

# Only Death Can Part Us: Messages on Wartime Cards

Cary Nelson

One of the major challenges for a historically-based cultural studies is the absence from our archives of any substantial record of how ordinary people in earlier periods interacted with various discursive regimes. One may, for example, gauge the role literature played in the lives of those who left letters and diaries behind them, just as book reviews tell us a good deal about reception among those who read widely. But for the myriad consumers of popular texts who never read or wrote at that level the record appears largely nonexistent. As it happens, in some cases evidence does exist; it simply has never been collected or studied.

I have assembled an archive of wartime popular poems—on over 10,000 cards, postcards, envelopes, and miniature broadsides designed for personal exchange rather than public display—to gain access to the roles poetry played in the lives of the mostly lower class and middle class people who provided battlefield cannon fodder and homefront victims of modern war. They often include a preprinted poem and a holograph message. The poems vary widely in length, with some folding cards printing poems of 30-40 lines, but the largest number of cards with messages have short verses of 2-4 lines. Essentially indistinguishable from greeting card verse, their use is, however, anything but casual. As Barbara Herrnstein Smith points out, even a cyni-

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cally marketed commercial card can be transformed by use: “those who purchase and subsequently send the verse as a message may very well mean what it says” (58). It is these texts with only the most marginal literariness that will be my main concern here.

Such preprinted poems for interpersonal exchange began appearing on non-postal peacetime cards about 1820. The wartime poem card is thus a distinctive subset of the general phenomenon. Their wartime use begins with preprinted envelopes and letter sheets during the American Civil War. When postcards became popular in 1900, their use soared. It peaked during World War I, when millions of postcards were mailed to and from the front. Beginning in 1900, poem cards could be strikingly illustrated, but in this essay I will focus primarily on the messages, not the illustrations.

Very few wartime correspondents expected to be remembered by anyone other than their friends and family members. Like the overwhelming majority of working class people—and many, though not all, of these correspondents are decidedly working class—they regularly experience themselves as living apart from public recognition. Yet, like the poor of many periods, they often know that when history does notice them it will turn them into victims. In war, decisive victimization happens on a scale that is overwhelming and monstrous. Even then, however, their names are often barely registered in the documentation of their times. These cards and their messages give us glimpses—but only glimpses—of how those who are conscripted to fight wars conduct their lives and make sense of experience that is fundamentally beyond comprehension. The result is a distinctive sort of textual microhistory, not a comprehensive account of ordinary life during war but rather a partial window on ordinary life gained by way of discontinuous recovered voices. These are the voices of those who ordinarily have no voice at all, who may not even want one, but whose voices in these remnants are nonetheless a gift to us decades later. With a sufficient number of cards, the messages begin to cluster and reinforce one another. A certain discursive shorthand that would be unintelligible in a single communication becomes readable when a dozen people use the same or comparable language.

The cards and their messages also show us, perhaps for the first time, the role that literature—specifically poetry—has played in the lives of modern soldiers and their families. Uncannily, it is also mostly poetry whose authors did not aim for high cultural recognition or canonical status either; the poetry, which is often anonymous, would be remembered largely only by those individuals sending it to one another. The popular voice of poetry—and remnants of the voices of readers and users of poetry, their fears and aspirations and mechanisms for coping—when gathered together like this gain a certain collective, generational, and circumstantial coherence, something a single card from a single correspondent could rarely have. The result is a kind of chorus of the ordinary, variously rhymed and semi-literate, as popular poetry and fragmentary personal writing interact and gain collective force in a process of historical recovery.

One can begin with the first war in which postcards played a major role, the second Boer War of 1899-1902. A British soldier named George is serving in Africa and manages to send home to his parents a notable trophy—a captured German poem card (fig. 1). He encloses it in an envelope, now lost, so further details about the family’s name cannot be retrieved. The card, however, tells its own story. The

color picture on the front shows seven Boer soldiers crouched behind rocks and firing, presumably at troops like George. It is a surreal landscape in which the peaked rocks in the foreground are like replicas of the mountains in the distance. It produces an effect of staged action, enhanced by the puffs of smoke that hang sus-

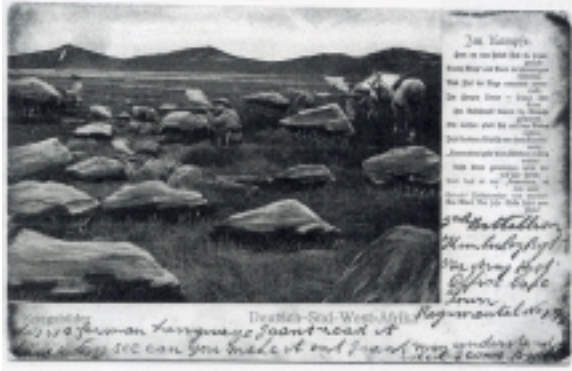


Figure 1

ended above four of the rifles. A lone white horse, exposed, stares without comprehension from the right. Beneath the poem, “Im Kampfe” (“In Battle”), George gives his address, his Regimental number (198), and notes that he cannot translate the German language text. He urges his parents to “have a try see can you make it out” and vows that he may be able to read it by the time he returns home. If he returns home. For the theatricality of the image also embodies a more sober reality. Here is George’s message from the other side of the card:

Hoping these few lines find you all in the Best of Health as it leaves me—I just received your letter glad to see you are in the Best of Health—I am at Swakopmund German South West Africa—the enemy is just in front of us—we stand to arms day and night—I have just been four months soldiering—I have travelled 3,000 miles on account of the Boer Rebellion—I can tell you I have seen some country out here—we are in the German territory—I am afraid the Diamond mines will have finished for a few years to come there is no one will have any money to buy them when the war is settled—we keep losing an odd man every day—they keep sniping at us—we are all waiting for the word go—glad to say I am in the Best of spirits—so now draw to a close—with Best Love to all of you from your son George +++++

If George has captured a prime instance of one of German culture’s characteristic forms of idealization, a poem, he has also entered a zone where other absolutes, including life and death, are immediately at issue. George awaits the order to advance. His parents cannot have been pleased to see the German rifles firing on the front of the card or to read the reports of British losses from German snipers in their son’s message. Nor is it likely to have helped if his parents were able to translate the poem, since capturing the poem does not guarantee the British troops have captured the Germans’ resolve. The poem amounts to a pledge to kill British soldiers:

They’ve come very close to the enemy now,  
Through thorny, difficult terrain.

Their eyes are fixed on the goal,  
 Loyalty strengthens their hearts, loyalty without end.  
 They're crouching in the bushes with their weapons cocked.  
 Now they throw themselves flat on the ground,  
 as shots rattle from the cliff's edge.  
 "Comrades! Give it back to the Witbois.  
 Take aim at this treacherous enemy."  
 "There he is!" "Comrades, there are many of them."  
 Be of good cheer, soldiers! Our honor unites us!  
 Have faith! The strength of our will draws us to our goal!

Despite their occasional marshalling of imminent peril, moreover, such cards presumably at least reassure their recipients that the sender survived to that point. Strictly speaking, no message other than the recipient's address is necessary. The fact that a card or letter was mailed confirms that the sender had not met his or her death at a moment of past inscription. But every wartime postal communication is also haunted by the interval between inscription and delivery. For the stories of mis-sives arriving after the sender was killed are legion, familiar enough to have embedded themselves in popular culture. The underside of the exclamatory announcement—"I

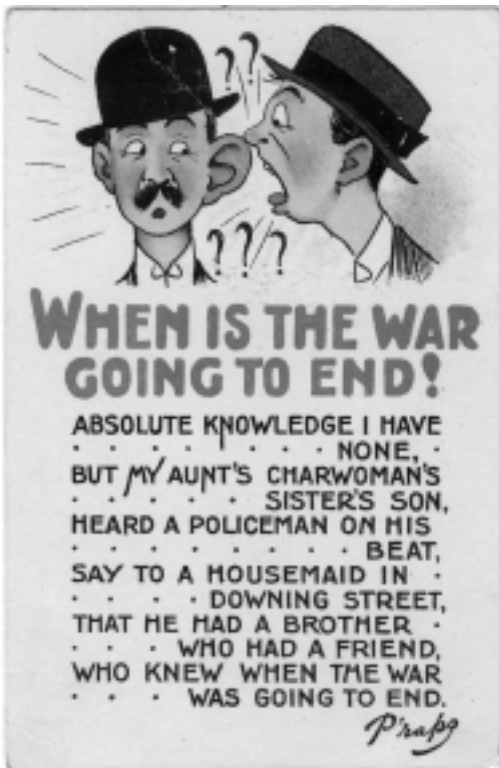


Figure 2

am alive"—is often an unanswerable question: Is he still alive? An aura of pain and drama and intensity attended the arrival of every message from the front. Thus a young British man, for example, writes to his sister May Tudor to report news of their father on the back of a poem card—"When is the War going to End!" (fig. 2)—that was issued in multiple versions on both sides of the Atlantic. He specifies that he can only confirm his father's condition for a moment that has already passed:

I hope you had a happy day on Friday. Did you hear from Dad. I had a letter on Saturday he was all right then. He says he has not had a letter from you a long time.

Partly because such wartime cards register a moment of sur-

vival, they are preeminently temporal, rather than spatial. Indeed time permeates the wartime card. Not so all postal communications. Since the postcard is so firmly associated with travel and tourism, such cards remain the reference point for every instance of the genre. Even postal reminders often announce a journey that should be undertaken. But many journeys include postcards that are markers of place. Historic buildings, dramatic vistas: all such cards evoke monumental places. Essentialist expressions of sentiment mostly still fail to make the card primarily temporal. "I was here recently," says the sender, but even that message mostly articulates the sender to place; the exact moment of the visit is frequently less important to the recipient of a tourist's card. The postcard from the front, on the other hand, is most often sent from a place that cannot be named. Yet it has an alternative monumentality—that of history and its decisive events. The wartime postcard thus substitutes monumental time for monumental space. And monumental time devours and destroys individual subjects. Only in memory does it even have relative longevity. The monumental moment always stands in for death.

Relief and dread are intermingled in the receipt of the wartime card. Every wartime card or letter reader is, to borrow a phrase from Jacques Derrida's *The Post Card*, a "fearful reader" (4). The white face of card or envelope may be a miniature tombstone, marking a soldier's last day alive. And with postcards, which most often lack a return address, the recipient's name is the one most prominently inscribed. The card becomes a eucharistic wafer, through which the sender rises again in the addressee.

Death is so close a cousin to life in wartime communications that soldiers are obsessed with preventing cards from going astray. "Dear Ella," writes George on a World War I poem card to his married Canadian sister, Mrs. James Farris, in Wolfville, "Just a line to let you know I am off for war. I will rite again and let you know my address so be good." Bill Yates sends a 1916 poem card to his father John in Bamber Bridge in Lancashire with much the same message: "Just a P.C. to you I hope you are all in the pink the same as me I think we shall be leaving here before weekend but I cant say were we are going so dont write back until you hear from me again." Bonnie Stevenson in Nottingham gets the same warning on a Royal Air Force poem card from Ernest: "A P.C. asking you not to write me until you hear more from me, for if I get through I may be moved anytime." The concern all through such messages is not only with failing to receive a card but also with the card being stamped "Return to Sender," for then it will be indistinguishable from a card returned because the recipient is deceased. The poem is then reflexively hollowed out; it becomes a dirge. And in what can be a nightmare of repetitive stamping, a card or letter can appear to have chased a ghost through no man's land, acquiring multiple cancellations before circling back brutally to its sender.

Late in World War I, on September 25, 1918, Jack sends a poem card to his girl Grace to tell her he is going over and makes the familiar commitment to survive, not that the matter will necessarily be within his power:

Just a note to let you know that I am now at Dover waiting for the  
boat to take me to France. I set sail at two-o'clock this afternoon.  
I left Felixstowe at 7-o'clock last night and we arrived here about

four this morning. We had a magnificent send off from camp last night. All the road to the station was packed with soldiers wishing us 'bon voyage.' We had a grand tea at the officer's expence before we set off, and the O.C. gave us all a grand pocket wallet each. So assuring you that I am going out with a good heart, and with full confidence of coming back alright, I will come to a close by sending you the best of love and wishes from yours ever.

It was always unclear how often one should send such assurances. Ideally, those at home wanted daily reassurance. But then the uncertainties of delivery would turn an empty mailbox into a grave, with the previous day's partial reassurance turned into the next day's anxiety, the following day's terror. And battle conditions often made daily correspondence or daily mail service difficult or impossible, though mail from the trenches in the World War I was surprisingly reliable, usually taking but 2-4 days to reach England from France. What's more, unnecessarily prolonging silence risked inflicting agony on those back home. Millions of Great War postcards transcribe and enact this dilemma. One standard solution was to send a quick note after a major, well publicized battle to confirm survival. Thus one Corporal Anstey of the 4th Yorks Regiment sent a poem card, "My Own Dear Boy," home to his son in Leicester simply announcing "Big Advance Thursday 8-8-18 at 4:20." Sending such a message beforehand would have been a breach of military regulations, so the few words confirm survival but also reconfirm continuing peril.

The wartime postcard begins to wait upon death from the moment of enlistment, for the potentially foreshortened narrative of a soldier's life starts immediately and does not depend upon further events. This is especially evident in French messages on World War I poem cards, where it became an acceptable convention to mark the moment of departure for service—and particularly for the front—as a moment of apprehension and sadness. The same sentiment would have been culturally unacceptable in Britain, Germany, or the United States. But the French frequently registered the onset of mortal risk with regret and often commiserated with one another. On the back of a poem card showing a child in a sailor suit draped in the flag—"Glorious Easter—Here are some eggs full of hope transported here in the French flag!" translates the text—Maignon writes to his parents to tell them his brother (or a friend or relative) has left for military service. Here is his message translated into English: "I write to tell you that Octoire has left. Just today, to my great surprise, I received his cards ... I am filled with sorrow, dear parents, especially since I had a letter from him on the 22nd that said he did not know his date of departure. I kiss you with all my heart. We both kiss you with all our heart." The departure from civilian life is always potentially a departure from life itself.

Marie Pueck carries on a three-year correspondence with her absent husband by way of cards with rhymed couplets, among them one on a card where a mother and daughter imagine their husband and father at war: "Consider that this little thought is stuffed with sweet kisses." She is unashamedly hopeful his military assignment to Montpellier and Marseille on the French coast will keep him out of action: "Your letter of March 17 has made me so happy to learn you are staying at your station. The dear Lord loves and protects us. Let's hope he keeps protecting us and keeps you at your

station until the end of the war.” She promises to send him money, for French soldiers were paid little, and tells him about the children he has not seen for so long.

Even in training, amidst all the bluster and manufactured cheer, death announces itself from the battlefield and passes through the postcards of soldier and civilian; so, in 1915 British soldier Bob Brown writes to his mother in Newcastle-on-Tyne from the Naval training camp at Blandford: “Just a few lines to let you know we are going into our new lines on Monday so I will send my new address later. Tell Joe that we know young Skeets has been killed in the Dardenelles.” The note is on the back of the poem “Lord Kitchener’s ‘Boys’” (fig. 3), the poem’s title printed under clasped hands that signify not only soldier-to-civilian solidarity and soldierly camaraderie but

also the British “helping hand” lent to Belgium and other smaller countries. In the context of earlier postcard imagery — clasped hands regularly figuring transatlantic or bi-national friendships — the image also suggests the potential for solidarity with the United States. That potential is reinforced by the British appropriation of American composer Stephen Foster’s 1851 song “Old Folks at Home.” The year after the post card was mailed, Kitchener, serving as Secretary of War, would himself be killed at sea, and memorial poem cards would be produced and mailed in great numbers. So Bob’s mother could then take out the card and wonder what it meant to be one of his boys and whether it was not death’s handclasp the card depicted. And what, in any case, is that place “so far away” where the poem’s final line tells us young Brown now resides? The Blandford training camp is, after all, still on the island. The real distance is the symbolic removal from ordinary life; it is a difference of kind, the potential journey into death’s country.

Civilians also sent poem cards to one another as vehicles for death announcements. Thus in December, 1915, Miss G. V. Finlayson in the Welsh town of Newport in the county of Montgomeryshire received news of a relative’s death at sea. The message is carefully (and ceremonially) printed out by hand beneath an unexceptional bit of marshall verse:



Figure 3

Banded together for sternest strife,  
 Banded together for death or life;  
 Banded together to face the foe,  
 Be the warfare short and swift or slow.  
 Never to falter till all is done,  
 The War Fiend crushed, and the victory won.  
 Brothers in Arms! we fight with might  
 For Liberty, Honour, Truth and Right.

The recipient could easily take the poem's eight lines either as consolation or as awkwardly jarring with whatever grief the news made her feel. Yet this early in the war it is likely the sender believed the honor of the cause would properly contain grief within national pride. On the reverse, an oval portrait of King George is superimposed on a British flag itself fluttering over and effectively mastering the flags of four allies. It is an unstable discursive mix, for the command not to falter in this context cuts two ways, evoking not only military resolve but also a warning to civilians not to let personal loss trump the sense of national mission.

But anxiety is in some ways more difficult to contain than loss, whose decisiveness at least lets mourning get under way. Anxiety in so many of these messages struggles against its poetic containment. On a card postmarked November 4, 1915, exactly a month before the one sent to Miss Finlayson, a woman who signs herself Mabel writes to her brother, Corporal Thomas Leggett, who is with the British 9th Lancers, a Cavalry Regiment, in Rouen, France. "My Dear Tom," she writes, "Many thanks for Pansy P.C. & field card. I've had no letter from you for more than a fortnight—so guess you're busy. Hope you are alright. Its jolly cold here now. Guess it's colder where you are, ain't it? With lots of love and kisses from your loving sister." Mabel barely controls the need to complain about not hearing from Tom for two weeks with the phrase "so guess you're busy," but that remark is simultaneously touched with dread about what occupies him at the front. Just how cold it is where Tom now resides inevitably depends on whether he is alive. These cards seek, almost mystically, to restore life with a kiss, as if the act of communication itself has the power to call up a living recipient. Meanwhile, the text on the reverse offers ideological solidarity as another kind of sustenance.

Not all the cards have a recognizable addressee, for many of the most intimate messages were written on poem cards mailed in an envelope. The message on the other side of "To My Dear Soldier Boy 'Somewhere in France'" has no salutation, no signature, and no specific destination. Its text, eerily run on without punctuation, strikingly counteracts the absence of framing nominations, for it is rich with names whose future is in doubt. Lineation, meanwhile, provides a partial punctuation effect:

Just a card hoping  
 you will like it  
 it is raining and  
 hail very heavy  
 while I am writing  
 this hoping you  
 have seen Arthur



and Harry Chapman  
 by now we have not  
 heard from Billy Bowman  
 for a few weeks and  
 the last letter we sent  
 came back good night  
 and good luck.

It is a pattern repeated on card after card, as civilians write to soldiers seeking news and reassurance and civilians seek solace from one another in sharing the mix of dread and willed hopefulness.

Sometimes the very briefest message can have its telling poignancy enhanced by its synergy with the poem on the reverse. An undated World War I card, its address lost with its envelope, reads simply “I am longing to hold you in my arms again, Annis.” The poem too is about longing, and its surrounding iconography amplifies the pain of desire and hope stretched out over the long lifeline from England to Europe (fig. 4). The title, “Good Luck Go With You,” borders a horseshoe-framed picture of troop ships diminished in size by their distance from home. Cascading leaves of ivy trail away in size on either side of the poem. And a tiny British flag is more a mere reminder than a nationalist guarantee. Like so many wartime poem cards, this is popular culture at its unapologetically most sentimental, but it is not uninteresting and not uncomplicated. More sophisticated readers may decide for themselves whether the combination of historical context and the differential relationships between message, text, and iconography save such a card from mere sentiment. For me they do.

For one telling example of such differential relationships I offer a fundamentally banal Christmas message mailed home in 1941:



Figure 4

A little picture to express  
 My wishes for your happiness,

A little message from my pen  
 To haste the Day we'll meet again.  
 God grant you every Christmas cheer  
 And joy throughout the Coming Year.

The sentimental illustration shows a cottage in snow with a horse-drawn sleigh before it. Many of us might not choose such a card, but then the soldier sending it had no other options. At the bottom of the card is printed "STALAG VIII B, Germany. CHRISTMAS 1941." It was sent to Mrs. W. C. Golding at 47 Welbeck Street, Cavendish Square, London, by her son William, who used the nickname Cecil. He was wounded and captured in the historic Dunkirk crossings, taken prisoner, and interned as a prisoner of war in Germany. That year British prisoners were allowed to send one Christmas card, though not to include a personal message. The message is the card itself, with William Golding's name and prisoner number (38) on the reverse. It was his last message home, its brittle, superficial cheerfulness belied by subsequent events: William died of his wounds a few months later. His mother placed the card in a silver frame, now tarnished, and kept it on her mantel until the late 1980s, when she was sent to a nursing home and her possessions were sold. These supplemental facts are surely sentimental as well. And yet they testify forcefully to the ways ordinary people can be entangled with history. Would it be Dunkirk newsreels or her son's face Mrs. Golding saw when she looked at the card? Were the saccharine poem and the absurd illustration over the years tinged with the obvious ironies? Does anyone dare chuckle at the placement of the poem on the mantel for four decades? The story is in fundamental ways not exceptional but representative.

Brevity is the first law of the postcard, the mixed tyranny and promise of its minimal allowance. Unlike the presumed leisure of the letter—in which digression, explanation, and persuasion are all possible—the postcard imposes a law of conciseness. You have only so much measured space in which to say what you choose. For the uses to which postcards are appropriate, this can occasion both triviality and the most dire necessity. As Derrida puts it, a post card "is so simple, elementary, a brief, fearful stereotyping" (20). It is a range we have all known or imagined: "Greetings from the Vatican" or "I am still alive."

A post card is also always in a condition of implicit comparison with a letter. No matter how telling its message, it is always also, again in Derrida's words, "but a minuscule residue... a residue of what we have made of one another, of what we have written one another" (7). Derrida, of course, is drawn to the postcard because its fragmentary character suggests the nature of all communication. In a sense, I am quoting him against himself, taking him as addressing as well the post card difference. To be sure, the past "writing" to which a postcard alludes is actually broadly interactive; it encompasses not just letters sent but also all the discursive history of the relationship in question, its conversations, its unspoken understandings and its accumulated miscommunications. A postcard also conventionally abjures a more prolix literariness. It announces "we have played the post card against literature"; what you receive will "spare you the too abundant literature to which you would have been subjected" in a full letter (9). But a poem card pits literature against its

minimalist erasure in its own material form. It can put the most aestheticized, idealized form of literariness, a poem, in dialogue with a discourse stripped of everything but its essential communicative minimum. Yet the very brevity of the postcard message lends it ambiguity and certain relatively unconstrained potential for multiple meanings. The unstable poetics of postcard messages places them in dialogue with literary poetics. Thus the relationship of the two forms of writing is never merely oppositional. On the poem card they can be mutually supportive or undermining, interrogative or echolalic. They are combinative and differentiating. And they can be both these things at once. For a message on a poem card can simultaneously mark its difference with literariness and yet be suffused with poetic and literary effects. Yet the difference with a letter is always present. There, the effort to guarantee meaning comes into play by way of a whole series of strategies for containment, specification, and recall.

Over time, a series of letters may substantively track a whole relationship. Indeed, a relationship can be effectively constituted discursively through correspondence. There will always be an invisible extra-textual supplement of effect and intent, along with unconscious motivation and response, and all of this propels us into speculative interpretation. Nevertheless, we know letters as an alternative terrain of self-expression, interpersonal relations, and self-deception. Postcards, however, are inherently more fragmentary. For Derrida, they thus encapsulate the fragmentary nature of all communication. Whatever else the written message on a postcard offers us, it will always also offer unreadability and unknowability. Yet my purpose here is a double one, at once to maximize the readability of messages and to register their inevitable gaps and lost significance. And wartime cards offer special conditions of interpretation for later readers, namely a powerful determining context that makes it possible to recover some meanings that more historically isolated messages might altogether lose.

Though letters can also lose a good deal of their coherence once they are severed from their relational contexts and private linguistic codes, their sheer fragmentary evasiveness is often in no way as insistent. Letters thus have very different social roles and histories and thus prompt different expectations. A letter can be a unique event within a relationship—a turning point, a testimony, a revealing narrative, a disclosure of feeling that marks a permanent before and after. A postcard most often is not. But sometimes a much larger narrative can be compressed within its confines. Here is the message on a card postmarked on March 22, 1915, addressed to Miss Maud Stacey in Coventry:

Dear Maud,

Just a line hoping that you will not be offended at my writing but simply cannot help it as you do not know my feelings. I wish I was on a better footing with you and everything would be alright and I should have something to look forward to if ever I come back safe. Please remember me to all and give them my kindest regards I think this is all so I remain your loving friend Jim  
xxx.

One touch of nature makes the whole world kin.



Figure 5

implicit seriality at stake for both message and poem. The card is postmarked in Southampton, so Jim is most likely awaiting transport to France. But he is already dwelling on that categorical distance from ordinary life the song evokes; it is there, most obviously, in Jim’s speculation about “if ever I come back safe.” We too can only speculate about the character of Jim’s relationship with Maud. Soldiers will, to be sure, write to almost anyone back home, the need to sustain contact with their earlier life is so great. Not to be actively remembered at home is to be wholly given over psychologically to the nightmare of war. To be in intimate contact with a loved one back home is at least intermittently to renew the illusion that part of your life is being lived elsewhere, away from combat. But here the effort is specifically to repair failed communication in the face of mortal risk. If the familiar travel postcard says, as Derrida puts it, “Useless to write to me here, my stay is too short” (14), the military postcard, I would add, says “Write now, better still, write yesterday, if you would be sure to reach me, for life is short.”

Jim is perhaps driven to leverage his risk to secure at least a partial commitment from Maud, a classic wartime dynamic. More than that, it is difficult for us as related readers, voyeurs at a temporal distance, to say with any reliability. The relationship to which the card indisputably testifies is fundamentally unreadable. The card is eloquent and mute at once. And its interpersonal eloquence is not

The message is on the back of “Surrender—On the Rhine” (fig. 5), part of a six-card illustrated version of “It’s a Long, Long Way From Tipperary,” perhaps the most popular song of the war. Jim’s message ends with a popular quotation from Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*, a reference nonetheless from a different cultural register that embodies an aim to poeticize his text and make it co-eval with the poem on the reverse. There is also an implicit pun put forward in the relationship between the two texts, since Jim is announcing his own impulse toward romantic surrender on his way to the Rhine. Since the six cards were sold as a set, it is possible Jim mailed them in sequence, possible as well that a group of soldiers shared them.

In any case there is a shared im-

decisively grounded in identity or character. We might with luck learn more about Maud M. Stacey of Gosford Street, though many of these wartime correspondents were members of the working class, and the historical record does not often grant them loving or respectful attention. What pathos Jim's testimony offers is primarily historically grounded. Maud and Jim are now representatives of a generation at war. That is the legacy for us of Jim's remarks on the eve of the worst trip his generation could take, a journey to the trenches of France.

As with all other wartime cards, the angel of death hovers over every wartime declaration of love. Even mutual civilians know their lover's privacy is stolen from the wider social chaos and the impinging background spectacle of disaster. The clichés of wartime romance pass unimpeded from popular culture to interpersonal relations. I declare my love so that you may have it (and me) in case I should die. Or—I withhold my declaration for fear it would haunt or bind you should I die. Either way, it is through death that wartime love must pass to reach the beloved. And wartime love—despite romantic claims to the contrary—is thus death's ultimate confirmation, rather than its denial.

Every modern state has realized these relationships need to be intensified and embedded in popular common sense if citizen compliance with mortal risk is to be obtained and sustained. And every industry whose brief touches on that terrain has understood that as well. The singular erotics of wartime love have to be widely marketed if patriotism and self-sacrifice are to hail large numbers of citizens. The wartime romance will always have a paradoxically double character—it provides a compensatory illusion that personal life can be lived apart from battlefield stresses at the same time as it narrativizes the war in personal terms—yet it nonetheless helps make war tolerable. It does so in part because interpersonal relations, though decidedly not under either party's complete control, at least reconstitute an overwhelming historical context within comprehensible personal parameters. The drama of passion substitutes for the military drama of life and death, for wartime love can be noble and painful and awesome and fleeting—and intermittently sublime—like war itself. As the historical record shows, one of the ways to promote patriotism by way of romance is with poems. The pledge to risk your life is enhanced when it gains an element of personal romance, when it is imbued with interpersonal drama, when fealty to the state and the lover are fatally conflated and confused, when the volunteer contemplating a battlefield death imagines he will rest his head in his lover's lap. Indeed, in poem and song cards, wartime death is regularly figured as a miraculous moment of communication with the beloved, an orgiastic instance of spiritual oneness. The fires of war are thus equally the fires of lust; lovers who part on the way to war ignite a burning need for one another.

The first step in the process of installing these beliefs is the eroticization of separation. "Absence makes the heart grow fonder," that transnational cliché, acquires a military uniform and seemingly figures in every lover's wartime departure scene. You will love so much better, with such magnified intensity, for being apart, or so every near adolescent soldier and his girl must be persuaded. Every major combatant country in World War I distributed poem cards devoted to this theme. Lovers, sisters, fathers are all members of the national family, entangled in affairs of state. Their romantic poem



Figure 6

poetry breaking new ground they were apparently willing to settle for something more common. They were partly looking for elevated sentiment, to be sure, but not that alone. They sought a formal representation and semi-public inscription of feelings they experienced under extreme pressure.

They also continually sought to maintain relationships interrupted by war, an aim the poem cards could not always fulfill. William Clement Lees, born to a middle class family in 1880, son of William and Emma, at 8 Earl Street, in Rusholme, near Manchester, still more dramatically was trying to create a relationship. After completing his education at St. Stephen's School in Manchester, he took a job in 1896 as an office boy for Joshua Hoyle & Sons, a cotton manufacturer. After he worked his way up to being one of the firm's representatives, they recommended him for their Glasgow office and he moved there in 1905. As his diary reveals, by then he had acquired a range of other interests: publishing a short story in *Answers* in 1900, attending art school classes in 1901, participating in a fencing competition in 1905. He met a Scottish girl, Margaret Clark, on a horse-drawn tram on the way to work in 1911, and they were married in 1913. They both took great pleasure in going to the theater regularly. As his military records in The National Archives in London confirm, he joined the Scottish Rifle Volunteers, moving up to the Territorial Force in 1908. Contracted to fight on home territory, they would drill each week and attend

cards represent a kind of historical verification and elevation of the personal. They testify to a unique moment when private emotion is communal, inextricable from political and ethical crisis. Each ordinary soldier and his wife or lover enact the destinies of nations in their interpersonal contracts. As an ideology crafted to romanticize one's transformation into cannon fodder, it is largely repellent. As a complicating model of interpersonal politics it cannot be so readily dismissed.

Most people did not require elaborate poems to meet such needs. Clearly the vast majority of those who sent wartime poem cards were not looking for rhetorical inventiveness, for inscaped and idiosyncratic language that can capture reality in an unanticipated net. Or if they were looking for poetry



Figure 7a

an annual camp. For many young men it was as much a social commitment as a military one, at least until the Great War began. Then a number of the Territorials volunteered for active service. In August, 1914, the 5th Scottish Rifles were mobilized, and Will was assigned to coastal guard duty. That was the beginning of nearly five years away from home, interrupted only by brief leaves. Will's younger brother Ted, who signed up when war broke out, urged him not to join the Regular Army, not only because Margaret was pregnant, but also because the war experience was close to intolerable. Two years after enlisting, Ted himself was scheduled to be married on leave, but he was killed in the trenches on July 14, 1916, before he could depart for home. Almost immediately, Will himself left for France, arriving there on August 1st.

Will's daughter Winifred Margaret Lees was born on November 15, 1914, while he was on active duty on the coast. She would spend her early childhood without seeing her father more than a few days each year. Meanwhile, Will would soon find himself under fire, first being shelled in a reserve battalion building roads and repairing trenches, later in direct assaults. In an attempt at once to establish a relationship with a daughter who did not know him and to prove that innocence could survive the onslaught of war, he began sending her postcards from France once she was old enough that her mother could read to her. His determination to keep the domestic and the military worlds separate is reinforced by his decision never once to mention writing home in his detailed wartime diary. Often the cards he sent to Winnie were brief illustrated nursery rhymes (fig. 6), personalized with Will's messages on the reverse. He would comment on the narrative or the illustration, seeking both to charm her and to bind her to him. On the back of an illustrated postcard postmarked September 15, 1917, a card without text of its own (fig. 7a & 7b), he writes out a longer poem for Winnie and sends it to the family home at 19 Kelvinside Gardens:

This little girl went roving

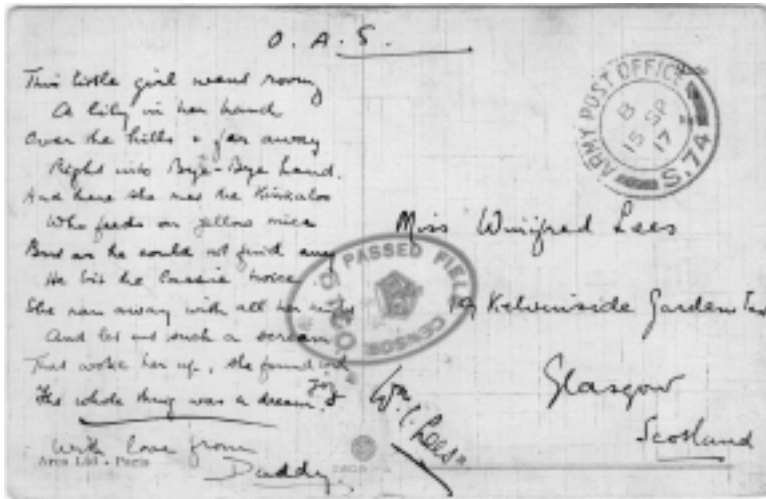


Figure 7b

A lily in her hand  
 Over the hills & far away  
 Right into Bye-Bye Land.  
 And there she met the Kinkaloo  
 Who feeds on yellow mice  
 But as he could not find any  
 He bit the lassie twice.  
 She ran away with all her might  
 And let out such a scream  
 That woke her up, she found with joy  
 The whole thing was a dream.

From 1917 to 1918 Will sent home over a hundred cards. But Winnie never found a place in her heart for this invisible correspondent. Will would return home and have two more daughters, but he remained estranged from Winnie for the rest of his life. His surviving daughter Dora, born in 1922, remembers him telling her mother on the day he died in 1933 that there was not enough room in the house for both Winnie and him.

Yet for other correspondents the poem card did its required work. Toward the end of 1916 a young Canadian named Horace volunteered for service in the Great War. He lived in Toronto and was deeply committed to a young woman named Nellie Spence, a member of a working class family that rented a house at 882 Eastern Avenue. Horace—the cards do not include his last name—was clearly working class as well. The Toronto City Directory, which lists residents by address, tells us Nellie's father Joseph was a brick maker. Nellie herself was a laundress at New Method Laundry.

On one series of cards sent from France, where Horace reports he is “under shell fire every day,” he offers his reasons for going to war. He enlisted first of all, he writes, because he was thinking of what his forefathers “had done in years gone by.” The Canadian flag, he points out, has “given freedom to every one all over the



world” wherever it has flown. “So my darling you will see what I have meant, the flag must not be put under foot.” That is what the Germans have set out to do, he believes, and rightly or wrongly, the reasoning has been internalized. Besides, he does not like to think of himself safely at home while others are risking their lives. The notion that perhaps none should risk their lives in the carnage of the war is not available to him. And so as shells burst around him in the Winter and Spring of 1917, he and Nellie reaffirm their vows by way of patriotic poems sent back and forth across the Atlantic Ocean. On the back of one poem card, seeking an image that will finally fuse the martial and personal impulses, Horace constructs a Canadian flag out of “love and kisses” xs (fig. 8). The martial music of the poems effectively puts a target on his chest despite the very personal devotion commemorated on the reverse of each. The field of lovers’ xs they send to each other—50 or more per card—might as easily be taken as a field of crosses in a French cemetery.

Horace was able to buy a number of poem cards in London on his way to the front. As the weeks go by, he parcels them out until they are exhausted. To Nellie’s sister he sends the longer poem “Canada’s Men,” for although his family originally came from England, it is very much as a Canadian that he enlisted. Then he buys a score of expensive silk postcards in France, putting much of his funds into purchasing them. They go to Nellie, to her family, and to a few friends in Toronto, like delicate multicolored butterflies rising from the fires for the flight home. In return some ask for news of their own friends and relatives at war, but he cannot confirm that they are alive, so he offers trust in providence as the only consolation available to him. Aggie, another Canadian, has a husband supposedly in the 120th Battalion, but neither she nor Horace can raise an answer from him.

Even when Horace resorts to clichés there is a sense of inner conviction in what he writes. As often happens with these working class cards, his messages include frequent spelling and grammatical errors. The rhetoric of the popular poems thus provides an ordinary but grammatically correct language Horace and many of these

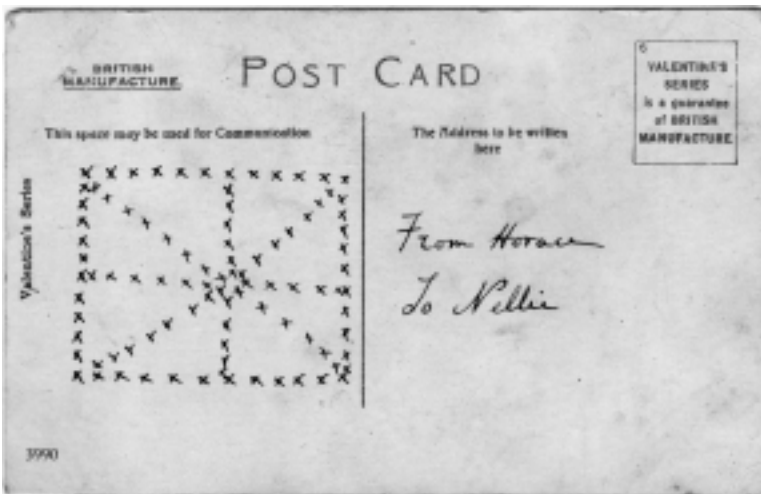


Figure 8



Figure 9

some wartime correspondents little of what they say comes easily. We cannot be certain when error-ridden cards reflect battlefield haste, preoccupation, or laziness and when they embody a struggle to communicate despite limited education, but the pattern is so widespread—encompassing cards written in training camps and in transit—that the capacities of the soldiers are unmistakably at issue. Curiously enough, the struggle with composition lends the messages an additional credibility. Rewritten in perfect English, some of Horace's messages might collapse into truisms. Awkwardly constructed sentences, on the other hand, suggest the intensity of the need to communicate despite the strain of doing so. And, occasionally, soldiers like Horace come up with solutions that embody a naïveté heart breaking in its fusion of inventiveness and ideological conformity.

In a moment's respite, Horace pecks out declarations of love and patriotism in letters constructed of tiny dots. These eerily resemble concrete poems that would be published half a century later. The quatrain on the other side of the card (fig. 9) is part of a series of six illustrated poem cards published under the title "At Duty's Call." They were sold in a packet with the series title printed in bold letters on the face of the envelope, a title that may alone have been enough to hail him, though duty's call is amply reinforced by each of the verses:

other correspondents cannot muster; it is one of the ways poetic language is effectively an elevated language for these correspondents. Nellie sends poems to Horace and simply registers her love on the reverse. "These card will tell your heart my thoughts more than I could," Horace writes on the back of "Love's Token," one of three poem cards sent in an envelope. It is likely that some correspondents cannot compose longer messages. Others try, but end up with only partial coherence. A number of the longer French messages are rife with errors, sometimes with words so badly spelled they are legible but unrecognizable.

The peculiar spellings and unfinished sentences, the lack of proper punctuation, all impede our reading of the cards now but at the same time point us toward their deep expressiveness. For

Cheer up, dear lass though we must part  
 You would not have me stay—  
 I go to fight 'gainst tyrants' might,  
 And honor points the way!

It is a bathetic popularization of the last lines of Richard Lovelace's "To Lucasta, Going to the Wars," a poem that is the referent and the touchstone for every poem since about a soldier leaving his girl to take up arms and that links martial devotion to literariness every time it is adapted or referenced, infusing lived sentimentality with transhistorical status: "I could not love thee (Deare) so much, / Lov'd I not Honour more." Yet it is the ground on which Horace will make his stand. Meanwhile, in the illustration, two actors stand in for Horace and Nellie, their frozen melodrama made possible by patriotism's histrionic restaging of Victorian sentiment. The embellished letters of the card title lavish on the fatal terms the arts of ideology. Full stops are generously distributed through the message, telegram style. It destabilizes the lines, turning the message into a reversible mix of plea and declaration. Death and love are equal powers here. That, along with history's indisputable context, transforms the poem card from pathos to testimony. "I Love You," Horace writes, unwittingly mimicking a tombstone rubbing, "And. I. Know You. Love Me. So Nothing. But. Death Can. Part. Us. Two."

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