

Roundtable: Ethics after Ethics**North American Society for the Study of Romanticism, 9 August 2013****David Collings, Nancy Yousef, Jacques Khalip, David L. Clark****“On the Politics and Poetics of Burial and Exhumation”****David L. Clark**

I happen to live in downtown Toronto, only a few blocks from the Chief Coroner's Office, which is located the small, nondescript building to which the bodies of all Canadian soldiers killed in Afghanistan are taken for examination, this, before being sent on to their surviving families and loved ones scattered across the country. These bodies have been arriving there now for over a decade, the grimmest possible return on a useless war about which Canadian universities—each of which is a *public* institution--have said next to nothing. When small groups of professors do organize against the war, as they did two years ago at the University of Calgary, or as some did in the weeks following the attacks on 9/11, they are bullied in ways that are chilling to say the least. Before being delivered to Toronto, the bodies of war-dead are flown by military transport aircraft from Afghanistan to Trenton Air force Base, and then driven the 172 kilometres to the mortuary in Toronto along a portion of the McDonald-Cartier Freeway, named after the founding fathers of the Canadian confederation, but now re-named “the Highway of Heroes,” so that by the simple act of driving along one of the most travelled motorways in the country, you assent to war, to the becoming-heroic of the war dead, not to mention the disappearing of the inimical enemies, the non-heroes, whose bodies and graves, like their lives and homes, remain

mostly illegible to Canadians. For a time, photographs of the coffins being off-loaded at Trenton were forbidden by the Canadian government, an interdiction that says a great deal about the imperative to police the representation of the war dead. Tellingly, even when the ban was lifted, no one could bring themselves to violate it. Instead we—but who are “we,” who is the subject of the address of the war-dead?—are encouraged to turn out to salute the bodies as they pass by on the “Highway of Heroes.” Having often—too often--been hailed by those convoys,



and having often watched the crowds gathered on the overpasses and roadsides waving Canadian flags and “paying tribute” (“pay tribute” is the not quite dead or dead-enough metaphor that you see used in the newspapers), I’ve had plenty of occasions to think about how the war losses --whether the dead of NATO coalition or the Afghanees dead--“put our politics and ethics to the test” (Simon 133), and how, in a pervasively militarized culture, the war-dead are experienced

and imagined at the intersection of ethical obligation, civic life, historical memory, practices of remembrance, and modes of representation. What does it mean to be a professor of humanities and watch this parade of coffins? What does it mean to observe and to be encouraged to observe “Canada’s dead,” to recall Felicia Hemans’s shrewdly self-consuming phrase, her death-sentence about the losses haunting the life of the homeland (“England’s Dead” is, among other things, a contraction for “the nation is *deceased*.”)? I’m trying to think about a politics and an ethics of internment and exhumation in the context of practices or promises of peace, and it helps that all of the questions involved are ones that Romantic thinkers and students of Romanticism know well. Ian Baucom argues that during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic conflicts, war became the last and most dangerous sovereign power, in whose torturing wake we still struggle. In two extraordinary recent books, Mary Favret and Jan Mieszkowski have differently explored the ways in which “the Napoleonic war imaginary” (as Mieszkowski puts it) haunts the long-twentieth century, forming the milieu of war-time and of “everyday war” (Mary Favret’s phrase) that is also our time, our everyday. To speak much too quickly, if Romanticism is elementally a condition of wartime, then Romantic ethics—if there is such a thing—will be an ethics unfolded amid war, the war-dead, and the promises of peace, then, now, and to come. Or to put this another way, if we are to talk of Romantic ethics, is it possible *not* also to be talking about war, wartime, the formations and deformations of militarism, and the ways in which the war-dead are figured, remembered, disappeared, economized, and aestheticized. Is it possible to talk about peace in the same breath as the war dead? Or to recall something my colleague, Susan Searls Giroux has recently asked, “Can the university stand for peace?” (33)

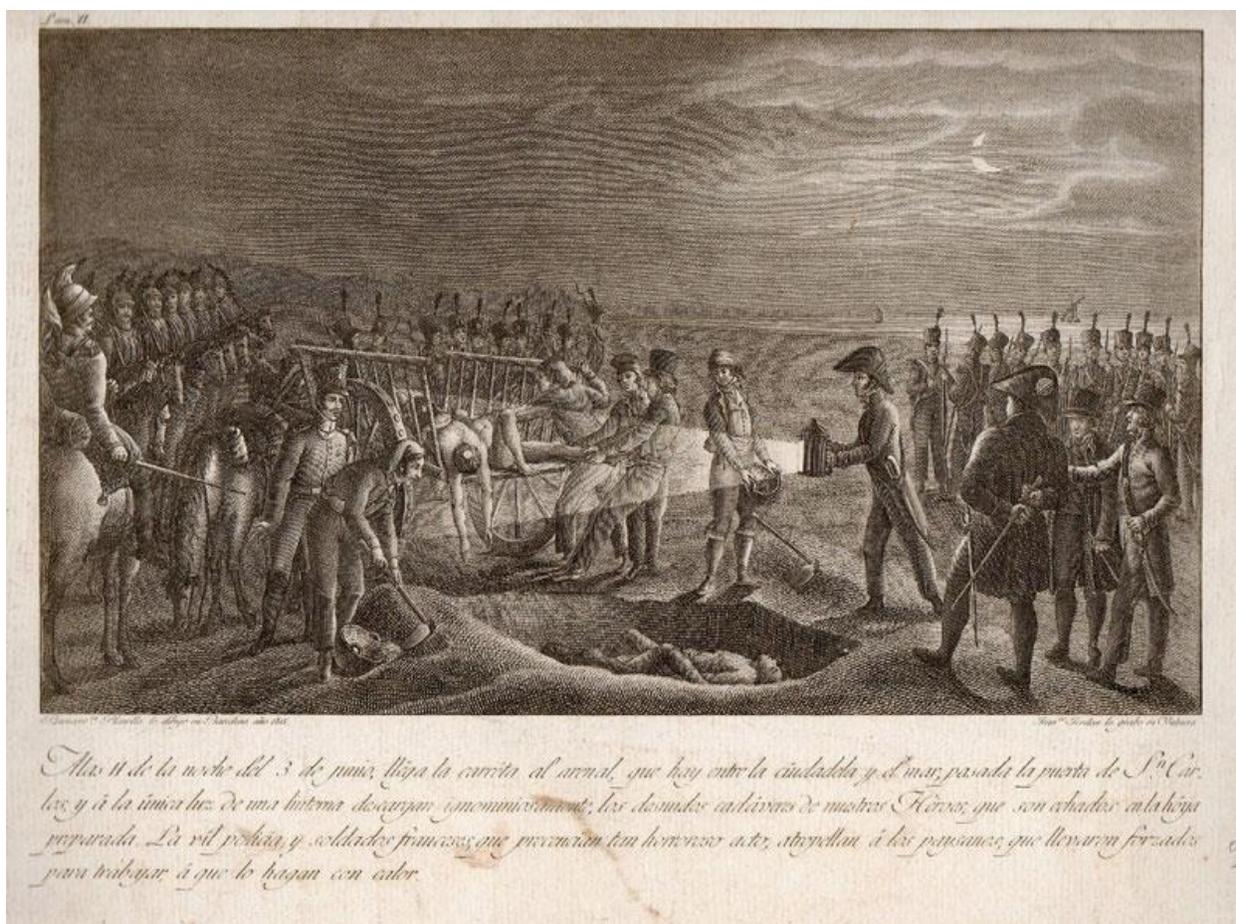
I have two Romantic landing places where we might begin a discussion of the ethics of

imagining, recalling, and representing the war-dead.

My first example is from Felicia Hemans, a poet for whom death, war, and the war dead are a constant worry, the occasion for an exploration of her complex dissent from what Gary Kelly calls “a masculinist, unreformed, illiberal world” (61), a profoundly militarized world. The stakes are perhaps no higher, or the form and meaning of her work more densely imbricated, than in her plain-talking and well-known poem, “England’s Dead”--what Susan Wolfson calls the “virtual national anthem” of Great Britain (xx). Recent readings of the poem bring out its powerful contradictions. *There slumber England’s dead*, the speaker says several times, casting her searchlight eye across the wide world of empire. Exploiting the indeterminacies of the deictic (for where exactly is there? And in what ways is it both not *here*...or not not *here*?), Hemans’s speaker inhabits a kingdom whose light suffuses the world, but what is revealed by that illumination is a dominion of the dead, and an Empire that seeds the world with the bodies of its soldiers and those whom the soldiers have killed. In fact, the dead are triply lost to sight and knowledge: the place of their burial sites remains unknown; their deaths are appropriated by the sacrificial logic of preserving the sanctity of the hearth while also somehow extending it values worldwide; and they are lost in the way that Antigone’s blinding tears register in *Oedipus at Colonus*, lost in the sense that the dead are a figure for absolute deterritorialization. There is a land out of reach of every imperial ambition, a radically “undiscovered country” . . . which may help explain the ferocious ways in which they are appropriated and possessed. Their unkept and unkempt graves remain humanly unmarked, a condition of signlessness that Hemans’s poem registers by obliterating it with all too legible signs. David Simpson notes that for Hemans “Globalization brings not peace but the sword. The untroubled sequence of familiar words tells

a terrible story of how violence against strangers is also, eventually, violence against the homeland” (xx). England exports and rationalizes its violence, but Hemans’s point is that that aggression is finally always already auto-immune in nature. Yet the poem, which is addressed apostrophically both to the dead and to those who are urged thoughtlessly to affirm the dead, is, I think, stranger still. The poem’s triumphalism, the quality that led in part to its being appropriated as a jingoistic national anthem, is not simply a false consciousness awaiting its correction, but part of several distancing strategies at work whose function it is to evoke the war dead without appearing to disinter them or figuratively to return them to England’s custody or safekeeping. There is a queer way in which the poem leaves the dead where they are, lost, possessed in the form of a kind of permanent dispossession, England’s to have, yes, but in the volatile, tense mode of not-having. Hemans thus occupies a position not unlike that of “The Association of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo,” who, counter-intuitively, have objected to the post-junta government’s efforts to excavate the mass graves left behind by the state sponsored murders during Argentina’s ‘dirty war’” (Harrison 144). Hemans too is working in close quarters with the politics of exhumation, including poetic exhumation. Anthropologist Zoe Crossland notes how the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo resist the return of the bodies of their loved ones because it compels the dead to “take their ‘proper’ place in individual and collective memory—becoming of the past, rather than the present; of the dead rather than the living” (cited by Harrison 145). The worry is that the “past, along with the dead,” will be buried, reminding us, as I think Hemans does, that the opposite of forgetting is not—or not always--remembering, but justice, and that a polity cannot be ethical polity unless it creates spaces—aesthetic spaces, for example—for the absent dead, among other indivisible remainders.

My second example comes from the Spanish engraver and contemporary of Goya, Francisco Jordan--another troubled scene of exhumation. The image that you have before you is from 1812, and depicts French troops, with the support of Spanish collaborators, ordering the local farmers to bury the stripped bodies of Spanish insurgents by moonlight along the sea shore



Just outside of Barcelona. There's so much to say about this engraving: the image's basic compositional details borrow from heroic battle paintings of the age that emphasize the massing of dead and wounded soldiers around a commanding officer, but here we don't bear witness to a battle but the disappearing of combatants in the dead of night. We are given to think that the total war of the Peninsular War ends here, in the form of secret internments in which death is made to die....although it's hard to miss the prominent place that Jordan gives to

the first body in the pit, the singularity of that profile staring eyelessly into a cloudy sky without stars. The prominent place given to the technology of the lantern and the penetrating light of its light is also remarkable, its non-naturalistically defined beam giving it a laser-like precision. The officer leaning purposefully into his lantern (it's a kind of prosthesis) remembers contemporary understandings of Napoleon as the "gatherer of light," impossible not to look at and possessing an irresistible gaze, as Mieszkowski notes (xx). He brings light and truth to Spain, but that Enlightenment is also the harbinger of death and of spectacular instances of sovereign power over life that here appear to extend beyond death. It's hard not to think that Jordan's engraving expresses an incredulity about a kind of Georgic militarism, the literal burying of history in nature for the purposes of hiding uneconomizable losses from public view. The fact that the caption almost occupies the same compositional ground as the buried dead suggests that for all of its outrage at the desecration of the bodies, it too may well end up interred, a part of the earth that is covered thick with *other* clay, as Byron might say. What I'd like to end with is this: drawing your attention to the pre-cinematic quality of the engraving, the way in which Jordan lets us see the scene well beyond what the lantern's light lets us see, as if using a technique called "day for night," the device of simulating a night scene while filming in the light of day. In this way, the engraving draws attention to its artifice, and to the degree to which it too frames our understandings and responses, including our ethical responses, the obligation to look where the worst is otherwise unregarded or overlooked. The French bury the bodies but as spectators we disinter them, indeed, possess powers of sight that are almost forensically anthropological in nature, as if empowered to see right into the dark confines of the grave. I'm reminded of Tom Keenan and Eyal Weizman's recent work, which tracks the history of bearing

witness as it shifts after the Holocaust from evidence (at Nuremberg), to the broken testimony of the survivors (at Eichmann's trial), the bone fragments and bullet casings, all the remains of atrocities, the things that today are made to speak. Like those corpses, Jordan's engraving is itself a thing that speaks, or is made to speak. But I think something else is happening too: as spectators we assume a kind of night-vision, as if allowing our eyes to adjust to the darkness, something that the French troops have trouble doing, hence the need for the supplement of the lantern. We are asked to see with "eyes so used to darkness," to recall a phrase from Arendt that Jacques Khalip has discussed so elegantly in a recent essay. The war-dead are buried not only in the light of the lantern but also amid a more pervasive and unilluminated darkness, a darkness in which we can nevertheless somehow see. The light beam puts to us that French soldiers are responsible for betraying their own secret, but the glare of that light all but obscures another kind of seeing. Jordan's point is counter-intuitive, not least because, like moths, we are attracted to the light precisely because we are outside its weirdly defined cone: the fact that we observe the ignominious fate of the Spanish dead positions us in a gloom that isn't just a privation, a lack of light, awaiting the coming of the day, but contains its own dissenting resources.

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