



Slimescapes

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If the First World War is described as the end of illusion for a whole generation of young men, the horrors of trench mud can be said to be the beginning of that end. The constant source of trauma in war writings is that the mud was not just churned up earth, but compounded of organic wastes, empty shells, iron scraps and rotting human flesh. Mud divested the public school officers of the cloak of cleanliness and heroism that Victorian ideology and war propaganda had wrapped round them: soldiers realised that they were not 'swimmers into cleanness leaping' but rather 'houseflies upon a section of flypaper'. Soldiers often stood ankle-deep or even knee-deep in the mud, resulting in trench-foot. A trench newspaper wrote, 'Hell is not fire; that would be the ultimate in suffering. Hell is mud' and this sentiment is echoed by thousands of letters and memoirs on both sides of No Man's Land. Boyd remembers how on a pitch black night, 40 of his men drowned in the mud; Nicolson remembered a man who was trapped in the mud for sixty-five hours. In Henri Barbusse's *Under Fire* (1917), one of the earliest and most powerful novels written on the war, mud 'not shell' is the main agent of violence as Barbusse shows mankind regressing into primordial slime. The following extract is from the memoirs of Lewis-Gunner Jack Dillon, as recorded in the Imperial War Museum sound archives. Dillon took part in the infamous Passchendaele offensive:

Now the mud at Passchendaele was very viscous indeed, very tenacious, it stuck to you. The mud there wasn't liquid, it wasn't porridge, it was a curious kind of sucking kind of mud. When you got off this track with your load, it 'drew' at you, not like quicksand, but a real monster that sucked at you.

The acute memory of visceral trauma exceeds the material, literal referent 'liquid, porridge, quicksand' and can, like the octopus simile in the opening letter, only resort to the imaginative. The ritual repetition of the word bears witness not only to the viscosity of the trench mud but to the terrors of experiencing a malign world through the skin. The verb recurs obsessively: Sassoon and Blunden's 'sucking mud?', Owen's 'sucking clay?', Aldington's 'sucking squelch?', Read's 'sucking, clutching death' and Jones's 'aquatic sucking'. Discussing the pleasures of the oral stage, Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) underlines the aggressive impulse, later developed by Melanie Klein: 'During the oral stage of organization of the libido, the act of obtaining mastery over an object coincides with that object's destruction'. Is there a projection of infantile aggression onto the undifferentiated mud so that the soldier, in turn, becomes a powerless nipple before the polymorphous perversity of a monstrous child?

Mud belongs to the liminal category of slime that troubles the dualism of Sartre's ontology in his

phenomenological masterpiece, *Being and Nothingness* (1943). Sartre writes,

The slimy... [seems] docile. Only at the moment when I believe that I possess it, behold by a curious reversal, it possesses me... I open my hands, I want to let go of the slimy and it sticks to me, it draws me, it sucks at me...

If contact with slime threatens subjectivity in normal times, one can imagine its terrifying potential for the soldier in the trenches where men were being constantly reduced to objects. War narrative is traumatised by the sheer Thing-ness of the human body. Barbusse speaks of men's bodies as the 'larvae of pollution' while Remarque calls them 'rubber tyres'. Graves records the trauma following the sight of 'the cap he had worn, splashed with his brains'. 'I had never seen human brains before: I somehow regarded them as a poetical figment'. Knowledge, learning and civilisation flounder in the face of the ineluctible nature of human matter as the human mind 'the centre of the humanistic world - is revealed to be not merely a Thing but an unwholesome mess. In everyday trench life, the boundaries of the body can no longer be policed as bodily fluids are perpetually on the brink of spillage. Men vomit as they collect corpses in Graves' *Goodbye To All That* and Cloete's *Victorian Son*. While mud and slime seep in: Celine speaks of 'eating Flanders mud, my whole mouth full of it, fuller than full?'; in 'A Night of Horror?', the narrator writes: 'The suffocating mud and slime/Were trickling down my throat'. Remarque writes: 'Our hands are earth, our bodies mud and our eyes puddles of rain.'. Membranes have become permeable: the skin can no longer separate the inside and the outside, the self and the world. While shelling killed and mutilated, mud insidiously took away human subjectivity: it rendered the living human being a Thing, formless and foundationless.

Mud, muck, mire, mirk: these are the ruling words and images in Sassoon's war bulletins, eliciting a wide range of responses from savage realism to irony and satire:

Down, and down, and down, he sank and drowned,
(?Counter-Attack?)

*O German mother dreaming by the fire,
While you are knitting socks to send your son
His face is trodden deeper in the mud.*
(?Glory of Women?)

*We lugged our clay-sucked boots as best we might
And someone flung his burden in the muck,
Mumbling: 'O Christ Almighty, now I?m stuck!?'
('The Redeemer')*

The disappearance of the visual horizon of one's body and experiencing it at one with the chaos of primeval matter is the defining trauma in Sassoon's narrative. Bourgeois morality and conventional religious structures explode before the frightfully embodied consciousness and bodily defence, as slime threatens to trap and dissolve human form. In Wilfred Owen's 'The Show?', written under the influence of Henri Barbusse's *Under Fire*, soldiers are seen as 'strings of grey?', trailing and scraping 'slimy paths?'; in Edmund Blunden's *Undertones of War*, the very structure of pastoral is seriously challenged by the presence of trench-mud 'nature made unnatural' as images of mutilation are projected onto the earth: 'The whole zone was a corpse and the mud itself mortified'.

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