



“As a Choir of Frogs”. Nightmares in Australian Great War Poetry

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Abstract

Australian Great War poets were not able to escape their relationship with the dead, turning nightmares into poetry. Images haunted them, and through their poetry it may be seen that they lived in dread which became a central state of their subconscious. Frederic Manning said that the battle fields were the damned circles where Dante trod, recognising that he was in a hell where the dead became the carrion of rats and crows. Leon Gellert said that he strolled to hell where the world rolls wet with blood and the skinny hand of Death gropes at the beating heart. Their horrific visions help explain the shell-shocked realities of post-war years.

Manning saw a boy’s face coming out of a cloud through a mist of blood, haunting him with its trembling lips, convulsing with terror and hate. He says it was the mask of God, broken by the horrors of war. Some saw hope in happy dreams interrupting nightmares, but Manning and Gellert stand as poetic examples of the soldier’s wartime hell. Gellert wrote, ‘the scythe of time runs red, while a Foul Voice screams and Fear runs shrieking by the wall’. Manning saw them all as a raucous choir of frogs. These mad images inform the reader of a mind tormented by sights too hideous to reconcile, and show the poet’s subconscious dread of the terror he must live with.

Keywords: *Nightmares, Australian, War, hell, conscious, subconscious*

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Introduction

When it comes to nightmares in Australian Great War Poetry, we may observe a strange transitional process through four stages of development which ultimately bring the dreamer into a strange relationship with the demons of what Frederic Manning called the "damned circles Dante trod" (Manning 1917, 35). These stages, not demonstrated in any critical theory or study, but merely recognisable from the poetry, begin in the conscious world where the soldier experiences 'death', then moves into the subconscious, where the soldier relives 'death' within his nightmares. Then, the soldier finds relief, as a subconscious 'life' interrupts the subconscious 'death'¹. Finally, the soldier, in a conscious state, experiences 'life' as the scars of war, where he knows that sleep will evoke subconscious nightmares, daily experiences will bring back conscious nightmares, and ironically, 'life' will generate an awareness of 'death'.

In the poetry of two Australian Great War poets, Frederic Manning and Leon Gellert, both of whom were soldiers, it may be observed that soldiers formed a strange relationship with the dead. The images both haunted and tormented them, and through their poetry it may be seen that soldiers lived in a constant state of dread and fear, which became an intrinsic state of the sub-conscious². Manning said that the battle fields were "the damned circles where Dante trod", and in so saying, recognised that he was in a hell where the dead and dying would become "the carrion of rats and crows" (Manning 1917, 24). Gellert similarly said that he "strolled to hell" where the "world rolls wet with blood and the skinny hand of Death gropes at the beating heart" (Gellert 1917, 38). These images demonstrate the effect the war had on the sub-conscious world of the soldier.

Their visions were horrific, and in many ways, they explain the suppressed shell-shock realities of the post-war years that many soldiers suffered³. In his nightmares, Manning notably saw a boy's face, delicate and

¹ It is important for this paper to understand the terminology used. 'Subconscious death' and 'subconscious life' are introduced here to distinguish between 'nightmares' and 'happy dreams', where nightmares represent death and happy dreams represent life. Happy dreams can interrupt nightmares, which is what is being referred to in this phase.

² While comprehensive studies on British Great War poetry covers this subject, next to nothing has been written about the Australian experience. This paper attempts to redress the balance.

³ A very good covering poetry's relationship with shell shock may be found in Daniel Hipp,



blond, coming to him out of a cloud through a mist of blood, and in this boy's face, symbolic of innocence, he saw a wraith of sleep, haunting and troubling him with its trembling lips, convulsing with terror and hate. Shockingly, Manning says in his poem 'The Face' (Manning 1917, 15), that it was the very mask of God, broken by the horrors of war.

Manning's and Gellert's nightmares stand as poetic examples of the soldier's wartime hell. Gellert writes that 'the scythe of time runs red, while a Foul Voice screams and Fear runs shrieking by the wall' (Gellert 1917, 7). These frenzied images inform the reader of a mind tormented by sights too hideous to reconcile, and show the poet's subconscious dread of the terror with which he must live day and night, possibly for the rest of his life. Manning also gives graphic images of the dead in the field of war. Such images as a "red smear falling down a boy's face" (Manning 1917, 15), "peopled with stiff prone forms, stupidly rigid" (Manning 1917, 22), and "the stilled soul of night's oppression" (Manning 1917, 10) are a few examples. He says, "Dead are the lips where love laughed or sang" (Manning 1917, 23), and here we come to understand why so many war veterans were not willing to talk about the war. They had lost their innocence and somehow died inside. An anonymous Australian poem speaks of this loss: "Adieu the years are a broken song, / And the right grows weak in the strife with wrong. / The lilies of love have a crimson stain / And the old days never will come again." (Holloway 1987, 11).

However, another Australian poet and soldier, Frank Westbrook, gives a glimpse of hope in his poem, *Brown Eyes*, where we can see that there were some dreams that kept safe the sanity of the soldier during the war. Yet, he asks the question; "How can such two brown lustrous eyes disturb my dreams with dreams of warmer skies?"⁴ (Westbrook 1916, 25). How, indeed, can a nightmare be interrupted by a dream? However, for many, the terrors of war were too strong to be disturbed by happy dreams. The nightmare of war was, for some, far too dark to shed any light of hope so that the soldier could escape the dread, horror and terror of hell's fury.

This paper looks at the relationship between demons and soldiers, and how the nightmares of war translated into incredibly sensitive poetry.

The Poetry of Shell Shock: Wartime Trauma and Healing in Wilfred Owen, Ivor Gurney and Siegfried Sassoon (Hipp 2005).

⁴ See note 1: Happy dreams can interrupt nightmares – subconscious death can be interrupted by subconscious life.



Australian Great War poets such as Manning and Gellert, to name but two of the many⁵, were able to give witness to the nightmares many soldiers had, but they were not able to escape their relationship with the dead of war; a relationship that they lived with throughout the years of the war and beyond.

1 War is hell – Death as a conscious reality

It has been said that 'war is hell', but this is a far truer statement than any mere antiquated aphorism about human suffering. Soldiers lived with death, and they could not escape its reality. They physically experienced death by witnessing it first-hand, in their friends and their fellow man. Importantly, they experienced death in all its bloody horror while they were conscious, knowing full well what it was and what it meant, and thus, the conscious reality of these experiences was something tangible, which interacted with the soldier in real time, so, these experiences created unforgettable and inescapable images. The experiences were recorded in the memories of the soldier who was living in a real hell; incapable of diverting the mind's eye from the death which surrounded him. The outward signs of war became a warning of the inward signs of hell.

Many Australian Great War poets wrote about their experiences of war's hell, and they were often times frightening visions which seemed almost to foretell of the poet's unhappy relationship with the dead. Australian poets⁶ were struck to the very core of their imaginations by the vividness of Death as a living presence in the world. These poets personified death as the enemy of human happiness, whose only goal in life was to awaken the human mind to the realisation that death was a man-made reality, and that man's ultimate end was one of his own making. This has much in common with Adam's fall into sin and his braking of God's covenant with man.⁷

Three Australian poets show different aspects of death, which seem to evolve into a circular curse on mankind. In Christopher Brennan's⁸ *A Chant*

⁵ There are hundreds of Australian Great War poets. A current listing may be found on the Australia Great War Poetry website: <https://dpgsheridan.wixsite.com/agwp/agwp-canon-register>.

⁶ Certainly poets of all nations experienced this, but this paper is only interested in the Australian experience.

⁷ Just as sin was brought into the world by Adam, so too was death by that sin. So, death was a man-made reality which broke man's bond with God.

⁸ While Christopher Brennan was a civilian, it does not exempt him from having a voice in



of Doom, he identifies "the evil one" as the parent of death. In Frederic Manning's *Grotesque*, he identifies "sardonic mockery" as a human participant of death. And in Leon Gellert's *Armageddon*, he identifies "Death" as the offspring of the parent and the participant. These three aspects of death are awoken in the poet's mind by the very real and conscious participation in war.

In Brennan's lengthy anti-German war poem, *A Chant of Doom*, written in late 1915, he recognises that the devil is the motivator, and thus the father of German aggression. He tells of how the beautiful and free Spring, some sort of vestal virgin of Earth, has been ravaged and taken by the 'hosts of darkness' as they 'ravished their way through Belgium'. After Brennan accuses the Germans for their crimes, and curses their association with the evil one, he cries out to this shadow of Death which covers the world, that he wants the return of this eternal virgin, Spring.

Ha, the doom begins, begins!
 Ay, the hour is well begun
 When the Babel of his sins
 Topples on the evil one:
 Malediction, crime, and sword —
 These his harvest, bride, and hoard;
 These to gladden, hous'd and stored,
 His eternal bed and board!

Chime his fame and chime his name;
 Rhyme his title, rhyme his shame;
 German faith and German trust;
 German hate and German lust;
 – Bring the Beast unto the dust.

Cast the carrion to the dark
 With its sin for shrouding-sark;
 Raze his name and raze his birth:
 Give the spring-time back to Earth!

(Brennan 1918, 22–28)

this subject. Like all of the civilian poets during the war years, they had what we might call 'immediate secondary access' to the events of war, as opposed to poets writing years afterwards (even to the present) who lack the immediate element. Brennan's voice must be given credence here, especially as his poem speaks in terms all civilians could readily relate to. Brennan's 'conscious participation in war' is the same as any civilian of the time, experiencing the effects of war on mankind.



Brennan had no love for the Germany of the Great War, which was inspired less by the war than by the hostilities in his own household, and his desire to spite his German wife and mother-in-law, both of whom he abhorred (Clark 2020). Nevertheless, Brennan makes a clear observation in the poem that the devil (the evil one) is the father of death, which he associates with the war.

In Manning's 1916 poem, *Grotesque*, he brings the Brennan notion of German participation in Death's plan for mankind into a new focus. He recognises the "sardonic mockery" of a skull as the participant of death, and as such, mankind ironically mocks himself by his enabling of death. For Manning, the very act of war, whether it is by German or British, Turkish or Australian, or whoever, is an awakening of mankind's unnatural pact with Death (Manning 1917, 22). In his 'Grotesque', Manning indicates that the mindless voices of men at war sing the same nightmarish songs that turn them from men to frogs, as though some spell had been placed upon them.

These are the damned circles Dante trod,
 Terrible in hopelessness,
 But even skulls have their humour,
 An eyeless and sardonic mockery:
 And we,
 Sitting with streaming eyes in the acrid smoke,
 That murks our foul, damp billet,
 Chant bitterly, with raucous voices
 As a choir of frogs
 In hideous irony, our patriotic songs.

(Manning 1917, 35)

Manning saw that the lived experience of war's ironies was something so hideous that it turned man into a partner of Death. While Brennan saw the evil one as the father of death, Manning saw mankind as an ironic co-conspirator⁹; an enabler. Yet, a striking moment in Manning's poem is understood by the fact that the mocking skulls do not have eyes to see the horror seen by living soldiers, whose eyes stream with tears, not only because of the acrid smoke, but also because of the terrible hopelessness of war, which turns human voices into raucous frogs, singing of glory and honour. Manning paints a most vivid picture of Dante's damned circles, paved with the

⁹ This is evidenced in his poetry, especially 'Grotesque' and 'The Face'.



skulls of dead mocking men and bitterly hoarse frogs¹⁰, where living soldiers are forced to take refuge in damp and foul darkness, and all the while, with streaming eyes, hating the very patriotism that spurs them on. Their very participation is their accord with Death.

In Gellert's 1915 poem, *Armageddon*, he sees Death as the offspring of Brennan's 'parent' and Manning's 'participant'. Death is also woken when we sleep, as the lived experience of war feeds the nightmare. But Gellert notes that Death is active in the conscious, living world of war, and that soldiers just like him are subject to Death's "skinny hand". Yet, unlike Manning, Gellert sees that the soldier, who is in this living hell, still has honour.

The world rolls wet with blood,
 And the skinny hand of Death
 Gropes at the beating heart.
 The salt tears well, and flood
 With strife the choking breath,
 And nations sway and part.
 The scythe of Time runs red,
 Red with the bleeding year.
 Sound is but a knell,
 And Sleep has a scarlet bed.
 Dreams are wet with Fear,
 And Honour sits in Hell.

(Gellert 1917, 38)

Like Manning, Gellert makes reference to the eyes of the soldier, which are also streaming with salt tears. He personifies certain words throughout the poem to give a greater elevation of thought to the underlying meaning of the poem, which is that mankind is doomed to hell because of its enabling of Death. Such words as Death, Time, Sleep, Dreams, Fear, Honour and Hell, are personified so that Gellert might effect a link between mankind and the supernatural. 'Death' has 'skinny hands that grope at the beating hearts of

¹⁰ Interestingly, frogs were the second plague of Egypt, after blood, and Manning seems to recognise the grave similarities. "This is what the Lord says: Let my people go, so that they may worship me. If you refuse to let them go, I will send a plague of frogs on your whole country. The Nile will teem with frogs. They will come up into your palace and your bedroom and onto your bed, into the houses of your officials and on your people, and into your ovens and kneading troughs. The frogs will come up on you and your people and all your officials." (Exod. 8:1-4 NIV)



men'. The scythe of 'Time', that ancient Titan god Cronos¹¹, who devoured his own children. 'Sleep' is personified as a corpse reposed on some bloody bed. 'Dreams' take on a life as anxious persecutors, while 'Fear' lies with 'Sleep', as if in some unholy and unnatural act, to torment 'Dreams'. 'Honour' is personified as Manning's raucous frogs who sing their patriotic songs, and 'Hell' takes on the character of a living, breathing organism, such as Dante's damned circles of the battle field.

2 Visions of hell in nightmares – Death as a subconscious reality

Because of the confronting nature of the lived experience of war, most soldiers experienced bad nightmares; so much so, that the conscious reality of war was to become a subconscious reality of hell, and Australian poets would reveal a five stage development¹² of the nightmares' processes from entrance to realisation. Throughout these five stages, the poet would reveal that sleeping with Death would generate a strange relationship, a sense of growing fear and terror, and an interaction with Death that would ultimately condemn man as the breaker of man's covenant with God. Through the act of war, a new Adam had raised his head and brought death into the world.

While there may be a certain level of arbitrariness in the listing, the five stages of nightmare development are quite recognisable in Australian Great War poetry¹³. The first stage shows sleep as a portal to a subconscious hell, so that the act of going to sleep unlocks the nightmare. The second stage shows a transition from life to death, and the dreamer allocates reason for

¹¹ In an ancient myth recorded by Hesiod's *Theogony*, Cronus envied the power of his father, the ruler of the universe, Uranus. Uranus drew the enmity of Cronus's mother, Gaia, when he hid the gigantic youngest children of Gaia, the hundred-handed Hecatonchires and one-eyed Cyclopes, in Tartarus, so that they would not see the light. Gaia created a great stone sickle and gathered together Cronus and his brothers to persuade them to castrate Uranus. Only Cronus was willing to do the deed. (Hesiod 1914, 154–166)

¹² These five stages are not the same as the four stages mentioned in the introduction, briefly shown here as "conscious death" (reality of war), "subconscious death" (nightmares), "subconscious life" (happy dreams) and "conscious life" (changed reality). The five stages are spoken of in the next paragraph.

¹³ This is not demonstrated in any critical theory or study, but merely recognisable from the poetry. These five stages offer an effective framework for recognising the progression which is being studied in this paper.



the change. The third stage reveals a new reality, and the dreamer recognises his separation from life. The fourth stage sees madness personified, and the malevolence of the nightmare revealed. The fifth and final stage exposes the true horror of the nightmare so that the dreamer suddenly understands the true implications of his personal hell.

In Brennan's poem, *Doom*, he demonstrates the first stage by identifying a personified "Evil" as Fate and Judgement, a natural Doom of man, and that this Evil enters the subconscious from the conscious when we go to sleep and dream. Sleep is therefore, the portal to a subconscious hell that wants to condemn man. The conscious reality now becomes a subconscious reality.

Dead night, unholy quiet, doom, and weird
 Are heavy on its roof,
 The palace-keep that prosperous Evil rear'd
 Defiant, heaven-proof.

Founded in fraud, mortar'd with blood, and clamp'd
 With clutching iron hands,
 It frown'd down right, its flaunted scutcheon ramp'd
 Above the abject lands.

And now, the sentinels have left that gate
 Nor bar protects, nor pin,
 But high and wide the portal yawns, till Fate
 And Judgment enter in.

(Brennan 1918, 29-31)

Brennan recognises a "heaven-proof and defiant Evil" which clutches onto its domain with iron hands. These iron hands are clearly a damning reference to the trappings of all-out war, yet sleep, the removal of sentinels from the gate of consciousness, has opened up a yawning portal allowing Fate and Judgement to enter. Brennan shows here that by going to sleep, the soldier opens himself up to the nightmare.

In Gellert's poem, *War!*, the second stage of nightmare development, he gives reason for the transition from life to death. From the conscious reality to the subconscious reality. He witnesses his own death, and thus becomes subconsciously dead. At this stage he is a passive participant in the dream.



When my poor body died,—Alas!
 I watched it topple down a hill
 And sink beside a tuft of grass.
 I laughed like mad,
 and laughing still
 I bowed and thanked the bit of shell
 That set me free and made me glad.
 Then quietly,
 I strolled to Hell.

(Gellert 1917, 65)

Gellert's shocking imagery of his watching his own dead body toppling down the hill and sinking beside a tuft of grass, insignificant and trivial, while he is somewhere above laughing madly and without sense, is a dramatic poetic device of the soldier's transition from life to death within the subconscious world of the nightmare.

In John Le Gay Brereton's¹⁴ poem, *The Grave*, the next stage of nightmare development, he recognises a new reality and the separation of body and soul. He believes that he is conscious throughout this process. At this stage he has become an active participant in the dream. For the dreamer, he no longer believes in a conscious reality, but in a subconscious reality that he believes to be conscious. In other words, he believes the nightmare is real.

In the grey dawn I lie within my bed
 Still as a frozen lake that pats no more
 With murmurous delight the o'erhanging shore,
 Yet grim thoughts heave obscurely in my head;
 For curtains I have earthen walls, and lead
 Is colder than the wooden garb I wore—
 But oh! that heart of mine is still as sore
 As when I did not know that I was dead.

I knew her (O my Life!) and she was fair,
 And gave her beauty to the hills and sea,
 The wonder of her voice to leaf and wave.

¹⁴ John Le Gay Brereton, a civilian, clearly had no first-hand experience of the war or death, but he does speak of death in this poem with the authority of someone who had immediate knowledge of death, much like Christopher Brennan. Both Brereton and Brennan registered a clear demonstration that the civilian, while not at the same degree as the soldier, did understand the metaphysical anomalies of death in war.



The brown earth lies between us; does she care
That since she cast the first dull clod on me
My lonely heart is aching in the grave?

(Brereton 2012, 58)

He equates the grave, not only with a bed, but also with his house with "earthen walls". He clearly sees a separation of body and soul; of old life and new existence. Brereton recognises his separation from life, and the creation of a new reality, where he, with lonely aching heart, lies separated from that "Life" he knew by brown earthen walls.

In Gellert's poem, *The Moving of the Shades*, the fourth stage of development in the nightmare, he reveals the malevolent nature of the nightmare, and that this nature is a mixture of the worst characteristics of mankind. He personifies these eleven characteristics as Shades that wish him ill. He is trapped in a subconscious reality which he believes is conscious and hates him.

The black revolving depths have moved and stirred
with news. Their Lord has cried. "Send these, and these."
Swift feet awake. Shapes speed. The dreadful word
resounds along the tunnels of the seas.
Sly Falsehood comes, with Sin and Flattery,
and long toothed Fear runs shrieking by the wall.
Face-hidden Sorrow follows Cruelty,
and peering Jealousy grown over-tall
Slobbering Lust is there, a smear with slime,
and Vice's ushers from the Uttermost;
Comes painted Pleasure, somewhat fat with time;
and Murder takes his place amid the host.
Thronewards they stand and gaze, the Foul Voice screams.
"Invoke this God! Go hand in hand with dreams?"

(Gellert 1917, 7)

Gellert's nightmare is filled with the demons of war, and these creatures are personified in all their malevolence. They come, he says, from the "Uttermost", a clear reference to hell, where such spectacles may be found. However, Gellert indicates, somewhat indirectly, that all these characters, while innately base and vile, are seemingly very human.

In Manning's poem, *The Face*, the final stage of the nightmare's development, he exposes the true horror of realisation, and becomes immersed in



the nightmare's fearful reality. He interacts with the subconscious reality and is shocked at what he finds. For Manning, the shock is mankind's broken covenant with God. It is a deep look into one's own face as a loss of innocence, and a realisation that hell is of our own making.

Out of the smoke of men's wrath,
The red mist of anger,
Suddenly,
As a wraith of sleep,
A boy's face, white and tense,
Convulsed with terror and hate,
The lips trembling. . . .

Then a red smear, falling. . . .
I thrust aside the cloud, as it were tangible,
Blinded with a mist of blood.
The face cometh again
As a wraith of sleep:
A boy's face delicate and blonde,
The very mask of God,
Broken.

(Manning 1917, 15)

Manning's poem is a confronting and shocking self-accusation, where he shows the deeper reason for the nightmare. He interacts with elements of the nightmare by thrusting aside a cloud, and being blinded by a bloody mist. But his recognition of the boy's face as a mask of God, broken by war, is a shocking confirmation of the notion that mankind's pact with the evil one has produced Death, and broken man's covenant with God. In this dramatic moment, one is compelled to think of what Adam thought when confronted in the garden by God.

There are many other Australian Great War poems which support this five stage development of the nightmare, and they all have in common the soldier's strange association with death (whether written by soldier or civilian), either as a personified character or a state of reality. Their deaths, as their lives, are spoken of in terms of strange bewilderment, yet they are all filled with a piteous humanity.



3 Life interrupting death through dreams – life as a subconscious reality

Soldiers also experience life in a subconscious state. These experiences were recorded in a previous conscious state, probably when the soldier was a civilian back in Australia, but are now revealed while the soldier sleeps. So, the soldier, while having a nightmare, can be interrupted by a dream¹⁵. This may be a mechanism of escape from the nightmare, or just protection from it. Yet, reality would always bring the soldier back to the conscious state. Some soldiers found brief escape from their nightmares, such as Frank Westbrook, while others, such as Leon Gellert, hoped for escape, knowing fully that sleep would bring the nightmare, but they still hoped for a dream to protect them.

Frank Westbrook and Leon Gellert give two interesting examples of dreams interrupting nightmares, prompting the dreamer to ask philosophical questions about their nature. The poets use metaphysics to explore the deeper regions of their subconscious, but the soldier still knows that he is at war, and not in the safe, happy arms of his past.

Westbrook's poem, *Brown Eyes*, is hopeful, as it gives him a distraction from the nightmares of war. He even asks a question about how a dream can interrupt a nightmare. However, an important element in this poem is that the dreamer is taken back to Australia, where he recalls all the wonderful things he loved, birdsong and flowered scents, Australia's bushland and lulled sleepy evening hymns.

Oh, two brown eyes where love-lit shadows swim
Like pools asleep and lulled by evening's hymn.
How can such two brown lustrous eyes
Disturb my dreams¹⁶ with dreams of warmer skies,
Of singing birds and scented flowers of spring,
And sounds of Austral's bushlands whispering?
Ah, I forget the miles of heaving sea
That distance flings 'twixt love and me
And two brown eyes.

(Westbrook 1916, 25)

¹⁵ A distinction is made here between 'nightmare' and 'dream', where a nightmare is a bad experience in sleep and a dream is a pleasant one.

¹⁶ Westbrook's word choice here is 'dream' and not 'nightmare'. This is obviously to do with meter, but the context makes it quite clear that he means 'nightmare'.



The driving force of Westbrook's poem is the owner of the two brown eyes. A woman he clearly misses and loves. Yet, Westbrook wonders philosophically about how a dream of happy memories could ever interrupt the nightmares of war. In the poem, Westbrook shows that the two brown eyes had so affected him that he forgot the long distance he was from all he loved. By recognising this, Westbrook shows that the nightmare was still there in the back ground, but at the moment of the interruption, he happily dreamt of warmer skies and two brown eyes.

Gellert's poem, *A Song*, is more foreboding than Westbrook's, as he knows that sleep will bring nightmares, and he even sees the "old shadows creeping in the darkness of the talking palm trees", but he hopes that he will join the dream of loved ones far away.

The night has come, I feel the desert dew,
 I lie in Afric's sands
 And breath the night, for night like these are few
 In other lands;
 But where are you?
 May sleep come soon. I see old shadows creep
 Along the sleep stream,
 The darkness 'mid the talking palms is deep.
 I can but dream
 Are you asleep?

(Gellert 1917, 29)

Gellert's poem is filled with hope. He desires a happy sleep, when he might dream and forget his nightmares. He hopes, almost against hope that the object of his love is back in Australia dreaming happy dreams so that he might share in them. But Gellert knows that the shadows, a metaphor of nightmares, are creeping in the darkness. These "shadows" remind us of the malevolent characters of his poem, *The Moving of the Shades*, filled with hatred, and the "darkness" also reminds us of the "Uttermost", Gellert's notion of hell from the same poem.

In this interruption of death through dreams, poets like Westbrook and Gellert, both soldiers, show that reality would always hark at the soldier and bring him back. Furthermore, the philosophical notions heighten the soldiers' misery because there is still a risk of nightmares in the happy dream, so that hell could infect life.



4 Scars of nightmares – Life as a conscious reality

For those soldiers who survived the war, the nightmare lived on in many different ways. When the soldier slept, he again woke the nightmares. When the soldier was awake during the day, unexpected events could trigger a re-living of the nightmare. The soldier often felt like the walking-dead, as old images wouldn't die and he found himself back in the hell of war.

After the war, soldiers were left with the scars of war. Soldiers experienced life in a conscious state, and the experiences transformed into scars, where the soldier would relive in real time (consciously) the experiences of war. This was manifested in different ways, but they were all characteristic of the same thing. There was a changed life, a growing old with images of dead that didn't die, and a going back to the land of a living hell.

Soldiers, such as Jack Lockett, knew that if they were to go to sleep, they would have nightmares, and thus, they consciously lived with this knowledge. Soldiers, such as Ted Smout, lived with the reality of a conscious interaction with memories, as some things would trigger episodes of fear. Other soldiers, such as Leon Gellert, lived as though in a state of living death. They saw death everywhere and even considered themselves as being somehow dead, and all of this was while they knew they were conscious.

Jack Lockett, like so many soldiers, was no coward, yet he feared going to sleep. He knew that sleep would open that portal of hell spoken about by Brennan, and that Fate and Judgement would enter in along with Gellert's hideous Shades. "You dream of it [war]. You're not too bad in the day time, but you dream of it you see. When you go to sleep you're back at the war again." (*Australians at War* 2001 – 1:0:22) Lockett's wartime scars were such that sleep was the catalyst for awakening past hells. Lockett's nightmares were obviously foreboding, and they created a mental fear which filled him with trepidation when going to bed.

Ted Smout was also no coward, as he had fought and survived the horrific third battle of Ypres, Passchendaele, one of the bloodiest battles fought on the Western Front, in 1917. Smout's nightmares were unpredictable, and often violent shocks into instinctive muscle memories. "We used to go to the exhibition to watch the speed races, the bike races. And after the races one night they put on a display of fireworks. And they let off these skyrockets all at once...and the noise of those skyrockets going off was just a repeat of the [war explosions], I fell to the ground and vomited, and that was 1924." (*Australians at War* 2001 – 1:1:3) Smout's wartime scars were awoken by any



unexpected occurrence which had a similarity with war. It could come at any time, and would often leave him in physical fear.

In Leon Gellert's poem, *The Grey World*, he identifies a common phenomenon in post-war existence. Many of these men felt like walking dead, as though they were strangely somehow not alive in their living bodies. Old wartime images played out in the conscious mind of the returned soldier and kept him somehow in the war zone. In his mind, death was everywhere, and he even felt that he was not living. He had become stuck in a strange new reality.

Grey nights in the wind,
And the grey-faced dead.
Grey hairs in my head,
And grey eyes in my mind.
Grey mists in the morn,
And grey waves that rave,
Grey mould on my grave,
And grey eyes forlorn.
Grey clouds in the sky,
And the grey world asleep,
Grey ghosts that sigh,
And grey eyes that weep.

(Gellert 1917, 52)

Gellert's poem shows just how much the soldier knew of his personal death to the world. Gellert's use of the word "grey" is quite significant as well, as it appears twelve times throughout the text, and on each of the twelve lines. Like a shortened sonnet, designed purposely to encounter the biblical number twelve. Twelve apostles, beacons of light and hope; all now grey with the effects of war and mankind's co-operation with Death. He even tells how the grey world is asleep and fails to see man's pact with Death.

All three men, Lockett, Smout and Gellert, were Australian soldiers who had experienced death first-hand, and they each had different post-war experiences of the nightmare. Lockett's was the nightmare of sleep; Smout's was the nightmare of the unexpected, and Gellert's was the nightmare of waking remorse. In sleep, as in waking life, ex-soldiers were exposed to the memories and realisations of their wartime experiences. In some sort of full circle, the nightmares of the war saw subconscious experiences brought back in nightmares, conscious experiences brought back the nightmares, and a conscious awareness of the subconscious.



5 Conclusions – *Media vita in morte sumus* – “In the midst of life we are in death”

Soldiers consciously experienced death in war, and then, these experiences revisited them in their subconscious as nightmares. Sometimes, these nightmares were interrupted by dreams, where the soldier's subconscious death was interrupted by his subconscious life. Finally, the soldier's conscious life was scarred by the earlier states, and he lived in a strange mixture of life and death, as well as consciousness and sub-consciousness. The soldier was left to the ravages of time, not dead and buried, but dead and scattered to the winds and machinations of life. The realities of war produced nightmares that lived on in the conscious and subconscious worlds of soldiers long after the war. They were trapped in this reality and felt that they had lost their youthful happiness, and that they were merely bloody fragments left to the ravages of time.

In Manning's poem, *The Trenches*, he shows that after the war, those who had experienced the horrors of war were cast adrift and abandoned. They were unable to speak of their traumas, for they now had dead lips. Their old loves had been metaphorically killed, and their happiness had lost its lustre.

Dead are the lips where love laughed or sang,
The hands of youth eager to lay hold of life,
Eyes that have laughed to eyes,
And these were begotten,
O Love, and lived lightly, and burnt
With the lust of a man's first strength: ere they were rent,
Almost at unawares, savagely; and strewn
In bloody fragments, to be the carrion
Of rats and crows.

(Manning 1917, 22)

Manning's graphic depiction of the wastage of man through war is most poignantly shown in the last two lines of the poem, where he describes how the eyes of the soldier have been savagely rent from their sockets and strewn in bloodied pieces to the ground so that they can be carrion for rats and crows. Manning's poem, *The Trenches*, is a shocking view of the human wastage wars create. The eyes of which Manning rents from the soldier's skull have seen too much, and because of their witness, sit in some sort of



condemnation of the soldier's broken covenant with God. The connection between Manning's three poems, *The Trenches*, *Grotesque* and *The Face*, are most striking in this. In *Grotesque*, the skulls sit in their eyeless sardonic mockery. In *The Trenches*, the eyes have been rent from their sockets. In both poems the self-accusation of human complicity with Death is played out in *The Face*, where the eyes are blinded with a mist of blood, only to reveal that the face is the broken mask of God; a broken covenant, and thus, the soldier's damnation. As the soldier brakes his pact with God, he unites himself with Death.

Mankind's wartime relationship with Death may poetically be heard in the raucous voices of Manning's "choir of frogs", as they sing in hideous irony, their patriotic songs. But these songs are merely remnants, or rather, echoes, of previous broken covenants with God. The nightmares of the soldier are manifestations of self-accusation and regret.



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