), published in 1922 and 1930 respectively. Hans J. Rindisbacher, in *The Smell of Books*, agrees that while smells began to present in French literature in the late nineteenth century in works such as J. K. Huysmans’ novel *Against the Grain* (Rindisbacher 145), first published as *À Rebours* in 1884, modernism might be defined as “the surfacing of the olfactory as an essential element in writing” (146).

In this exegesis, the word *modernism* will refer to “the wide range of experimental and avant-garde trends in the literature ... of the early 20th century” as described by Chris Baldick in *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (213). Baldick describes the literature of *postmodernism* arising in the 1960s as comprising “fragmentary sensations ... in which the traditionally valued qualities of depth, coherence, meaning, originality, and authenticity are evacuated or dissolved amid the random swirl of empty signals” (266).

Both Fjellestad and Rindisbacher see the olfactory sense as truly coming into its own in terms of theme and structure in the postmodernist period, with the publication of Patrick Süskind’s *Perfume*, which was published in German in 1985. Set in the smell-ridden landscape of eighteenth-century France, the plot pivots around the main character’s search for his own special odour, which is inextricably tied to his identity and sense of self. The images are vivid and fresh, even the most putrid. Rindisbacher

states that even compared with the “abundance of smells” in *Against the Grain*, “Never before Süskind has the olfactory been used to such an extent to carry the plot structure of a narrative” (Rindisbacher 298). In addition to the thematic and structural use of the olfactory in postmodernist literature, Fjellestad states that “The novel is also exceptional in its dominance of olfactory over visual imagery, and in its richness of the vocabulary linked to smell. It is tempting to see *Perfume* as heralding an ‘olfactory turn’ in literature” (Fjellestad 641-42).

But what of the olfactory imagery in Owen’s “Cramped in That Funnelled Hole”? While Rindisbacher writes that the use of the olfactory in *Perfume* “allows the reader to relish his or her safe distance from the events, yet sends a shiver down everyone’s spine when thinking of their physiological closeness” (Rindisbacher 298), the same might be said of Owen’s poem. From the safe distance of one hundred years the reader feels the smell of the bones and dead which seems still to emanate from the mud. While *Perfume* may signal an “olfactory turn” to the extent that smell is used in theme and structure, Owen’s description of the stench of the dead lends an aspect of time to the poem which draws the other images together. The olfactory image, if not dominant, ends the poem at least, and the soldier remembers the smell of the dead long after the bodies disappear from sight. In Owen’s “Cramped in That Funnelled Hole”, the vocabulary linked to smell is limited, but it is the unexpectedness of the images which provides depth to “when bones and the dead are smelt / Under the mud” and the qualifiers of taste in “the sour sharp odour of the shell” (7-8, 9).

Might the works of Owen and other war writers display early features of an “olfactory turn”? Fjellestad writes that “in literary criticism smell is undoubtedly one of the most neglected subjects” (640), and it may be timely during the commemoration of the war’s centenary to reflect on the depiction of the sense of smell in its literature. It is



proposed that indicators of a shift in olfactory representation may be found in the literature of the First World War, in which olfactory references are intertwined with episodes from the past and usually clichéd figures of speech are reformed into shocking juxtapositions. In Owen's poem, for example, the smell of the dead recalls the moment the soldiers fell; mud, which before the war was an inconvenience to trudge through, has become a tomb. Such a shift appears to have been influenced by the experience of the battlefields.

### **The Shifting Sensorium**

Walter J. Ong, in "The Shifting Sensorium", describes how the emphasis on particular senses may change with the environment; confronted with a vast array of sensations, individuals will focus on "some types of perception more than others, by making an issue of certain ones while relatively neglecting other ones" (28). While observing that Freudians have long favoured the role of the senses of hearing and sight in abstract thinking, Ong describes "shifting relationships between the senses" that are culture-dependent (28). Thus historical events such as war, which expose an individual or groups of people to new environments, might affect the organisation of the sensorium.

Owen's "Cramped in That Funnelled Hole" reflects the high level of sensory input to which the soldier at the front was exposed: the sounds of artillery and shouts; the jostling of men and gear in the narrow spaces; the taste of bitter food, of blood and vomit; and the new assortment of smells. When the soldier's view of the battlefield was blocked by the trench wall, the scene had to be construed through the other senses. In the poem, the soldiers wait "in one of many mouths of Hell / Not seen of seers in visions; only felt" (5-6), an idea appearing again in Owen's letter to his mother describing the trenches:

It is pock-marked like a body of foulest disease and its odour is the breath of cancer.

I have not seen any dead. I have done worse. In the dank air I have perceived it, and in the darkness, felt. (Stallworthy 158)

William Miller, in *The Anatomy of Disgust*, describes the orifice as a possible point of entry or emission of hazardous material (89). The image of the mouth, or orifice, presents in the “ragged jaws” in *Under Fire* and “death’s jaws” in “Cramped in That Funnelled Hole”. In another of Owen’s poems, “The Show”, men disappear into holes in no-man’s-land: “(And smell came up from those foul openings / As out of mouths, or deep wounds deepening.)” (14-15). The image is encased in brackets as if referring to another, deeper place.

The attention drawn to the sense of smell in the trenches is evident in an article by another of the war poets, Robert Graves, who remembers a range of olfactory sensations long after he has returned home:

The familiar trench smell of 1915-17 still haunts my nostrils:  
 compounded mainly of stagnant mud, latrine buckets, chloride of lime,  
 unburied or half-buried corpses, rotting sandbags, stale human sweat,  
 fumes of cordite and lyddite. Sometimes it was sweetened by cigarette  
 smoke and the scent of bacon frying over wood fires (broken  
 ammunition boxes); sometimes made sinister by the lingering odour of  
 poison gas. ("What Was That War Like Sir?")

Both Owen and Graves refer to the smell of corpses, an unpleasant aroma which defies representation and must be described in terms of its source of origin: the corpses who lay “under the mud” or within “foul openings”. In Western culture, a body should

not be left to rot “unburied” or, worse, “half-buried” – confronting images that provoke disgust.

In the period leading up to the late nineteenth century, an attempt had been made to eliminate or hide nasty and dangerous smells altogether. Alain Corbin, in *The Foul and The Fragrant: Odour and the Social Imagination*, states that this deodorisation was part of an attempt “to repress all the irrefutable prophetic markers of death: excrement, the product of menstruation, the corruption of carcasses, and the stench of corpses” (90). Death was to be hidden, with all its unpleasant side effects, including smell. Light, on the other hand, was increasingly considered to be good for general health, leading to what Corbin calls “the great swing in attitudes that was to give uncontested supremacy to the visual” (154). In 1930 Sigmund Freud alleged that the human’s ability to smell had decreased as a result of the upright posture, which had allowed visual cues to take over in sexual attraction (*Civilization and Its Discontents* 46-47).

In the early twentieth century, propose Classen, Howes and Synnott in *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell*, writers such as Proust may have begun to recapture the past using scents precisely because aromas had been deodorised away from nineteenth-century society (87-88). However, for the war writers the experience of the trenches, in which heightened olfactory input was associated with reactions of disgust and horror, may have played a role.

Miller states that in Western culture “smell ends up associated with the dark, the dank, the primitive and bestial, with blind and subterranean bestiality that moves in ooze” (75), images which resemble those used by the war poets when describing the trenches. Of all the sensations, Miller writes, smells have the special property of being “pervasive and invisible, capable of threatening like poison” (66). Those in the trenches

awaiting orders for attack or retreat could not escape the smell around them. For the war writers, the sense of smell could hardly be ignored – it was an inherent part of the horrific experience – and this encouraged new ways of depiction.

But how did literature shift from the late nineteenth century, in which the olfactory was used mainly for characterisation and was coded, to the point of an “olfactory turn” almost a century later? Some literary theories of representation which emerged in the early twentieth century may be of relevance.

### **Representing Death**

Geoffrey Hartman, in *On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies*, suggests that writers make the audience believe a traumatic story is “real” by capturing the sensations of the body which might accompany feelings associated, for example, with exposure to extremes of temperature (541). Owen’s poem “Cramped in That Funnelled Hole” captures all the senses including smell, which is used to retrieve the memory of the dead.

But what is being represented by these olfactory images? During the war, Ferdinand de Saussure published in *Course in General Linguistics* a theory of language in which a word becomes a “signifier” that denotes what is signified (67) – not the “thing” itself, but rather the “concept” of it (66). For smell, this is particularly relevant; as Barthes said, “*écrite, la merde ne sent pas*” (Barthes 140). When Owen writes in “Cramped in That Funnelled Hole” that “the dead are smelt / Under the mud” (7-8), the smell itself is not conjured up but the reader recognises what is signified. Contrast this with the image presented in the poem’s first two lines, of a hole through which the soldiers watch the dawn, which can be more easily imagined. When Owen writes that “the dead are smelt”, the smell represents the death of the victim. What is signified

cannot be truly absorbed by the soldier in the trenches; it is the writer's task to convey that ambiguity.

Classen et al. write that "the odour of the cadaver is a potent sign of the end of the life of the body" (150). In Western culture the smell of dead people is covered over first by removing the body from public view and then by embalming, the purpose of which is "to reduce the trauma of death for the survivors" (154). But in the trenches bodies are rarely removed quickly nor embalmed and there is no escape from the smell, so the potency of the sign is magnified and hence the survivors' trauma increased.

Shortly after the war, Sigmund Freud published *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which sets out the opposition between two ideas, namely the instinct of self-preservation which is common to all living things and the death instinct (65). Freud proposes that despite this instinctive drive towards death, "the organism wishes to die only in its own fashion" (65). In Owen's "Cramped in That Funnelled Hole", the soldier is left with the smell of putrid flesh. The soldier in the trench knows he will die at some stage, but does not want it to be here, now ... like that.

Jacques Derrida, in *Of Grammatology*, writes of a series of "supplementary mediations that produce the sense of the very thing they defer: the mirage of the thing itself, of immediate presence, of originary perception. Immediacy is derived" (157). For those writing of the smell of the dead or dying in the trenches, this deferral is highlighted, as none of the writers has experienced death at first hand nor is likely to have witnessed death on such a scale. The stench can only be described in relation to the object from which it comes, for example "the dead are smelt" or the "odour of the shell", which suggests that the finality of death defies representation and does not fit neatly with Derrida's concept that "there is nothing outside of the text" (158). The

events of the war posed a challenge to writers, who sought new ways to represent these concepts convincingly.

In “Cramped in That Funnelled Hole” Owen uses sensations to convey the feeling of immediacy – except for the references to the smell of the dead, which linger as a reminder of the distant past. Here the writer uses the olfactory sense to recall a memory. In the trenches young soldiers were exposed, many for the first time, to the odour of corpses; even the medical staff could not have experienced it on such a large scale. The smell was one they were unlikely to forget.

### **Remembering War**

In “The Role of Odor-Evoked Memory in Psychological and Physiological Health”, Rachel Herz proposes that such memories are “more emotional and evocative” than those evoked by the other senses, as only the olfactory receptors are directly linked to the amygdala and hippocampus, which are associated with the functions of emotion and memory (2). Herz states that vivid odour-evoked memories can set the heart racing and trigger the release of adrenalin, eliciting affect “before a cognitive understanding of why the emotions produced has occurred” (5). The impact of “unconscious olfaction” on physiology and affect is examined by Teresa Brennan in *The Transmission of Affect* (9).

Rindisbacher suggests that the sense of smell seems closest to memory (14); an odour is usually described using metaphor or by describing their source of origin, and thus its “linguistic structure brings up an Other, a reference to the outside” (15). Miller proposes that this is how we remember a smell or taste in the first place – through the sensations associated with the event that led, for example, to vomiting, the feeling of unpleasantness or disgust – and that only an experience of the same smell can trigger a memory associated with it (77).

But Robert Graves recorded in his autobiography that “Since 1916, the fear of gas had obsessed me: any unusual smell, even a sudden strong scent of flowers in a garden, was enough to send me trembling” (*Goodbye to All That* 237). It is not only the smell of gas which is linked to Graves’ memory of the gas attack, but any unfamiliar smell. Bettina Beer, in “Smell, Person, Space and Memory”, confirms that odours are more consciously perceived if they are “very unfamiliar; unexpected; their context deviates from everyday experience” (188). Beer refers to research which suggests that important odours can be stored in the memory together with episodes, citing as an example Proust’s recollections evoked by a madeleine dipped in tea (Beer 189-92). Hence for Graves the memory of the traumatic episode of the gas attack is triggered by any surprising smell.

The psychology of fear is a field of science which is still being explored and is beyond the scope of this exegesis; however, it should be mentioned that olfaction is well recognised in the literature on post-traumatic stress. Herz, for example, notes that olfactory memories may be “exceptionally potent triggers in post-traumatic stress disorder” (4) and are difficult to extinguish (7), as Freud discovered in his work with shell-shocked soldiers who were “fixated” to a trauma, returning to the event endlessly, even while dreaming (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 13).

In the poet’s recollection the smell of flowers sits alongside sensations of disgust and the memory of the gas attack, a shocking juxtaposition of images. What a contrast with a poem Graves wrote before the war, “Cherry-Time”, in which fruits plucked in the night give “a juice of pure delight / Cool, dark, sweet, divinely smelling” (14-15). The unsettling effect of combining positive and negative emotions in literature is explained by T. S. Eliot in an essay in 1919 as “an intensely strong attraction toward beauty and an equally intense fascination by the ugliness which is contrasted with it and

which destroys it” (“Tradition and the Individual Talent” 42). In 1921 Eliot states that a poet is ideally suited to “constantly amalgamating disparate experience”, such as falling in love and “the smell of cooking” (“The Metaphysical Poets” 64), or in Graves’ case the smell of flowers and memories of the battlefield.

In the close readings of war texts in Part Two, further examples will be found of the scent of flowers accompanying images of death – a dramatic contrast in which sweetness is tainted.

Classen et al. state that odours can also trigger “dreams or hallucinations” (157). Just after the war, Freud described the condition of traumatic neurosis that may occur after a risk to life. The sufferer, unable to absorb a shocking event as it occurs, must “*repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of . . . *remembering* it as something belonging to the past” (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 24). Barker, in *Regeneration*, provides a fictional example of the olfactory triggering repetitive-compulsive flashbacks in the character of Burns, the traumatised soldier who has fallen face down into the gut of the rotting German corpse and later, in hospital, cannot eat as the smell of food reminds him of the traumatic episode (19). For Burns, the odour recalls the sensations of disgust he felt when his mouth – an orifice – made contact with the bloated abdomen: the smells of fresh and decomposed food merge, and in his memory are linked.

This is an example of what Jay M. Winter refers to as “embodied memory” (55) in which the bodies of the soldiers “*perform* something about their war experience . . . hold traces of memory; they are speaking to us, though not in a way which we usually encounter. Here stories become flesh” (57). The body retains the memory, even if the mind rejects it. The olfactory sense can contribute to the embodied memory of the shell-shocked soldier and thus provide crucial information on what happened to that person.



In *Shell Shock and the Modernist Imagination*, Wyatt Bonikowski postulates that the figures used in literature are “revolving around an unrepresentable Thing that motivates their repetition”, providing insights into the traumatic experience (11). The attempts of war writers to signify this “unrepresentable Thing” through the olfactory sense is the topic of this discussion.

Soon after the war, in 1926, Roger Fry writes in *Transformations*: “The evocations of smell are indeed so powerful that they would doubtless form the basis for an art similar to music in its deep emotional evocations, if only different perfumes could be perceived in relation to one another” (4). But scientists have found that humans have hundreds of olfactory receptors near the nose that can distinguish many more varieties of smell (Tompa). Were modernist writers limited in their depiction of smell not by the ability to perceive one smell from another, or to understand its meaning, but by the language used to signify those differences?

### **Upside-Down Sensations**

Textual representations of smell are limited by the terminology available. Plato writes that “the diversities of odour fall into two sets. They lack names because they do not consist of a definite number of simple types. The only clear distinction to be drawn here is twofold: the pleasant and the unpleasant” (Cornford 273). A smell is usually described, Miller suggests, in terms of whatever emits it – for example, rotting flesh smells like rotting flesh or something similar, like faeces; the alternative is to use “simple adjectives and nouns expressing either the pleasantness or unpleasantness of the smell, most of which merely mean bad or good smell: fetid, foul, stink, stench, rancid, vile, revolting, nauseating, sickening” (67). Rindisbacher associates “good smells” with “attraction, eroticism, sexuality, birth, life” and “bad smells” with “repulsion, corruption, decay, and ultimately death” (103).

The division between good and bad smells can influence the language used to describe smell in certain social groups. Miller notes that the word “stink”, for example, “has a forcefulness that makes it not quite proper in polite conversation. One usually avoids it by using softer formulations such as ‘smells bad.’ Or one uses stink while suffering a small anxiety regarding its likelihood of breaching decorum or of typing oneself as vulgar” (78).

Perceptions of whether a smell is “good” or “bad” can change over time. Graves mentions that the vile smells of the trenches can be “sweetened by cigarette smoke and the scent of bacon frying” which are thus presented in a positive light. However, in the twenty-first century, smoking is banned in many public spaces; furthermore, the smell of fried fat which is inviting at a barbeque may resemble more abhorrent smells (Miller 68). The inversion of olfactory references in the war literature will be examined further in the next section.

Classen et al. propose that odours exist and change in a space or “smellscape” which can be used by cultures as a way of making sense of the environment (97). The olfactory experience is not only biological and psychological, but “intimate, emotionally charged . . . such value-coded odours are interiorised by the members of society in a deeply personal way” (3). By the end of the nineteenth century, society appeared to have coded which smells were acceptable and which were not. Corbin suggests that for “modesty” a woman was encouraged to turn away from animal scents to become “the natural, sweetly perfumed woman-flower” (186). This process was not, however, without its dangers, as a refined person could become unfamiliar with nasty smells; thus “delicate young girls, for example, might fall victim to parosmia (confusion of smells)” (141) if confronted with an unpleasant reek.

According to Classen et al., such categorisation may persist in the modern West, where the myth still lingers of women as “the perfumed sex”: prostitutes might veer towards “bad odours on the olfactory scale of feminine value”, while maidens are “naturally fragrant and should smell of nothing stronger than the flowers with which they are associated”, and “wives and mothers are surrounded by smells of cooking, with a dash of some respectable perfume, nothing too heady, thrown in on special occasions” (162).

But the events of the First World War threw all these categories into confusion. In *A Cultural History of the Senses*, Classen writes that a “characteristic sensory experience of war was that of inversion . . . War produced upside-down sensations, both for combatants and for the inhabitants of occupied territories” (20). Trench warfare was an inverted space in which the soldier could no longer rely on the visual, as much of the activity took place in darkness; for the soldier, smells were experienced as “internal sensations” which, when added to the external barrage of the sound of gunfire, could “lead to a divided consciousness” (21).

Classen gives an example of this dichotomy:

... the English poet Rupert Brooke could enthusiastically write of soldiers going to war in 1914 as “swimmers into cleanness leaping” (1942: 146). In the trenches, however, the “fresh wind” of war turned out to be a fetid swamp and leaping into “cleanness” was transformed into wallowing in mud. After the First World War, in the minds of many, war became sensorially and socially foul. (Classen 23)

Miller suggests that the experience of disgust may be dependent on context; nurses and doctors, for example, may be accustomed to “evil-smelling and decaying

bodies” (61), although not the stench and scale of mortality with which they were confronted in the trenches.

I propose that examples in war texts of these “upside-down sensations” (Classen 20) and the subversion of the coding of smells may signify a change in the olfactory imagination in literature. Examples in war texts of usually clichéd figures of speech reformed into shocking juxtapositions may be possible indicators of a shift in the representation of smell which appeared before the “olfactory turn” in postmodern times.

### **Discussion**

Fjellestad describes a significant evolution in literary representation of the olfactory sense to the point of an “olfactory turn”, heralded by Süskind’s novel *Perfume* (Fjellestad 642). In this work, the olfactory is used as a thematic and structural device; odours are most often described in terms of their source of origin or using rich adjectives that draw attention from the visual. However, I believe that this postmodernist work may also be read as a fable, in which the reader is placed at a distance from the vicious murders of young girls and the cannibalism of human flesh which is the end point of Grenouille’s fruitless search for identity and a personal scent. His fabricated odour comprises the identities of others and not his own, an “empty signal” (Baldick 266) like the perfumes of today which, write Classen et al.:

. . . are evocative of things which are not there, of presences which are absent: we have floral-scented perfumes which were never exhaled by a flower . . . These artificial odours are a sign without a referent, smoke without fire, pure olfactory image.

This then is the manner in which smell, denied and ignored by scholars of modernity, can be called a ‘postmodern’ sense. (205)

A scent in the past, on the other hand, was “proof of a material presence” which could be traced back to its origin (Classen et al. 205).

My proposal is that the morbid smell of the First World War trenches was indicative of a material presence – the dead and dying soldiers – and was a sign which could be traced to its source or referent, that of death. However, this reality was not able to be absorbed by witnesses, who often revisited the horror again and again in Freud’s cycle of repetition-compulsion, swinging between repression and incomplete recollection. In my view the smell of death, put aside and deodorised in Western culture, was not “ignored by scholars of modernity” (Classen et al. 205) but rather utilised by writers striving to depict the “unrepresentable Thing” (Bonikowski 11). Thus smell, which Fjellestad describes as “*the* sense of postmodernism” (650), may have played an equivalent role in the modernist literature of the early twentieth century.

The war texts engage the reader through descriptions of sensory input, as has been demonstrated in Owen’s “Cramped in That Funnelled Hole”. In the trenches, the stench of cadavers might be seen as “a potent sign of the end of the life of the body” (Classen et al. 150) which the soldier was unable to absorb. De Saussure’s 1915 theory of language is relevant to the challenge posed to war writers in the depiction of these odours: a signifier can only conjure up the concept, rather than the thing itself. With each layer of representation meaning is deferred, as the signified becomes more and more removed from what Derrida later calls the “originary perception” in which the “immediacy” of an event can only be “derived” (*Of Grammatology* 157). Again, the reader is held at a distance.

Yet why are Owen’s olfactory references so evocative, bringing the past forward so that the smell of corpses seems to emanate from the mud long after the battle is over? Is it because the sense of smell is connected with the most primitive part of the brain

and is linked to memory? Or is it a function of Freud's theory of repetition-compulsion: the traumatic memory is unable to be absorbed and is thus repressed, so the smell becomes an indicator of what happened but not a revivification of that memory, that is, both a revelation and repression? The soldiers' bodies speak for them, as Winter describes it, holding "traces of memory" (57) of events that they relive as if happening now rather than in the past.

I suggest that early modernist writers strove for new ways to represent this embodied trauma: the olfactory images in the war texts are thick with metaphor and jumbled together in shocking combinations intertwined with repressed memory, eliciting in the reader a profound emotional response. In Part Two of the exegesis I will examine selected war texts for evidence of such a shift in olfactory representation.

## Part Two

### Introduction

The trenches of the First World War exposed eyewitnesses – or in the restricted range of vision, nosewitnesses – to a barrage of new sensory input, including the stench of dying and decomposing bodies. As writers strove to capture the horror of the battlefield and “the unrepresentable Thing” (Bonikowski 11) with which they were confronted, new forms of olfactory representation seem to have emerged in their writings.

A comprehensive study of the war literature is beyond the scope of this exegesis; however, the texts of three modernist writers will be examined for olfactory references that might reveal a shift in literary representation. These works hint at early features of the postmodernist “olfactory turn”: the sense of smell is used to some extent for theme and structure; the olfactory imagery may, if not dominate, be as powerful as that of sight; the use of vocabulary is complex. However, my discussion focuses on the following experimental literary techniques used by modernist war writers: subversion of the Enlightenment coding of scents into “good” and “bad” smells, inversion of sensory input leading to uncomfortable juxtapositions of images, and the link between the sense of smell and embodied memory.

But if, as is suggested in this exegesis, the shift in olfactory representation resulted from the experience of the trenches, might this literary effect only be perceived in the texts of those who fought or worked at the front? For this reason I chose to analyse the texts of three modernist writers whose involvement in the war differed. The Australian soldier Frederic Manning served in the Somme in 1916, an experience which inspired his novel *The Middle Parts of Fortune*, published in 1929 as *Her Privates We*. Vera Brittain worked as a nurse near the front, and wrote her autobiography *Testament*

*of Youth* in 1933 from memories, letters and diaries. Virginia Woolf lived in England during the war, well away from the front; yet Woolf's depiction of smell in 1925 in *Mrs. Dalloway* contrasts dramatically with a later work, *Flush*, published in 1933.

### ***The Middle Parts of Fortune***

Set in the trenches of the Western Front, Frederic Manning's *The Middle Parts of Fortune* abounds with sensory depictions; the reader is told that "the senses certainly have, in some measure, an independent activity of their own, and remain vigilant even in the mind's eclipse" (9). Towards the end of the novel the heightening of the olfactory sense is brought out by mist across a battleground: "Its damp coldness enhanced the sense of smell. There was a reek of mouldering rottenness in the air, and through it came the sour, stale odour from the foul clothes of the men" (245-46).

Exposure to the smell of death at the front is presented almost as a rite of passage: the main character, the soldier Bourne, is furious when an administrative worker on the front "who has never even smelt a dead horse in South Africa, turned one of my men out of a canteen" (Manning 221). Bourne implies that the clerk has not been near enough to the fighting to smell death of any kind and so has less authority over the soldiers.

At times the olfactory images oscillate between stench and fragrancy. For example, when Bourne remembers the dead in Trones Wood, they are "festering"; he remembers "one vented in the wind the stench of death", but his sobs bring him back to "the warm smelly darkness of the tent [which] seemed almost luxurious ease. He drowsed heavily; dreaming of womanly softness, sweetness; but their faces slipped away from him" (Manning 15). The stink of corpses is so extreme that even the smell of the tent provides comfort, leading him to dream of the sweetness of a woman; these incongruent images sit fleetingly side by side.



Feminine fragranciness is mentioned again when a French woman asks Bourne to translate a letter from her lover, a British soldier, who writes: "I wish we were together again so that I could smell your hair. I love you always, my dearest" (Manning 128). But the woman sees it differently: "*Il aimait flairer dans mes cheveux tout comme un petit chien*" (129). The man associates the smell of the woman's hair with idealised love, while the woman thinks he sniffs her hair like a cute little dog – an animalistic representation which is tinged with sexuality, an inversion of the Enlightenment coding.

The writer chooses a stronger animal metaphor to describe Bourne in the trenches: "Only the instincts of the beast survived in him, every sense was alert and in that tension was some poignancy" (Manning 11). Yet the word "poignancy" invites a dual interpretation, for according to the Macquarie Online Dictionary, a *poignant* smell is one that is "pungent" and thus can be either "distressing" or "mentally stimulating" ("poignant," def. 3).

Again, the metaphor of the beast is used to describe Bourne going into a dugout:

As Bourne entered, his nostrils dilated at the reek, as though some instinct of a beast survived in him. Each of the guttering candles had a halo round it. The smoke from them, and tobacco, and acrid fumes from a brazier, could not mask the stale smell of unwashed men, and serges into which had soaked and dried the sweat of months. (Manning 265)

His nostrils are alerted to the stench and widen to receive the sensory input. Even the smoke from the candles, which have a sacred connotation, cannot overcome the body odour.

Yet early in *The Middle Parts of Fortune* the men's skins under their shirts are "like satin, supple and lustrous; the sweat washed out the dirt, and was absorbed with it into their clothing which had a sour, stale and rather saline smell" (Manning 18). Here

the unpleasant smell is not attributed to the body, which washes itself naturally, but the clothes, constrictive and unchanged, in which the odour of sweat sours – an uncomfortable juxtaposition of images which highlights the human sacrifice.

Further, the olfactory organ is represented in Manning's novel in a subversive manner. For example, a tank is "nosing its way slowly through the stagnant fog . . . its uplifted snout seemed to imply a sense of direction and purpose, even though it was not, in bulk, as formidable as they had expected" (235). The tank becomes a slow-moving fat pig: benevolent almost and not as large as the soldiers had feared. Similarly, a rat in the trench elicits in Bourne "a sigh of disgust" but then, "its muzzle twitching sensitively, sat up, sleek and well-fed, to stroke its whiskers with its fore-paws" (262, 263). The personified image of a rat considering the smells of the trenches briefly distracts Bourne from his nausea. Thus rat, tank and human – each attempting to navigate the horrific trench environment – are presented using incongruous olfactory images which unsettle the reader.

Unlike Süskind's *Perfume*, in *The Middle Parts of Fortune* the olfactory sense is not used as a structural device, but its depiction demands a deep engagement from the reader. Olfactory images sit uncomfortably together and subvert expectations from the Enlightenment period, whether in relation to the moral rules of wartime, gendered coding, or personification of the animal or inanimate.

However, Manning's work is set entirely in 1916 France and does not reveal the process of change in olfactory representation as a result of the war experience. For this purpose, the texts of two other war writers will be examined, the first of which begins before the turn of the century.

### *Testament of Youth*

Vera Brittain's autobiography *Testament of Youth* spans the latter years of Queen Victoria's reign, when the author was born, to the 1930s. During the war Brittain worked as a nurse, at times near the front. With the author's increasing involvement in the war, references in the memoir to the olfactory sense seem to become more prominent and conflicting.

While again *Testament of Youth* does not employ the olfactory to the same extent as *Perfume* in terms of theme and structure, throughout Brittain's work the scent of flowers is used to represent the love between the young Vera and Roland Leighton. A chapter entitled "Provincial Young-Ladyhood" opens with Roland's poem "In the Rose-Garden", which describes their meeting at the Headmaster's Garden Party in 1914, just before war breaks out (Brittain 34). In the poem Vera is portrayed as more beautiful than a rose as she steps into the sunlight like "Noon and a scented glory / Golden and pink and red" (9-10), an image which remains in line with the Enlightenment coding of "the natural, sweetly perfumed woman-flower" (Corbin 186).

When war is declared and Roland signs up, however, the metaphor of the rose becomes more complex. The young soldier gives Vera "a bunch of tall pink roses with . . . the sweetest scent in the world" (Brittain 96) which she fastens to her dress:

In the warm atmosphere of the restaurant, their wistful, tender perfume clung about us like a benediction.

Incongruously we talked, that dinner-time, about the way we should like to be buried. . . . I asked him quite suddenly: "If you could choose your death, would you like to be killed in action?" . . . Roland replied quite quietly: 'Yes, I should. I don't want to die, but if I must I should like to die that way. . . .' (Brittain 96)

The scent of the roses takes on a religious connotation and seems to lead to talk of being killed in action: an unusual topic of conversation for a courting couple. Roland decides he would prefer to die in battle, in line with Freud's ideas on the desire of an organism to die in its own fashion; yet this reflects the soldier's lack of experience of the battlefield and a naivety of what such a death would entail. In this passage the scent is associated with the memory of a lovers' meeting which evolves into a presentiment of death; the reader is invited to contemplate both the past and what the future might hold for Roland.

When the young lovers are first alone together in Leicester at the start of 1915, while Roland awaits his departure to France, he presents Vera with "another sheaf of pale pink roses. He looked tired, and said he had had a cold; actually, it was incipient influenza" (Brittain 101). Now, the flowers are arranged in a funereal sheaf and Roland is unwell. When he sits close to her, she feels afraid and thinks later of the quotation: "There is no beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion" (102), reflecting the conflicting nature of the images.

After Roland arrives at the front, he sends her a poem, "Villanelle", describing a dead soldier found in the woods, which begins:

Violets from Plug Street Wood,  
Sweet, I send you oversea.  
  
(It is strange they should be blue,  
Blue, when his soaked blood was red,  
For they grew around his head;  
It is strange they should be blue.) (Brittain 114, 1-6)

The word "Sweet", which could refer to either the violets or Vera, echoes the scent of roses which has come to symbolise their love; however, the colour of the

flowers is not right and contrasts with that of the dead man's blood. After the simplicity of "In the Rose-Garden", the poem must have made quite an impression on young Vera and, along with Roland's descriptive letters from the front, informs her of what is happening in the trenches. The poem plays with the past and present tense, drawing the reader into that world.

When Vera works with returned soldiers, she is exposed to men's naked bodies and their excretions. Other nurses, in line with the Enlightenment coding of "bad smells", try to avoid the smelliest tasks, but Vera discovers "a masochistic delight in emptying bed-pans . . . and disposing of odoriferous dressings in the sink-room" (Brittain 144). The pairing of the disparate terms in "masochistic delight" reflects the inappropriateness of taking pleasure in such tasks. Vera is thankful she is not beholden to "the Victorian tradition which up to 1914 dictated that a young woman should know nothing of men but their faces and their clothes until marriage" (143).

Vera notes a change in Roland's letters from the front; he seems "more obsessed with the idea of death than ever before" and sends one letter which "was grim with a disgust and bitterness that I had never known him put into words" (Brittain 173). The olfactory images become increasingly vivid. For example, he asks those who idealise war to look at the corpses of soldiers – then they will see "how grand and glorious a thing it is to have distilled all Youth and Joy and Life into a foetid heap of hideous putrescence!" (174). Later, Vera writes back that "my metamorphosis has not been as complete as yours – in fact I doubt if it has occurred at all" (193). But there are many indications in *Testament of Youth* that Brittain has been greatly affected by the war, through her relationship with Roland, her brother and other friends, and as a result of nursing work.

The first dressing at which Vera assists is “a gangrenous leg wound, slimy and green and scarlet, with the bone laid bare” (Brittain 187), not olfactory descriptions as such, yet the smell reeks from the page. But Vera is more afraid of becoming like the composed sisters in the ward who work without obvious pity (187) – another example of an unexpected juxtaposition of images. Roland compares his life at the front with her “world of long wards and silent-footed nurses and bitter, clean smells and an appalling whiteness in everything” (191). For him, the smell of disinfectant does not reassure but is bitter and frightening, a shocking recoding of smells.

After Roland is killed, even a sniff of the “melting sweetness” of tall pink roses – the symbol of their love affair – brings Vera to tears (Brittain 214). Later, the meaning of floral images is further deferred as they become infused with sexuality: “mauve and pink gladioli held their slender, spiky heads erect in the warm, scented air” (300). The clothes in which Roland died are sent to the family, but his mother cannot stand their presence in her son’s absence and orders for them to be taken away, saying, “They smell of death; they are not Roland; they even seem to detract from his memory and spoil his glamour” (226). Here I suggest the smell of the dead man’s clothes may be seen as “pure olfactory image” (Classen et al. 205), a presence which only makes clearer the absence of a beloved son and leaves the “originary perception” (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 157) of his essence hanging in the unknown.

In *Testament of Youth* stench becomes a marker of death and suffering. When Vera searches for her brother Edward amongst the covered stretchers, she is afraid of “what fearful sight or sound or stench, what problem of agony or imminent death, each brown blanket concealed” (Brittain 252). After the war Vera remembers the “dying men, reeking with mud and foul green-stained bandages, shrieking and writhing in a

grotesque travesty of manhood” (386), placing into question the idea of “manhood” and the limits of endurance.

Vera returns to England to look after her parents, but the Enlightenment coding of smells continues to be subverted. “Bad” smells are introduced into the house by a new maid who is labelled as “an amateur prostitute who . . . smoked pungent cigarettes which, to my father’s intense indignation, continually permeated the flat from her bedroom” and who is soon replaced (Brittain 392).

The day of the Armistice only reminds Vera of the deaths of Roland, her brother and a close friend, Victor. She recalls a letter she wrote to Roland early in the war, on “a warm May evening, when all the city was sweet with the scent of wallflowers and lilac”, but with a pervading sense of presentiment (Brittain 421). When after the war Vera returns to her studies, that scent is tarnished: “Once again, as in 1915, Oxford from Carfax to Summertown was warm and sweet with lilac and wallflowers and may; it seemed unbearable that everything should be exactly the same when all my life was so much changed” (437).

It is not until Vera falls in love again that this contradiction appears to reconcile. Vera decides that for the marriage ceremony:

. . . I’ll carry, not lilies nor white heather, but the tall pink roses with a touch of orange in their colouring and the sweetest scent in the world, that Roland gave me one New Year’s Eve a lifetime ago. When the wedding is over, I’ll give them to Roland’s mother; I know G. will understand why. (Brittain 606)

These examples display the changing depiction of the scent of the flowers in Brittain’s *Testament of Youth*, from strictly coded images to those comprising incongruous and unstable elements which may unsettle the reader and allude to an

immediacy that was observed in Manning's work. While the olfactory images do not provide a structural scaffold for the work, as is the case in Süskind's *Perfume*, they play an important role – thematically and symbolically – which develops as the war progresses.

### ***Mrs. Dalloway and Flush***

Finally, indicators of an olfactory turn will be sought in two works of Virginia Woolf, who lived in England during the war. The first, the 1925 novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, has been used as a literary model for the structure of the creative work, as detailed in Part Three. However, *Mrs. Dalloway* is also pertinent for the scarcity of its olfactory images, in stark contrast to Woolf's later work, *Flush*, published in 1933.

Like Brittain's autobiography, flowers are a theme in Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, which begins with a decision by the central character to buy flowers for the party that evening. However, olfactory references appear only in one scene in *Mrs. Dalloway*: in the florist shop Clarissa "breathed in the earthy garden sweet smell" and is seen to be "snuffing in, after the street uproar, the delicious scent, the exquisite coolness" (13, 14). When Clarissa's husband buys a bunch of roses and hurries off to tell his wife he loves her, there is no mention of Brittain's "sweetest scent" (Brittain 96), only the ghastly images of the War's dead "shovelled together" and Richard "bearing his flowers like a weapon" through the streets (*Mrs. Dalloway* 126, 127). This jumble of discordant thoughts linking flowers and the war – almost as a repressed indicator of what happened – prefigures the olfactory recoding which has been postulated in Brittain's text.

Such jarring juxtapositions occur elsewhere in Woolf's novel: when shell-shocked returnee Septimus Smith hears the voice of a dead comrade, his wife carries dying roses into the room (*Mrs. Dalloway* 102); the geraniums of his office colleague



are said to have been “ruined in the War” (98). In any case, Septimus cannot smell the flowers, having lost the ability to “feel” as a result of the war, and has to rely on vision and hearing (95), a reflection of the pre-war attention to these two senses.

According to Elaine Showalter’s 1991 introduction to *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf’s focus on the visual and auditory in the novel may also relate to contemporary advances in cinematography which led to experimentation in visual representation (xxi-xxiii). This point is discussed further in Part Three of the exegesis in relation to my use of the novel as a model for my own creative work.

But it may be that *Mrs. Dalloway* does not exhibit the same olfactory features as the works of Manning and Brittain mentioned above because, unlike those authors, Woolf lived in England during the war and was not exposed to the smells of the trenches. In other words, perhaps a writer’s presence or proximity to the front – the intensity of the olfactory experience – might have influenced the deployment of the sense of smell in their literature.

On the other hand, Woolf’s later work *Flush: A Biography* is full of odours – unsurprisingly, perhaps, given that this story of the courtship of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning is told from a dog’s perspective. Other writers of the time had begun to explore the canine point of view; for example, in 1927 Sir William Beach Thomas wrote a letter to his dog for the *Atlantic Monthly*, republished later in *The Way of a Dog*, and in 1931 Franz Kafka’s short story “Investigations of a Dog” was published. These works might have encouraged Woolf to experiment with new points of view and forms of olfactory depiction.

Woolf’s decision to prioritise the olfactory in the novel *Flush* may also be viewed as a response to the lingering constraints of Victorian times. Alison Booth, in “The Scent of a Narrative: Rank Discourse in 'Flush' and 'Written on the Body’”, notes

that in *Flush* Woolf surmounts the barriers to women writers she described in her speech to the Society for Women's Service in January 1931 (Booth 7). In the speech, Woolf spoke of the role of "The Angel in the House" (Woolf, "Professions" 58), whose role it was to run the family home and, most importantly, "be pure" (59); the author said she had to kill that angel in order to write, but barriers of propriety still remained which prevented her from "telling the truth about my own experiences as a body" (62).

According to one critic, in the summer of that year Woolf began *Flush* (Silver 157), a novel in which the olfactory sensations of both "good" and "bad" smells – previously out of bounds for women – are explored in depth, albeit through the body of a dog.

I suggest that *Flush* displays many features which reflect the proposed shift in olfactory representation in the early twentieth century. While Woolf had not worked near the front, she could have absorbed the changing depiction of the sense of smell from the work of other modernist writers. For example, the instinctive nature of the sense of smell and its link with memory are seen in Flush's reaction to a smell in the countryside "that ripped across his brain stirring a thousand instincts, releasing a million memories – the smell of hare, the smell of fox" until those memories give way to the sounds of a horn that call up "wilder and stronger emotions that transcended memory and obliterated grass, trees, hare, rabbit, fox in one wild shout of ecstasy" (*Flush* 6, 8).

Thus for Flush repressed memories of hunting are overcome by a deeper passion, an "originary perception" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 157) in which there is only the delight of the present moment which results in new life. For the dog, scent provides a clear indication of what is present or has been before. While Miss Barrett's father fails to sense that his daughter's suitor has visited, "to Flush the whole room still

reeked of Mr. Browning's presence" (Woolf, *Flush* 32). Yet at the door of Miss Barrett's room the new smell of perfume throws the dog into confusion (12).

Then there is the odd combination of smells in Flush's first impression of Ms. Barrett's house, in which "warm whiffs of joints roasting" are mixed with the "scents of male bodies and female bodies . . . of coal dust and fog" (Woolf, *Flush* 11), a construction which is not unlike Graves' shocking description of trench smells comprising "half-buried corpses" and "stale human sweat . . . sometimes made sinister by the lingering odour of poison gas" ("What Was That War").

While not a war novel, Woolf's novel *Flush* includes olfactory images that resonate with the discordant styles of representation found in war texts. As the dog approaches its death, this unsettling effect seems to become more pronounced: the smells of baked bread sit side by side with the spittle of drunk men; the sun makes the stone "reek", as does the shade; goats have a smell that is "raucous" while "the violet intricacies of dark cathedrals" lead him to sniff and taste "the gold on the window-stained tomb" (67). This intensity of smells appears to foreshadow the dog's death, in the same way as Bourne's senses are alerted before the attack in *The Middle Parts of Fortune*.

Near the end of Woolf's story, the narrator bemoans the limitations of the human nose and the depiction of the olfactory in literature in coded forms:

. . . there are no more than two words and one-half for what we smell.

The human nose is practically non-existent. The greatest poets in the world have smelt nothing but roses on the one hand, and dung on the other. The infinite gradations that lie between are unrecorded. (*Flush* 66-67)

But once liberated from the constraints of Victorian times – moving away from the focus on the visual and auditory, and upending the coding of smells in the manner of other modernist writers – Woolf could write more freely about the olfactory experience.

## **Discussion**

I have proposed in this exegesis that the shocking experience of trench life in the First World War led to a heightening of the sense of smell for witnesses and a subsequent shift in its representation in the literature. Close readings of war texts have indicated the appearance of vivid olfactory imagery in relation to the smell of death, a subversion of the Enlightenment coding of “good” and “bad” smells, and a strong link between the olfactory sense and the processes of memory and recall.

In the wake of the Enlightenment, a renewed focus on the olfactory is demonstrated in Manning’s *The Middle Parts of Fortune*; the writer juxtaposes images of stench and fragrancy, and uses animal metaphors to underline the instinctive nature of the sensory experience in the trenches. Brittain’s *Testament of Youth*, in which a young woman is increasingly exposed to the horrors of the war, suggests a shift in olfactory representation from Victorian to post-war times. The sustained imagery of the scent of roses becomes paired with reflections on death: juxtapositions which confront and destabilise. While in these works the olfactory sense is not used thematically or structurally to the extent of Süskind’s *Perfume* and in no way overpowers the visual images, the examples discussed can be seen as early indicators of the postmodernist “olfactory turn”. However, the overall effect of these modernist images is not to defer meaning further, but to draw the reader closer.

Perhaps this transition is most evident in the works of Woolf, who did not work near the front but appears to have been influenced by the change in olfactory

imagination in the war literature. The depiction of the shell-shocked soldier in *Mrs. Dalloway* is vivid, yet relies on the visual and auditory senses in line with the mores of the first decades of the twentieth century. Woolf's speech to the Society for Women's Service may be seen as a turning point after which she could write more freely of embodied emotions. The result is *Flush*, a novel in which olfactory imagery impinges on theme and structure; threatens, through the dog's perspective, to overtake the visual images; and pushes experimentation to new levels through discordance and synaesthesia.

Even in the late nineteenth century some writers had employed rich olfactory descriptions in their narratives; an example is Huysmans' work *Against the Grain*, which was published in 1884 as *À Rebours*. But the literature of the First World War provides dramatic indicators of a departure in olfactory representation from the strict Enlightenment coding. Thus "bad" smells took on a prominence as a generation of men and women were exposed directly or indirectly to odours or signs of a concept that had been shunted away from Western society, namely death – the "unrepresentable Thing" (Bonikowski 11).

This argument has several implications. Firstly, such olfactory images provide insights into the war experience and the impact of embodied trauma on combatants and non-combatants alike. Secondly, the new patterns of representation reflect, and may have influenced, emerging experimental trends of modernist literature. Thirdly, these changes indicate a rapprochement between writer and reader that contrasts, and may even have been undermined by, the detachment of later postmodernist writings.

Trauma in the literature of the early twentieth century contains much of the first-hand experience of war and stench, but in postmodern writing there may be a devaluation of sympathetic literary representations of trauma and character. In

Süskind's case, for example, there appears to be a more analytical representation of the olfactory. While the writer uses history to formulate the story, Grenouille is a person with no odour and no meaning to his life – a postmodern construct. Thus *Perfume* can be seen as both historical and clinical, almost essayistic, without the sort of literary/experiential redemption of despair that First World War writers tried to convey in their warnings of apocalypse. The olfactory images in the war writings have the sense of “immediacy” referred to by Derrida (*Of Grammatology* 157) and even of things to come.

Part Three will include a discussion of the influence of the proposed shift in olfactory representation on the writing of the creative work.

### Part Three

#### Inspiration for “One Sunday in Picardy”

“One Sunday in Picardy”, the creative work presented in Volume One of this thesis, is a novel set during the First World War. An Australian doctor returns to see his young French fiancée. Unable to remember his role in one fierce battle for which he was decorated, the doctor’s thoughts are plagued by traumatic images and sensations as the likelihood grows of another German attack.

This story was inspired by the lives of my grandparents, who met when my grandfather was billeted to the *château* of my grandmother’s family on his way to the Battle of the Somme in 1916. Within a week the doctor proposed to the girl, then just sixteen, but her mother told him that “these are extraordinary times” and asked him to return when the fighting was done. Many anecdotes have been passed down our family, including stories of the week German officers stayed in the *château* and held the family at gunpoint; the young doctor’s gallstone attack on the boat in the Dardanelles; the day the Red Baron’s body, shot down nearby, was brought to the *château* to be washed; life as a medico in the trenches; and the resolve of the young couple to be together despite the misgivings of their families.

My grandmother and father recounted snippets of these events so often that they seemed to become my memories too, and those of my brothers. We are the last generation to have known my grandparents, to have listened to my father’s retelling and to keep the stories alive.

The unusual nature of our grandparents’ relationship was evident. Grand-mère was beautiful and exotic, with a strong French accent she guarded carefully until moments before she died, when she turned to my father and spoke her last sentences in perfect Oxford English. We knew Grand-père as a sweet old man with Parkinson’s

disease, anxious that we might fall and scrape our knees. There were no antibiotics in the trenches, my father used to explain, and a man could die from the infection of a small cut. The mysteries that made our older grandparents different – the Anzac Day marches, hot garlic snails in the shell for lunch, their names – seemed to stem from wartime France. Always present was what my grandmother left behind when she came to Australia. “Life is about choice,” she would say later, extending a thin finger into the hazy space before her as her lenses clouded over. “If you choose this, then you can’t have that.” Then she would swing her finger in an arc and let her hand drop. I wanted to try to know what “that” was and to understand her struggle, and that of my grandfather.

With the commemoration in 2015 of the centenary of Australia’s involvement in Gallipoli, attention has been drawn to personal stories of the First World War.

Exploring the lives of one’s ancestors is an emotional experience, intensified by learning of what was endured during the war. My father had drawn imaginary lines on the kitchen table to describe the shifting position of no-man’s-land above the dugout where my grandfather worked at Bullecourt, but my research, outlined below, revealed just how close he often was to the fighting. The *château* where my grandmother’s family lived was near enough to the front for a piece of shell to burst through a living room window and slice off the arm of a statue on the mantelpiece. The scale of death occurring around them was unfathomable. In the midst of the horror of war, the bond between my grandparents became a symbol of hope and redemption that would pull me through the writing process.

### **Research Design**

I began the doctorate planning to produce a work of creative nonfiction that would closely adhere to the “facts”. The family stories were interesting, I thought, and should not be tampered with. In *You Can’t Make This Stuff Up*, Lee Gutkind offers a



guide to what can and cannot be made up in this genre, while acknowledging that the definition of creative nonfiction is still under debate (5-8). But there were many gaps in what I knew about my grandparents: there were photos but no letters, objects such as furniture and jewellery but with no written provenance. The war records and history books could fill in some missing pieces, but a certain amount of invention would be required. I would write about my discovery of their story as a memoir, pushing the boundaries of nonfiction, blurring fact with fiction. But I wondered how my family might view my imaginative reconstruction of the events.

In November 2013, at the Creative Manoeuvres Conference at the University of Canberra, I presented a paper entitled “Writing as Self-Definition” which focused on motivations to record a family story. I realised that what interested me lay between the historical records and the oral family stories, namely what brought, and kept, my grandparents together. In other words, their story, not mine.

My supervisor recommended an immersion in First World War literature to get the atmosphere of the era: fictional works such as Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* and Frederick Manning’s *The Middle Parts of Fortune* which told powerful stories about the impact of the war on those on the battlefield and at home. Encouraged by these fictions, I decided to write a novel rather than a memoir. It would be inspired by my grandparents’ lives rather than claiming to be a factual account, although the historical events would not be altered. Using this format I could explore those areas between the family knowledge, tell the tale instinctively and perhaps stumble upon hidden secrets.

Thus, while “One Sunday in Picardy” is informed by an oral family history and historical research, it is only an imagining of what happened: a story of a story, an extra layer of perspective. Margaret Atwood writes in *In Search of Alias Grace: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction*, it is not that “there is no truth to be known”, but rather

that “truth is sometimes unknowable, at least by us” (37). But I was determined to get as close as I could.

For the purposes of creative nonfiction, Gutkind states that immersion in a public story enables a writer “to own it – to make it their story. A faithful immersion will ultimately yield intimacy” (71). Writers might place themselves in an environment similar to that of their subject to give the writing more depth; George Orwell, for example, led the life of a pauper so he could write *Down and Out in Paris and London* (Gutkind 71-72). Robin Hemley explores this technique further in *A Field Guide for Immersion Writing: Memoir, Journalism and Travel*. The immersion process might be applied to the writing of fiction set in the past, using an adaptive approach.

In the case of my story, set one hundred years ago, the physical environment had changed; in addition, the people who inspired the story were not members of the public but deceased relatives. I continued to gather information through family stories and intensified my research on the First World War. My grandfather’s war records from the National Archives of Australia allowed me to trace his path through the war years. Information on the battles was available on the Australian War Memorial website, both in the official histories and the unit war diaries. The research must be accurate when writing a war novel, writes Sara Knox in “On the Nearness of Distant Things: Researching the Historical Novel”, in order “to serve the memory of the dead” (176). In the war diaries I was moved to discover reports written from the front in my grandfather’s hand, for it confirmed what my father had often said – that the sweet old man we loved had been courageous in the war. Details of his medical studies and career were retrieved from the archives of the University of Adelaide.

In addition to the war texts discussed earlier in this exegesis, my readings ranged from early literary models which conjured up the way people were thinking

during the war, such as Virginia Woolf's novels and diaries, Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Alain-Fournier's *The Lost Domain*, to more recent works which provided a reflective viewpoint, such as Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy, Sebastian Faulks' *Birdsong* and Sebastian Barry's *A Long Long Way*.

Many other texts, nonfiction and fiction, supported the writing of the creative work; the most important of these have been included in the bibliography.

The next step in the immersion process was to visit some First World War historic sites and my grandmother's village. In April 2014, I conducted a field trip to England and northern France. The methods and findings, which were reported on in full on 25 June 2014 at the University of Adelaide Post-graduate Conference, have been summarised below.

My plan was first to visit a hospital in Harefield, England where Jack was a patient in 1915 and then worked. In France I would visit the sites of three battles – Fromelles (1916), Bullecourt (1917) and Villers-Bretonneux (1918) – and Daours, my grandmother's village.

The book *A Stout Pair of Boots: A Guide to exploring Australia's battlefields* by war historian Peter Stanley was a useful reference when organising my trip. In addition, my supervisor advised me to talk to the locals (I speak French and am a member of a weekly conversation group) and to note my own personal reactions to places, such as the smells or the atmosphere.

These strategies proved invaluable. In England, for example, the old hospital at Harefield had been covered with plastic, but by walking the grounds I discovered behind some overgrowth the lake on which the soldiers used to skate. Inside the decrepit building I found the old ballroom in which the doctors used to play billiards. The vicar of St Mary's Church talked of funeral processions during the war at which the

local headmaster draped the soldiers' coffins with a British flag, now held at Adelaide High School, which I've since visited. These scenes came alive in my imagination.

At Fromelles in northern France I was led through the freshly ploughed fields where on 19 July 1916 the first day of battle began for the Australian troops on the Western Front, and for my grandfather. At Bullecourt, he was buried in his aid post in a bombardment when he refused to leave his patients; he retrieved two stretcher bearers under enemy barrage, for which he was awarded the Military Cross. My cousin and I located the spot with the help of Monsieur and Madame Durand, a local couple who have helped to preserve Australian war relics. In a field now covered in maize, I visualised my grandfather working frantically at the post.

In Amiens I saw the *château* in Daours, the little church in which my grandparents were married, and the hide on the marshes to shoot ducks. The war diaries enabled me to trace the site of the walking wounded station and the mill where the gas cases were treated. On Anzac Day, my cousins and I attended the Dawn Service at Villers-Bretonneux, commemorating not only the landing at Gallipoli in 1915 but also the local battle in April 1918, the looming German attack in the creative work. The pieces of the story were forming around me.

During the trip I visited family, who were most hospitable. My grandmother had said she missed all the *fêtes de famille*, and looking down the lovely tables, the smiling faces and the feasts, I understood what she meant. I ate macaroons in a Parisian sitting room, while a statue with one arm looked down on us from the mantelpiece: a woman sowing seed in the field, a gift from the sculptor Albert Roze to my great-grandfather. In the creative work, the statue becomes a symbol of the proximity of war.

The approaching war centenary meant that a plethora of dawn services, re-enactments and museum displays were available. Australian diggers were everywhere,

real soldiers and actors crawling out of trenches with pistols in hand, fighting the enemy.

I felt the rattle and heard the hum of the 1945 Piper J-3 as a pilot from the *Aéroclub de Picardie* followed the swerving path of the Red Baron on his fatal flight along the Somme; I looked down to the woods near Villers-Bretonneux and smelt the mustard gas sinking into the foliage. Around the *château* in Daours, I trod on cobblestones that had clattered with the hooves of German cavalry, heard the vibrant rush of water under the bridge and smelt the murky ponds in the marshes. I sipped wine at the bar of the old Godbert's restaurant where the family used to go, as did soldiers in Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (102). These sensual details made the stories I had been told somehow more real, a concept that was explored later through the exegetical work on the depiction of the olfactory sense.

Thus I immersed myself in the war narrative and the love story of my grandparents. Hemley states that "the immersion writer makes the world part of his text" (186). I felt a new confidence emerge in my writing. Wartime France had been drawn into my imagination and was no longer something separate that needed to be woven in with the story, but an inherent part of it.

I continued my research on the war throughout my doctoral studies. Visits included the Keswick Barracks Army Museum of South Australia and the performance "Austral House After Dark" in the Ayers House Museum, where the curator of period costumes, Dr Madeleine Seys, helped me find the dress that Georgette would wear to the grand dinner in "One Sunday in Picardy". The well-attended services commemorating the centenary of Anzac Day on 25 April 2015 and the broadcasting of evocative television series such as *Anzac Girls* indicated the public's growing interest in war stories.

## Literary Techniques

Some of the literary techniques used in the writing of “One Sunday in Picardy” were modelled on those used by Virginia Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway* and Pat Barker in the *Regeneration* trilogy.

The repercussions of war are presented thematically in *Mrs. Dalloway* and my own work. For example, time is a recurrent motif in Woolf’s novel, illustrated by the chiming of Big Ben; in my creative work the grandfather clock in the hall of the *château* marks the passing of seconds and highlights the distortion of time as the future is placed into question. An increase in the speed and intensity of wartime relationships is reflected in interactions between Jack and Georgette, Pat and Simone, and Solaine and the spirit of her husband Émile.

The theme of love in wartime in “One Sunday in Picardy” indicated that the story be written in a romantic rather than a minimalist style. The fairytale quality of Alain-Fournier’s *The Lost Domain*, written just before the war, was helpful in this respect, as was other literature of the time such as Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*. The more realistic style employed by Barker in the *Regeneration* trilogy, a compelling portrayal of the harsh effects of the war on combatants and doctors, did not seem to fit with the creative work.

Showalter suggests that the sky-writing plane in *Mrs. Dalloway* is one of the “cinematic linking devices” which allows the author “to pan from mind to mind” of the people who look up at it (xxiii). For each it triggers a different response. I thought of the scene in “One Sunday in Picardy” which is told from Richthofen’s viewpoint as the pilot sets off on his last flight. Why not introduce the perspectives of other characters looking up from below? Just as in the novel the character Mrs. Dempster “longed to see foreign parts” (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 30), for example, I wrote a scene in which

Georgette envies the pilot's view and considers a life outside the war. For Jack, the sound of the engine brings back painful memories and the smell of dead flesh. For Claude, fishing for the carp for the grand dinner that night, the clatter accompanies the strains of "*La Marseillaise*" that fills him with a sense of patriotism; the catching of the fish becomes a metaphor for the shooting down of the German ace. Woolf's interchanging storylines in that first scene were instructive when I melded the narratives of the fisherman and Richthofen.

"One Sunday in Picardy" shares similarities in plot with *Mrs. Dalloway*. Woolf's novel opens as Clarissa remembers her meeting at Bourton with her former love Peter Walsh, who would be back soon from India; in my creative work Jack returns to stay with Georgette's family and thinks of the first time he met her. In addition, the character Septimus Smith is traumatised by war – as is the character of the young doctor in mine – and his story is told in a series of post-traumatic flashbacks, reflecting Freud's theory of repetition-compulsion which influenced my own work. Finally, Clarissa prepares for a party that evening, just as the family at the *château* prepares for the grand dinner. However, *Mrs. Dalloway* is set in one day, while my creative work was to cover 1914 to 1918 through a patchwork of scenes, something I sensed might confuse the reader. Could Woolf's work become a model for "One Sunday in Picardy" in terms of structure; that is, could Jack and Georgette's story be told in one day?

On 21 April 1918 Manfred von Richthofen was shot down on the banks of the Somme; my father told us that the body was brought to the *château* to be washed. My grandfather retrieved the pilot's discarded empty wallet which my brother says was later donated to the Australian War Memorial. During the field trip, I investigated the feasibility of the corpse of such an important man being brought to my grandmother's

home. I followed the line of ambulance clearance recorded in the unit war diary of the Fifth Australian Division from the site of the crash on a ridge by the Somme, a track which led past the *château*, where the corpse could have been offloaded. I visited the Departmental Archives of the Somme at Amiens, but found no record of a stop at the *château* on the way to Bertangles where the body was buried.

According to the unit war diaries, a sports meeting for Jack's battalion was held at the *château* that day for the troops to unwind before the imminent German attack. My grandfather would have returned changed after the episode at Bullecourt; my grandmother, too, was by then almost eighteen, and had been living under constant threat of her life. The couple would have been filled with anticipation about their reunion. This was a pivotal day in their story. And so I would use Woolf's timeframe as a model.

Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy was also a useful resource. Each of the three novels is presented in short chapters which include one or more scenes; the chapters are grouped into parts. *Mrs. Dalloway* is divided not into chapters but scenes, in which the perspectives of the characters interweave. A change of setting is marked by an extra space between paragraphs. My creative work draws from both structures: the chapters, grouped into parts, are short and contain scenes viewed from multiple perspectives which thread together. My supervisor commented that at times the flashbacks providing the backstory took over the narrative and that the main thread was getting lost. I returned to the literary models. In Barker's trilogy the scenes were clearly delineated. In *The Ghost Road*, for example, Rivers goes in and out of memory, time and place without having to signpost it, because the reader gets used to the principal location which is synchronised in time. In my creative work the central story, which takes place on 21 April 1918 at the *château*, had to be strengthened. Headings were added to the



working manuscript to mark changes in the setting and timeline; later, as the main thread became clearer, most were removed.

Showalter suggests that the many perspectives presented by Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway* allow her “to show us her characters from a variety of embedded viewpoints” in a modernist fashion (xxi). My story was to be told from different cultural perspectives: of a young French girl and an older Australian man, the girl’s mother and a German pilot. As I wrote, the viewpoints of others such as old Claude and Tottie the maid began to appear. These minor characters required attention too, for as Joan London said at Adelaide Writers Week in 2015, “If you put a character in a novel, you must give them a face”.

In the *Regeneration* trilogy Barker uses real personages to create the characters of the doctors such as Dr Rivers, and the war poets Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen and Robert Graves. These characters have a certain authenticity – the fictional Billy Prior less so, in my view. In “One Sunday in Picardy” most of the characters are based on real people: Jack and Georgette and their (my) families; Pat, the batman; and Manfred von Richthofen.

Yet initially my supervisor commented that the main characters, though sharply drawn, seemed to be viewed from above a glass cabinet. I needed to get inside the characters’ minds; the reader must be held through sharp insight and not observation.

I had not known my grandfather well when, in my teens, he died after a long and debilitating illness. But the unit war diary entries, some of which he wrote, provided clues to the young man’s character; he seemed to resemble my father, diligent and hardworking. Barker’s character Dr Rivers, based on a real personage, became a useful model for Jack. Rivers is sensitive to the vulnerability of his traumatised patients and begins to suffer symptoms which resemble those of shell shock. In “One Sunday in

Picardy” the doctor, Jack, works with patients at the front. Jack is traumatised by the medical catastrophe at Fromelles where the dying lay unaided in no-man’s-land and also by the events at Bullecourt which he cannot remember. He starts to experience some disturbing symptoms.

While the character of Jack was beginning to fall into place, Georgette, inspired by my grandmother who loved fashion and cooking, I found harder to penetrate – perhaps because I knew her as a much older woman who lived into her nineties.

I was directed to examine the use of free indirect speech in the works of Woolf and Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, to learn how a third-person narrative can lead the reader into a character’s mind. In Volume II of *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Woolf describes how she creates the characters in *Mrs. Dalloway*: “I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters; I think that gives exactly what I want; humanity, humour, depth. The idea is that the caves shall connect, & each comes to daylight at the present moment – Dinner!” (263).

This process seemed suitable for “One Sunday in Picardy”: to build caves which would ultimately connect in the final moments of the novel – the grand dinner. Later in the same volume Woolf writes that “It took me a year’s groping to discover what I call my tunnelling process, by which I tell the past by instalments, as I have need of it” (*The Diary* 272).

But the tunnels leading from Georgette seemed dark, unformed. Jack is an older medical man, of a modest background, while the girl lives in a *château*. Georgette has a wildness about her that leads to clashes with her mother, a formidable woman. Many officers stayed at the *château*. What drew Georgette to him? My supervisor suggested I search the literature for strong women characters. Several models emerged: for Georgette, the gradual maturation in wartime of the strong-willed Valentine in the film

of Ford Madox Ford's *Parade's End*; for the relationship between Georgette and her sister Simone, the sisters Elizabeth and Jane Bennett in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*; and for the powerful figure of the mother, Mrs. Ramsay in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*.

To free up my writing, I changed the character's real name to Georgette (my grandmother's and daughter's middle name); with this came a freshness that was required for the young character. Kate Grenville describes this approach when writing about one of her forebears in *Searching for the Secret River*: "Changing his name changed my relationship to the character. My great-great-great grandfather had stepped out of the book now, taking his name with him" (188).

Privacy was another issue: my characters were inspired by a real family with living descendants. I decided to change most of the names at the end of the first draft, except for Jack, because I could not imagine him as anything else.

### **Self-Reflexivity**

As mentioned, the immersion process involved broad reading of fiction written during and about the war. This led to the adoption of *Mrs. Dalloway* as the model for my creative work, with the *Regeneration* trilogy as an additional resource for structure and characterisation. For the exegesis, I would investigate Barker's presentation of real personages in fictional form; whether the language used was poetic or based on realism; and the originality of the language by comparing it with primary sources such as the work of the real Dr W. H. R. Rivers, who had in turn been influenced by Freud's theory of repetition-compulsion.

During the writing of the first draft of "One Sunday in Picardy", olfactory images began appearing, despite my own weak sense of smell. In *Mrs. Dalloway* the visual images are strong, reflecting the cinematic techniques used. In my creative work,

light had become a symbol of the surreal nature of life in a *château* surrounded by windows, compared with the shadows of the trenches. The French light is soft; Georgette twirls in it under the chandelier and sinks beneath its reflection in the bath bubbles.

Yet smell was also emerging as a theme in the story: the flowery, fruity smells associated with Georgette, love and a sheltered life, and the vile, recurring smells of death which haunt Jack.

After I completed the draft, my dog went blind. Her other senses began to take over: hearing and touch as she bumped into things, but especially her sense of smell. In the park she sniffed the excretions of old friends, and her own, with renewed vigour and gained confidence to run unleashed. Like Flush, olfactory messages helped her to make sense of her environment, as if through smells she could re-picture or remember the landscape. Anthony Doerr's Pulitzer Prize-winning *All the Light We Cannot See* includes passages in which a blind girl "sees" through her other senses, such as "Her father radiates a thousand colors, opal, strawberry red, deep russet, wild green; a smell like oil and metal, the feel of a lock tumbler sliding home" (45).

Christine Kenneally's *The Invisible History of the Human Race* was published in 2014. Kenneally refers to a study in which mice were subjected to a painful stimulus while an odour was released. Later, with the scent administered alone, the mice continued to react strongly, an effect which was demonstrated in two generations of offspring that had not been subjected to the conditioning process. It was proposed that the linkage between certain smells and pain could be inherited through epigenetic markers on the genome of the mice which altered the expression of DNA (305). Could these changes help to explain Winter's "embodied memory" in which the men's bodies "*perform* something about their war experience" (Winter 55, 57)? Had the expression of

the genome of Graves, for example, been altered so that any unusual smell could trigger the fear of a gas attack, even after the soldier had returned home?

I returned to *Mrs. Dalloway*, looking for olfactory references, but found them only in the scene in the flower shop, not the vivid ramblings of shell shock victim Septimus Smith. Where were the references to the smell of death that appeared in the literature of the war poets, for example? And if the distinction was based on gender, an overhang of Victorian gentility, why did Virginia Woolf so brilliantly depict smell in *Flush* in 1933? To inform my creative work, further investigation was conducted on the use of the olfactory sense in the war writings, which became the new focus of my research.

The argument presented in Part One of the exegesis is that the shocking experience in the trenches of the First World War led to a shift in olfactory representation in the literature, which pre-empted the “olfactory turn” proposed by Danuta Fjellestad for the postmodernist period. The close readings of war texts in Part Two reveal examples of vivid olfactory imagery in relation to the smell of death, the subversion of the Enlightenment coding of “good” and “bad” smells, and a strong link between the olfactory sense and memory. Are any of these features apparent in the creative work “One Sunday in Picardy”?

Using the search terms “smell”, “odour”, “stench”, “stink”, “aroma” and “whiff”, more than forty examples of olfactory imagery were found in the first draft of “One Sunday in Picardy”, many of which referred to the smell of dead bodies. Each of the main characters is exposed to the presence of a corpse, interpreted above – using de Saussure’s theory of language – as a sign of the end of the life of a body. The Giscard women wash the body of Émile; the doctors treat dying men in the trenches; the priest

attends to last rites and burials; and Georgette and Jack prepare the cadaver of the German ace for the funeral.

Jack's olfactory sense is heightened: he remembers the sickly sweet smell of his first hospital dissection, the charred remains of a victim of the *Flammenwerfer*, and the stench of death carried in the wind from the front. For Georgette, the smell of the German corpse is accompanied by fear, not the love she felt washing her dead father, and she later finds that "It had stuck with her, the smell, the dirt in her nose, the dead eyes following her around the room" (Ahern 137).

A cursory examination of "One Sunday in Picardy" suggests that it follows what Fjellestad describes as "the conventions of representing love in terms of floral scents and of repulsion in terms of foul odors" (646). The young girl Georgette is associated with "the scent of sugared pears" (Ahern 64), the men with the more sinister smells of war.

However, in the first scene Jack looks out from the train to see the reflection of the sunrise on the water; this world which is "upside down" (Ahern 10) indicates Jack's inner turmoil. When the doctor travels through war-torn Amiens, a woman he sees on the bridge smells not of perfume but of fish. To Jack, while Georgette smells of pears the smell of death hovers in the wind, on a dinner fork, in the fragrance of roses while the couple listen to music – surprising triggers like those which reactivate Graves' fear of the trenches.

Georgette, though living near the front, has been sheltered by her mother and confined to the *château*. When Solaine asks her daughter to attend to the corpse upstairs, the girl is almost overcome with fear. Jack's presence in the room reassures then unsettles her. The aroma of polish on his boots is at odds with the stink of the corpse. The girl notices the absence of the flowers she placed on the table, an example

of “the traces of the presence of the now absent” (Fjellestad 647) and an inversion of D. H. Lawrence’s 1915 short story *Odour of Chrysanthemums* in which flowers symbolise the miner’s death. This “confusion of smells” as described by Corbin (141) is a pivotal moment for Georgette, forcing her to confront the traumatic effects of war in the midst of her increasing desire for Jack. In the bath she covers herself in bubbles to wash off the smell of the dead man, purifying herself for her lover.

Later that night, Jack returns from attending to his dying friend with the smell of vomit and excrement on his boots. But Georgette, rather than being repulsed, is able to comfort the doctor. Both scenes may be interpreted in the light of Georgette’s growing awareness of her womanhood.

The link between the olfactory sense and memory is highlighted in “One Sunday in Picardy”. For example, the young doctor struggles to remember what happened at Bullecourt – a repressed memory that is linked to the smell of death and destined to be played out in a Freudian cycle of repetition-compulsion. The death of his friend in the mill and the associated smells bring the scene back to him and force him to accept what he risked through his heroic actions.

But there are other olfactory images which speak of the present. Jack longs to lick off the pumpkin that has stuck to the girl’s fingers in the kitchen; the smells in the gas mill are a sign of the death of the soldiers and the childhood friend he has pushed away. These smells provide an immediacy which is less “derived” in the Derridean sense (*Of Grammatology* 157). When Pat, his childhood friend, dies in his arms, Jack is forced to confront what is signified, “the unrepresentable Thing” (Bonikowski 11) that awaits us all – and the catalyst to unblock his memory of the events at Bullecourt.

These examples, among others, suggest that features of the shift in olfactory representation appearing in the war texts may have also emerged in the creative work.

Jack's memory of Georgette through the scent of pears; the washing off of the German's odour in the bath ... without realising it, I was using olfactory images as symbols. And like Roland's poem in *Testament of Youth*, in which the colour of violets and human blood sit side by side (Brittain 114, 1-6), there are instances of the subversion of Enlightenment coding through dramatic contrasts. By considering olfactory representation in the war literature, I was able to make a more critical analysis of my own work and identify areas to be strengthened.

I thought that the scene describing the washing of the Red Baron's body could be improved – the corpse stinks, and Jack has the smell on his hands as well, and yet Georgette notices the polish on her lover's boots in contrast to the bloodied animal skins of the pilot. This shocking juxtaposition of smells might act as a prelude to her coming-of-age trajectory – presenting a potential theme that was subsequently explored.

The olfactory references that had crept into "One Sunday in Picardy" through an immersion in the war literature added depth to the story. Exploring the characters' personal scents seemed to bring them out from beneath that glass cabinet. The risk was to produce an anachronistic feel, a postmodern understanding of the recoding of smell that did not exist in 1918. But the close readings of the war texts produced sufficient evidence of a shift in olfactory representation to justify this approach.

## **Discussion**

Kenneally writes: "Our DNA is a palimpsest too, and thousands of stories have left their traces in our personal genome. As humanity evolved and traveled, and as families do the same, new stories are layered over old ones, and we can learn more by understanding when and how they were written over one another" (264).

We are a palimpsest of stories, of everything that has happened to us and our forebears. By retelling the stories of our ancestors, we add another layer to history, both



public and private. But more questions may be raised. Did the sensory assault of the First World War lead to subtle changes in the expression of genes, such as for the olfactory sense, then handed down through the DNA? Or is the primeval recognition of the smell of death, the disgust, a factor of being human which is common to us all? In any case, the current fascination with the stories of the war suggests that the experiences of those at the front left a lasting impression on subsequent generations.

Life writing enables a writer to develop their sense of individual self by researching family and historical records, imagining what their ancestors thought. In *When Memory Speaks* Jill Ker Conway writes of finding “a visible sign of the genetic material that lives on in me” when she researches her father’s medical records (184). My aim was to search for what my grandparents had experienced together that held them together so tightly; in the end it was their story and mine, intertwined.

The immersion process was integral to achieving that goal. Research revealed the historic details of the battles, the way of life, but it did not suggest what my grandparents were thinking. Reading the literature of the time, visiting sites and talking to family members helped to simulate the atmosphere and draw attention to sensory images, bringing the characters to life.

## Conclusion

In this exegesis, I have explicated aspects of the writing of “One Sunday in Picardy” from the theoretical, analytical and self-reflexive perspectives.

In Part One, I positioned my discussion in the trenches of the First World War with particular attention to the sense of smell, a neglected subject in literary criticism. I proposed that the front imposed new and horrific sensory input which led to a shift in olfactory representation in the war literature, superseding the coded images of the Enlightenment. I suggested that the prevailing of the “smellscape” (Classen et al. 97) over the visual in the trenches led to a sharpening of the olfactory sense, in line with Walter J. Ong’s ideas on the shifting sensorium. Referring to the theories of de Saussure, Derrida and Freud, I considered what was signified in the war literature by the stench of a corpse. The smell was interpreted as a sign of “the unrepresentable Thing” (Bonikowski 11), the end of the life of a body – a concept impossible for a human to absorb though recognised by the most primitive part of the brain. Both “good” and “bad” smells were offered as triggers for repressed or forgotten memories which are experienced as if in the immediate present, starkly illustrated in the embodied emotion of traumatised soldiers. I suggested that as a result of the war experience modernist writers experimented with new ways to represent these concepts in a manner that foreshadows the “olfactory turn” in postmodernist literature put forward by Fjellestad and exemplified by Süskind’s novel *Perfume*.

Four war texts were chosen to illustrate my point. Close readings revealed dramatic changes in the depiction of the olfactory, including within and between works. Features noted by Fjellestad in *Perfume*, such as vivid imagery in relation to the stench of death, subversion of Enlightenment coding of “good” and “bad” smells, and the link between the olfactory sense and memory, were found in the war literature. However,

while in the postmodernist novel the gore is held at a distance, in modernist war literature juxtapositions of shocking sensory images act to draw the reader closer. New perspectives are sought through the olfactory organs of a dog, a rat, a tank. The images reek with stench and scents, indications of a literary reawakening of the sense of smell.

Finally, I described how this research came about through the writing of “One Sunday in Picardy”. By a process of immersion in modernist literature and the war setting, a new element emerged in my own writing: olfactory images, including the smell of death, confusions of scents, and odorous triggers into traumatic flashbacks. Through these intense sensations I imagined how the characters perceived their world and each other; the fictitious figures appeared more tangible, the writing more immediate, less deferred in the postmodernist way. And the inspiration for these characters, my youthful grandparents, seemed closer too.

Although the creative work “One Sunday in Picardy” may be read as historical fiction, the characters were created from real personages. The writing process became a personal quest for meaning, a form of life writing through which I could imagine what my ancestors experienced and thought. But the work is not a fictional autobiography in the style of Brian Castro’s *Shanghai Dancing*, or an intricate memoir such as Beth Yahp’s *Eat First, Talk Later: A Memoir of Food, Family and Home* – I only appear briefly on the last page. Nor can it be classified as a family history, for the ancestral stories passed down are only starting points for scenes and not reproduced as creative nonfiction in the style of Gutkind. My creative work was inspired by the memories of others; it ensued from a literary and physical immersion in the past through which sensory images, unbeknown to the writer, crept into the text and suggested new meaning. Hence “One Sunday in Picardy” is not presented as a melange of genres, but

the result of a new area of research and writing – a composite of what has been inherited.

As Jacques Derrida says in his book *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, “it is we who have been entrusted with the responsibility of the signature of the other’s text which we have inherited” (51). Although I am unable to explore that idea in depth, it is an interesting parallel: the process in which, Derrida says, understanding is gained by a recipient with “a keen-enough ear” (51) might here be applied to the nose. The transference or reproduction of emotions in terms of the signature of an other’s text is what I have attempted in this thesis.

The argument for a shift in olfactory representation in the literature of the First World War has several implications. Firstly, the resulting imagery provides new insights into the war experience and the impact of embodied trauma on combatants and non-combatants alike. Secondly, these changes indicate a rapprochement between writer and reader that contrasts the detachment of postmodernist writings, such as Süskind’s more analytical representation of the olfactory experience in *Perfume*. Thirdly, the evolving patterns of representation reflect, and may even have influenced, emerging experimental trends of modernist literature, thus changing prose style forever.

The challenges of writing a story inspired by the meeting of my grandparents a century ago were addressed, in part, by using an adaptive immersion process. However, the field trip was conducted early to maximise the effect on the writing of the creative work, before my investigations into the sense of smell had begun. Thus the primary olfactory data collected on the trip regarding flora and war relics, for example, was limited. Another drawback of the study is that the analysis in Part Two does not include works written before the war or after 1933; a broader range of texts might have helped

to pinpoint changes in olfactory representation in modernist literature. This area invites further investigation.

Today the focus has swung back to the visual and auditory senses, perhaps for the same reason as Woolf's – the cinema. Our sensory input is once again limited in scope. By going back to the literature of the First World War, with attention on what is smelt and felt, insights might emerge “from those foul openings” (Owen, “The Show” 14).

This exegesis has explicated the creation of “One Sunday in Picardy” from various viewpoints: the theoretical, the analytical and the self-reflexive. Informed by this research process, an oral family story may have entered new literary territory.

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