

The Unburiable: Death Ritual in Osbert Sitwell's Poetry of the Great War

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Introduction: The Work of Mourning in the Great War

In a 1916 collection of propaganda pieces, *Blood and Iron: Impressions from the Front in France and Flanders*, Wilson McNair describes a scene along the Marne where a group of German soldiers are cremating dead comrades:

[There was] a fierce and sinister light which the eyes of men have not viewed before in this Western world of civilization. It is the light of the German funeral pyres which they have builded to cremate their dead. By the glow of the burning villages they have gathered the dead and brought them together in piles, heaped up under the pure sky. Man upon man they are heaping them, youth upon youth, bodies that yesterday went forth with young life in them and to-day are offal upon the face of the earth. Great pyramids they build with these dead, that loom up dark and horrid in the night and already cast their taint upon the winds. Around the piles of dead they build wooden pyres and over them pour barrellfuls of paraffin and then cast straw upon them that the work lack nothing in its effectiveness....And the strong fire leaps upon the dead men, curling above their faces and picking out for the last time beloved features which it seems to caress before devouring. (155)

The scene McNair describes calls up a hellish, savage vision from the underworld that contrasts sharply with neat plots shaped out of the chaos of the battlefield and marked with small white crosses. In his text, bodies are heaped up together; in the gathering, in the burning, the “beloved features” are lost, and humanity erased.

McNair's text illustrates the problem of writing about the body rendered unburiable by war. Burial ritual is a process constructed to address the human need to manage and make meaning from death. Writing from the Great War, however, shows these rituals to be just that – constructions,

fruitless and futile, offering no solace to the living, no honor for the dead. To throw bodies onto a pyre to burn, in McNair's vision, is "uncivilized." The bodies – "dark," "horrid" – rise up in stark contrast to the "pure sky." It would be more "pure" to return the bodies to the earth, yet this is made impossible by the exigencies of wartime. There are no gestures, no words sufficient to bury these dead. There are too many, the deaths too horrible, the lives too cheap.¹

For Osbert Sitwell, death in combat can never be ritualized; the work of mourning is undone. Sitwell, an officer in the Grenadier Guards, saw the world of the war as a "holocaust" (qtd. in Pearson 103). The poetry Sitwell wrote as a combatant during the Great War and published in the anthology *Wheels* in 1916 exemplifies his problematization of the possibility of ritual. These poems – "The End," "20th Century Harlequinade," "Black Mass" – show how the desire for ritual goes unfulfilled, how the impulse towards ritual fails.² Sitwell interrogates the power (and powerlessness) of ritual to deal with the unburiable body in an undefined space. The body, the corpse, is central to burial ritual, both for the deceased and for those left behind. If the body is unburiable, if space cannot be created and defined for remains and the practices surrounding them, the ritual is perverted, thwarted. Sitwell exposes this perversion through the use of an empty pageantry, of the motifs of ritual without the meaning.

Death ritual provides an important space for and vocabulary of performance which enables people to reorder their experience, to examine and accept new roles, and to make sense of loss of life. Eric Leed writes generally of the use of ritual to interpret and understand wartime experience, claiming,

War experience is nothing if not a transgression of categories. In providing bridges across the boundaries between the visible and the invisible, the known and the unknown, the human and the inhuman, war offered numerous occasions for the shattering of distinctions that were central to orderly thought, communicable experience, and normal human relations. (21)

Leed, using the ideas of Victor Turner, describes war as a liminal experience. In Turner's paradigm, death itself is a rite of passage with attendant rituals necessary to make meaning of that movement from one state to another; this movement is significant for both the person who has died and the person left behind. The dead person, in death, undergoes a process of separation from loved ones and the social group. Likewise, the people left behind go through a process of separation from the deceased and are forced to re-envision their roles in relation to the dead. Ultimately, the passage is consummated; all those who take part in the ritual, in the movement, find their new, transformed position.

Key to Turner's conceptualization of mourning ritual is the making

present of the dead in order to situate them within the rites of passage; the dead have a proper role to play in these rites. For Jacques Derrida, this process of the “ontologization” of the dead is the “work of mourning” (9). The work of mourning is *knowing*, knowing the dead and positioning the remains of the dead where they belong; we acknowledge the dead and put them in their place. One might posit that for many people ritual is a necessary component of the work of mourning. The performance of ritual, its gestures and language, is one of the ways we, in Derrida’s terms, ontologize remains by “identifying” and “localizing” those remains (9). Through ritual, we can know the dead, determine the space they occupy, place them there, and hope that is where they stay.

Integral to this process is certainty, the certainty of the boundaries of body and space. However, Osbert Sitwell’s wartime poetry refracts ritual through a broken lens, showing the collapse of a ritual space and creating through his poetry not a rite of mourning but a spectacle of death and destruction. His texts play out not the “ontologization” vital to mourning, but instead deploy an empty pageant devoid of ritual significance. In the world of Sitwell’s poetry, being can no longer be enacted through ritually meaningful gesture, and order can no longer be constructed through ritually meaningful language. As Christine Froula has recently noted, consolation is not available in the poetry of the Great War (90-91). In Sitwell’s work – poetry written for an audience for whom the horror of war could never be real except through meaningless loss, by a poet whose conception of self and the possibility of consolation had been shattered – all that can be made available to cope with death on such a scale is an aestheticization of the subject in a spectacle signifying nothing.³

The Failure of Ritual: Bodies and Space

In the literal and figurative failure of funeral ritual, the unburiable body is deprived of meaning. Work on the Great War over the last ten years, particularly in the area of mourning, has engaged with the construction, deployment, and efficacy of bereavement practices. While some claim that the commitment to these practices was crucial to sustaining the self, others argue that funeral practices, coming as they must from a certainty in the possibility of order, an acknowledgment of the boundaries between the living and the dead and a power to preserve those boundaries and keep the dead in their place, can only fail in the Great War and its aftermath.

Joanna Bourke writes in her study of the male body in the First World War that the event “was to dramatically rearrange the theatre of death. Although there was nothing new in anonymous and unseemly endings, such degradation became ubiquitous in the carnage of this war” (210). Bodies were blown to pieces, disintegrated, disappeared. Corpses were buried when trenches collapsed, only to be uncovered when another shell

exploded, tearing up the earth: a burial that is also an unburial. Many literary and cultural scholars have noted with grim, unrelenting detail the dismembering of the soldier's body in the Great War, seeing attempts through modernist literature and culture to "(re)member," in Bourke's formulation. Bourke claims that as the war made the dismembering of the body an inevitability, processes of (re)membering arose to contest that inevitability. These were processes not only of commemoration and memorialization, not only processes of official, authorized, shared mourning like the creation of the Menin Gate or the Cenotaph in London, the telegrams of condolence sent to families, the wearing of poppies. Through these means of remembering, the bodies themselves – missing, broken – were re-membered, made whole, in the minds of those who never got a corpse to bury.

Similarly, Allyson Booth argues that soldiers themselves attempted to construct and deploy their own processes to manage death. Booth's work shows how soldiers created ways of honoring the dead while also recognizing that "the two states exist in an unpredictable relation to each other" (53); soldiers sought to negotiate this relationship in invented battlefield funeral practices. Jay Winter, in his own study of these commemorative processes, makes a compelling claim for the universality of mourning and commemoration, manifested in "a complex traditional vocabulary of mourning [which] flourished largely because it helped mediate bereavement" (223). While the mourning practices surrounding the Great War are, for many scholars in the field, an integral component of modern modes, Winter sees continuities between tradition and modernity, continuities necessary to sustaining life, healing, and a coherent sense of self.

Bourke, Booth, and Winter make compelling claims that those who suffered loss during the Great War found means to mourn in the construction of ritual, drawing on tradition and a human need for closure. Many other recent studies on mourning and the Great War, however, also examine attempts to make meaning from the carnage of that cataclysm, attempts to define and contain trauma that are not always successful. The body is broken, and all that can be spoken is that pain; there is no closure for the abject self. Trudi Tate considers the mechanisms deployed in modernist literature for working through the trauma of war. She argues that the construction of memory surrounding the war emerges from the witnessing subject struggling to reassert and reaffirm the boundaries of the traumatized body, a struggle that reveals not the potential for wholeness but the frailty and fragmentation of the human in war. Sarah Cole also shows how attempts to sustain self through mourning would often fail; she notes that soldiers tried to maintain a distance from the dead rather than mourn the remains because the inevitable destruction of an intimate relationship with a comrade was just too painful for the living to bear when

that destruction was taking place on a daily basis. She notes that while many would seek to maintain a semblance of “decent burial” in order to honor fallen friends, there might be just as often a refusal to memorialize the dead. The unburiable body reminds those desiring ritual of the impossibility of their own burials, rather than providing a space to deal with the end of the body.

Ritual requires meaningful performance within a clearly delineated space. The body, even in its remains, must be whole, known, and knowable. As David Eng and David Kazanjian have theorized, the negotiation of loss and trauma through the body and space can create sites for meaning (4). Yet sometimes these specters cannot be laid to rest. Elaine Scarry’s work has shown that the body can be irretrievably deprived of meaning. The processes of war and destruction forbid the acknowledgement of the body in pain, and thus erase the reality of the body itself, rendering its death unreal, its corpse unburiable. The point of ritual is, on the one hand, to accept the reality of the dead body and, on the other, to transform it so its deadness is no longer intruding upon the world of the living. By acknowledging the dead body, ritual participants recognize the physical transformations of the injured, dead, decaying body, and finally the need for ritual to make the body whole and clean, to (re)member – to, in Scarry’s terms, “resubstantiate” (125). In contrast, the unburiable body of war is a deconstructed body that can never be made whole, and a body that cannot be talked about because we do not talk about what happens to a body during war.

The unburiable corpses in the texts of the Great War represent the need for ritual and its failure. Fallen bodies in “no man’s land” cannot even be recovered for burial. Bodies in this space serve as a metaphor for failed ritual: bodies that cannot be retrieved, lost in a space without clear borders, without clear meaning. In this environment, the ritualized body and the ritual space is impossible. “No man’s land” becomes not only a constantly shifting space on a map outlining a war of attrition or a space between combatants to be traversed with fear and dread. “No man’s land” is the place where no man can exist physically or metaphysically, where no man – and no man’s life – has meaning. It is a place where no ritual space can be constructed and fulfilled, a place outside language and gesture.

Michel de Certeau’s ideas on the relationship between place and space may be useful here in theorizing ritual space and its failure. For de Certeau, “place” signifies location, position, and thus stability. Space, in contrast, is the intersection of a multitude of “vectors” and “contexts”: “*In short, space is a practiced place*” (117). Space is an arena of praxis, of representation, of gesture. One might see de Certeau’s idea of “space” as necessarily involving ritual in its broadest definition. It is through practices and performances of ritual in all its forms that meaning may be made

and a sense of being and becoming may be found. This space is neither one of stasis nor fixed location, but one of process and transformation. If, as Edward Sojas as well as many others have noted, this conceptualization of spatiality is linked to processes of being, the space of “no man’s land,” of the front, might be seen as a contested space where *not-being* is of primacy, and practices needed to make meaning from being are always already thwarted. The processes of localization necessary for mourning – the situating of the dead not only in their “proper place” but in *space* – do not occur in “no man’s land.” Thus, this space is rendered almost no “space” at all, no longer a site for meaningful practice but a theater for empty spectacle where being has no significance.

War’s participants are always in “no man’s land,” caught between life and death. There is no boundary to demarcate the space of the dead; there is no line between the space of the living and the space of the dead. All participants – the people dying, the people left behind – are perpetually trapped in a liminal space between the living and the dead. Reginald Blomfield, in his memorial for the Menin Gate, captured this very idea. The Menin Gate, a massive stone structure, marks the passage of the Menin Road out of Ypres into one of the most horrific sites of the Great War, the Ypres Salient. Almost every British soldier fighting in Europe passed through this gate, a *seuil* or doorway into what Osbert Sitwell called a “nightmare land” (qtd. in Pearson 90). Yet this gate does not delineate a boundary: the living men passing through it are already dead.

The Spectacle of Death in Sitwell’s Poetry

These studies offer valuable frameworks and insight with which to understand the mechanisms of mourning present in poetry of the Great War. However, what is the reader to do with Sitwell’s work? It is dark, ironic, bitter. It reaches towards ritual in a way that other work, such as that of Isaac Rosenberg, does not. Yet, unlike Robert Graves’s poems of the period, Sitwell’s cannot acknowledge the possibility that ritual might be deployed in any fruitful way. By casting death on the battlefield as spectacle, Sitwell renders the experience of war and its necessary ritual failures as empty pageant; the battlefield is littered with bodies that are denied ritual, and rituals required to make meaning must fail in a world where life is already given over to death. Sitwell’s texts, poems without narratives in which death is pure image, highlight the artificiality of any attempt to make meaning of combatants’ death; the abject body is made into an aesthetic object, displayed in a space like a stage, for show.

In later memoirs, Sitwell recalls an early awareness of mortality in the sensual and the everyday. Sitwell comes to an awareness of death not simply through an awareness of language, but also through sensory experience. A deep and detailed consciousness of everyday surroundings,

their sensations and their memory, is intertwined with a consciousness of mortality; *Left Hand, Right Hand!* is permeated with these kinds of *memento mori*:

I recognized the use of all the detail on the table, the diamond and ruby horseshoe brooch, the gothic pendant that had been made for Lord Albert to give his wife, with its fantastic shape and its black pearls, the silver hairbrushes, the innumerable photographs, the bottles and jars; but I did not understand one thing, a loop of thick rope, a foot or two long, twisted in a knot round the head of the bed....Eventually, after many implorings, I was told what it was. "It's a bit of a hangman's rope, darling. Nothing's so lucky! It cost eight pounds – they're very difficult to get now." (*Left* 121)

Sitwell shows the presence of death in the everyday, which will become important in *Wheels*. In *Wheels*, death is linked with sensory experience. There can be no experience of being in the world without a constant awareness of death.

At the same time, death is linked with beauty, with objects, with artificiality; it is a harlequinade. The Sitwells present death as pageantry. The image of the corpse inviting the living to the funeral, to the *danse macabre*, echoes much of the imagery in the Sitwells' poetry. This aestheticization of death is evident in Osbert Sitwell's memoirs, and finds a place in the poetry he produced during the war:

All this Davis [their nurse] emphasized – for she possessed a naively morbid mind – by taking Edith and me every Sunday afternoon when in Scarborough for a walk in the municipal cemetery, to admire the white marble angels, with a touch of green mildew on their wings, and the damp-clotted, moldering chrysanthemums that adorned the graves of which they smelled.... My father would have been furiously angry with her for leading us on these mournful expeditions under dark, gray-blue northern skies, with the wind howling round the sharp-edged headstones; but he never found out. (*Left* 197)

As in the earlier reminiscence about the bit of hangman's rope in his mother's bedroom, in this memory emblems of death are commingled with things of beauty yet it is all mixed in with signs of decay: mildew, damp, mold. It is as though the Sitwells, in their poetry, return to the "disgusting theatrical exhibitions," the "vulgar meaningless parade" that G. H. Phillips characterized the late Victorian funeral as when he called for its reform in 1875 (*A few words*). While other poets were turning towards starker images, the Sitwells embraced pageantry.

Sitwell's poem "The End" reveals a preoccupation with the decay and corruption of death reminiscent of his childhood recollections of cemetery

visits. He writes:

Round the great ruins crawl those things of slime; –
 Green ruins lichenous and scarred by moss, –
 An evil lichen that proclaims world doom,
 Like blood dried brown upon a dead man's face.
 And nothing moves save those monstrosities
 Armoured and grey and of a monster size. (13)⁴

This is a nightmare image of a ruined world, not a space where ritual might occur, but a boundless place of the abject. Everything in this place oozes, undefined and fluid. Civilization is in “ruins,” surrounded not by people, subjects, but “things,” things themselves which are “slime,” without borders. The world is covered over with an amorphous, formless “lichen,” compared to a human face that has itself been erased by blood. The body in this metaphor has been violated, its boundaries broken, as what should be inside flows out. The face, a marker of subjectivity, is rendered invisible.

Sitwell's corpses are nothing more than decaying matter: “The air is thick and brings/The tainted subtle sweetness of decay” (14). The corpses are objectified, desacralized, not interred in the earth with solemnity but left to wriggle in the dirt like worms, “long, writhing bodies” (14). Sitwell's imagery in “The End,” his vision of the ruined body and the ruined earth, reveal a world without ritual, a world where the dead are left to rot and denied all commemoration.

Sitwell's “20th Century Harlequinade” presents a spectacle of battle-field death, again from the point of view of a participant in a show that has long ended, the figure left alone on an empty stage.⁵ Sitwell takes the metaphor of the stage, of war as “show,” to its limits. The death and destruction that came with the arrival of the twentieth century is cast here as an empty pageant; fate, the grieving clown, is our performer, the figure inviting us to the *danse macabre*. Yet he is also audience, a detached observer viewing the show.

Sitwell uses the trope of the harlequin, this time in a reversal as the clown is a dotard, alone and grieving. The figure of play – the harlequin – is transformed into a specter of violence and brutality. In “20th Century Harlequinade” he depicts a botched civilization; here it is a pageant, a carnival marked by death, with Fate, “malign dotard, weary from his days,/Too old for memory, yet craving pleasure,” watching the spectacle, “the beauty of the universe he hates,/Yet stands regarding earthly carnivals” (21). The procession of life goes on, but for Fate it is marred. At the same time, Fate seeks pleasure; this will become for the “malign dotard” the destruction of the “earthly carnivals”:

The clatter and the clang of car and train
 The hurrying throng of homeward-going men.

The cries of children, color of the streets,
 Their whistling and their shouting and their joy,
 The lights, the trees, the fanes and towers of churches,
 Thanksgiving for the sun, the moon, the earth,
 The labor, love, and laughter of our lives.

* * *

He thinks they mock his age with ribaldry. (21)

Fate as personified here is beyond memory. Without civilization, the construction of collective memory is impossible; it is these processes that provide meaning to experience, and to death. Without memory, the making of meaning out of death must falter. Fate sees the carnival of life before him as a mockery, either of his old age, or of his era which has passed; the line is ambiguous. Fate has always been present, a spectator, yet also an inexorable force – the wheels that keep moving towards death. The people in the scenes of the poem live their lives, unaware of the presence of death among them.

Sitwell's "clown," his "dotard" Fate, wreaks destruction on the human carnival he sees before him:

The pantomime of life is near its close:
 The stage is strewn with ends and bits of things,
 With mortals maim'd or crucified, and left
 To gape at endless horror through eternity. (22)

The world of the charming bergamasque is over, and Fate is about to bring death. The beauty of life and art, the "charming masques," must end, replaced by a different performance – that of Fate, like a ghastly Prospero working a hideous magic.

Fate wears his own mask now, a different mask from that of the dotard clown at the start of the poem:

The face of Fate with other paint
 Than that incarnadines the human clown:
 Yet still he waves a bladder, red as gold,
 And still he gaily hits about with it [...]. (22)

He seems to be wearing the greasepaint of the performer, yet at the same time Sitwell seems to want to raise the spectre of a bloody clown: "other paint than that incarnadines the human clown." Human beings are rendered into clowns, part of the farce.

The limelight of the stage becomes the light of the funeral pyre:

And still the dread revealing lime-light plays
 Till the whole sicken'd scene becomes afire.
 Antic himself falls on the funeral pyre
 Of twisted, tortured, mortifying men. (22)

Antic, the fool who couldn't stand the farce, the force of chaos bringing destruction, himself is destroyed. Sitwell again uses images of twisted bod-

ies, desacralized, unremembered corpses.

Soldiers during the Great War were accustomed to calling battles “shows.” Here, Fate puts on his own show, one of violence and horror. The world and the people in it are fractured, broken, bloody. The end of the world becomes a performance, a spectacle, and we are the audience. In the limelight of the play the true nature of Fate is revealed; the carnivalesque becomes a place of horror rather than of ritualized festivity. However, here the festivity, the affirmation that comes from living that we saw at the beginning of the poem, is gone. What remains is a horrible reversal of festivity, reflected in the stanzas that frame the poem at beginning and end: the “earthly carnivals” have become “the whole sicken’d scene.” As Christopher Ames has pointed out, festivity is often positioned as a site for the ritual encounter with death. Fate has become a caricature of a harlequin, waving a balloon that he wields as a weapon or a body part that he treats as a toy. Finally he himself falls on the funeral pyre, a funeral for the end of humanity. Yet this is also a failed funeral; there is no consolation, no mourning; the absence of a “decent” funeral signifies the end of civilization and humanity. Josef Pieper claims that funerals themselves are festive, in a way: they provide consolation, which is a form of affirmation (28). Here there is no affirmation, only death and destruction, the end of a force which destroyed itself.

Sitwell places the reader in the theatre of death, turning us into witnesses to the destruction of humanity and of life as we know it. Readers become part of that British nation willing to sit by and watch as the carnage piles up, until all that is left is a heap of bodies. This stance appears again in his final poem in this 1916 issue of *Wheels*, “Black Mass.” Here Sitwell rewrites ritual to show the devastation of the war, “the horror that is felt where man is not” (28). The violence of the poem, the brutality of its images, might indicate that this is in fact a world without ritual, a world where meaning cannot exist. Yet in Sitwell’s vision of a postwar world, ritual will exist in order to celebrate death, rather than life. These rituals are performances meant to signify the end of affirmation. Sitwell’s black mass is a rejection of those very things that signify the affirmation of life: “those bright countless stars that shine/Celestially serene on summer nights”; “thoughts of immortality”; “the fear of moonlight falling on a face”; “the fear of laughter” (27). The mass is “vibrating with the wish to damage man [...] filled with men of evil thoughts” (28).

The plotting of the war, the destruction of the world, has become a ritual moment. At its culmination, the desire for destruction is almost orgiastic, a bacchanalia:

But now they whirl and dance in ecstasy.
The highest moment of their mass is near.
We only feel the swaying of the shades,

And evil bars of music, that escape
 Our consciousness, tho' we have known it long [...]

 The consummation of our awful hopes. (29-30)

The spectacle he conjures is one of violence and destruction. Ritual here does not provide closure, community, or affirmation. Its meaning is questionable, its processes fraught with ambivalence. This ritual, the profane performance of a death-desire, has always been part of human experience. In Sitwell's vision it is brought to the fore, extinguishing hopes of affirmation.

In another volume of his memoirs *Laughter in the Next Room*, Osbert Sitwell recalled the Armistice Day celebrations, celebrations for the end of the war he himself had fought in:

So, that night it was impossible to drive through Trafalgar Square: because the crowd danced under lights turned up for the first time for four years – danced so thickly that the heads, the faces, were like a field of golden corn moving in a dark wind. The last occasion I had seen the London crowd was when it had cheered for its own death outside Buckingham Palace on the evening of August the 4th, 1914; most of the men who had composed it were now dead. Their heirs were dancing because life had been given back to them. They revolved and whirled their partners round with rapture, almost with abandon, yet, too, with solemnity, with a kind of religious fervor, as if it were a duty. (*Laughter* 6)

Here the event is itself cast as ritual, yet it is one remarkably devoid of celebratory impulses. In fact, it echoes some of the orgiastic imagery of "Black Mass." The crowd is emptied of humanity, and does nothing more than remind Sitwell of the carnival of August 1914, a carnival that would quickly turn to a carnival of death on the Somme. The celebration is haunted by the ghosts of those who had been killed; it has become a funeral. It is a *danse macabre*, and everyone is invited to accompany the dead.

Sitwell, through the lens of memoir, recalls the spectacle of Armistice Day, a constructed spectacle of official commemoration. He himself casts this moment as ritualized; the street is rendered a ritual space as people pursue what they believe will be a transformative moment of meaning-making: celebrating the end of death and the beginning of life. This is in sharp contrast to the poetry written 30 years before from the "nightmare land" of the battlefield. There, Sitwell deploys not ritual but empty pageantry, a grotesquerie of images that can only deflate any attempt to ritualize death and thus transform the experience of loss. Sitwell's poetry seeks to be image, artificial; this rendering of death functions to elucidate its true meaninglessness.

In her work on ritual, Catherine Bell claims that people expect ritual

to “work as a type of social alchemy to transform good intentions into new instincts or weave the threads of raw and broken experiences into a textured fabric of connectedness to other people and things”; however, Bell argues that ritual is “interaction with the world,” emerging from particular worldviews informed by time, place, culture, power (264). Bell’s work cuts against the archetypes established by Turner. The failure of ritual on the battlefield, and in Sitwell’s poetry, subverts Turner’s reading and theorizing of ritual and shows that ritual may in fact be rendered impossible.

Much poetry of the Great War, including Osbert Sitwell’s, shows that the individual can no longer interact with the world, can no longer view being in the world with any significance, and thus cannot mourn when life ceases. One is always already doomed, dead. The body cannot be buried physically, and cannot be buried metaphysically. The way the individual is in the world, and the way the body is – and ceases to be – in the world is the center of energy for death ritual. Death ritual’s failure reflects an inability to be in the world, and the representation of that failure is an interrogation of what it means to no longer be certain how to be, and not to be, in the world.

Notes

1. Historians such as David Cannadine and Pat Jalland have written extensively on the unprecedented scale of the carnage of the Great War and the impact this had on funeral practices. Practices which had been fairly common even into the early twentieth century (elaborate funerals, the use of mourning clothes, jewelry, and household goods, even the extended mourning period) were dispensed with: there were simply too many people to mourn.
2. *Wheels* ran for several “cycles,” edited first by Nancy Cunard, then by Edith Sitwell until 1921. Reviews of its first appearance in 1916 noted the artificiality, the unpleasantly aestheticized spectacle of the texts published within. The critic for the *Pall Mall Gazette* wrote that *Wheels* was “conceived in morbid eccentricity, and executed in fierce, factitious gloom” (qtd. in Pearson 116). Another critic complained that “the foetidness of the whole clings to the nostrils” (qtd. in *The Sitwells*). R. L. Mègroz, one of the first critics to consider the work of the Sitwells, noted its tendency to “degenerate into incoherence and sterile nihilism” (104). Yet as Kathryn Ledbetter argues, *Wheels* did mark an important moment in the modernist attempt to redefine poetry (323).
3. I follow Jay Winter and Trudi Tate in using Julia Kristeva’s term “abject” in this context to signify the wartime subject threatened by dissolution; the corpse is a primary site for the articulation of fear surrounding the abject, and both Winter and Tate see practices of mourning, commemoration, and witness during the Great War as instrumental

- in staving this off (Winter 225; Tate 68).
4. All quotations from Osbert Sitwell's poetry come from *Wheels* (1916). Page numbers are noted in parenthetical citations; a full bibliographic entry may be found in the list of works cited.
 5. See Fussell's discussion of war as theater in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, chapter 6.

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