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The Erasure 'Art' of WW1 Canadian Military Postcards as Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

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World War I began during the height of the popularity of the picture postcard and its collecting. Postal acceptance of the divided-back postcard at the beginning of the century had made it possible to write messages on both sides, enabling the picture postcard to become the equivalent of today's text message, used to communicate day-to-day events – departures, arrivals, delays, visits, unusual weather, and minor ailments. For the cards' picture side, mass production by large manufacturers had resulted in the creation of standard genres – seaside views, public buildings, famous actresses, news events, sexually-suggestive cartoons, ships, village streets – a list which would be added to on the outbreak of war.

But the war also brought to the manufacturers the requirement that censorship approve their images and designs before publishing. Censorship controlled both the implied message of the card and the image itself, particularly those of the new genres such as battlefields, military installations, warships, abandoned children, or damaged cities. Censors oversaw the postcards mailed by soldiers with attention both to images and message – an apparent necessity with exchanges of postcards between a soldier and his family sometimes occurring several times a week (Huss 333).

As a further measure of control, most militaries issued to their soldiers special postage-free postcards. These military postcards resembled the pre-1902 British picture postcard, with no message being allowed on the address side and the message replacing the picture.

The French and German cards used censorship to control the message, while the British and Canadian ones provided a pre-printed message which in some ways resembled a blank cheque. The soldier was invited to insert his signature, his service number, and on some cards to add or delete a limited amount of prescribed information. But unlike the cheque, the card threatened its own destruction should excess information be inserted.

The examples examined here were mailed by a member of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, my grandfather, Pte. Albert Frankland. Brown, who enlisted in June 1916 in Vancouver in the 158th Battalion and trained at Vernon, B.C. His battalion travelled by rail to Halifax in November 1916, where it boarded the lost *RMS Titanic*'s sister ship, *Olympic*, for the crossing to Liverpool. On reaching Halifax, members of Brown's unit were given this Canadian-produced military postcard (Figure 2) on which to report to their next-of-kin the safe completion of their train journey.
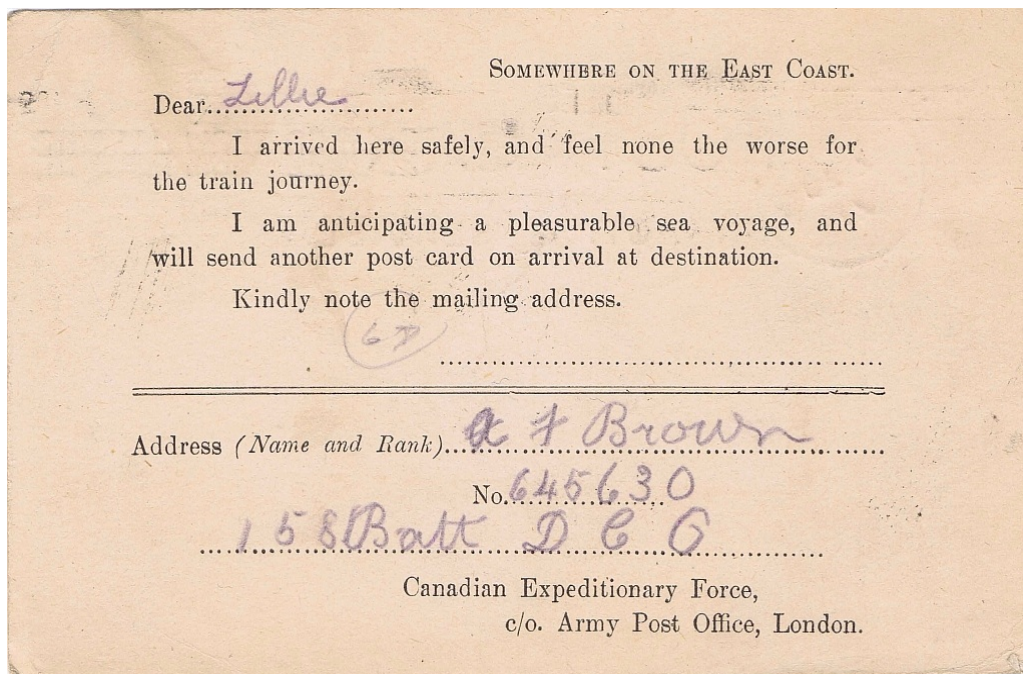
Here Pte. Brown had to state that he felt "none the worse for the train journey" and anticipated "a pleasurable sea voyage." His situation was a vulgar parallel to that of Jacques Derrida when he discovered he must, because of the limitations of language, use "under erasure" words which are misleading but nevertheless unreplaceable (*Of Grammatology* 60). Pte Brown's postcard had been printed before the train journey commenced, and had thus erased his freedom to write of the hazards he might have encountered. It had also erased any indication of thoughts he might have had about the U-boats and surface raiders which were a possible part of "pleasurable" Atlantic voyages in the fall of 1916. As well, the card's return address of "somewhere on the east coast" was inaccurate. The card's address side (figure 3) shows that it had not been posted in Halifax but had travelled with the troops across the Atlantic: it bears a London "Foreign Section" postmark of 21 Nov 1916, which is the same day that Pte Brown's disembarkation card

from the *Olympic* (Figure 4) was postmarked in Liverpool. This deception may have been planned to limit the spread of information that *Olympic* had sailed.
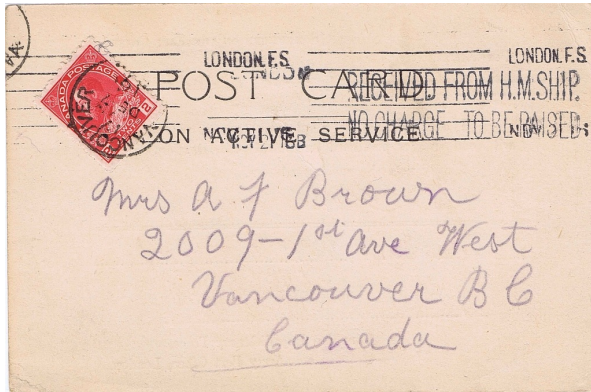

Figure 3. Arrival in Halifax PC.

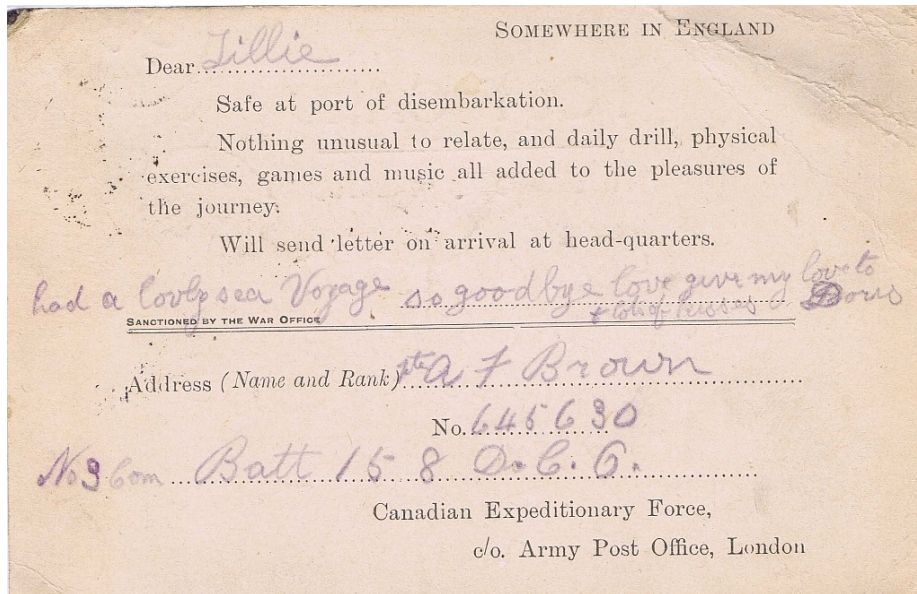**Figure 4**. Arrival in Liverpool PC.

Figure 5. Arrival in Liverpool PC, message side.

The text of the Canadian-produced disembarkation card faced Pte Brown with endorsing additional misleading words when it characterized the Liverpool reception camp as a recreational facility. As well, its "nothing unusual to relate" message was redundant, the concept of a standardized message itself being antithetical to the accommodation or anticipation of the unusual. But Pte Brown was so pleased to have been granted a 3-inch dotted line to write his own words – the ominously final "so goodbye love" – that he went on to write "give my love to Doris," "and lots of kisses" and then, perhaps to placate the overseers of such postcards, added "had a lovely sea Voyage." Despite his daring to write outside the dotted lines, the card was processed and received.

On arrival in France Pte Brown sent home a number of picture postcards of Boulogne, where he had landed, and of places nearby. Most of these are unaddressed and unmarked

by a post office or censor, and were presumably enclosed in a now vanished "on active service" envelope. One, however, with a picture of a small sea-side village between two steep hills (figure 6}, had had its caption and/or message scratched out and overlaid with thick white paste – whether by Pte Brown or someone else is unclear.

Figure 6. PC caption and/or message overlaid with paste.

Figure 7. Ypres 1914-16.

In June 1917 he sent home a two-panel postcard that depicts the transformation-by-gunfire of Ypres. The card bears a Canadian stamp and a Vancouver postmark, which indicates that it was passed by the censor at his base. On the back he had recorded a once well-known anonymous poem, but one evidently unknown to him, which he wrote he had discovered written on a "remaining" wall of the city. It is a poem about absence and erasure that echoes the erasure of people and buildings that is evident in the photos:

> Here['s] to those that are not here
> or are not standing by.
> But if drinking beer would bring them here
> I'd drink old Blighty dry.

Pte Brown agrees with its sentiments, which he correctly reads as constituting an elegy for the fallen, and as one created by soldiers from backgrounds and discourse communities similar to his own. It's an interesting act of

transcription: he has copied an unofficial text that he has found on a wall in this city onto an authorized photo-image of this city and its few remaining walls, and possibly pre-empted the text's erasure during further gunfire or restoration. It's an inscription over a scene of erasure, as was the original inscription of the poem on the wall. While the poem dreams of reversing the erasure of "those who are not here," his copying reverses the possible obliteration of the poem.
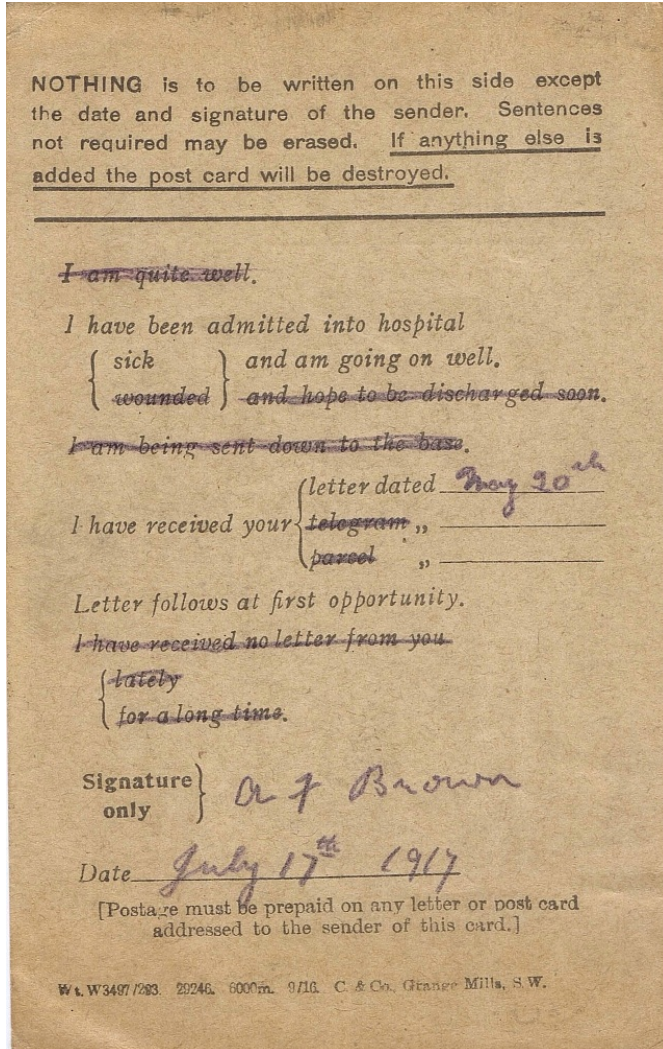

NOTHING is to be written on this side except the date and signature of the sender. Sentences not required may be erased. If anything else is added the post card will be destroyed.

I am quite well.

I have been admitted into hospital
{ sick } and am going on well.
{ wounded } and hope to be discharged soon.

I am being sent down to the base.

(letter dated May 20th
I have received your { telegram ,, ——————
(parcel ,, ——————

Letter follows at first opportunity.

I have received no letter from you
{ lately
{ for a long time.

Signature } a f Brown
only }

Date July 17th 1917

[Postage must be prepaid on any letter or post card addressed to the sender of this card.]

Wt. W3497/293. 29246. 6000m. 9/16. C. & Co., Grange Mills, S.W.

Figure 9

In July 1917 Pte Brown was in hospital (his service records indicate that he was suffering from myalgia), from where he sent home this British-produced military postcard (figure 8).The postcard forbade him to write anything but the date and his signature. "If anything else is added the post card will be destroyed." He was instructed that he could communicate only by erasure, and under the threat of erasure. One of the parts he erased was the statement that he "hope[d] to be discharged [from the hospital] soon." A second remnant of this hospital stay is this drawing of a nurse (figure 9), most likely sketched by a fellow patient. The artist appears to have projected onto her the impersonality required by the postcard, an act which hints that the card may have been regarded by its users as systemically normal. On 21 July 1917, Pte Brown mailed a slightly different version of the card. This time he did not erase the suggested "hope to be discharged soon." There is no way of knowing, however, whether he was reading "hope" as wish or expectation.

Pte Brown survived Passchendaele and Mons to serve briefly in 1918-19 in the poorly planned Allied occupation of the Rhineland. He was stationed in the Rhine resort town of Bad Godesberg, south of Cologne, from where he sent his wife a postcard of cruise ships in the riverfront harbour, writing on it "We ride on the (st cars (boats (trams all free." He does not seem to have been an especially articulate man – when he wrote freely on a postcard he seldom filled the entire space. He appears not to have written

letters but have substituted bundles of postcards. Born on a Yorkshire farm, educated at a village primary school, he had worked as a farm labourer before emigrating to Canada. Although in Vancouver he had worked at a sawmill, on his enlistment papers he declared his "Trade or Calling" to be a "teamster." In December of 1918 he was disciplined for having disobeyed an unspecified order. Like many soldiers in that war he was transitioning from a centuries-old largely oral agricultural life to an age of mechanically produced texts, mechanically regulated time, and mechanically destroyed men and horses. Did he chafe at the restricted agency offered by the military postcard? – evidently, but probably no more than he did at the restrictions imposed by any other part of that war.

Warfare has always required organization and discipline; the conception of these has evolved along with the technologies and practices of the cultures involved. The standardized military postcards and systematic use of artillery to destroy cities encountered by Pte Brown were technology-inspired cultural practices in which most of the warring nations found themselves invested in ways that transcended the war itself. Figure 10 shows the 1919 painting *Olympic with Returned Soldiers*[1] by Canadian artist and Group of Seven member Arthur Lismer of the ship *Olympic*, on which Pte Brown sailed to Europe.

Figure 10. Arthur Lismer, *Olympic with Returned Soldiers.*

The ship is in its wartime camouflage, a geometric design conceived to erase its visibility by converting its actual shape into a monoplanar pattern of volumes and shades. The design replicates a kind of systematic abstraction in visual art which will erase both realism and impressionism, a geometric abstraction which was already visible in 1912 in the work of French painter Robert Delaunay and the Czech Frantiscek Kupka. Lismer, born like Private Brown in Yorkshire, paints the camouflaged ship realistically, much as

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[1] http://www.warmuseum.ca/firstworldwar/objects-and-photos/art-and-culture/official-art/olympic-with-returned-soldiers/ Canadian War Museum 19710261-0343

he might if he were painting a copy of a Picasso. But his treatment of the snow on the dock gives hints of his later semi-abstracted Algoma landscapes.

Arguments by art historians that World War I helped bring about or intensify the fractured and distorted images of early Cubist, Expressionist, Constructivist, Futurist, and Dadaist art have appeared frequently in these years of anniversary – arguments that art, as the *Los Angeles Times* declared in 2012, was "forever changed by World War I."[2] Except for the Dadaists, however, several of whom served in the German military, and for the British-Canadian painter Wyndham Lewis, a direct relationship is difficult to prove.

It is more likely that these art movements, with their determination to be modern and their disdain for sacralized art and art forms, as in Marcel Duchamp's defacement of Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, *L.H.O.O.Q*,[3] shared with the military and with contemporary industry objectives such as simplicity, efficiency, and the serialization of production. The Impressionist Claude Monet had been using serial production, photography, and simplification of form for his multiple paintings of Rouen cathedral, The Houses of Parliament, and his Giverny gardens since the 1880s. Duchamp produced multiple copies of many of his art-constructions – *Bicycle Wheel* (1913), *The Fountain* (1917), *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919) – as a satiric comment on what critic Walter Benjamin would somewhat belatedly (1935) identify as "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (*Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*). Reductions of form and colour were practiced by Mondrian in Holland throughout the war. Architect Mies van der Rohe of Chicago skyscraper fame learned his minimalist motto "less is more" in Berlin in 1909 while helping Peter Behrens design the AEG Turbine Factory.[4] 'Less is more' was certainly a concept implicitly used by militaries hoping to standardize weaponry, ammunition, and manpower, or – once the armies had become immobile – to adapt assembly-line techniques to supply-chain management. Simplification, deletion, and erasure were both the means and the goal of their military art – a means in its restrictions of roles and vocabulary, and a goal in its objectives of erasing an enemy's gains, fortifications, weapons, soldiers, and cities.

The art that the military may have led the way for was the art that, decades later, sought total erasure, such as in Robert Rauschenberg's 1953 attempt to create an *Erased De Kooning*,[5] or Ad Reinhardt's and Mel Ramsden's erasure of colour in their 1961-1965 black-painted canvases,[6] and Reinhardt's description of his as "the last painting which anyone can make" (13) – arguably an attempt to erase painting itself. The militaries' erasures were also artistically prophetic in foreshadowing the site-specific art of the 1970s and 80s. Reims Cathedral from the First World War and Coventry from the Second – along with the Hiroshima dome and Berlin's Reichstag and Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial

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[2] http://articles.latimes.com/ 2012/jul/21/entertainment/la-et-cm-world-war-art-20120722

[3] www.nga.gov/images/decor/dadainfo_fs.shtm.

[4] Detlef Mertins, "What did Mies van der Rohe mean by less is more?" http://de.phaidon.com/agenda/architecture/articles/2014/april/02/what-did-mies-van-der-rohe-mean-by-less-is-more/

[5] https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/98.298.

[6] For an example of Reinhardt's work see http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/reinhardt- abstract-painting-no-5-t01582; for Ramsden see Wilson, 16-17.

Church – have become tourist art destinations in our time. Like the bicycle wheels and urinals transformed into art objects by Duchamp, these were mostly unremarkable examples of their type, but elevated to what Benjamin calls the "aura" of art by their transformation into unique partially erased forms and by the particular circumstances of that altering.

Modernist art's direct attempts to represent the war often did produce surreal landscapes and semi-Cubist soldiers with robotic bodies and mechanical uniformity. British war artist Christopher Nevinson's *Night Arrival of Wounded* (Figure 11) is a drawing in which Cubism, military discipline, man, army cap, and truck merge into a pattern of seemingly automated angles.[7]
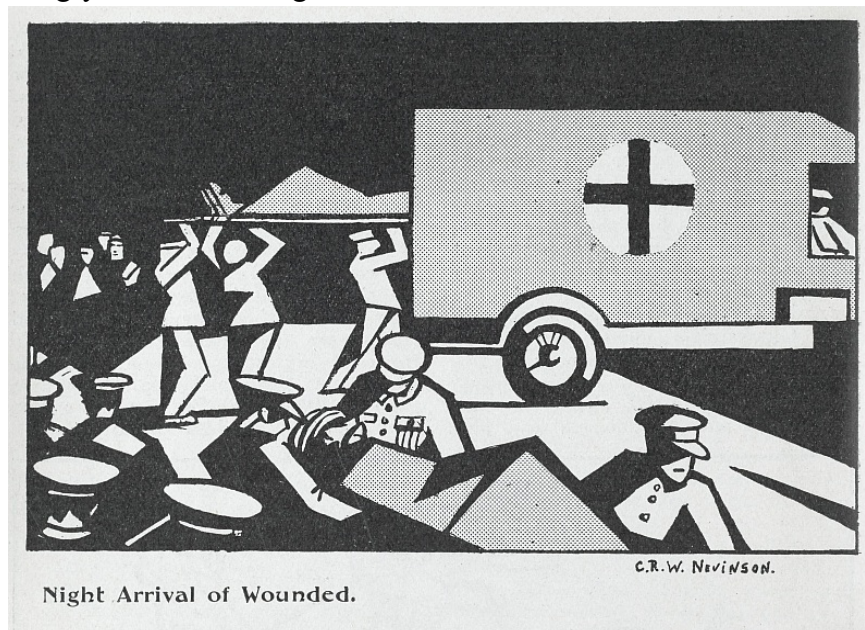

Night Arrival of Wounded.

C.R.W. NEVINSON.

Figure 11

Fellow artist William Roberts' *Gunners Pulling Cannons, Ypres*, shows a less austere, more anguished understanding of this merging.[8] More familiar to Canadians is Wyndham Lewis's painting *A Canadian Gun-Pit*,[9] which hangs in the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa. This painting depicts not just a gun pit but also the similarities among its guns, shells and soldiers' bodies. Lewis, working in Flanders with the Canadian military as one of its war artists, produced an even more dramatic depiction of such dehumanization in his *A Battery Shelled*, now in the collection of London's Imperial War Museum. Here, war appears to have reduced the bodies of the afflicted soldiers to mechanized puppets.[10]

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[7]

[8] The image reproduced here is taken from the collection of the Wellcome Library, Euston Rd, London.

[9] http://www.englishcubist.co.uk/ypres.html.

[10] *A Canadian Gun-pit* is held by The National Gallery of Canada, transferred from The Canadian War Museum. Accession Number 8356.

http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/16688

Figure 12. Lewis, A Canadian Gun-pit.

Such reductions, simplifications, and deletions were common artistic responses to the war. They were less overtly ideological on the British side than on the German where
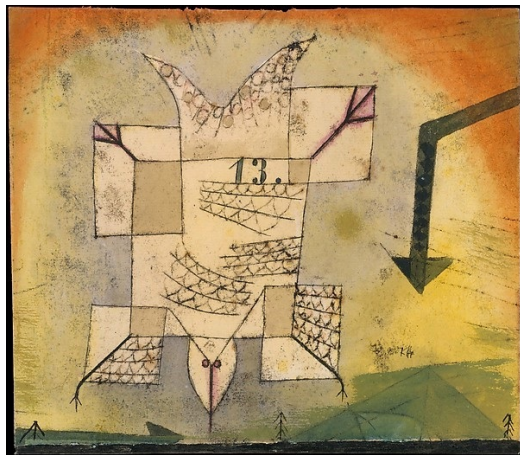

Figure 13. Klee, Falling Bird.

artists participated in the politics of postwar disillusionment. We see them in Paul Klee's 1922 *Der große Kaiser reitet in den Krieg* (*The Great Emperor Riding to War*),[11] George Grosz's 1919 *Für deutsches Recht und deutsche Sitte* (*For German Right and German Morals*)[12] and Otto Dix's 1920 portrayal of mutilated German war veterans, *Die Skatspieler* (*The Skat Players*).[13] All three artists were veterans of the German military. Klee had served in aircraft maintenance, and in 1919 produced the watercolour and ink drawing *Abstürzender Vogel* (*Falling Bird*),[14] which, much like Wyndham Lewis earlier, disturbingly merged the natural and the mechanical into a shape that was ambiguously both falling bird and falling airplane. Dada co-founder Hugo Ball had written in his diary on 24 May 1916 that in Dada art "the horror of our time, the paralyzing background of events, is made visible" (65).

It was not until after World War II and the emergence of such concepts as "treated text" and "erasure art" that the deletion and erasure techniques of World War I information

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[11]

[12] http://www.bildindex.de/document/obj02534263

[13] https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/121769

[14] http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=4212

http://metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/483046.

control appeared in art. One of the first Canadian examples was bpNichol's poem "em ty" in his 1971 Governor-General's-Award winning visual poetry book *Still Water* – a seemingly slight poem that implies productive erasure. One of the earliest and largest was British painter Tom Phillips' 1965-70 *A Humument*, derived from W.H. Mallock's obscure 1892 novel *A Human Document*[15] Phillips drew and painted over most of every page of Mallock's novel, leaving most visible only selected passages of text which combined to tell – or reveal – a rival story. Also early was British conceptual artists Terry Atkinson and Michael Baldwin's 1967 *Map Not to Indicate* – a map of North America with all but Iowa and Kentucky erased,[16] recently exhibited at the Tate Britain. Contemporary with these was American poet Ronald Johnson's 1967 work *Radi Os*,[17]composed by deleting text from an 1892 edition of Milton's *Paradise Lost.* Most of these works dramatized the position of an individual in relation to an authoritative mechanically reproduced printed text, with Johnson's work being the most obvious. But all these works echoed Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.*, which obscured the face not of the original Mona Lisa but the faces on cheap postcard copies of it, transforming the "readymade" copies into a limited edition hand-work. Erasure here came with irony: it purported to improve or add to the original – to make it "more," more artisanal, more scarce, more challenging. If the war's erasures had been directed at erasing beauty, as in Ezra Pound's suggestion that it had traded its soldiers' lives for "two gross of broken statues" and "a few thousand battered books" ("Hugh Selwyn Mauberley," Pound 91), erasure art was aiming to create more. In Tom Phillips' work it was directed also at erasing the sort of undistinguished prose that Pte Brown had been made to accept and sign by his military postcards.

I have travelled past Bad Godesberg on two occasions. On the first I was travelling by rail from Trier to Cologne to visit the Ludwig Museum. On the second I was travelling down the Rhine by boat and passed it in the night. In the morning I took a bus to the Neanderthal Museum near Dusseldorf. Pte Brown did not send a postcard from Mons.

Figure 14. Pte Brown's Bad Godesberg postcard.

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[15]

    Phillips considers *A Humument* t to be a "treated text" rather than an "erasure text" because the subtracted words remain visible on the original book's altered pages. He creates his alternate text by highlighting it with colour and linking its parts with hand-drawn lines and balloons. See http://www.tomphillips.co.uk/humument

[16]

    http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/art-language-terry-atkinson-map-to-not-indicate-p01357

[17]

    For a description of *Radi Os* see Selinger 1992.

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