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## Authenticity and Art in Trauma Narratives of World War I

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

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There were others who suffered, to whose voices we must also attend.

--Jay Winter, "Shell-shock and the Cultural History of the Great War" (2000)

I write because they left their indelible mark on me and writing is its trace.

--Georges Perec, *W, or the Memory of Childhood* (1988)

Fresh wounds break open older wounds. One of the most estranging images recorded by soldiers on the western front was that of cemeteries in which heavy bombardment had unburied the dead. If historians and literary critics in the late twentieth century turned to World War I to focus on representations of what the British called shell shock, they did so in order to find ways to deal with the legacy of World War II. This midcentury trauma silenced the generation that survived its combats and camps, and it left what Nicholas Abraham calls a concealed, "phantom" injury to be mourned by the children of camp survivors.<sup>1</sup> The return to 1914 was an indirect path taken toward understanding the present. Attempts to understand how the Holocaust and the Vietnam War had rendered narrative problematic, if not impossible, sent scholars back to consider how a similar breakdown of language and storytelling arose from World War I. As Walter Benjamin had written in "The Storyteller," "With the World War a process began to become apparent which has not halted since then. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from battlefield grown silent--not richer [End Page 91] but poorer in communicable experience?"<sup>2</sup> In recent years, historians' conferences and journal issues dedicated to the epidemic of nervous breakdown or "combat fatigue" suffered in 1914-18 have focused on those "silent" men, reexamining medical and autobiographical accounts that help us understand the kinds of meanings allotted to trauma and its symptoms by doctors, military leaders, and politicians as well as by the soldiers themselves.

Modern interpreters have brought to this task the psychiatric definition of post-traumatic-stress disorder (PTSD) that emerged from our experiences in Vietnam. This diagnosis has enabled us to frame the forms that shell shock took and to inquire why they became so central to the earlier war narratives that have often been identified with modernism. PTSD has offered literary critics a vocabulary to describe the symptoms of soldiers' mental disturbances that may figure in memoirs and other autobiographical accounts: nonsequential memory, flashbacks, nightmares, and mutism or fragmented language. Those symptoms bear a suggestive resemblance to certain features of modernist experiment: decentering of the subject, montage, ellipses or gaps in narrative, and startlingly vivid images. This similarity--or, some would argue, connection--between a set of medical symptoms among veterans and a set of stylistic features in narrative has fostered a masculine canon of modernism.<sup>3</sup>

Behind these moving accounts of combatants' psychological injuries lies concealed another history of wartime trauma, one that has only begun to be written. "One train may conceal another," runs a French aphorism, and the shock experienced by combatants during the war for a long time displaced our attention from noncombatant traumas. Margaret Darrow has argued that French women disappeared from the cultural memory of World War I not because of "memory-loss" but because the story was never created: "a failure of memory creation."<sup>4</sup> As descriptions of a disturbing gap in the historical narrative, both phrases suggest trauma, perhaps because women's experiences so dramatically broke with accepted scripts, shocking many contemporaries. Restoring this repressed narrative requires us to bring social history together with feminist history. To do so, Darrow and other historians have turned to the experiences of civilians, such as those in occupied zones or in cities under bombardment, and to the experiences of the noncombatant medical corps, which of course included women. Over the last two decades, a focus on original sources has led to the publication or reedition of civilian and nursing diaries and memoirs, and historians have begun to



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