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## Memory, War, and Emotion; disClosure interviews Jay Winter. January 27, 2006

Brandon Absher  
*University of Kentucky*

George Phillips  
*University of Kentucky*

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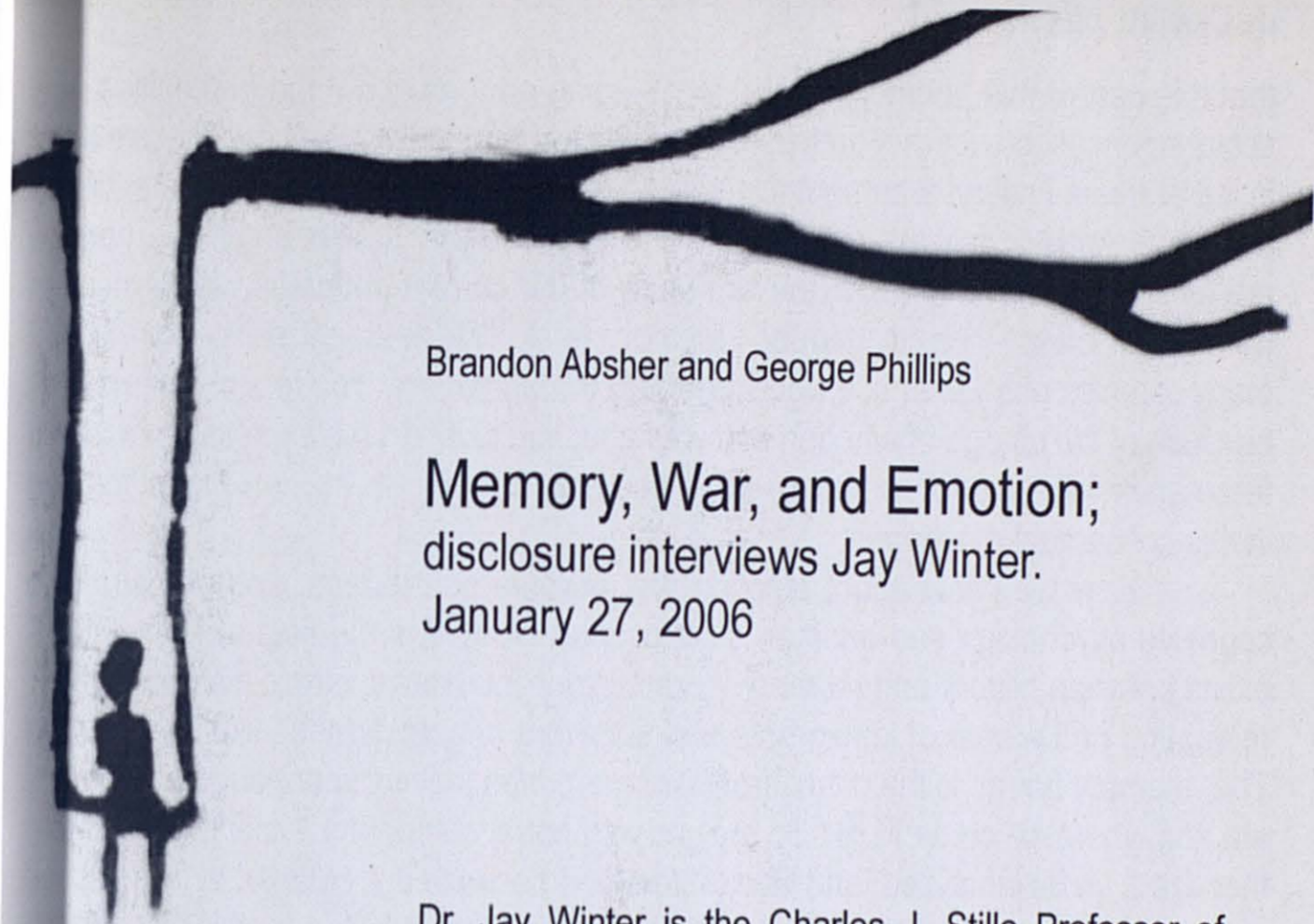
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Brandon Absher and George Phillips

**Memory, War, and Emotion;**  
disclosure interviews Jay Winter.  
January 27, 2006

Dr. Jay Winter is the Charles J. Stille Professor of History at Yale University. He was a university lecturer and reader at Cambridge University until 2001, when he returned to the United States. Specializing in World War I, Dr. Winter has authored a number of books on the social impacts of war, most recently on memory and commemoration. His current book, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*, explores the ways in which emotion and meaning are mediated by the material sites of war memorials. As a guest of the annual Committee on Social Theory's Public Lecture Series, Dr. Winter spoke about "Anger and Memory: The Moral Witness and Two World Wars" January 27, 2006. *disClosure* editors Brandon Absher and George Phillips had the opportunity to meet with Dr. Winter during his visit to the University of Kentucky.

**dC:** As you know the theme of this year's issue of *disClosure* is emotion. Do you think that emotion is overlooked in the humanities in general? Would you say that it is underrepresented as a theme of inquiry?

**JW:** Yes it is. Part of the attraction of emotion is

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that it is part of this "memory boom" that's going on throughout the humanities – social sciences too, for that matter. Everybody's interested in memory. That's true in literature, in history, anthropology, sociology, and politics – it's true of the entire academy. And not only the academy – it's true in fiction, in theater, and film. There are all kinds of ways in which the signature of our current generation is memory rather than class, race, or gender. Memory is big business – it sells. And like many complex phenomena, it works primarily through affect. You retain a memory because of the charge of emotion that was attached to it. So the expression of the fascination with emotion is because this "memory boom" gets its institutional form in this conceptual movement.

How we know about emotion has multiple possibilities: one of them is cognitive psychology and another is philosophy. A third is the field of force that exists between history and memory – oral history, interviews, ethnic histories, the recreation of the past of immigrants and survivors of catastrophes like 9/11, etc. The "memory boom" is the configuration of memories that we share about who we are and where we come from. So my understanding of emotion is that it is under-theorized, under-analyzed, and little understood because it is cloaked by this vast and expanding category of memory. What we need to do is get under this category and find out what people really mean by the word "memory" to understand how emotion and affect are dominant within the humanities and social sciences too.

**dC:** Would you say that the "memory boom" is happening in part because of all the atrocities of the Twentieth Century?

**JW:** Yes. That's right. It's over-determined. The "memory boom" is happening for many reasons. One of them is the need for recognition and acknowledgement of the victims of war in the Twentieth Century. This is true of women, children, and the elderly as much as it is of soldiers. The category of "victim" which used to be related to men in uniform – think of shell shock or post-traumatic stress disorder – has expanded throughout society. There are other sources as well. One of them is that those who can tell their story can claim compensation from the state for injuries. So there's a material dimension to this that led the American Medical Association in 1980 to accept the category of post-traumatic stress disorder as a medical syndrome which therefore produced medical pensions – pensions on the basis of medical disability. The emotion that is attached to shell shock is terror and paralytic fear. So when we look at the question of war and its victims we can see how material issues can be involved in the way in which we as citizens feel – and maybe are wise to feel – responsibility for those who have vanished in war.

Between 1960 and 1990 there's also a gigantic increase – of a factor of at least three or four – of the number of people who go on to higher education in both the United States and in Europe. By that I mean that the demand curve for

cultural products has shifted to the right. There are a lot more people interested in historical museums than ever before. There are a lot more people who are educated – highly educated – than ever before and what they spend their disposable income on cultural products – for example, on the History Channel, on visiting battle fields, on traveling over-seas to exotic or non-exotic places – has increased. There is a material source for the outcome of the "memory boom." For exhibitions, there's now a whole art exhibition specialty called a "blockbuster exhibition," and this never happened before. So you have both a moral and political issue, a material issue, and, I would argue, a shift in the demand for artifacts describing the past and our relationship to it. There are probably a host of other reasons I could add, but the important thing is that it's over-determined. There are so many explanations for it.

And, the likelihood, I think, is pretty clear that emotion will be encapsulated by memory for the foreseeable future. That's on the basis of thirty years of living in Europe. I've only been back here for five years now. But spending most of my professional life in Cambridge, England has led me to see both that I'm American by accent and upbringing and that it's really on both sides of the ocean. I don't think there's much difference.

**dC:** Since we're talking about victimization and you alluded to the emotional consequences of war, could you say something about these emotional consequences? Your work *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* talks a lot about this issue. How do people deal with these emotions and how do they express them?

**JW:** Well, there are two levels to deal with. One is that wars don't stop at the armistice. The idea that you can have a beginning date and a terminal date for war is old-fashioned. The character of violence, both international and domestic, as such is to make legal definitions of warfare redundant and out of date. So, the post-war moment frequently involves violence and involves displacement, dispossession, and the inability to go home again in the full sense of the term. The earthquakes that wars represent have after-shocks that are just as integral to the story of war as the battles themselves. Those involve women, children, and the elderly as much as soldiers. So, it's everybody's story.

*Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* was an attempt to contribute to an already existing literature, the center-piece of which is a great work called *The Great War and Modern Memory* by Paul Fussell.<sup>1</sup> Fussell was a soldier in the Second World War who survived by accident because he was looked after by a professional soldier, who was a sergeant. During the Battle of the Bulge they both hit the ground, a shell over head, and the sergeant didn't stand up. The book is dedicated to him. So the accidental and arbitrary nature of warfare is part of what

Fussell calls the "ironic moment" or in another phrase "modern memory." By that he means the sense that history is a game in which we are trapped, at the moment when someone has torn up the rules. The idea that there is, as it were, anticipation leading to outcome has to be rethought – they're always at a vast distance from each other. The notion that we actually can control the development of our own lives and that we die one at a time – all these, shall we say, predictive elements of life, according to Fussell, came to an end in 1914. Now why did he write that? Because he was a soldier in the Second World War and knew something about the arbitrary nature of survival. But also because he was fed up during the Vietnam War with people talking about body counts when they had no idea about what they were getting into at all. So, it's a post-Vietnam book.

My take on this is slightly different. He created something called "modern memory" in his work saying that the First World War was the moment when Twentieth Century cultural life and literary life, in particular, began. And those writers - Norman Mailer, Thomas Pynchon – who wrote thereafter are standing on the shoulders of giants. This ironic vision of the world – that we're not in control of what we think we are and that, in many respects, we are less free to know the fate that awaits us than somebody in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century – led to the view of modern memory. My book was an attempt to say the opposite. Namely, that what war does is create gigantic cultural ripples, but in a backward as well as a forward direction. It doesn't just create modern memory; it creates un-modern memory at the same time. And by that I mean a reiteration or a flowering of classical romantic and religious images. For instance, the superstition of spirit photography – a move of the sacred out of the churches into the practices we now think are exotic, esoteric, possibly slightly insane.

But millions of people needed help to cope with this dislocated world in 1918 or in 1949. And they got it wherever they found it, whether in churches or not, it didn't matter. My claim is that Fussell wrote a masterpiece, but war turns the cultural clock backward. Not necessarily by creating wonderfully imaginative, original, abstract works which I understand to be Modernism, but by moving the clock back to a moment when the romantic is powerful and classical norms – associated with the Trojan war – flourish and a certain kind of religious sensibility on the pagan parameters of Christianity really connects to us all.

**dC:** In your work you talk about the sites of memorial as civil religion. Yet, you also believe that it's not being used for patriotic purposes. Could you talk about the idea of civil religion and how this isn't connected to patriotism?

**JW:** Yes. The notion is that, especially in France, when people visit war memorials, (this is Antoine Prost's notion and I subscribe to it completely) they're not there to worship the state, they're not there to worship the profession of arms.<sup>2</sup>

They're there to mourn those who fell and they are fundamentally pacifist. War memorials, in their original form, are fundamentally about loss, memory, and "never again." But, over time war memorials – and I say this in *Sites of Memory* – are plastic; they're malleable, they have a half-life, and they begin to lose their original charge as soon as they are unveiled. And other meanings, different meanings, sometimes contradictory meanings can be attached to them.

But the initial purpose of this vast commemorative moment was to make war unthinkable. "Never again" is a phrase of the First World War not the Second. It's not about the Holocaust; it's about the First World War. And, the extraordinary difference between countries has to be recognized. The Nazis obviously did something different. But, in the inter-war years there's an awful lot of soldier's pacifism. It sounds like a contradiction in terms, an oxymoron; it isn't. Soldier's pacifism was a reality. And, these sites made sacred the sacrifices of people not for the purpose of glorifying war or glorifying the nation, but for the purpose of living out the republican ideas they were educated into from the 1870's on when France became a republic again.

What Prost has done is quite extraordinary; he's one of the great historians practicing today. He first of all counts the monuments – 33,000 or 38,000 or something like that, huge numbers, in every little village. He sees what they are and he describes them all; very social scientific. And then, he shifts gears into a kind of lyrical romanticism to describe what they look like and what it felt like to be there. So, when I was originally approached to think about emotion, here's the place to find it. Think of memory as being built into material objects. Material objects have narratives to them; it's for us to tease them out. And when you do, you get the emotional charge. So, emotion never exists outside the language in which it is expressed or the objects to which it gives expression. That's what some people call the linguistic turn. But, I think it's true that if you look at objects of commemorative form or objects of art, the emotional charge is in it. It's up to us to pull it out.

Think of Mia Lynn's Vietnam Veteran's Memorial – here's a huge charge. It's in the object. The important thing is that it comes out in our relationship to that object when we interrogate ourselves. "What are we doing here by looking at this?" And she made the surface colorless to enable us to look at our own faces, to literally say that. That's in my view one of the things the focus on emotion can enable us to do – to find those sites where your own engagement with the subject is made manifest. And when that happens, when the charge of the object, your own emotive contribution, creates something new, something different, some people call it an anti-monument. In other words, it's about the relationship between the object and you and not about some message which is didactic and hortatory. It's about us; not so much about them. It's about the living and not about the dead.

**dC:** You mentioned museums earlier. Does it take away some of that emotional charge when you have an object removed from its site and put in artificial places like museums?

**JW:** It can. You're right, there is a problem there. One thing though that makes a difference is that these sites – museum sites – where objects are artificially located are sites where “universal history” and “family history” cross. People come to exhibitions and bring their family histories with them. So what they do with the objects is use them as triggers to either contextualize or actualize stories about their Great-Uncle Harry or Aunt Bess or whoever.

By making it possible for people who are not in the academy to participate in the narrative of the past, we now face a historical public which is much more voracious in its consumption of historical books and publications than ever before. Most of which are not written by professionals. They're written by all kinds of people. What's wrong with that? This is the field of public history. This is a very powerful and, I think, interesting field. The internet is all over it. So is the History Channel. So are all kinds of digitized materials.

I did a series on the history of the First World War for PBS and BBC nine years ago and that wouldn't have been possible to do in the 1950's. When television was born it wasn't there for that purpose. It took time for there to be a technical revolution that enabled history to encapsulate emotion. And in many respects, there are two critical breakthroughs necessary for this. The first was the invention of the audiovisual cassette in the 60's where you could record voices which are emotive. The second one is Ken Burns' series on the U.S Civil War. Ken did it through banjo music. He used music to give it a motif and to give the loser – the Southerner – the narrative voice, there's music there. So, you record the voice and then you record the music. And, when you do both of those things technically, you can create an affective feel surrounding history which sells it and disseminates it to tens of millions of people. That's at the core of the memory boom. And it does do things that are important. There are, of course, lousy versions of this. Not everybody is a Ken Burns.

A good deal of the time the subject of war is now taught in different ways than it has been before. It's no longer primarily about weaponry or shock-troops on the cutting edge. It's about a test of society, a test of large groups of people from very different walks of life. And, it's also about individuals who are trapped or caught up in something that they never anticipated or didn't foresee. So, for instance, the idea that war is about generals is gone. Who's the commander in Iraq now? I don't know who it is. It doesn't matter anymore. It's not Westmoreland. It's not Vietnam. It's another world where war is diffused and has all kinds of faces attached to it and, as we now know, it doesn't come to an end.

**dC:** If you think about war as more diffuse and as about individuals, and if you think the most salient and lasting feature of it is mourning, why is it that states continue to go to war with one another?

**JW:** The problem is that it's not states that go to war anymore. It is transnational groups and sub-national groups who attack in such a way as to make states react. The nation state is still there, but its borders are porous. Al-Qaeda is not a national organization. Colombia hasn't been a state for fifty years. It has four or five different armies all jockeying for position. Yugoslavia fell apart. The notion that war is that institution which defines a state is going out of date. Globalization makes it difficult. Ecological problems, climate change, etc. these are transnational issues. In Europe – where I've been for the last year and where I taught for most of my life – there is something now which is supra-national. The law of the European Union is superior to the law of the individual states in the same way as the Supreme Court is superior to state law. That was a fundamental step on the way to the unification of the United States. I'm not sure it's going to happen in Europe, but it's there. And every country that joins the European Union has to accept that supremacy in the judicial construction of the Europe. So, the state isn't what it used to be. It's still there, but wars happen between and among groups some of which are states and a lot of which are not. So, war is now fragmented into smaller units and smaller and sometimes bigger forms that don't describe national boundaries. There's something else.

**dC:** Those groups that are waging war with states – like 9/11, which are intended as acts of war- are doing these things because they fail to appreciate the mourning that goes along with war and these acts of violence?

**JW:** I don't know if scholars later will find this especially. But, in my view 9/11 was an expansion of the civil war within Islam that was going on for 30 years before. What happened was that three major states kept up Western interests in the Islamic world: Nigeria, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. The war within Islam is to say that such a westernization of the societies and religious beliefs that goes along with American development is destroying Islam. And it's one minute to midnight. So what they needed to do is to cut off the hand that supports these profane Islamic states. And the way to do that is to get the United States to pull out. So, the attack on the World Trade Centers was an attempt, if anything, to provoke the United States to go in to the Arab world and, therefore, to horrify Muslims even further - to show them the reality of the base character of the regimes under which they live. You want to overthrow Saudi Arabia, you get the United States to come in and show what Saudi Arabia really is – the McDonald's of the West.

When the time comes, the notion of losses – both to the people who

have been murdered and to themselves – is relatively unimportant because the civil war has been going on for twenty years without anybody noticing it at all. The numbers who have been tortured and killed are much greater than the numbers who died in 9/11 or even in the War in Iraq. But, all that is irrelevant once a state is attacked and the state configures it as a war between states and actually finds one to destroy in order to be conventional. Saddam Hussein was overthrown, I think, because an Arab state had to be overthrown and Afghanistan wasn't good enough – it was too thin of a state. It wasn't because of weapons. Whether they lied about it or not, we know they weren't there. You can make your own judgment about when that was – whether before they decided to go or after. The critical point, in my view, is that the context of war is transnational.

The attack on the United States on 9/11 was an attack on the civil war support that the United States has given to these three major oil controlling or producing nations – especially Saudi Arabia and Nigeria who are big oil producers – in order to stop them from becoming fully fundamentalist. We can argue that they were wrong or right, but their immorality seems clear. Their cruelty to the women and men on those planes is evident in the World Trade Center attacks. The stupefying brutality of what they did is unquestionable. But the framework is of a war of a kind that we haven't seen much of before. It doesn't look like the war that American leaders of both parties want to talk about because we want to talk about one state versus another. That's the way we conceptualize war and it's not like that anymore. Adjusting to it is another matter. All the leaders go to Condoleezza Rice and she was a Soviet expert. The Cold War was a war between two big people with satellites and surrogates. Things aren't like that anymore. It's no surprise that they couldn't handle the intelligence information, since they tried to fit it into boxes that weren't relevant to it anymore.

**dC:** Since we're speaking about 9/11 and issues surrounding that, what's your opinion about the World Trade Center memorial site? The architects say in their opening statement, "This design proposes a space that resonates with the feelings of loss and absence that were generated by the death and destruction at the World Trade Center." Also, Mayor Bloomberg said something that was very interesting. He believes that the site is actually for our children. He claims, "It is so that those who visit that sacred ground know what happened there and why so many people died to protect our freedoms." What are your thoughts about this and how we feel about it? Also, what do you think of Mayor Bloomberg's invocation of the sacred here?

**JW:** That's not his invention; it's Rudy Giuliani. They took two steel girders and left them like a cross in the pit that was dug in all the rubble. Outside there was a sign saying "This is to honor all the heroes who died in 9/11." Who decided

that they were all heroes? A cleaning person accidentally sweeping the staircase when the plane blew up – what's heroic about that? So the notion of sacrifice and heroism is what gives the public officials the language of the sacred. I find it repellant. It seems to me to use the concept of the sacred for political advantage is questionable at best and hypocritical at worst. So, the deployment of these symbols makes the notion of holy war easier for Americans to accept.

"Jihad" in Islam is a direct copy of crusader language. "Jihad" comes out of the crusades and not the other way around. To see what is happening now as a crusade is monstrous. First of all, it would never end. Secondly, it would mean a war between the West and Islam which is not a war that the West is going to win. There are too many people out there – there are more than a billion Muslims. You can't wage a war of that kind. And yet, it seems necessary to make the political space for the decisions that have been taken by those in power. Democrats have been just as fast to use this language as Republicans. So this is not Bush-bashing.

The second thing is that, for what it's worth, both here and in Berlin my advice was sought about what to do because of what I've done in France on war memorials. The Berlin memorial was of the Holocaust and I was approached by the German government and the same thing happened in the city of New York. Here it wasn't the federal government, it was municipal. In both cases, my advice was to leave the site empty. The less said, the more it means. If you want to show what happened there to your children or grandchildren, leave it empty. I don't know if you've been down there, but it's so eery. Every time I went I would look up to see where the Towers went. It's almost like a reflex in the back of my head. What you see is this big space and then you see nothing. So, in my mind's eye I think I'd somehow become figured toward the buildings and they weren't there. It was absolutely eery to see the space of nothing. That is one of the most difficult and complex emotions you can imagine. You can feel something, but to feel nothing – that's hard. They did it. They had the space. But this is the most high-priced real estate in the Manhattan, maybe even the world. The German decision was taken for other reasons but it was also right smack in the middle of the official city next to the Brandenburg Gate.

If the issue is what kind of memorial would you build to remind people in fifty years of what happened here, I don't think architecture is very good at it. Minimalism of the kind Mia Lynn did with the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial is much greater than bombastic stuff where the sacred comes out. But, politicians can't live with minimalism; they don't get the headlines, nobody listens. So, they're compromised time and time again. In turn what might be a major achievement like Mia Lynn's most of the time doesn't get built because it's about something rather than about nothing. War is about both – it's about something and it's about nothing. It's about the nothingness that accompanies lost life but it's also about the series of

decisions that were taken – maybe on the basis of inadequate knowledge, maybe on the basis of real knowledge – that change the world in which we live. So, going back to the Michael Bloomberg statement, I don't think he'll ever get what he asked for. He'll never get a monument that will tell the children fifty years from now what happened here – not with the political pressures under which all politicians work. However, if he had left it empty – the one part of Manhattan that has nothing in it, quite simply nothing – this would be weird, eerie, and uncanny. This is exactly what the attack of 9/11 was. It was a gash on the earth like Mia Lynn's memorial that is irresistible; it attracts you to see "What in the world is this." "This is going into the ground" – six or eight floors when the towers crashed. It can't be done. It has to be done in some super-duper multi-story setting where the acts of verticality – and maybe New York had to do this – suggest hope. That's why you can't leave it empty, you have to give hope. And, hope architecturally is always pointed up.

**dC:** This is reminiscent of your discussion of Verdun in *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*. Would you draw any connections here? It seems as though what you're suggesting is similar to what was done there. There's this open space and just a scar on the face of the earth.

**JW:** Well the forests have grown back but they haven't rebuilt the towns. Some of the towns are completely gone but the forts are just the way they were. Sometimes nature just takes over. Maybe that would happen in New York. The claim of minimal signification is frequently a claim for maximal effect because the more you can identify the symbols of a commemorative form the less free you are to bring your own emotion to it. So, if you go to something like the Lincoln Memorial, for example, its figurative character already tells you, "Here's a wise man sitting down looking over his people." It's over-sized, laying down the law, the man who set his people free. All of those things are there. What black Americans think about it or white Americans I don't know, but the story is there for you – it's already there. Saying less is frequently saying more.

When nature takes over a site there is an act of imagination to put your self back in this place where not a single tree existed. Everything, absolutely everything, was destroyed in this twelve month battle of bombardment – probably two million shells were used. I think there are many examples of this, where if you create a memorial, you frequently tell the story in a hortatory or didactic way. This is one reason why I think Gettysburg is good as a field – it's very hard to find where the Gettysburg Address happened. Nobody heard it at the time. It was just "over there" somewhere. Whereas if you want a very big, grandiose monument, you'll be told what to feel and what to think. That's what's going to happen with the World Trade Center. I think the pressures are too great to let it alone. The symbols will be very mixed and probably very difficult for our grandchildren to

figure out. Let's hope they do a better job than we do.

**dC:** War isn't just about grief. There are people who are angry and people who are filled with hate. There's the joy of victory. There are all kinds of things that happen. You talk a lot about the cultural and material consequences of grief and mourning. Do you think there are similar consequences to these emotions? Would there be sites of anger, fear, or joy like there are sites of mourning? Are there places we can go to feel these things?

**JW:** Well the choices seem to me to be limited. First, there's the battlefield itself. Like the World Trade Center, the battlefields can be retaken by nature and sometimes by construction. So, if you imagine the Warsaw Ghetto as a place where dreadful things happened, it's now a housing district of relatively pleasant high rises. So where do you go there? There is a structure there, but where do you go to see it? It isn't very easy to find. Battlefields are all over Europe and they aren't easy to find. I still believe that small is beautiful, the miniature is the key to these gigantic stories. The smaller they are the better.

There's one, for instance, on Rosenstrasse in Berlin which is very small – it's a little park. It tells the story of three hundred German women in 1943 in Berlin whose husbands were partially Jewish. The husbands were taken out to be deported. These three hundred women – God knows with what courage – sat in front of Gestapo headquarters on Rosenstrasse. They had a sit-down strike to demand their men back. And I almost didn't believe it when I first read it, but they got them back. Yes the Gestapo put machine guns in front of them. Yes they could have murdered them all. But they didn't. Instead the men came back. One of the children of one of the couples, the woman of whom was in the sit-down strike husband of whom was in the prison, did the sculpture that is in the street telling the story of his mother's courage and that of her three hundred friends to get their men back. Now, that story is tiny. It's very small compared to the Second World War. God knows it is infinitesimally smaller than Band of Brothers or Saving Private Ryan. But, that is a space which has anger, courage, hope, and a lot of other things and it has loss too. This is the only place where this happened. All the other streets of Berlin have nothing of the kind. I suppose my sense is that the way in which emotion can be expressed is outside the gates of the political to start with and, secondly, it must focus on very small groups. The bigger we get in the field of the representation of emotion the more likely we will lose the affective charge at the core of a story. Small is beautiful in this regard.

**dC:** The last thing I wanted to ask you is whether you think these sites let us go through cathartic experience. Do we let go of our emotions when we visit these places? Or do they let us have our grief or anger?

**JW:** I think monuments mediate grief. They don't necessarily let us loose it. I've seen hundreds of people at different war memorials – including Mia Lynn's Vietnam Veteran's Memorial and all over Europe – who touch the names on the war memorial. The reason they do that is that they get a reality check. They know what they lost, but they know also what they haven't lost. They can go on living. The purpose of the visit is not so much to forget about the dead, but to recognize that there is life that carries on anyway and not to feel that this is a crime – that it is an insult or some kind of profanity to acknowledge loss and to grieve for it and go back to your life. This is, by the way, deeply ingrained in Jewish culture. After a year you have to get up and if you stay in your mourning after a year, you're committing a sin. Paralysis is not necessary. It's not living, it's shadow living. Many of these sites of commemorative form are places that mediate grief so that people can get up and live their lives again.

### Notes

(Endnotes)

<sup>1</sup> Paul Fussell, *The Great War in Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

<sup>2</sup> See Antoine Prost, *Republican Identities in War and Peace: Representations of France in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Oxford University