



In the next set of reflections we look at the effects of munitions on spirituality. In addition to fighting hand to hand with guns and bayonets, or sniping from the trenches, soldiers were for the first time subjected to munitions which were optimised for the destruction of many people at once. Shells and gas could be released without those firing knowing how many they had killed or injured. Who or what was the enemy? A man who sought to kill you personally with his sniper rifle, or the metal object that randomly landed where you happened to be?

We will explore these issues and their effects on spirituality in *Guns, Wire, Gas* and *Shrapnel*.

Guns

*'And a bullet comes droning, whining by,
To the heart of a sentry close to me.'*

R B Marriott-Watson *Kismet*

Killed in action 1918



In 1917, a private soldier, William Hill, was shot during intense fighting. The bullet entered his left temple and exited at the other side of his skull. He collapsed and was taken to be dead. However, after he had been removed on a stretcher and left with a number of other corpses, he regained consciousness, got off the stretcher, and began to help other wounded, apparently unaware of the gaping wounds in his head. Not only did William Hill survive, but he appeared to have no serious injury. His friends, astonished by his luck, called him 'Lazarus'.

William, however, did not believe it was luck. He believed that he had been saved for a purpose. Formerly uninterested in religion, he decided that he had in effect died and been raised to new life. After the war he became a minister and dedicated his life to the service of others. In his pocket, he carried the spent casing from a bullet. Whenever he met a new person, he would say 'I'm William Hill, like the bookmaker, and I should be dead, but through Jesus Christ I am alive'. And he would show them the bullet and talk about his faith.

Such miracles of survival did sometimes happen. Blaise Cendrars tells of his friend Garnero, who was blown up, scalped by a shell and who had fallen into a catatonic state. Believing him dead, Cendrars laid him in a shell hole and covered him with earth. Years later, Cendrars met Garnero in Paris, to find him alive and well, though missing a leg. Another shell had exploded him out of his grave, blown off his leg and shocked him into life so that he was able to yell for help. Garnero, another 'Lazarus',

recalled the rough tenderness and kindness shown at his 'burial'. He noted too, that Cendrars had not escaped unscathed and now had only one arm.¹

One of the popular souvenirs from the First World War was a 'pocket shrine' made from the casing of a bullet. The inner part of the shell rotated to reveal, typically, a carved image of the Virgin Mary. Many soldiers tried in their own way to turn their firearms, the very embodiment of death and destruction, into ideas of life and salvation. Cendrars, his recollection shot through with irony, relates how his friend Goy was put on a charge for putting photos of his wife and daughter into his rifle butt: 'A rifle butt, with its registered number, must not be transformed into a reliquary. It is sacrosanct.'²

Yet what this tells us is that one of the ways in which soldiers asserted their humanity was through spirituality, even if they were not particularly devout. By carrying a deadly bullet transformed into the Mother of God, or placing a photo of a loved-one or a family, into rifle butt, showed a desire to assert what is good and true over the evil of death. The guns could not be stopped, but they might be transformed by small acts of human defiance, small acts which continued to say that God's world had been made differently and the hope of that world still remained.

Prayer

God of Love,

We remember all those who carried guns and used them.

*We thank you for those who survived the bullets
and mourn those who did not.*

*We thank you for the determination of those
who tried to make good things in the midst of evil.*

*May we work for reconciliation in your world,
so that all who carry guns to war today,
may have the chance to lay them down for good.*

Amen

¹ Cendrars, B., (1946) *La Main Coupée*, (1973) English translation *Lice*, London, Peter Owen Ltd, pp.58-69.

² Cendrars, p.35

Wire

'In the Royal Welch the barbed-wire entanglement was the responsibility of the company behind it. One of our first acts on taking over trenches was to inspect and repair it. We did a lot of work on the wire.'

Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That*.



Photo by sunshinecity

'Mind the wire' resonates through David Jones' First World War memoir *In Parenthesis*, as he recalled making his way through the maze of trenches with his friends.³ He was talking not just about barbed wire defences but telephone wire, the important means of communication. Wire was everywhere at any height and in the dark unbroken wires could knock or trip you over or broken pieces could snag on your clothing.

Barbed wire was both friend and foe and thousands of miles of it were employed as part of trench warfare. Barbed wire could be delivered in large coils and unrolled and erected quickly on posts as a defence for the trenches. Sometimes multiple lines or coiled entanglements of wire were put up and cups of stones hung on the wire which would jangle at any approach. Access points had to be very

³ Jones, D., (1937) *In Parenthesis*, London, Faber, pp. 36; 44; 197.

carefully defended. The wire then, was a defence against the unseen enemy coming towards the trenches at night, but it could also be an enemy if you were trying to get back from a sortie and got tangled in it. Once you were caught on it, panicking and pulling to escape might make it more and more impossible to do so. So soldiers had simultaneously to learn how to repair the wire and invent better ways of breaking or getting over it. On raids towards the German trenches, Blaise Cendrars remembers the zigzagging network of German wire and the fear that cutting the wire might sound an alarm or detonate a mine.⁴ Barbed wire then, was one of those strange elements of war that could be both friend and foe; it could save your life or end it. Soldiers were all issued with wire cutters, both to facilitate the endless repair that Graves recalls, but also to break through the wire as well. 'You stretch out hands to Jerry-wire as if it were bramble-mesh' wrote David Jones.⁵

Another result of the miles and miles of war defences was that the wire became a gruesome gallery of death and decay as dead soldiers became impaled on it and sometimes decayed where they hung, irrecoverable, facing their friends with the grisly reality of their death. Cendrars recalls a 'mummy' entangled in the wire.⁶ It's not surprising that one of the songs of the First World War carried the lines 'If you want to find the old battalion/They're hanging on the old barbed wire'.

Wire then, was another spiritual issue. It was a guardian of your life, but it could also contribute to your death. It could signal danger, but also betray you. It also confronted you with the possibility of your own death and spoke to your deepest distress about not being able to recover and bury the dead. It is not surprising that it entered the anxious voices of *In Parenthesis* or became part of a song. How else could you deal with it?

Prayer

Merciful God,

*We remember all those whose lives were wound about by wire:
mending, defending, cutting, breaking.*

*We remember all those who lost their lives on the wire,
those whose bodies hung there while their friends could do nothing.*

*We pray today for a world beyond barbed wire,
for freedom from fear and anxiety,
from the jangle in the night that announces the enemy.*

*We pray this in the name of your Son
who hung on a cross
while his friends could do nothing.*

Amen

⁴ Cendrars, pp 25-29.

⁵ Jones, p.166.

⁶ Cendrars, p.55

Gas

Gas! Quick, boys! – An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime

Wilfred Owen *Dulce et Decorum Est*

Killed in action 1918



In the Preface to his war memoir, *In Parenthesis*, David Jones mused on the change from fighting hand to hand where you could, as it were, look into the eyes of your enemy, and 'loosing poison from the sky'. He mused on all the lovely things human beings are capable of experiencing, and wondered what it meant that to all these experiences had to be added things like doing gas-drill.⁷

Vera Brittain wrote: 'I wish those people who talk about going on with this war whatever it costs could see the soldiers suffering from mustard gas poisoning. Great mustard-coloured blisters, blind eyes, all sticky and stuck together, always fighting for breath, with voices a mere whisper, saying that their throats are closing and they know they will choke.'⁸

Gas was disabling rather than necessarily a killer, although sometimes soldiers died weeks after gas inhalation, their lungs already compromised from the insanitary conditions and smoking. Phosgene and chlorine gas were also used. So gas masks and drills were a necessary part of life at the front in an attempt to prevent injury through contact with the poison. However, gas was perhaps most

⁷ Jones, p.xiv.

⁸ Brittain, V., (2009 ed) *Testament Of Youth: An Autobiographical Study Of The Years 1900-1925*, ch 10. W&N.

effective in creating dread and fear in people who could see the slow moving clouds approaching and know that they could not avoid being enveloped in it. Unlike being ammunitions which would either hit you or miss you, the gas was all the more frightening for being pervasive and getting inside you, making it difficult to see, speak or breathe.

What does the reality of chemical weapons mean to us? As created beings are we perhaps more afraid of the idea of gas clouds and poisons entering us with the air we breathe than bullets or explosions? There is a psychological horror about gas that can profoundly affect us. What did the approaching gas mean to those who fought in the trenches and how, spiritually, did they cope with this strange, creeping enemy that could get into their eyes and lungs?

As David Jones noted, a world which requires human beings to do gas drill has moved a long way from God.

Prayer

Loving God,

We remember all those affected by gas in the First World War.

We accept their horror and their pain.

*We give thanks for all those who comforted
and nursed the victims of gas attack,
and for all who worked to provide gas masks and protectors.*

We hold before you all who are victims of chemical warfare in our time.

We pray for all those working to prevent such weapons.

Amen

Shrapnel

'Tomorrow we return to the trenches. The men are pessimistic but cheerful. They all talk about getting a "cushy" one to send them back to "Blitey".They look forward to a battle because that gives them more chance of a cushy one in the legs or arms than trench warfare.'

Robert Graves *Goodbye to All That*

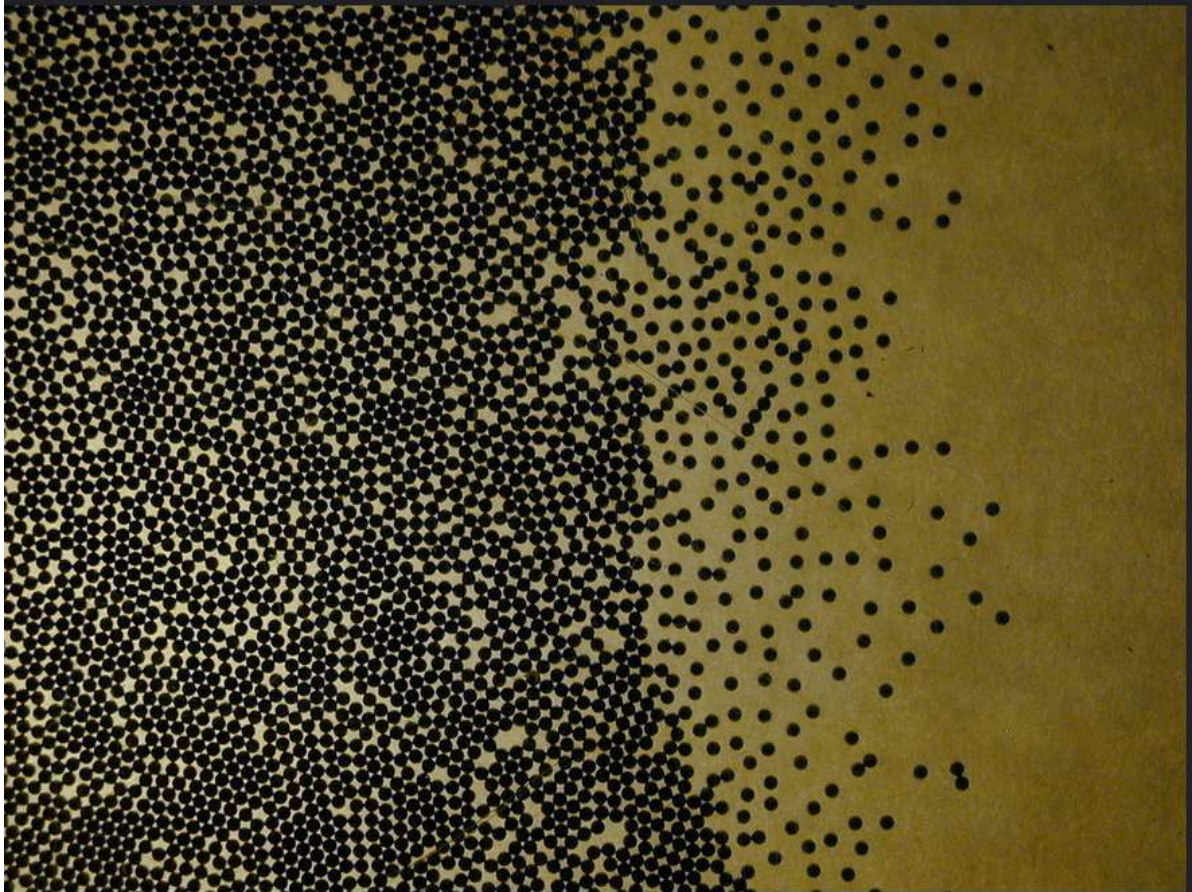


Photo by flickr

Shrapnel came from a hollow shell which was designed to explode above an enemy position, showering the men below with lead and steel balls. Another kind of explosive, the fragmentation shell, was designed to explode on impact and fragment into many pieces of damaging metal. Both kinds of shell were intended to cause maximum casualties for the fewest number of munitions.

Both kinds of explosive could kill, but many more soldiers were seriously injured by the shrapnel and fragments embedding themselves in their bodies. If you were really 'lucky' you might get a 'Blighty one' as Robert Graves records above, an injury which would send you home to recover, but not so devastating as to affect you permanently.

Shrapnel injuries caused not just disability but also disfigurement and these injuries were the drivers behind important advances in early plastic surgery and reconstruction techniques in medicine. Many soldiers suffered horrific injuries to the face and this required doctors and hospitals to investigate new ways of treating such damage so that ex-soldiers would again be able to see, hear, smell or eat.

These kinds of injuries needed not only physical healing but also a way to come to terms with the spiritual issues associated with healing and wholeness.

But some people were also injured in such a way that the shrapnel or metal fragments could not be extracted and so the shrapnel became part of their daily existence and a permanent reminder of the war. In this way, shrapnel injuries became part of a person's legacy and their spiritual development. To carry the evidence of war inside the body meant that it could not be left behind, only accommodated and hopefully transformed.

But there were also psychological and spiritual forms of shrapnel, not physical bits of metal but the trauma of the explosions and injuries resulting in 'shell-shock'. Such shell-shock, which we would today call Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), would leave ex-soldiers with nightmares, flashbacks and feelings of dissociation or intense anxiety. David Jones remembers breaking down: 'all gone to pieces and not pulling himself together not making the best of things'⁹ and was himself affected by mental suffering after the war, unable in fact to write *In Parenthesis* until some years later. Some surviving ex-soldiers were not able to settle back into their home life afterwards or make sense of their experiences. Some people carrying this mental 'shrapnel' in their minds committed suicide.

Prayer

God of our healing,

*We remember not just those who were killed in the First World War,
but those who were injured and disfigured by shells and bombs.
Especially we pray for those who broke down, those who ran away,
those who were shell-shocked.*

*Today we pray too for all who bear in their bodies the marks of war.
All those who carry shrapnel,
all those suffering from PTSD.*

*We pray for all who work in health professions
who seek to rehabilitate those hurt by war.*

*We pray that all those who carry shrapnel in their minds or bodies
can be restored to health and wholeness.*

Amen

⁹ Jones, p.153.