

VINCENT SHERRY

Introduction

“The *Great War*,” yes, of 1914–18: the adjective the contemporary record applied to the event emphasizes still some monumental, colossal quality in it. For reasons that were unclear, or that changed and became even more unclear, there were 10 million dead in less than half a decade, as the major nation states of Europe and North America aligned and engaged in a conflict that mobilized, galvanized, and exhausted their resources of human, financial, intellectual, and spiritual capital. On the landscape of modern time this war stands accordingly as a landmark, a milestone or turning point. Yet the differences it supposedly locates between centuries new and old blur now as history mixes three – the twenty-first, the twentieth, the nineteenth – into the line of sight. If it is famed as a “watershed event,” that is, the horizon it defines keeps disappearing, but not into unfamiliar distances, rather into recognizable similarities. The cinema that depicts the massive battles of this first mass war presents the vistas in which we see, as it were, miniature or toy versions of ourselves: the stick-figure militia in epic perspectives, a soldiery jerking forward toward certain death with the odd bravado of mechanical dolls – the dream of the machine, the whole romance of industrial technology that enchanted the cultural imagination of the nineteenth century, all of this was concluded and grimly disproved in the awful outcomes of mass mechanized warfare. A cynicism particular to the twentieth century looks back to this Great War as its major, shaping occasion.

In its geo-political outlines, too, subsequent history has followed the model of the specific military configuration of the conflict. The face-off situation of the two major armies on the Western Front provided the initial image, the most vividly material form, for those rival alliances that underlay the Second World War and that continued (with changes of side) through the Cold War. The many dreads of the twentieth century find their prime type and defining instance in the four years (and more) of stalemated trench warfare: the inevitable menace of that second war, approaching through the 1920s and 1930s, and then the threats of nuclear conflagration over the next

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fifty years. Another legacy lies in the distortions that total war enforced on the discourses of a culture, in the totalizations of view – the exaggerations that stimulated the required popular involvement, the hate campaigns, the cartoon enmities, all in all, the mechanism of oppositional thinking and the bogus extremities it effected. Gigantism is a feature equally of the political and military dimensions of mass warfare, and it scales much of the subsequent experience of the century to its intimidations, at once intimate and immense. The figure on the poster commanding recruits for the new mass armies of 1914 is the image within the image of Big Brother, insignia of a totalitarian dictatorship that represents just one later state and stage of (this first) total war.

As the First World War, then, this Great War tends to be represented by political historians as one in a series reiterating a type. No less correctly, however, and perhaps more tellingly, historians of literature tend to find a record of the novelty it constituted to contemporary sensibilities and, so, of the shock it goes on reporting. Its singularity, the difference it made, is preserved as a presentiment by British poets and novelists in particular, and even through the second half of its embattled century. Philip Larkin, one of the most representative voices in the literary culture of post-World War II England, expresses this attitude in 1960 in “MCMXIV,” which proclaims

Never such innocence,
 Never before or since,
 As changed itself to past
 Without a word –

Larkin images this “innocence” in a poetic transcription of a familiar photograph, where a crowd of young men in London on the first Monday of August 1914 peers into a camera that stands, in effect, as ourselves – into a future whose terrible truths we know far better, or worse, than they:

These long uneven lines
 Standing as patiently
 As if they were stretched outside
 The Oval or Villa Park,
 The crowns of hats, the sun
 On moustached archaic faces
 Grinning as if it were all
 An August bank holiday lark . . .¹

Those “archaic faces” image their own (last) prewar moment on the far side of a divide that we project from our own point in historical time. This is a division which Larkin reiterates through an allusion later in the poem

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1 Central London Recruiting Depot, August 1914

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to the “Domesday lines,” a reference to the first land survey of Britain, drawn up in 1085–86, and an image here of some ancient or residual form of order for the British landscape of early 1914. This configuration of distant antiquity represents a location Larkin establishes from the outset of the poem by inscribing his title in Roman numerals, which present that 1914 date, it seems, in some remote sign system, some alternative calendar, an unpronounceable chronology, like some *ur-zeit* toward which, in effect, the numbers count backwards. Larkin applies these touches, not just to set that older moment in the gloaming of a romantic nostalgia, but to magnify the feeling of disparity between Then and Now, Before and After.

While later writers see the war as a boundary marker in the history of values and attitudes, this tendency is evident especially and first of all in the writing of that moment. Already in 1914, the book of sonnets by Rupert Brooke that was published in 1915, that title date is mythopoeically inscribed. Now, Brooke’s sonnets exemplify the decorous measures of the “Georgian” style in verse writing, which had been in vogue since 1911; this was a poetics of elegant simplicity, where a classical transparency in literary vocabulary combined with a steady grace of verbal music and the deep appeal of pastoral’s imaginative prospects:

There are waters blown by changing winds to laughter
 And lit by the rich skies, all day. And after,
 Frost, with a gesture, stays the waves that dance
 And wandering loveliness. He leaves a white
 Unbroken glory, a gathered radiance,
 A width, a shining peace, under the light.²

In late summer 1914, this poetic sensibility turns to accept and even celebrate the emergent event. But this is a rhythmical diction which, even as it rises to idealize the advent of war, outdates itself in doing so. Sestet to “The Dead,” these six lines offer an elegy for soldiers dying already in numbers that multiply Brooke’s cherished “he” into *anomie*. And the “radiance” on the Western Front “gathered” no benign prospects “under the light” of its flares, it revealed a bone-yard of astonished horror at the atrocities technological weapons had effected on the dead. Brooke’s sumptuous testament is most moving in its irrelevance. A first year forgone as soon as the second, “1914” is already commemorated and raised and framed from this far side of time in a legend of precious loss, one that feels as though it were made real by Brooke’s own death in the second year of war.

But the image in which Brooke greeted the bracing claims of the new martial experience – “as swimmers into cleanness leaping”³ – remains vivid in cultural memory, among other reasons, for the profound irony it affords

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in historical retrospect. It is the same reason that returns Larkin, forty-five years later, to the moment it holds in freeze frame. Like the figures in the early-August 1914 photograph, the bodies of Brooke's fabled army float for ever in a sort of mid-air sempiternity, suspended between the ideal England from which they have taken their leap and . . . well, the rest of the century, which is no cleansing pleasance of late summer. "Never such innocence again." Whether or not this "innocence" is invented in historical retrospect, whether or not it functions just as a way of reckoning a not so wonderful present in relation to an ever better past, the map of cultural history offers no site for this act of imaginative psychology so inviting as the moment of the Great War.

Yet the nostalgia can be upheld, it may be supported by the sturdier material of standard intellectual and social histories. The Europe of 1914 was politically and ethnically variegated but it was also, to some considerable degree, culturally unified, and it was held together under a standard of values whose collapse may count as a more than abstract tragedy. Liberalism is a term whose significance is always relative to a particular instant in cultural time, insofar as the liberation it pronounces as its namesake value will be gauged in relation to the constraints of contemporary convention, while the freedoms it wins will evolve into subsequent expectations. Nonetheless, the dominant concepts of this intellectual tradition – the value of rationalism, a faith in Progress, the code of reasonable freedom – enjoyed a particular dominance in the public culture of turn-of-the-century Europe. And the influence of this body of philosophical attitude was being proven in a number of actual political situations: with the power of the Social Democratic Party in Germany, in the ongoing mandate the Liberal government in Britain enjoyed since its landslide victory in the elections of 1906, and in the continued optimism of *la belle époque* in France. It is the force of contrast between the establishing premises of those cultural values – rational gradualism, technological progress, scientific meliorism – and the hitherto unimaginable atrocity of mass mechanical conflict that makes this Great War stand out as the sizeable event it really was. Indeed, it stands on the seismic line of divide between centuries, or, as we perceive it, between Then and Now, Better and Worse.

Granted, this majority consciousness of liberal values and practices was being contested by increasingly powerful oppositional minorities. On the political spectrum, these ranged (by conventional measures) from right to left: from the exertions of neo-monarchical interests such as *Action française* to the threats of working-class insurgency and underclass revolution, not only in Germany and Russia but also in France and Great Britain. The English version of this pan-European phenomenon is recounted memorably by George Dangerfield, in *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (1935).

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Dangerfield argues that a broad if loosely strung coalition of interests from the workers' and women's movements combined with the constant volatility of Ireland to threaten the center of Liberal political power in Britain. In this reading, the war does not undermine the existing structures of British society, as it does in most popular understandings. It serves instead to absorb the forces of internal dissent, to project these outward toward a shared enemy and, so, to deflect the energies of incipient revolt. As engagingly anecdotal as it is boldly proposed, Dangerfield's version of history continues to exert an appeal to readers for reasons that may include also the validity of its sometimes daring argument.

What *would have occurred*, however, remains a possibility unproven in time. And the cultural authority of intellectual and political Liberalism was sufficiently strong to withstand those apparent challenges – the resistance it generated, indeed, by virtue of the hegemony it enjoyed. A sensible outlook on this complex situation is to see the Europe of 1914 balanced on an increasingly precarious platform of old codes, enfeebled beliefs. This system may have been ready to fall, even fated to fall, but the fact that its framework of ideals collapsed manifestly in the conflagration of war makes this the marking event for the time's turn. And the main literature of major record seems to attain this status by witnessing, in fact insisting on, this sense of difference.

It is this sense of difference that is scored into the signal phenomenon of this moment in cultural and literary history: “modernism.” As a comprehensive term, modernism includes in that emphatic suffix an understanding that it is not just modernity as a chronological condition that is being referenced: the word invokes a self-conscious awareness and assertion of this modernity, all in all, some enabling claim of difference to precedent convention, to the way things *were*. Of course the movement or energy that we label “modernism” was forming already and even altering itself in the years before the war, when the turn of the century had stirred a sense of passage between Old and New. Developments in material science and technological production also provided powerful coadjutors to aesthetic invention of comparable kind. Yet the most profoundly modernist writing is not marked by a simple optimistic confidence in progress or novelty (even its own). This literature has in its imaginative content some record of disruption in the conventional expectations of liberal modernity, some experience of the absconding or compromise of those promises. These intimations are enjoined on an alert awareness most forcibly in the circumstances of this Great War. And so the literature of properly modernist record testifies in its various ways to the provocative possibilities of this moment. To take the major names of London modernism in the war years: Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and Virginia Woolf all

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work in ways that echo and answer to the crisis they have registered in the mainstay frameworks of intellectual and political Liberalism. The unmaking of its once established language compels these literary inventors to remake it, and this novel imaginative idiolect can be heard as the inner record of this change-over moment in cultural time.

In literary bibliographies outside the modernist canon, too, the war marks the occasion to which any number of substantial transformations, all manner of significant initiatives, can be attributed. These far-reaching, influential developments can be followed by various registers in the several national traditions of pan-European and transatlantic literary cultures. In Britain, for vivid instance, the Georgian sensibility of the prewar years was not only challenged, it was ultimately transformed by the dire realities of the martial experience it was called upon to witness. The high-gloss, arcadian surface of Brooke and his companion talents lost its sheen, its credibility. A new convention formed around the strong models of (the later) Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, which featured in their discordant tones a lyric of often fierce realism. In French writing of the war, it is the novel that provides the genre of most significant and conspicuous invention. A newly daring naturalism came into the representation of protagonist-narrators' martial experience, originally and most influentially Henri Barbusse's *Le Feu* (1916). In Germany, too, the precedent conventions of fiction writing were staggered by accounts like Ernst Jünger's *In Stahlgewittern* (1920), whose title (*Storm of Steel*) fairly augurs the foreign objects raining tempestuously, invasively, into the stately cadences of German prose in the prewar years. Even the international "avant-garde," a label that indicates the militarization of literary and artistic activities that this "advanced guard" proclaimed in the years leading up to war, was compelled to reconceive such orientations, when, like Keats's poet, they awoke and found that their dreams had come true. American writers were catapulted into a frame of international reference to which only the most urbane and privileged of their compatriots had acceded in the prewar decades. Participation in the war strongly altered the ways in which the new nation could imagine itself, and the intensity and extent of that experience may be measured, inversely, by the relative brevity of the country's actual involvement in the military action of the war.

The literary history of this tumultuous moment is represented in a comprehensive account in the essays gathered here. As a glance at the table of contents may indicate, the three-part organization implements a two-fold system of division: in time and space, by historical phase and national geography. Thus the literature of (roughly) contemporary record is examined in Parts I and II, whose division accommodates the several major sources of its production: the extensive preserves in the British tradition in Part I, the work done

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from the Continent and by Americans in II. Part III then follows the legacy of the war as a subject in the subsequent record of the century, variously, in British fiction, in transatlantic literary criticism, and in visual media.

The apparently unequal portions afforded the material of Britain (Part I) and the European Continent and America (Part II) reflect the fact that, for a number of reasons in cultural history, the literature written in English retains the largest readership. Within these conditions, the specifically British record of the war remains the most popular, the most powerful and affective. So intense is the imaginative register in British literary history, indeed, that the import of the event can be followed in the difference it made genre by genre, in writing done by women in particular, and in view of the special grouping “modernism” confers as a term on a sensibility distinctive to this moment in modern English cultural time – these are the several categories of classification and analysis in the five chapters of this first part. The same conditions have nonetheless generated a somewhat insular scheme of literary history for many readers, a sort of English version of the *New Yorker’s* map of the universe. From this outlook, the diverse work of other national literatures shifts into distances or peripheries in which it shrinks in significance – or, when it offers its monuments, like Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*, these tend to stand isolated, contextless, like the end points of processes whose histories, whose other cultural productions, have gone missing. If, then, in contrast to Part I, Part II appears heterogeneous in content, it represents nonetheless a dedicated attempt to redress English near-sightedness. It indicates the variety and particularity of other, non-British traditions and representations.

Where, in those several national legacies, the war varies as a subject of imaginative construction, it also moves through time and changes as a function of the developing memory of the twentieth century. How it is reconstituted in subsequent literary fiction, and how critical scholarship continues to negotiate the terms in which the significance of the original literature is understood: these are the coverage areas of the first two chapters of Part III. They are complemented in the third, the last chapter of the book, with a view to the ongoing, changing representation of the war in twentieth-century film and video. The war coincided with the coming of “the movies” as a form of popular entertainment, and the conventions of this emergent medium were shaped to some significant degree by current political conditions, most notably, by the new demand for national propaganda, which various governments implemented through the movie-houses. The historically informed understanding which Laura Marcus offers in this last chapter complements and extends the sort of carefully contextualized assessments which the other chapters, dedicated to the several literary legacies, also present.

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In the section on the writing of British provenance, Paul Edwards demonstrates how the memoir, a genre invested with specific expectations about class and masculinity, even natural landscape, certainly writing style, was challenged and changed by the unprecedented event of the war. The stability of English social structures, which find their microcosm in the country's military hierarchy and their imaginative representation in the framework of the novel, is the issue addressed centrally by David Trotter; he follows the response of the "combat novel" in particular to the extraordinary pressures being exerted on existing class systems by trench warfare. A similarly targeted report on the impact of these conditions on lyric poetry shows in Edna Longley's account of the transformation this subgenre underwent during the war. Accordingly, she presents this event as the main context and provocation for the sort of innovation literary historians have formerly found mainly in "modernism." The particularly liberating effect the war extended to women is recovered by Claire Buck as the circumstance in which we may understand their new depth and exceptional breadth of literary activity. Self-representation in writing is a process that complements and extends a developmental gender history that features, not just new opportunities for work but, ultimately, consequentially, the acquisition of women's long-sought right of suffrage and, in the franchise, the capacity of potentially meaningful social representation. As an event in political and intellectual history, of course, the war provides the defining crisis of mainstream European liberalism, nowhere more than in Britain. Here the majority Liberal government was required to rationalize involvement in a conflict in a way that defied the major, sustaining precedents of its partisan traditions, its standards of moral rationalism as well as its logic of international policy. How this breakdown in the public language of English Liberalism is assimilated as the condition of major literary innovation by London modernists is the critical story I tell in the last chapter of this first section.

Liberal models of culture and history had been contested as well by the energies of a Continental avant-garde. Its militarization of the arts is studied comprehensively, in the first essay of Part II, by Marjorie Perloff, who follows the complications of prewar motive through postwar consequences. The wide range of international reference here also stakes out the larger area of coverage in this second section of the book. Catharine Brosman's chapter on the French writing of the war situates the event within an extended record of national memory. She shows how the conflict is appropriated and reacted to by separate interest groups in French culture in 1914 and then replayed variously, changeably, in the subsequent decades. For quite specific reasons, as Stanley Corngold proposes in the next chapter, the earliest moment of the war seems to be localized and preserved in German cultural memory. At the

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outset, the event effects the sort of unifying experience a new nation takes as an exhilarating affirmation; not surprisingly, wide-eyed zealotry combines with incipient dismay. This range of feelings plays in varying combinations through the major works of record and culminates in the consciousness of that most complex monument of the early postwar age, Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. In America, the relatively lengthy period of "latency" between the outbreak of war and national involvement encloses a moment in which the writers of this country can project its role in a kind of ideal, imaginary time, some prospective myth of American destiny in world history. John Matthews's chapter captures the sensibility special to this early phase and, in telling contrast, sets out the record of reversal and recognition in the hallmark novels of the next two decades, in effect, in the canon of modern American fiction.

The later phases of this ongoing engagement are surveyed and mapped in the specific locale of post-Second World War British fiction in the first essay of Part III, where Sharon Ouditt shows how the original literature of the Great War is consistently rewritten over successive decades. What this tradition witnesses in the constant process of reimagining the war is the great capacity of its initial literary record, not just to be recycled, but to be rediscovered, and to be found anew because the recognitions it registers are instinct, it seems, with the presumptions, the underlying character, of our own developing modernity. Understandably, then, the historical content and depth of its original literature represents a virtually inexhaustible resource for scholars. The internal logic of a forty year process of critical reconnaissance, here as the chronology of its major phases and dominant topics, is set out as an intellectual history-in-miniature in the chapter by James Campbell. This is a tradition whose frame of reference has expanded gradually over four decades, beginning with a virtual immersion in the canon of British war writing but extending at length to an international and transhistorical outlook and interdisciplinary set of attentions. The present volume takes its place in this evolving series.

Conventional gender identities are reinvented. The narratives of rationalism, those models of logical progress now forgone as a promise for history, are recast. The avant-garde is turned forward through the war into a retrograde state, a neoclassicism as guarded and fragile as the postwar calm of the early 1920s. The stories which literary historians propose as the plot or consequence of the war are as various as this multifarious event. Each of these meanings appears as a mostly local truth, a glyph dispatched as it were from just one of those multiple fronts. Thus the use and value of a volume such as this may be the gesture it makes toward the composite quality of the bigger picture – and toward representing a necessary plurality of views,