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**Bereavement in the Arts**  
**The Grieving Parents by *Käthe* Kollwitz.**

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**Bereavement in the Arts**  
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**Abstract**

This paper reflects on Käthe Kollwitz's sculpture of '*Trauerndes Ehepaar*' (the Grieving Parents) and the ways in which it offers profound insight into the experience of parental loss and grief that it portrays.

**Key words:** Parental grief, WW1, artworks, memorials, theories of grief.

During recent years culminating in 2018, we have been living in the shadow of the First World War. In 2017, I was fortunate to 'win' a ballot ticket to attend the Centenary Commemoration of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battle of Ypres, otherwise known as 'Passchendaele', that was held on the 31<sup>st</sup> July in the Tyne Cot Cemetery. Here more than 11,900 of the British and Commonwealth dead are buried and nearly 35,000 servicemen, from the United Kingdom and New Zealand who died in the Ypres Salient after 16 August 1917 and whose graves are not known, are commemorated.

'Passchendaele' had been present in my consciousness since childhood through the stories my mother told about her father – a grandfather I never knew – who had served as a Doctor in the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) during this fearsome period. Towards the end of her life, she wanted me to know about a puzzling 'something' my brother and I would find when we came to dispose of her belongings. The story behind what turned out to be two lumpish pieces of metal was that my grandfather had been in 'No Man's Land' attending to a wounded soldier when German firing recommenced and his temple was 'winged' by some of the shrapnel that fell around him. Reaching into the mud, he retrieved the shrapnel that we would discover amongst his only daughter's possessions after her death 80 years later. My grandfather survived the war to work as a pre-NHS family doctor in a poor part of Leeds. But, as for many others, his story had left me with an interest in WW1, especially the history of Ypres and the Battle of Passchendaele, the work of the RAMC, and the impact of military bereavement and trauma that has become a late interest in my research and therapeutic work.

But this Centenary year was not my first visit to the Salient having spent a few days in Ypres in 2006 touring well known sites of interest, including the 'In Flanders Fields' Museum, the Menin Gate, and the Tyne Cot Cemetery. The individual graves of British and Commonwealth soldiers are set in the iconic layout, each marked by headstones of Portland stone arranged in neat rows with each headstone border planted with a mixture of floribunda roses and herbaceous perennials – like an English garden. Less well known and visited (at least by British tourists) are the German Military Cemeteries – and what an extraordinary contrast they make! Each cemetery comprises rows of flat stone slabs placed on the ground marking a grave in which (generally) 8 soldiers are buried. The two

German cemeteries that I visited at Langemark and Vladslo were either surrounded by trees or had oak trees - the national tree of Germany - growing within their perimeter, and these features, in contrast to the openness and light of Tyne Cot, seemed to give them a more sombre character. As well as the grave stones set in the grass, Langemark includes additional architectural features – a sculpture of four military figures standing solemnly watching over their German comrades, as well as several sets of three low level stone basalt-lava crosses. But it is in the Vladslo cemetery that you find - for me at least – one of the most astonishing pieces of bereavement art – *Käthe Kollwitz's* sculpture of '*Trauerndes Ehepaar*' (the Grieving Parents).

As you first enter through the gate, the view of the cemetery seems rather bleak and it appears to be devoid of any architectural features.



Photo 1

It is not until you venture further towards the rear that you are confronted with *Käthe Kollwitz's* remarkable work - a monumental piece that took 18 years to reach completion – and, as you approach the two larger-than-life size sculptures, you become increasingly aware of the intensity of the grief and pain that is being expressed through these forms.

Both figures are kneeling.



Photo 2

The man, holding himself stiffly upright, has his arms folded tightly across his chest – as if he is restraining himself. The woman – reputed to be the face of *Käthe* set beside that of her husband's - is bent forward as if stooped under the weight of her unutterable sorrow as they both look down upon the grave below where their son Peter is buried.



Photo 3

On hearing of his death, aged 18 in October 1914 two months into the War, *Käthe* is reputed to have said '*There is in our lives a wound which will never heal. Nor should it.*' As a renowned artist and sculptor, she made a commitment to create a memorial to her son and to the dead as well as to those who suffer from the consequences of war. In 1919, after several attempts at various designs with which she was not satisfied, she put the project aside, noting in her diary: '*I will come back; I shall do this work for you, for you and the others.*' She was eventually able to fulfil her commitment in April 1931, writing in her diary '*In the autumn - Peter, - I shall bring it to you.*' It was eventually brought to Vladso in 1932.



Photo 4

Whilst it is possible to read more about *Käthe's* experience of grief through her diaries and letters, it is here that we can see and grasp for ourselves, in the *raw visceral and visual form* of the statues before us, some of the aspects of grief responses to this irreparable loss that we have subsequently tried to theorise; *to capture in words*. Freud's definitive paper '*Mourning and Melancholia*' was both written (1915) and published (1917) after the outbreak of the war in which Peter died. The suffering that these figures embody as a result of the loss of a child, described as harsh and relentless' (Brabant, Forsyth, and McFarlain, 1997, p.255), is evident in the 'heavy stones' of grief that Park and Halifax (2011) hope will 'eventually be the ballast for the two great accumulations of wisdom and compassion' (p.359). And perhaps, before it began to be theorised in the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, these figures also embody the potential for a culturally gendered response to loss (Schwab, 1996; Stroebe, 1998) exemplifying the contrasting responses between the instrumental and intuitive styles of grieving (Martin and Doka, 2011). They also seem to represent, with great compassion and the insight borne of experience, the overwhelmed and controlled responses to grief described by Machin (2009). Do the separateness of the figures also somehow point to the isolation of grieving parents, not only from

their social networks but also from each other (Riches and Dawson, 2000)? Is not this monumental work evidence of an attempt to maintain attachment to the lost object (Bowlby, 1968/1998), maintain continuing bonds (Klass et al., 1996) and make meaning through memorialisation (Daines, 2014; Neimeyer, 2000)? And is not the self-reproach and the feelings of guilt – a feature of traumatic bereavement (Barlé et al., 2017) that *Käthe* is said to have struggled with as part of the older generation that encouraged their children to go to fight on behalf of the Fatherland - not visible in their bearing?

In Act 4, Scene 3 of *Macbeth*, Shakespeare has Malcolm exclaim '*Merciful heaven! What, man! Ne'er pull your hat upon your brows. Give sorrow words. The grief that does not speak whispers the o'erfraught heart and bids it break*'. But *Käthe Kollwitz* has done something more for us. In giving her deep sorrow a visible form she has taken us *beyond words* to reveal a profound truth at the heart of the experience of parental grief (an experience later endured by my own parents).



Photo 5

100 years after the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battle of Ypres, and wearing my grandfathers RAMC and Welsh Guards regimental badges, I brought the pieces of shrapnel back to Passchendaele. Awaiting the start of the ceremony, I chatted with another 'descendent' sitting next to me. She had brought with her photos of her Irish grandfather and his two brothers who together had travelled from Galway to Dublin to enlist in the Royal Veterinary Corps in the first days of the war. It seems that, through the artefacts that are handed down over the generations, we continue to wish to maintain attachment to the lost object, maintain continuing bonds, and make meaning through memorialisation.

But it was not only to the 'lost object' of my grandfather that I have a sense of maintaining attachment. It is also to my now dead mother whose early life was shaped by his importance to her, alongside the 'presence' of his silence about the experience of being a doctor in such an unspeakable war. It is to the mother who, in her later life, faced – like *Käthe* – one of life's 'greatest *interminable* tragedies' (Cacciatore et al., 2013-4: 184 *my emphasis*). Melanie Klein (1940:362) argues that 'every advance in the process of mourning results in a deepening of the individual's relation to his inner objects'. My mother could never truly '*give sorrow words*' – like *Käthe's* husband, she tried to hold herself tightly for fear of being overwhelmed – and in the sorrow of bereaved sibling-hood this was too painful for me to face. But I have now been able to 'en-visage' ('in the face') her more clearly through *Käthe Kollwitz's* sculpture, and in the faces of other bereaved parents I have met during a range of

bereavement research studies. I am aware of how my journeying - outward to Vladslo and the Ypres Salient, shrapnel in hand, and contemplatively inward – have, and continue to be, endeavours of ‘meaning making’, not solely through memorialising, but by deepening relations with my inner objects, and of finding a meaningful ‘purpose’ for aspects of family and personal history and experience - that is, to make reflexive use of them to contribute in some small way to understandings of bereavement and bereavement care.

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