

Evelyn Copley. *Representing War: Form and Ideology in First World War Narratives*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1994. Pp. xii, 261. \$45.00.

*Representing War: Form and Ideology in First World War Narratives* performs a number of useful and interesting tasks. At its most down-to-earth level it is a critique of many of the best-known works of literature dealing with trench warfare in the First World War, such as Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That*, David Jones's *In Parenthesis*, and Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. What is new in Copley's approach to these works is her use of structuralist narratology (developed by Gérard Genette) and methods of ideological critique derived from postmodernist poststructuralist thinkers such as Jacques Derrida. Linda Hutcheon's writings on postmodernism are also an important influence on this study. Its principal aim is to look carefully at the message conveyed by *formal* elements in these narratives (their use of narrative structures and realistic techniques of description, for instance) as opposed to the meaning of the *content*. The form, Copley says persuasively, is an important part of the message conveyed.

The result of her investigation, by and large, is that these texts contain important contradictions. Most of the texts oppose the war, with all of its horrors, but their formal elements show that they are complicitous with the ideologies that produced the war. This argument is based on the following schema, which is repeated several times at various places in the book and seems to me to constitute its main theme: the "Enlightenment project," which originated in the eighteenth century, promised "infinite social progress through rational organization" (4); it led directly to the appalling catastrophe of the First World War; this showed that the Enlightenment project was thoroughly discredited and "had lost currency" (4); many writers who describe the horrors of trench warfare are vehemently opposed to the war, but their formal strategies show that they have not abandoned their belief in Enlightenment values; their books, therefore, contain internal contradictions.

The Enlightenment project is based on the assumption that human beings can be rational, objective, and intelligent in choosing what they want to do. The authors of these war narratives show that they are complicitous with this ideology when they calmly, objectively, and rationally describe events in the war as though they were taking photographs of what was happening. Another index of complicity is their tendency to make sense of the war by emplotting their experience as a rite of passage from immaturity to maturity, or as a brief interlude in the broader march of human progress. Copley writes that "the horrors they witnessed had to be mastered through narrative strategies which affirmed ideas of self-control, order, and progress" (116): "They were thus prepared to describe the nightmare of war but not to accept fully

the implication that the Enlightenment ideals they had volunteered to defend were, in fact, bankrupt" (117).

What Cobley says about these narratives would appear to be correct, and it needs to be taken into account by those specializing in war literature. She also has valuable things to say about Jones's *In Parenthesis*, and provides an epilogue about accounts of the Vietnam War, which she thinks are equally riven by internal contradictions. For those of us who are not concerned primarily with war literature, I think the main interest of the book lies in its assumption of postmodern and post-structuralist ideology, and in the many contrasts Cobley describes between modernism and postmodernism. We could apply to her own book Cobley's method of thinking about the First World War narratives. What hidden contradictions does it contain? This issue is important because one of the main intellectual challenges of the 1990s, in my opinion, is "living with postmodernism" (to adapt a title of one of David Lodge's books on literary theory).

*Representing War: Form and Ideology in First World War Narratives* speaks a postmodernist language and seems to assume unconsciously that postmodern poststructuralism gives us a more complete understanding of the world than does any other literary orientation. Cobley regularly uses poststructuralist expressions, such as "the self-generating capacity of language" (42), "the duplicitous pretences of classical realism" (108), "the real world is largely already a text" (44), and "the narrator's authority is always a site of violence" (104). The books (or "discursive productions") being considered are said to be "the enunciation of a historically situated subject which not only speaks but is spoken by a contradictory cultural site" (16). Cobley writes that the First World War was "highly instrumental in preparing us for a postmodern sensibility" (132), which equips us "to assess some of the darker sides of [Jones's] revolutionary project" (200).

If I had more space, I would attempt a fuller analysis of the post-modern ideology and language in this book. I would do so from the point of view of a male in his fifties, *père de famille*, who teaches with enthusiasm narratology, deconstruction, and ideological critique. It is important to know about these theories. I feel they enhance my understanding of both life and literature. But when I read such phrases as those mentioned in the paragraph above, I am startled by their assumptions and by what feels like an uncritical acceptance of a certain mode of being and writing. I believe that this person lives in a different universe from me. I would like to explore briefly this difference between Cobley and myself, because it is related to the most important general issue raised by the book. We do, after all, have to live with post-modernism, unless we want to put our heads in the sand.

One factor that makes me experience postmodern phraseology and ideology as "the other" is the feeling of giving up and giving in, of giv-

ing up in the face of a language that “speaks us” (as postmodernists say), and of giving in to self-contradiction. I am happy to recognize—indeed, progress in life seems largely to consist of recognizing—that we cannot control many of the more important things. But pursuing life rather than life-in-death (as Coleridge would put it) involves struggling to do our best in the areas where we have some degree of control. I am happy to recognize that there are contradictions in my life, that, like Hamlet, I am often “to double-business bound”; but these internal contradictions are usually debilitating and I need to struggle against them to maintain my being. The language of postmodernism, and the language of this book, contain a crucial element of giving up. I do not want to give up.

One of the main ways in which Cobley (and many other thinkers) seems to give up is in her simplified, unhistoricized use of the idea of the Enlightenment project, which she makes largely responsible for the First World War and which she says was shown by the war to be bankrupt. This kind of schematic plotting of history (which can often be found in literary criticism, and has its uses) seems to me in this case to obscure our understanding both of the past and of ourselves. Surely many people realized before 1914 that in individual cases rational analysis and objective description could lead to disaster. Surely many worthy projects, including the publishing of this book, still depend on Enlightenment values. It is a distorting simplification to say that the Enlightenment project was alive before the First World War and bankrupt afterwards.

What does this formulation mean, and why does it play such an important role in *Representing War: Form and Ideology in First World War Narratives*? My tentative conclusion is this hypothesis: that it is satisfying to postmodernists to present the Enlightenment in this schematic way, because it highlights the pretensions of Enlightenment thinkers, who thought they could control what was happening in the world. Perhaps postmodernists like to see these pretensions crushed dramatically in the First World War because it makes them feel better about their own compromises and inner contradictions. I wonder if this means that postmodernism has a gender, that it is predominantly “feminine,” more likely to be appealing to those who have had to give up, or comply, over and over again, because of the patriarchy that dominates most of our institutions. To lay some of the responsibility on language (by saying that “language speaks us”) may also be satisfying. But this is only a hypothesis, generated in the mind of a male reader, by an intelligent and involving book, written by a woman, about a disastrous war organized and largely waged by men.

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