Among the Missing: Mass Death & Canadian Nationalism at the Vimy Memorial

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"In monuments we frequently confront a combination of figurative, symbolic, cultural, institutional, historical presences, each of which plays its part in loading the overall significance—or 'subjectivity'—of the place. The gravity of a place, its overall resonance, is multiplied and extended in this way, haunted, occupied with the consciousness of a regime" (Hook 2005: 700).

PROLOGUE

The years following World War I saw an upsurge in Canadian nationalism. Canada's evolution from colony to nation—the subject and title of A.R.M. Lower's well-known history (Lower 1977)—during those years has become a staple of Canadian historiography. The centrality of the 1931 Statute of Westminster—establishing legislative equality between the dominions and Great Britain—to national development is now enough of a staple of Canadian political discourse to merit inclusion within the pages of the Canadian Encyclopedia (Hillmer 2008). Twinned to this as an artistic example of the nationalist surge—and again the sort of generally-held belief that an encyclopedia article includes—is the work of such painters as the Group of Seven, who in the 1920s appeared to embody a spirit of innovative Canadianism in their choice of subject-matter (Varley 2008). These events have been transformed into a teleology of Canadian independence, milestones in an evolutionary progression. That fixation on politics and painting has neglected the sculptural and monumental. Yet the vast war memorial to the Canadian World War I dead that looms above the battlefield of Vimy Ridge is part of the same progress. Again, a glance at the encyclopedia discloses the popular conviction of the significance of military prowess in the

growth of a nationalist spirit. (Roy 2008). Enacting the enshrinement of the military struggle, the Vimy memorial enlists the dead within that triumphant progress of national development. Very much a product of its time, the memorial persists in its relevance to Canada’s sense of self.

Figure 1: The Vimy memorial at its dedication, 26 July 1936. Photo: Veterans’ Affairs Canada

This conviction has been pushed to its furthest limit by the recent film Passchendaele (2008), which unfurls what has often been viewed as a monstrous slaughter into yet another banner instilling pride in Canada’s role in the Great War.

The Vimy Ridge memorial to Canada’s 65 thousand World War I dead (out of a population of 7.2 million) looms from a height of 110 metres over the chalk plain that lies below. It rests on a bed of 15000+ tonnes of steel-reinforced concrete, adorned with twenty allegorical figures, each twice life-size and carved from single blocks of an especially durable and white Croatian limestone (Veterans’ Affairs Canada 2008, “Design and Construction of the Vimy Ridge Memorial”). Its base and twin pylons wrested from 6000 tonnes of that same stone, the memorial’s sheer size and extent postpones any esthetic response to a later moment. A veiled female figure—she has been called “Canada Mourning” and “The Spirit of Canada”—occupies the focal position. We know the name both of the dancer who modeled her (Edna Moynihan) and the stone carver (Luigi Rigamonti) who worked from a pantograph diagram supplied to him by the memorial’s sculptor and designer Walter S. Allward. We even know that Rigamonti’s carving skills fetched him £850 (Chapman; “Surprise” 1974; Allward to Hughes, July 28, 1928, Allward Papers). We also know Allward’s fee for his completed work: roughly, $25,000, plus $12,000 per annum (Contract, Allward Papers). These bare numbers, these monumental trivia nonetheless guide us toward understanding how the materiality of a construct—resembling an ornate geological outcropping—forms a stage for the recital of a national/nationalist narrative epic in its scope.

Our search for a meaning that goes beyond factoids tells us something about the tectonic forces thrusting that monument into view. That emergence pushes us toward reflecting on how a colonial society deals with its losses in an imperial war, and how it reinvents itself in response to trauma. A testimonial to a burgeoning civic religion, the stone tablets of the memorial proclaim a humanist response to the fact of mortality. They also offer a specifically Canadian testimony to national mourning. Through the memorial, a machinery of consolation cushions post-Christian society’s loss of a vision of personal immortality, subsuming personal loss within a rhetoric of communal deliverance. Ironically, this attempt at

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3 Veterans’ Affairs Canada’s website contains two extensive repositories of information and statistics about the memorial.

transcendence most easily displays itself in the phenomenon of absence. Beckett-like, the fact of absence plays a generative role in both the memorial's genesis and execution. Absence, in fact, preserves whatever relevance the memorial exerts over viewers today. Finally, and this remains the greatest irony of all, the Vimy memorial captures within its structure a set of contradictions and puzlements defining the Canadian nationalism of the present era.

II

The government of Canada had a problem with the Canadian dead, a problem intrinsic to its colonial relationship to the metropolitan interests that had led it into the Great War. Where—one might ask—were the dead to be found? Where slept the brave? Not at home. Except in a few exceptional cases, the bodies of the dead were never repatriated (Cusack 2004). Their absence necessitated the memorial's presence. On this cultural/political foundation—rather than on the tonnes of reinforced concrete—rests the monument's allegorized superstructure. The emotional equivalent to a geological rift thrust atop it a memorial arresting in scale and national in scope.

It seems difficult now to understand how easily Canadians resigned themselves to the absence of the bodies of their dead. Three aspects of Canadian culture at that time help us realize the forces behind that mute consent. The hard facts of Imperial necessity that had shipped the live bodies overseas, kept the dead ones there. The authorities invoked logistics. The burden that the bodies of the dead imposed on supply and transport lines necessitated burying them near where they had been slaughtered (Longworth 1967: 10-14). The argument now appears facile, glossing over what may have been stronger motives. Yet it worked, both in Canada and in Australia. The prospect of hometowns reeling beneath the arrival of boxcars of sons and lovers—common sense asserts—had to have played some role in the Imperial authorities' decision to bury the dead in France. That distanced burial had long been the fate of common soldiers in times past. A change had, however, come about by the time of this war. Modern mass societies, reducing their citizenry to components of mass armies, sought to occlude this aim, a process ironizing the veiling of the statue of a mourning nation. Could a modern state with representative institutions and powered by individualist ideologies countenance a policy of anonymous mass burial for its citizen-soldiers? Therefore Canada followed the burial customs that began in the U.S. Civil War, that first of industrialized national combats. "The Fallen" (as the dead came to be euphemized, a term that our current involvement in Afghanistan has thrust back into public mourning) would rest in park-like cemeteries adorned with notable memorials. In the case of Canada's World War I dead, that meant resting in overseas park-like cemeteries with notable memorials. The sheer fact of a workingman's income barred those sites from all but the well-to-do. Grandeur in public memorializing could seek to reassure the distant mourners that those they wept over were venerated by the system that had shipped abroad the once-living bodies of their sons and lovers, and then transformed them into corpses.

Nor can we overlook the force of a vast psychic numbing at home, a mentality that would not have welcomed the actual presence of those battlefield remains. Consider: here lay a culture that had witnessed the beginnings of scientific medicine's success in alleviating human suffering. Sir William Osler, the greatest physician of his time, and a Canadian as well, could assure the Canadian Medical Association in 1902 that "[t]he average sum of human suffering has been reduced in a way to make the angels rejoice" (quoted in Bliss 1999: 299). The death machine struck dumb those angelic assurances, a fact that stunned those who had witnessed it, even vicariously. That war machine's version of perpetual motion had to have taken its toll on the sensibilities not only of the participants, but on those of the passive observers left at home, and now left behind.

Finally, the pre-Great War civilian culture had grown used to delegating death. The clergy in an overwhelmingly Protestant Anglophone Canada had begun downplaying death's awful finality and disruption. No longer in enlightened circles a necessarily first-hand experience, death and its attendant demands could now be farmed out to secondary contractors. The rise in scientific medicine, its speedy enshrinement within a newly-professionalized medical system, meant that people were living longer. More were dying in hospitals rather than at home, more were being buried by professional morticians and in professionally-maintained, purchased locations rather than in weed-choked churchyards (Connor 2000: 81-161; Gagan and Gagan 2002: ix, 3; Gidney and Miller 1994: 101-04; Habenstein and Lammers 1955: 389-444; Howell 1984: 107;
accustomed to these novel ways of handling death could acquiesce to
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Laderman that fought the War. Those modes of healthcare are now the norm.
Their very existence back then indicates that death and disposal
were evolving into second-hand ritual and experience. A political
practices that began as a trickle would flood the developed countries
were evolving into second-hand ritual and experience. A political
formation whose members—or at least its ruling elite—had grown
accustomed to these novel ways of handling death could acquiesce to
the expatriation of much of its onetime body politic, even in the face
of the discomfort that this exile would inflict upon the home front
survivors.5

Whatever reasoning compelled the decision to bury overseas the
bodies of the war dead, the age demanded an image, and Canada
would furnish one that emphasized valor, sacrifice and national
evolution as a consolation to those left behind. We can observe how
an articulate participant/observer of the War enfolded the memorial
within a teleology of Canadian nationalism. Canon Frederick G. Scott
had produced widely-read accounts of his frontline chaplaincy
experiences; later, he became an untiring advocate for veterans'
causes (Scott 1922). His remarks to Toronto’s Empire Club about the
memorial’s July 26, 1936 unveiling equate the monument’s mass
with that of the pain of loss. Scott then assuages some of that grief by
including it within a national narrative of progress:

“I feel that the unveiling of that monument and all that was
connected with it was really something more than the simple
display of a great memorial. It has a tremendous bearing on our
whole national development” (Scott 1936).

At the root of the memorial lay the logistical and emotional logic
of Imperial war, itself compelling overseas burial. The impact of the
finished structure that Canon Scott witnessed, however, sprang from
a set of local and increasingly nationalist convictions. The earliest
parliamentary record of the memorial’s inception shows us the
politicians outflanking the soldiers in their intuition that Vimy Ridge
could be made to play a central role in the formation of a post-war,
eventual post-colonial Canadian identity. During a committee
hearing of May 4, 1920, Canadian Corps commander Sir Arthur
Currie dismissed Vimy’s claims to pre-eminence among the army’s
wartime exploits. Vimy had not been the Corps’ “most outstanding
battle, or had the greatest material or moral effect on the winning of
the war.” General Currie and Professor Percy Nobbs, a McGill
architectural historian retained by the government had returned
from a survey of the battlefields in France. Currie, commander at
Vimy insisted to his politician audience that all of the eight sites
selected for memorialization deserved equal embellishment.

General Mewburn (Chair): [Y]ou would prefer see eight memorials
erected [?].
Currie: Yes, all of the same kind: no one more outstanding than the
others.

It was politicians like Sir Oliver Mowat and C.W. Peck, a wartime
Unionist government member who insisted that there was
something special about Vimy. They sought a structure that “would
embody a war museum, memorial chapel, record offices and an
observation tower” (Canadian Battlefields Memorials Commission
1929).7 They had locked on to what we have seen as one of the
mainstay myths of Canadian nationalism: that Canada’s success on
the Ridge demonstrated its emergence from colony to nation. What
popular historians see now as a nationalist milestone was then a
small, roadside marker (Berton 1986 and Granatstein 2004).8 But
the politicians spotted it first.

A battle-based nationalist mythology of the kind that Canon Scott
articulated lay in the making. Canadian nationalism in the 1920s
discovered what one theorist terms “a wartime nationalism that
derives not from the law’s ability to maintain order or implement
justice but from the willingness of citizens to sacrifice themselves in
the name of the state” (Nudelman 2004: 39). As Colonel H.C.
Osborne, the soldier who served as the go-between for Allward and
the Canadian Battlefields Memorial Commission later observed, the

5 Gagan and Gagan refer to “the wholesale transfer of the care and treatment of the
sick from the home to the hospital, which took place between 1890 and 1920”
(3).While Marshall is my central authority here, the others fill in the sense of delegated
death as a growing trend in North America. In the absence of authoritative Canadian
sources on what is now termed the “deathcare” industry, I have extrapolated from U.S.
accounts of an industry’s growth.
6 Surely the residual guilt from this expatriation led the government to subsidize the
overseas trip—now a “pilgrimage,” in the terminology of the civic religion increasingly
defining the response to the Great War dead—to the Memorial’s unveiling in 1936
(Lloyd 1998 and Murray 1936).

7 This kind of complex was in fact what the French would build to commemorate
Verdun.
8 Inevitably revisionism has sharply questioned and qualified both the extent and the
exclusivity of the Canadian victory. See Hayes et al. 2007.
memorial had morphed into Canada's chief mnemonic in its memory of the war, "not intended merely to commemorate the taking of Vimy ridge but the whole effort of Canada ... our main memorial of the War [which] stands for all that we accomplished" (Osborne to Allward, 20/xii/1927. Allward Papers).

III

The Vimy memorial embodies this version of Canadian nationalism, enshrining it through spatial positioning and the use of allegory. Toronto's Walter S. Allward created a temple rather than a shrine, a temple telling a story of heroism and endurance. By 1921, the Vimy site had sufficiently captured the public's attention to allow a Toronto Globe headline to mention Vimy Day as if it were a matter of common knowledge ("Flag Unfurled" 1921). In 1922, Prime Minister Mackenzie King could refer to Vimy as "one of the world's great altars ... consecrated and hallowed ground." In that same moment General Mewburn of the Battlefields Memorial Commission announced "that there is something distinctive regarding Vimy that comes very close to the hearts of Canadians" (House of Commons Canada).

Allward's design that had beaten out 160 rivals, sought to configure that combination of pride and heartache. It burst upon the general public in the February 13, 1923 edition of the Globe. Its twin soaring double pylons and no less than twenty allegorical figures, resembled nothing so much as the pillars of a Gothic cathedral and the profusion of statues assembled there ("The News in Pictures" 1923; Duffy 2005).

A present-day critic evaluates the Memorial as a structure "majestic and arguably un-Canadian in its grandiosity, allegorical thrust, and captivating mix of neoclassical and abstract form" (Picard 2006: 75). Such a critique seems convincing only if we view the memorial as a glorified gravestone. Viewed as an altar in a civil cult, however, the memorial's grandiosity appears appropriate. In the manner of pilgrims, viewers ascend a set of steps on their way upward to the neck-wrenching view of the pylons thrusting heavenward. The devotees find themselves flanked by sets of figures who reside within a national hagiography, rendering support for the defenseless as a hallmark of Canada's role as a nation. The mourning female figure casts her gaze downward to a funereal entablature. The ascending viewers are compelled to progress upward until they behold the structure's centerpiece: a version of a crucified Christ without a cross. Above that figure loom other allegorical figures representing peace, justice and other idealized virtues. Again, the intensity of the attempt to create a post-Christian shrine displays itself in two readily apparent ways: the provision of a disassembled pieta-like figuration (the sorrowful Mother in the person of Canada Mourning, the crucified Son in the contorted pose below), and the assemblage of statues who lack traditional iconographic reference points but whose sacral nature remains clear.9

Figure 2. Defending the Helpless, with Canada Mourning in background. Photo: Archives Ontario.

9 As we might expect, Canon Scott immediately caught the displaced religious doctrine, the crucifixion-without-a-cross motif, at work: "There is no visible cross but the position and the attitude of this dead or dying man between the two pylons suggest crucifixion with extraordinary dramatic effect ... That monument, with its crucified soldier, lying there, linking the two great pylons, with the statue of Faith pointing upwards high above, the mourning Canada will stand for all time as an uplifting symbol in our national life and in our national memory" (Scott 1936). For a learned account of the statues' meanings: Brandon 2008.
Nothing better indicates the reverential nature of the structure than the artist's excision of a planned victorious taunt. He had originally drawn a figure triumphantly crushing with his foot a German pickelhaube (the spiked helmet that had become a trademark of German infantry in dress uniform), but Allward's final intention sought the enthronement of peace rather than the boasting of victory (Accruals file 1927, Allward Papers; "Study for War Memorial #7" National Gallery of Canada). His nationalist temple includes a distinctively Canadian motif, an allusion to the war's best-known poem, written by Canadian John McCrae. A press release on the memorial cleared by Allward emphasized that the Spirit of Sacrifice "giving all, throws the torch to his Comrade" (Osborne to Allward, December 6, 1928. Allward Papers). "In Flanders' Fields" is an occasional verse warning against the prospect of a negotiated peace. Its dead speaker urges his hearers to raise high the torch that he flings their way. It is the sort of militant poem that a Modernist commentator like Paul Fussell scorns as "vicious and "stupid" (Fussell 1975: 250). Yet a romantic, idealist and moralizing reader of that poem—a reader attempting to express a nation's grief—can be pardoned for transforming it into a gentle elegy, a monitory gesture from the dead to the living to fight the good fight as defined by St. Paul rather than by General Haig. Certainly this is the way in which the poem is still read or sung at Remembrance Day ceremonies in Canada. Whatever reading Allward gave the poem, "In Flanders' Fields" seems of lesser importance than the very fact of Allward's sculptural allusion to its best-known passage. Allusive sculpture freezes poetic imperative into nationalist scripture, branding the monument in a specifically Canadian way.

From the start, Allward had been aware of victory's hideous cost. How was a monument to deal with that cost? A dream that Allward later recounted to a sympathetic journalist set out what he claimed was the visionary origin of his design.

"When things were at their blackest in France, during the war, I went to sleep one night after dwelling on all the muck and misery over there. My spirit was like a thing tormented. So I dreamed. In my dream I was on a great battlefield. I saw our men going by in thousands, and being mowed down by the sickles of death, regiment after regiment, division after division. Suffering beyond endurance at the sight, I turned my eyes and found myself looking down an avenue of poplars. Suddenly through this avenue, I saw thousands marching to the aid of our armies. They were the dead. They rose in masses, filed silently by and entered the fight, to aid the living. So vivid was this impression, that when I awoke it stayed with me for months. Without the dead we were helpless. So I have tried to show, in this monument to Canada's fallen, what we owed them and will forever owe them" (Perry 1922: 122-23).

Several aspects of this dream provoke comment. First, the dream contains nothing in it of the actual form that the structure would assume. It is a dream about a feeling that the artist later decided that his design had to convey, rather than any architectonic or spatial principle at play. Secondly, the very recounting of the dream places it within a framework of willed optimism. After all, the two armies could as easily appear to be advancing within a vast totentanz, a progress toward death and dissolution. Certainly Allward's final version of the monument had for its subject the dead rather than the living. A monument emphasizing consolation rather than triumph seems a darker realization of that dream than the victorious meaning that the artist wrenches from the dream itself.

Of course, my twenty-first century interpretation of a Great War memorial, with its emphasis on contradiction and unintended irony, risks becoming presentist. Yet it is this very cultural complexity—this disconnect between what was felt then and what hurts now—that gives such consolatory monuments their continuing relevance. Consider the Canadian-born Robert Tait McKenzie's Edinburgh memorial to the Scottish-American dead. Its left-to-right bas-relief that backgrounds a conventional seated figure displays a march led by an exultant regimental pipes-and-drums. That brave show is trailed by a set of civilians metamorphosing into soldiers as they advance. But where is that joyous procession headed? In a memorial to the dead, their final destination appears fairly inescapable. We are dealing here with stylized, public registrations of jagged anguish and grief, public and private. Yet they seek to radiate the consolatory as well. No wonder that World War I memorialists utilized to the fullest the vocabulary at hand: the long 19th century's traditional funerary motifs within the comforting setting of that particularly Romantic invention, the park cemetery. As Jay Winter points out, a public's understandable obsession with seeing the war in "traditional modes ... provided a way of remembering which enabled the bereaved to live with their losses, and perhaps to leave them behind" (Winter 1995: 5). Only allegory could work this charm. But it could not

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10 See also Curl 1980, Ragon 1983.
cover every scar, and here is where the law of unexpected consequences takes over.

Allward's dream could have resulted in a grander version of the kind of military monument that his culture had presented to him: a combination of the architectural column or obelisk (in this case, two columns), a figure (in this case, a score of them) and a testamentary relief (in this case the dedicatory inscription). Such had been a war memorial's components throughout the long 19th century; they recur throughout any catalogue of Great War memorials. Yet where the vast majority of monuments used as their figure an idealized combatant, Allward instead presented what became in effect a tableau, a pageant. Here groupings of figures re-enacted a counter-narrative to that of battle, an upward motion countervailing the subterranean thrust of the trenches. The Madonnas gazes downward, the Spirit of Sacrifice upward. In this way, the memorial rehearses an allegorized, hygienic and uplifting sanctification of the process it seeks to commemorate and symbolically re-enact.

Yet the comforting vision had lost its edge. Allward's exclusion of the triumphal from his figures (see above), King Edward VIII's sober remarks at the unveiling—coloured by the prospect of an oncoming war—stressing sacrifice and remembrance, Allward's admission to a news reporter shortly before the unveiling that the monument was "really about the Missing," all show how greatly the transcendental balloon of his dream had deflated ("The King at Vimy Ridge" 1936). In fact, a new and starker absence had left its mark on the memorial.

IV

[F]or our unconscious, there is one case in which the two opposing attitudes towards death, the one which acknowledges it as the annihilation of life and the other which denies it as unreal, collide and come into conflict (Freud 1957 198).

Monuments by their very nature attempt wrestle with that Freudian dichotomy by trying to pin annihilation to the mat. In effect, they state that "Yes, our subjects lie dead, but not really. You our audience will always remember them. This mnemonic structure you behold attests to our dead's immortality." So the logic goes. In line with this urge, Allward's allegorical figures presented what an acute observer has termed "complete monumental bodies which symbolically replaced the many absent, fragmented corpses" (Moriarity 1995: 159). Allward moulded those idealized bodies into a pageant of suffering and triumph, an allegory squeezing the last full measure of Christian reassurance from what is essentially a post-Christian imaginative statement. But a group of the Fallen had shown up for the reveille that the Vimy memorial sounds. If many of the survivors back in Canada proved to be one set of absenteeees from the audience, there was a second set as well. Mute at roll call, lacking all record of individuated identity, they needed a monument to give them voice. How would they, the Missing, be commemorated?

Those untraceable bodies—the names that 11,285 went by inscribed on the memorial—exercised a hypnotic hold over their culture. They made up an absence even greater than that imposed by distant burial, an absence of corporeality itself. The Empire would erect two enormous structures to commemorate the Missing. Sir Edwin Lutyens' Thiepval memorial (unveiled July 1932), imaginatively realizes the concept of vacuity in as striking a manner as Waiting for Godot would more than a decade later. Sir Reginald Bromfield's Menin Gate (Ypres; 1927) remains a heavily-visited site, where "Last Post" and "Reveille" are still blown daily ("Menin Gate Memorial"). Both structures bear on their surfaces the names of the missing. Nonetheless, as Allward pointed out, the CBMC had not included that feature on the monument in their original contract ("Memorandum to the Imperial War Graves Commission," November 8, 1927. Allward papers). What seems to have been an afterthought on everyone's part—which the patrons then opportunistically imposed upon their artist—has over the years swelled into the memorial's most prominent feature. A present-day government...

11 Duffy 2008 190-91, discusses one of the sculptural sources of Allward's death-narrative.
12 Field Marshal Lord Plumer expressed this heartache at the 1927 opening of the Menin Gate, "To their relatives [of the missing] there must have been added to their grief a tinge of bitterness and a feeling that everything possible had not been done to recover their loved ones' bodies and give them reverent burial...But when peace came and the last ray of hope had been extinguished the void seemed deeper and the outlook more forlorn for those who had no grave to visit, no place where they could lay tokens of loving remembrance..." This in turn necessitated erecting "a memorial worthy of them which should give expression to the nation's gratitude for their sacrifice and its sympathy with those who mourned them" (quoted in Duffy 2001).
14 Colonel Osborne first mentioned the matter to Allward after the 1924 completion of University of Toronto's Soldiers' Tower's listing of the dead on inscribed stone.
website now downplays the memorial’s allegorical figures, concentrating instead on the names of the Missing (Veterans’ Affairs Canada 2005).

Figure 3: A sandblaster inscribes the names of the Missing on the Vimy memorial. Photo: Veterans’ Affairs Canada.

The Veterans’ Affairs’ ministry’s standard printed brochure is sprinkled with shots of the allegorical figures; yet its entire final page images a portion of the monument that bears the inscriptions. An inset zooms in on a group of those chiseled names (Veterans’ Affairs Canada. The Canadian National Vimy Memorial). Public memory today foregrounds the names without hesitation. We like lists. Lists have become so prominent a feature of public memorializing now—think for example of the Vietnam War monument in Washington, D.C. and the Jewish Quarter Museum in Prague—that we assume that the inclusion of the names of the Missing had been planned from the Memorial’s inception. Not so. Carving the names presented a host of technical difficulties: planning the spacing required for inclusion proved a nightmare. Then the properties of his building materials compelled Allward to employ a cement wash atop his limestone in order to provide a ground for the inscriptions. This in turn made the names vulnerable to erosion. Yet that very erosion proved the chief factor compelling Canada’s government to undertake an extensive repair and restoration of the memorial, thus preserving it and bringing it back into public attention (Hucker 2007: 283-88; Valpy 2007; Veterans Affairs Canada Design and Construction). Even the artist himself, despite his initial reluctance, despite his suggestion (shocking to his patrons) that the names appear on the pavement that visitors use as a walkway, had gotten the point by the time of Vimy’s unveiling (CBMC Minutes, Nov. 8, 1927). He stated then that his memorial was primarily about the Missing (“The King at Vimy Ridge”). I contend however, that Allward was right the first time, for a deep rift looms between the idealism of the allegorical, nationalist agenda and the stark positivism of the naked names. That dilemma haunts us still.

The political insiders who understood that Vimy had to serve as the site for Canada’s chief war memorial surely shared Plumer’s grasp of public urgency over the Missing. Grief’s sharp gnawings, and a culture’s century-long funereal practices necessitated a location for their mourning of the Missing. Well then, Canada was building a worthy memorial indeed, one whose scale dwarfed most other aids to memory. Inscribing the names of the Missing there placed Canada on a plane with the other grievers, and offered the bereaved a lightning rod for their suffering. Yet this political logic did not include the imaginative aims of Walter Allward.

No other submission to the competition for the memorial made as extensive a use of statuary as Allward’s. The idealized and the allegorical lay at the centre of his artistic imagination. A list of names belongs to another ontological order. Including that list resembles footnoting a poem with a telephone book. A very Modernist gesture,

follows by at least two years the drafting of the original contract (Osborne to Allward, September 7, 1926. Allward papers).

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we might observe, but a gesture discordant with the rest of the memorial.

Allward’s dream—the vision that he claimed furnished him with the inspiration for his greatest project—included nothing as prosaic and positivist as a list of names. Small wonder that a sculptor-architect-designer intent on scaling heaven resisted being kicked earthwards! Is there a starker antonym to allegorical soaring than deadpan taxonomy? Against the deliberative, noble providentialism of the triumph over death, juxtapose the chanciness of obliteration and dispersal. For twenty idealized, significantly posed representations of the striving, yearning, aspirational human body, outlined in glorious curvilinear, substitute the spiky inscription of 11,285 names. Those inscriptions represent nothing less than the totality of what is now known about the bodies that those names once denoted. Of course Allward resisted the profanation of his dream of a ghostly army coming to the assistance of the actual corporeal one. How could he have welcomed such a reminder of the fragility and time-bound nature of actuality? Is anything more sobering than the compression of memory into sets of letters graven in stone and assembled haphazardly by death? Of course Allward initially saw nothing untoward in lining his walkways with those literal indicators of an actuality that his allegorical figures spurn. His remark that his memorial was all about the Missing seems, upon examination, more of a plea than a protocol. Yet through the irony that remains so firmly embedded in the Modernist consciousness, this inclusion of the names—suiting as it does the memorializing preferences of our own era—gives the memorial an appeal and a relevance that it would otherwise lack. What the builder shied from, has become the keystone of the structure’s current “draw.” That fact however, should not blind us to the thematic dissonance that the inclusion sounds.

Ignoring for a moment the artist’s initial vision, how do the names qualify the memorial’s role as a nationalist document? An ecclesiastical analogy clarifies the cultural negotiation that has taken place. Before the names, the nationalist temple that Allward planned resembled a splendid Unitarian chapel, a monument to a “higher” spirit asserting that somehow another order of existence enables the viewer to take comfort amid his tribulation. The names instead position us within an Anglican cathedral, decked with commemorative plaques of the dead. No amount of comforting can remove the simplicity of their fate. Pushing the analogy no further, we find that the sharply qualified—even undermined—idealized statement of national identity positions the Vimy memorial at the centre of Canadian nationalism’s current dilemma. What exactly is that “national development” that Canon Scott assumed that the Vimy memorial enshrined? What constitutes the nation celebrated there? Is there an essential aspect of Canadianness that is somehow present in the nation state known as Canada? Or does the label designate nothing more than a randomly assembled collection of individuals within a set of geographical boundaries? The discussion reels on and on, until it grows apparent that a Canadian Benedict Anderson would have had to entitle his seminal work, Imaginary Communities.

A recent essay collection’s title says it all: Canadas of the Mind. The Making and Unmaking of Canadian Nationalisms in the Twentieth Century (Hillmer and Chapnick 2007). That (pluralizing) letter at the end of “Nationalisms” telegraphs what the concluding sentences of the Introduction state. “Canadians’ sense of what it takes to belong keeps evolving as they attempt to incorporate their contradictions into visions of a national identity. ... The Canadas of the mind habitually reside in the future” (Hillmer and Chapnick 2007: 12). Within that structure of time loop/time warp that post-modernity has accustomed us to spotting, Allward’s Vimy memorial speaks to us still. The memorial reluctantly yet prophetically sets in stone a discussion that engages us still: the dilemmas and contradictions inherent in the idealized nationalism it at once proclaims, celebrates and mourns.

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House of Commons Canada Debates 1922. May 22. 2099, 2100


[----] The Canadian National Vimy Memorial. [Brochure]. 

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