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Story and history: exploring the Great War.

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Story and History: Exploring the Great War

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ABSTRACT

This essay suggests that the creative imagination proved to be the most effective guide to the experiences of the Great War. The argument is that the rational consciousness and its received, discursive language proved unable to explore many of the dimensions of an experience that was characterized by the irrational. That most precious of heritages--the language--actually prevented people from seeing and saying what was going on.

Most of the memoirs demonstrate a tension between that which is recognized by the rational consciousness and that which is rendered as there by the creative imagination. The various tactics employed by the memoirists to deal with that tension (most interestingly by the creation of a persona who stands in for the memoirist) are revealing in themselves. In exploring these issues we will discover that memoirs are actually a subset of fiction, and must be seen and read as such. We learn to trust the tale rather than the teller of it.

The novels, too, will demonstrate a dichotomy between novelist and novel. There too, as in the memoirs, we discover that the imagination can lead us into places not readily available to the discursive mind. Ford Madox Ford's Parade's End gives us an extraordinary picture of a civilization bound and impotent, helpless to free itself from the dead hand of its past except by some apocalyptic smash-up. It suggests in a number of ways precisely how and why European civilization seemed in the end to be so eager for the war that would destroy it. H.G.Wells's Mr. Britling Sees it Through is one of the very few contemporary renditions of the war that sees it clearly as nightmare and horror. Worse, Britling must realize that even though this nightmare may consume his son he can do nothing about it. It is a lesson of impotence that is enforced. Finally D.H.Lawrence's Kangaroo starts to explore some of the implications of the war. In the end, as a result of his own experiences in England during the war, Somers has lost his faith in the England he once so cared for, in civilization, in democracy, in any kind of political action, in connecting. It is a staggering loss.

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THE NOVELS 198

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Art speech is the only truth. An artist is usually a damned liar, but his art, if it be art, will tell you the truth of his day... Never trust the artist. Trust the tale.

D.H.Lawrence "The Spirit of Place"

Introduction

> Elizabeth walked up the stone steps...A man in a blue jacket was sweeping in the large space enclosed by the pillars.
>
> As she came up to the arch Elizabeth saw with a start that it was written on. She went closer. She peered at the stone. There were names on it. Every grain of the surface had been carved with British names; their chiselled capitals rose from the level of her ankles to the height of the great arch itself; on every surface of every column as far as her eyes could see there were names teeming, reeling, over surfaces of yards, of hundreds of yards, over furlongs of stone.
>
> She moved through the space beneath the arch where the man was sweeping. She found the other pillars identically marked, their faces obliterated on all sides by the names that were carved on them.
>
> "Who are these, these...?" She gestured with her hand.
>
> "These?" The man with the brush sounded surprised. "The lost."
>
> "Men who died in this battle?"
>
> "No. the lost, the ones they did not find. The others are in the cemeteries."
>
> "These are just the... the unfound?"
>
> She looked at the vault above her head and then around in panic at the endless writing, as though the surface of the sky had been papered in footnotes.
>
> When she could speak again, she said, "From the whole war?"
>
> The man shook his head. "Just these fields." He gestured with his arm.
>
> Elizabeth went through and sat on the steps on the other side of the monument. Beneath her was a formal garden with some rows of white headstones, each with a tended plant or flower at its base, each cleaned and beautiful in the weak winter sunlight.
>
> "Nobody told me." She ran her fingers with their red-painted nails through her thick dark hair. "My God, nobody told me."[1]

The experience of beginning to read the memoirs and novels

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[1] Sebastian Faulks, Birdsong (1993; rpt. London: Vintage, 1994), pp. 210-211.

of the Great War is an extraordinary one. "My God," one says, "did we really do this? Did people like me go out to a front that was like that? And suffer those horrors? And kill each other in that way? And if we did that, why did nobody tell me? Why was I not told when I went to school some forty years later? Did my grandfather do that? How? Why?"

My interest in the writings of the war stems from this sort of an experience. From the beginning there was a sense of a split, a gap, between whatever I had conventionally learned about the First World War, and what this literature seeemed to be telling me. The literature makes one feel something like the panic Elizabeth feels: "She looked at the vault above her head and then around in panic at the endless writing, as though the surface of the sky had been papered in footnotes." That tells, somehow, a very different story from the statistics of the casualties in the battles around Baupaume. J. M. Winter (who makes demographics speak in human tongues) in discussing the human cost of the war says "...the story of World War 1...was a story of suffering, multiplied by many millions, which taken as a whole is comprehensible not in statistics but perhaps only in art."[2] Why would such a story be comprehensible in art but not in statistics? Does that difference have anything to do with the difference between the received story I had grown up with, (this was a war to defend democracy; this was a war in which Canadian

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[2] J.M. Winter, The Experience of World War 1 (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 197.

troops had fought bravely, in which we had demonstrated our fidelity and loyalty to Britain), and the story I received from Graves or Aldington which certainly seemed to be a very different story? Was there any way to work out which of these stories was "true"? If the experiences I shared from Goodbye to All That had actually occurred--if that was what was actually happening to human beings--then, surely, the more conventional versions needed some drastic amendment. This essay is an attempt to explore some of the issues that come up both as we attempt to tell the story of the Great War and as we attempt to hear that story.

My first concern is to try to examine some of the reasons why certain aspects of the Great War may be "comprehensible ...only in art." Traditional wisdom would have it that if we want to find out what the war was really like then we should go to the historians. History, after all, deals with fact. Literature, on the other hand, deals with fiction. This essay is an attempt to deconstruct that opposition. First of all, I want to suggest that historical text and literary text share the same epistemological status.[3] Secondly, I want to explore the many

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[3] Historians may not like to think of their works as translations of fact into fictions; but this is one of the effects of their works...

The older distinction between fiction and history, in which fiction is conceived as the representation of the imaginable and history as the representation of the actual, must give place to the recognition that we can only know the actual by contrasting it with or likening it to the imaginable...

...In my view, we experience the "fictionalization" of history as an "explanation" for the same reason that we experience great fiction as an illumination of a world that we inhabit along with the author. In both we recognize the forms by which consciousness both constitutes and colonizes the

reasons why literature may give us a fuller version of what went on in the Great War than conventional history. I want to suggest the way in which literature is open to a wider variety of evidence--likely to admit more into the court--than is history. Literature is open to the promptings of the unconscious, the emotions, the passions. It can deal with an awareness of, for instance, defeat and horror and vulnerability that our conscious mind may well, self-defensively, repress. In the early 20th century, the historian, like most other citizens, was not very good at opening himself to the suggestion that, as Wells puts it: "...murder, destruction, and agony on a scale monstrous beyond precedent were going on in the same world as that which slumbered outside the...window..."[4]

My second principal concern is simply to try to establish at least one version of the story that the literature tells us. As I shall argue in this introduction I do not believe there is any one "truth" of the war, any more than I believe there is any one "true" reading of any of the texts of it. But our sense of what the war was like, what it meant, and what it means to us will, in the end, be established by the various readings we produce of the various texts of the war. I offer one such reading here.

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world it seeks to inhabit comfortably.

Hayden White, Tropics of Discourse (Baltimore and London: the Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp.92,98,99.

[4] H.G.Wells, Mr. Britling Sees It Through (1916; rpt as Mr. Britling, London: W.Collins, no date given), p. 178.

To return to my first concern, which has to do with the relation between imagination and rational mind, it seems clear to me that the quotation from Lawrence which prefaces this essay is universally applicable. But I want to suggest that it has particular potency in relation to the Great War. There are a number of reasons for this, and I'd like to begin by exploring some of them. I take it that the distinction Lawrence is making is between the "artist" (i.e. the conscious, controlling, discursive, rational mind) and the "tale" (i.e. the rendered work of the imagination). Why, in relation to the Great War, should we mistrust the former and learn to listen to the latter? There are a number of reasons why we must approach the language of war with great care. The first part of this introduction makes some general observations about the language of history and of war. I will then look specifically at some of the particular problems associated with the Great War.

The limits of rationality

Tolstoy's argument about history[5], offered as an epilogue to War and Peace, is brilliantly suggestive. Historians, in a medium which is inevitably rationalizing and formalizing, tend to suggest a world of clear cause and effect. In that world,

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[5] L. Tolstoy, 'Epilogue' War and Peace, trans. Rosemary Edmonds (1869; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957) We should remember, of course, that the history Tolstoy is speaking of here is nineteenth century history., i.e. for the most part empiricist, positivist.

external, readily-identifiable factors (political, social, economic) are the primary agents of historical development. This gives a quite false picture of our reality. The actual world, Tolstoy suggests, is chaotic; no clear lines of cause and effect are to be found. In fact the number of causes of any one occurrence far exceeds the capacity of the human mind to identify them. The irrational and the accidental are powerful and potent determinants of the past, and are not easily accessible to the historian's rational, teleological model.

This is especially true, Tolstoy suggests, in the case of war. There all is confusion, no clear rules are to be found, all is improvisation. Tolstoy adds a nice little anecdote of two duellists:

> Let us imagine two men who have come out to fight a duel with swords in accordance with all the rules of the art of fencing. The parrying has continued for some time. Suddenly one of the combatants, aware that he has been wounded and realizing that the affair is no joke but that his life is at stake, throws down his sword and seizing the first cudgel that comes handy begins to brandish it. Then let us imagine that the combatant who thus so sensibly employed the best and simplest means for his purpose was at the same time influenced by traditions of chivalry and, wanting to conceal the facts of the case, insisted afterwards that he won his victory with the sword according to all the rules of the art of fencing. How confusing and unintelligible we should find the story of such a duel! (pp.1221-1222)

In this case the fencer who snatches up a club is the Russian army defending itself against Napoleon. "Those who try to give an account of the issue consistent with the rules of fencing are the historians who have described the event." Tolstoy clearly feels that the same accusation can be made against the

historian of any war.

Traditionally historians have tended to listen to those who held power, who have left written memoirs. But are these really the forces that have made our past what it was, and what it is? Why should their documents be taken as "shaping" the time? Isn't any time--like our own time--more than likely to have been unshaped?[6] Isn't the unshaped, unregenerate, inarticulate, common man likely to have played in his own way at least as important a role in an historical period as the "shaper"? Isn't his experience--less accessible perhaps--at least as important a witness to a sense of "the truth of his day"?

Tolstoy reserves his most biting sarcasm for proponents of the "great-man" theory of history: why do millions of people start to kill each other? "Because", answers the historian "Lord Grey..." But how does what Lord Grey does actually make individuals kill? "Well, Lord Grey and others like him are in a position of power." But what, insists Tolstoy, is this power? How is it invested in the politicians or in the generals? How far does it go? Is it revokable? Don't we just use the term "power" to further mystify an already confused audience? There are a myriad reasons why millions of men start to kill, maim and burn one another; more reasons than we can know or articulate.

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[6] "Governments can do so little and prevent so little nowadays. Power has passed from the hands of Statesmen, but I should be very much puzzled to say into whose hands it has passed. It is all pure drifting. As we go downstream, we can occasionally fend off a collision. But where are we going?" (Lord Salisbury, 1895) quoted in Z. Steiner, Britain and the Origins of the First World War (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977), p 250.

Because we cannot face the implications of that (at some level history may be radically unintelligible), we make up a concept like "power" and use it.

Tolstoy's suggestion is, then, that the conscious, ordering mind may very well greatly misrepresent the reality in which we live. It is an argument persuasively amplified in Nietzsche's The Use and Abuse of History. Historians, assuming that the present is the only possible outcome of the past, see history as having led ineluctably to the now, and see the events of history only inasmuch as they can be shown to have played their part in the creation of the now. In fact, Nietzsche suggests, history has no teleology. The random, arbitrary nature of our past places it in a territory beyond the merely rational. Conventional history involves the knowledge of "facts", of what is over, finished, dead. But the essence of our reality, of real history, is its living fluidity, its becoming-ness, its openness to all the vicissitudes of the present.[7]

Behind the comments of a Tolstoy or a Nietzsche is a serious debate about historiography which has, of course, been going on for some time. It was the scientific revolution, whose successes were so indisputable by the end of the 18th century, that really set the mode for inquiry. The central assumption which gave rise to the extraordinary successes of that revolution was the empiricist doctrine that reality was rational, knowable,

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[7] This point of view is explored with exemplary clarity by Herbert Butterfield in The Whig Interpretation of History (1931; rpt. London: G.Bell and Sons, 1968) cf. particularly Chapters 1-3.

objectively verifiable, and absolute. Careful observation would discover laws which governed those phenomena under scrutiny. Authority was derived from dispassionate, disinterested observation, not from received truth, faith, secular or spiritual hierarchy. (This fundamental notion had, of course, very serious implications in relation to the various political movements and phiolosphies that were then current.) The discipline of history, with its eye on the indisputable successes of science, adopted the same positivist approach. It focussed on the marshalling of concrete fact, of provable evidence, in order to establish the fact of what had happened, believing that once that fact was established then the meaning of what had happened would be self-evident. Great 19th century historians such as Comte, Burckhardt, Acton and Ranke seemed clear that once we saw the facts for what they indisputably were, then the iron laws of society and history would reveal themselves.[8] Certainly there was no need for abstract speculations about the metaphysics of

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[8] Acton offers us this evidence of his belief that now, at last, we knew how to discover everything:

> Ultimate history we cannot have in this generation; but we can dispose of conventional history, and show the point we have reached on the road from one to the other, now that all information is within reach, and every problem has become capable of solution.

Acton, The Cambridge Modern History: Its Origin, Authorship and Production (1907), pp. 10-12. quoted in E.H.Carr, What is History? (1961; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), p. 7.

history. [9]

But by the last quarter of the 19th century this belief in an empiricist theory of knowledge, in an external, recognizable, palpable reality which existed independent of the registering, exploring mind was, in science as well as in history, about to be severely shaken. [10]

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[9] E.H.Carr offers a witty description of the innocence of these days. He speaks of Dr A.L.Rowse commenting that Sir Winston Churchill's World Crisis was inferior in one respect to Trotsky's History of the Russian Revolution because "it had 'no philosophy of history behind it'". Carr continues:

> British historians refused to be drawn, not because they believed that history had no meaning, but because they believed that its meaning was implicit and self-evident. The liberal nineteenth-century view of history had a close affinity with the economic doctrine of laissez-faire--also the product of a serene and self-confident outlook on the world. Let everyone get on with his particular job, and the hidden hand would take care of the universal harmony. The facts of history were themselves a demonstration of the supreme fact of a beneficent and apparently infinite progress towards higher things. This was the age of innocence, and historians walked in the Garden of Eden, without a scrap of philosophy to cover them, naked and unashamed before the god of history. Since then, we have known Sin and experienced a Fall; and those historians who today pretend to dispense with a philososphy of history are merely trying, vainly and self-consciously, like members of a nudist colony, to recreate the Garden of Eden in their garden suburb. Today the awkward question can no longer be evaded.
>
> (Carr, p. 20.)

[10] There are a great number of texts which cover this ground. Among those I have found most helpful are the Butterfield and Carr already mentioned, and, of course, R.G. Collingwood's The Idea of History (1946; rpt. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970). For those who would like to see the same arguments explored from an American point of view (and with an American background) one can whole-heartedly recommend Joyce Appelby, Lynn Hunt & Margaret Jacob, Telling the truth about History (New York, London: W.W. Norton, 1994) The most vigorous critical exploration of the nineteenth century empiricists is to be found in H. White's Metahistory (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973) In Tropics of Discourse (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University

One way of speaking about the developments is to speak of relativity. In the field of history various social historians recognized that that which had happened could be very different for different groups. Clearly there was not just one history out there; there was a multiplicity of histories, and what we see, indeed what is <u>there</u>, may well depend on who we are, where we are, and what we make of the events that surround us. That is, the truth of that which surrounds us does not inhere completely to those events but is, in part at least, created by our own inquiring minds, and those minds are multifarious.

Of course a change with such deep implications was not accomplished without real resistance. The fear (and it is one we find in scientific, as well as in historical and literary discourse) is that if the centre does not hold, if there is not one establishable objective truth, then in all those disciplines we are merely lost in a welter of relativity. We have no possible way of determining a reliable map, of fixing where we are, or how we got there.

> The absolutist defenders of scientific truth thought that if heroic science did not hold up, then relativism would be the only position logically available. Ironically, the old positivists sound much like the new postmodern relativists. Both deal in absolutes; neither can imagine the complexity of a human situation in which workable truths appear as the result of messy, idealogically motivated, self-absorbed interventions undertaken by myopic people whose identities may be vastly different and distant from one's own. (Appleby, Hunt & Jacob, p. 191)

The implications of this shift in paradigm are considerable.

Press, 1978) White offers a number of brilliantly suggestive essays on the necessarily literary dimensions of history.

Rather than thinking of historians as the empirical, disinterested discoverers of objective fact, we must start to consider the degree to which knowledge is itself a creation of our own controlling intelligence. So the historical text is a creation of an individual sensibility, and has pretensions not to the whole, absolute truth, but merely to one version of that truth from one specific point of view. Every attempt to write history will be superceded by some following attempt. Every history is provisonal. And the text is never a neutral statement of a fixed objective reality, but is itself instinct with the characteristics of the creating imagination. Buried in the text is as much subjectivity as objectivity. This is true both for the texts we study, and for the texts we produce out of that study. As Carr has it: "...the process of knowledge, far from setting subject and object sharply apart, involves a measure of interrelation and interdependence between them." (Carr, p. 73)

And so various binary oppositions start to break down. Truth is neither completely absolute, nor completely relative. That which we know is neither objective nor subjective. Collingwood says it very well indeed:

> The act of thinking, [or reading? or feeling?] then, is not only subjective but objective as well. It is not only a thinking, it is something that can be thought about. But because...it is never merely objective, it requires to be thought about in a peculiar way, a way only appropriate to itself. It cannot be set before the thinking mind as a ready-made object, discovered as something independent of that mind and studied as it is in itself, in that independence. It can never be studied 'objectively', in the sense in which 'objectively' excludes 'subjectively'. (Collingwood, p. 292)

This is a debate that, as I have suggested, has occurred in relation to literary studies as well. If there is no one fixed, objectively ascertainable reading of a literary text then, the fearful suggest, any reading of a text is possible. We have no fixed mark against which to value different, opposing readings. Indeed variant readings themselves have the same status as the original text.

But one can continue the line of Collingwood's argument above:

> Nineteenth-century philosophers so overdichotomized the difference between objectivity and subjectivity that it is difficult, when using their terms, to modify the absolute doubt that springs from the recognition that human minds are not mirrors and recorders. Denying the absolutism of one age, the doubters, however, seem oblivious to the danger of inventing a new absolutism based upon subjectivity and relativism. (Appleby, Hunt & Jacob, p. 247)

The "either/or" does not hold up: either an absolute truth or endless relativity. Rather we come to recognize that each statement we make, each reading we offer of a text, is a provisional one, calling out for further readings, further articulations, never absolute.[11] Nevertheless, there <u>is</u> a reading that more than one sensibility can give assent to. There is a reading that is made up of the various readings that are inter-subjectively agreed to, that then exists there as something more than merely one more variant in a world of equally valid variant

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[11] In any case, it is never sage to forget the truth which really underlies historical research: the truth that all history perpetually requires to be corrected by more history.
(Butterfield, p. 131)

readings. In the debate that occurs some provisional conclusions will be reached, conclusions that are attested to by the concurrence of the community involved. It is in that way that it becomes possible to speak of a qualified objectivity that may be established by the free debate of subjective responses.[12]

It is, in the end, a question of whether one wants to concentrate on what cannot be done or on what can be done. Yes, of course there is a gap between signifier and signified. But is the gap absolute, or is it merely that the relationship between signifier and signified is not absolute, but is contingent, relative, provisional? That is, surely we can refuse to accept the implicit despair of those deconstructionists (not all of them!) who want to argue that there is no stability to language at all. We can reject the suggestion that the possible relationships between signifier and signified are so endless that

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[12] No longer able to ignore the subjectivity of the author, scholars must construct stanadards of objectivity that recognize at the outset that all histories [as, indeed, all literary, critical "readings"] start with the curiosity of a particular individual and take shape under the guidance of her or his personal and cultural attributes. Since all knowledge originates inside human minds and is conveyed through representations of reality, all knowledge is subject-centered and artificial, the very qualities brought into disrespect by an earlier exaltation of that which was objective and natural. Our version of objectivity concedes the impossibility of any research being neutral (that goes for scientists as well) and accepts the fact that knowledge-seeking involves a lively, contentious struggle among diverse groups of truth-seekers. Neither admission undermines the viability of stable bodies of knowledge that can be communicated, built upon, and subjected to testing. These admissions do require a new understanding of objectivity.

(Appleby, Hunt and Jacob, p.254)

any statement can be shown to have an infinite number of meanings, and that therefore any statement has no verifiable meaning at all. It is true, as I have been at some care to suggest here, that there is no final reading of an historical event or a poem. Nevertheless this does not mean that history or poetry ceases to exist. History and poems are created in the imagination of the historian or poet (and are dependent upon those elements of subjectivity, artificiality, imagination and language we have been discussing.) They are then recreated with as much fidelity as possible in the reader. Neither historian nor reader ever gets the full picture. But a provisional truth emerges out of the debate between various readings offered. It is in that spirit that I offer a number of "readings" of texts in this essay. The way we read the "texts" of history and of literature will differ. There are different skills appropriate to the different disciplines. But in one essential way at least, I believe that there is no essential difference between the text of an historian and the text of a poet. They must both be "read". Again, Hayden White puts the suggestion as clearly as anyone:

> Nor is it unusual for literary theorists, when they are speaking about the "context" of a literary work, to suppose that this context--the "historical milieu"--has a concreteness and an accessibility that the work itself can never have, as if it were easier to perceive the reality of a past world put together from a thousand historical documents than it is to probe the depths of a single literary work that is present to the critic studying it. But the presumed concreteness and accessibility of historical milieux, these contexts of the texts that literary scholars study, are themselves products of the fictive capability of the historians who have studied those contexts. The historical documents are not less opaque than the texts studied by the literary critic. (White, p. 89)

Errata

page:line

36:5 and 7 up	for 'Marlowe' read 'Marlow'
37:6	for 'the voyageurs' read 'our emissaries'
42:20	for 'novel' read 'memoir'
71:12 up	for 'am' read 'as'
79:7 up	for 'Soldier' read 'soldier'
81:10	for 'authorities...' read 'authorities'
84:8	for '<u>Pilgrimage</u>' read '<u>Prodigality</u>'
117,n2, and 313	for 'Tielhard' read 'Teilhard'
142:16	for 'juxtasposition' read 'juxtaposition'
143:9 up and 144:1	for 'naïvité' read 'naïveté'
144:9 up	for 'Bethune' read 'Albert'
152:12-13 up	for '"medically unfit and of underdeveloped intelligence"' read '"medically unfit" and of "under-developed intelligence"'
174:1	for 'oneself' read 'one'
184:1 up	for 'repellant' read 'repellent'
187:13	for 'irresistably' read 'irresistibly'
201 n1:2 up	for 'Octagan' read 'Octagon'
230 n12	for 'Hemingwy' read 'Hemingway'
259:1	for 'holy crusade' read 'crusade'
267:3	for 'feeling into' read 'exploration of'
268:8	for 'too often lacking' read 'noticeably absent'
273:8up, n and 314	for 'St.Denis' read 'St Dennis'
314:7	for 'Hueffer' read '[Hueffer]'
314:22	for 'Gateway, 1936' read 'Henry Regnery Co., 1960'

One of the issues these comments of White's point toward is the recognition of the unavoidable centrality of interpretation. The historian offers a text that is already an interpretation of events. He will contextualize the events in order to suggest a particular meaning or a particular shape these events may have had. (The contextualization cannot be inferred from within the closed system of the text.) When we read an historical text we interpret an interpretation, and further contextualize the historian's offerings. Similarily the literary critic offers an interpretation of a text. The crucial recognition is that the event, or the text, has no meaning at all until it has been interpreted. All interpretation is a product of the relationship betwen subjective sensibility and the object of study, and is, therefore, neither subjective nor objective. The interpretation ends with a "reading" whose provisional validity is confirmed by the concurrence of the community to whom it is addressed.[13]

The Individual vs the Collectivity

These suggestions have some very interesting implications in terms of our social values. For one of the central principles

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[13] Joseph Margolis has written a number of highly stimulating works that deal with these issues:
Interpretation Radical But Not Unruly: the new puzzle of the arts and history (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995)
The Truth about Relativism (Oxford, Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1991)
Pragmatism without Foundations: Reconciling Realism and Relativism (Oxford, New York: Blackwell, 1986)

that comes under careful sceptical scrutiny as a result of all those developments we have been discussing above is that of "authority". All of the discussion above about developments in historiography suggests that claims of authority need to be taken very sceptically indeed. That scepticism extends to different kinds of authority. One looks very carefully at the claims, and then offers, at best, a provisional agreement. But, of course, provisional assent is not valid currency in a war. And, in fact, the differences in point of view in relation to the Great War were so extreme that any assent at all might prove to be impossible. Haig's policy of attrition is based on a statistical apprehension of what the army was. If the allies had a stronger numerical cohort than their enemy, then as long as each allied death was matched by an enemy death things were fine. But here's another point of view on just one of those deaths:

To His Love

He's gone, and all our plans
   Are useless indeed.
We'll walk no more on Cotswold
   Where the sheep feed
Quietly and take no heed.

His body that was so quick
   Is not as you
Knew it, on Severn river
   Under the blue
   Driving our small boat through.

You would not know him now ...
   But still he died
Nobly, so cover him over
   With violets of pride
   Purple from Severn side.

Cover him, cover him soon!
   And with thick-set
Masses of memoried flowers--
   Hide that red wet
   Thing I must somehow forget.[14]

It's an astonishingly powerful poem that uncovers precisely what must be kept covered, that remembers what, desperately, needs to be forgotten. That recognition of what one death is, has great difficulty in coexisting with an acceptance of the principle of attrition. Once we recognize that, and once we realize that the search for some principle of authority which would help us choose which of these "truths" to follow (which of these "points of view" with which to concur) is highly fraught, we start to see the sorts of problems that are posed by the war.

Any society (and especially any army) is based upon a set of generalizations that the individual must accept on trust as being relevant to him and binding on him. But a close look at any of these generalizations, say Tolstoy and Nietzsche (and Dostoevsky, and Kafka, and Conrad) leaves the individual radically sceptical, and terrifyingly aware of the difference between what the generalizations suggest as appropriate and what his own individual sensibility may perceive as necessary for him. As a member of an enormous army on the Somme one isn't fighting for king and country; it is simply impossible to say exactly what one is fighting for. In the end the individual allows the corporate entity over which he has no clear power to order--and, in some

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[14] Ivor Gurney, "To His Love", in Men Who March Away, ed. I.M.Parsons (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965) p.153.

cases, to end--his life. And the individual gives up that responsibility for himself without being able to ask the necessary questions of the corporation. Exactly how will this war benefit the king? Or the country? What does that mean?

It may be worthwhile noting that (not surprisingly) imaginative literature tends to support a sceptical approach to the claims of authority. Imaginative literature by its very nature renders a unique and individual sensibility, and therefore tends to be subversive of collective generalizations and, therefore, of the civic pieties which depend upon those collective generalizations. As Joseph Brodsky has said:

> If art teaches anything, it is the privateness of the human condition. Being the most ancient as well as the most literal form of private enterprise, it fosters in a man, knowingly or unwittingly, a sense of his uniqueness, of individuality, of separateness. It thus turns him from a social animal into a perceptible "I". Lots of things can be shared: a bed, a piece of bread, convictions, a mistress, but not a poem by, say, Rainer Maria Rilke. A work of art, of literature especially, and a poem in particular, addresses a man tête-à-tête, entering with him into direct relations. It is for this reason that art in general, literature especially, and poetry in particular, is not exactly favoured by the champions of the common good, master of the masses, heralds of historical necessity. For there, where art has stepped, where a poem has been read, they discover, in place of anticipated consent and unanimity, indifference and polyphony.[15]

Art, having confronted us with our own uniqueness, then introduces us to the possibility of society by involving us with the other unique individuals who people its world. This community of the imagination differs from society in general. In the latter the emotions and interests of the individual are constrained by--even

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[15] Joseph Brodsky, Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, 1987

sacrificed to--the collectivity. In the society literature creates the collectivity _is_ the emotions and the interests of the individuals. That is, public issues are only real when they declare themselves through the private voice.

There is a further reason why imaginative literature undercuts conventional military notions. In his introduction to an anthology of war stories (_Men at War_) Ernest Hemingway notes the inevitable opposition between the demands of the imagination and the demands of the military:

> A good soldier does not worry. He knows that nothing happens until it actually happens and you live your life up until then. Danger only exists at the moment of danger. To live properly in war, the individual eliminates all such things as potential danger. Then a thing is only bad when it is bad. It is neither bad before nor after. Cowardice, as distinguished from panic, is almost always simply a lack of ability _to suspend the functioning of the imagination_. [my emphasis]. Learning to suspend your imagination and live completely in the very second of the present minute with no before and no after is the greatest gift a soldier can acquire. It, naturally, is the opposite of all those gifts a writer should have. That is what makes good writing by good soldiers such a rare thing and why it is so prized when we have it.[16]

Problems of Language

Finally, of course, there is the problem of language. What the witness sees may not be tellable because he does not have the language for it. It was clear that the war marked a very significant break with the past, a disruption of all kinds of continuity. Such a disruption will make itself felt everywhere, most certainly in the

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[16] E. Hemingway ed., _Men at War_, (New York: Berkeley Publishing, 1960), p.17.

language. And it is clear that it was extraordinarily difficult to find a language that could express the actuality of this war. The collective notions that were then prevalent, and the language which embodied them, had been nurtured in the rich ground of Victorian prosperity, and were enormously powerful and stable. The use of that language, the evocation of those notions ("dulce et decorum est pro patria mori...") simply prevented people from seeing what was actually in front of them. When they _did_ see what was there, they realized the actuality had nothing to do with the language that was being used. Hence the horrified sense that somehow language itself had lost its potency or integrity. In 1915 Henry James noted in an interview (in a characteristic, late sentence):

> The war has used up words; they have weakened, they have deteriorated like motor car tires; they have, like millions of other things, been more overstrained and knocked about and voided of the happy semblance during the last six months than in all the long ages before, and we are now confronted with a depreciation of all our terms, or, otherwise speaking, with a loss of expression through an increase of limpness, that may well makes us wonder what ghosts will be left to walk.[17]

This lament echoes throughout our century from Frederick Henry's famous musings in _A Farewell to Arms_ (quoted p.309 below) to T.S. Eliot's despair in _Four Quartets_. The old great words are dead: "Armageddon", the "noble", the "sacred"--all trash for the propagandist. We will only know our reality when we discard that language and start, painfully, to forge another.

Humility, Impotence and Madness

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[17] _New York Times_, 21 March, 1915, 5: 3-4

On a number of levels this war enforced a lesson of humility. It suggested to historians that they beware of facile assumptions about the intelligibility and rationality of our past. It taught a much larger group--that of the middle class--that contrary to all they had been led to believe they did not, in fact, control their own destiny. Not only were these representatives of the greatest empire the world had ever seen unable to order the world as they would like it, but in the most personal and individual ways they had to learn a new and radical lesson: that of impotence in the face of lunacy. Neither their education nor their language provided useful tools to be used in the exploration of this lesson.

In the last twenty years there has been a much-needed explosion of interest in the experience of the "other ranks", of the enlisted men.[18] One of the areas that is much of interest

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[18] Among the many works available the following are of note:
Tony Ashworth, Trench Warfare 1914-1918: the Live and Let Live System (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1980)
Malcolm Brown, Tommy Goes to War (London: J.M.Dent, 1978)
John Ellis, Eye Deep in Hell: Trench Warfare in World War One (1976; rpt. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989)
Frank Hawkings, From Ypres to Cambrai: The Diary of an Infantryman, 1914-1919, ed. A Taylor (Morley: Enfield Press, 1974)
Lynne Macdonald, They Called it Passchendaele (London: Michael Joseph, 1978)
---, Somme (London: Michael Joseph, 1983)
Martin Middlebrook ed., The Diaries of Pvt. Horace Bruckshaw (1979; rpt. Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1980)
---, The First Day on the Somme, 1 July, 1916 (1971; rpt. New York: Norton 1972)
Denis Winter, Death's Men: Soldiers of the Great War (London: Allen Lane, 1978)
J.M.Winter, The Great War and the British People (London: Macmillan, 1986)
J.M.Winter, The Experience of World War 1 (London: Macmillan, 1988)

here is the exploration of the resources that enabled the enlisted men to cope, somehow, with that experience. To risk a crude generalization, perhaps an aspect of those resources had to do with an absence of the sort of expectations and assumptions with which the middle class were burdened. The power of a novel like The Patriot's Progress[19] may come, in part, from the way in which John Bullock faces so openly the experiences of the trenches. He is not trying to make this experience make sense. He knows it doesn't make sense. He is simply facing it as it is. And the novel gathers a frightening power from that immediacy. But the focus of this essay remains on the middle-class, on those who may well have thought they had some authority, some power, and who had to somehow deal with the enforced recognition of their own acute vulnerabilities.

My interest is in their story of the war, and how the story was told. I am interested in both how difficult it was for the writers I examine to see and acknowledge what was happening (how their conscious minds had difficulty accepting what was in front of them), and how their stories finally got told (through, as it were, the good offices of their imaginations).

As I have suggested the war provided a major lesson in the limits of rationality. We began to get a sense of the price we might have to pay for the marvellous physical advances of the

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[19] Henry Williamson, The Patriot's Progress (1930; rpt. London: Macdonald and Jane's, 1968)

enlightenment and the industrial revolution. This was the first fully industrialized war. As we have seen, Haig's "tactic" of attrition is rationally impeccable. He had done his sums correctly. But one might suggest that this is also the argument of the lunatic who doesn't see the cost of this program except in abstracted and therefore acceptable forms. It is an Alice in Wonderland confusion of impeccable mathematical logic with the truths by which and in which we must live. More generally the participants in the war discovered that rationality could neither help them recognize the appalling country in which they found themselves, nor could it suggest a way out. Sassoon describing his return to the front captures this mythic landscape:

> I ... was entering once again the veritable gloom and disaster of the thing called Armageddon. And I saw it then, as I see it now--a dreadful place, a place of horror and desolation which no imagination could have invented. Also it was a place where a man of strong spirit might know himself utterly powerless against death and destruction...[20]

On the whole those who had gone to fight the war (and, especially, those who later wrote about it) did so prompted by genuine ideals. They went to do battle for their country, and for the rule of law and the rights of plucky Belgium.[21] Those ideals, and the language which embodied them, did, as I've suggested, prevent those who went to war from consciously seeing the

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[20] Siegfried Sassoon, The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston (1937; rpt. London: The Reprint Society, 1940), p. 431

[21] There is also an interesting sub-set of those who volunteered because their private lives were in such a hopeless mess that the front seemed the best way out: Christopher Tietjens and his creator Ford Madox Ford both fall into this category, as do George Winterbourne and his creator Richard Aldington.

madness that was there, and from being able to say what they saw. (One wants to avoid being glib. But it seems reasonable to suggest that the conditions of this war were such that it is no surprise that the conscious mind avoided any full confrontation with what was there; that way lay madness.)[22] Many of the participants sensed the war was beyond rationality; it was accomplishing nothing, and it was destroying everything they cared about, most especially themselves. But even if you came to that realization you could do nothing about it. There was no way out. You were caught in impotent complicity with that which was destroying you. In the course of this essay I will demonstrate many of these points. But it is clear that the work of such as Eric Leed (No Man's Land (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) and Elaine Showalter (The Female Malady (1985; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987) has by now incontrovertibly established the psychological impasse many of the participants were caught in.

My argument in this thesis is that a close reading of the various texts (I concentrate on some memoirs and some novels) shows conclusively that time after time there is a conflict

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[22] An element that is common to almost all the memoirs of the war (starting chronologically with Remarque's All Quiet on the Western Front) is the recognition that one cannot afford to think too nicely upon the subject. In order to preserve one's mind one must not think! This is not a recognition peculiar to the Great War. From Vietnam: "On staff, there was too much time to brood over those corpses; there would be very little time to think in a line company. That is the secret to emotional survival in war, not thinking." Philip Caputo, A Rumour of War (New York: Ballantine, 1977), p. 219.

between what the conscious mind thinks it is seeing or says it is seeing and what the imagination is rendering as there. Frequently one can see the imagination struggling to render that which the conscious, rational mind cannot or will not accept. Perhaps the most obvious example of this kind of split occurs in the work of H. G. Wells. As propagandist--as urbane journalist--Wells sees the war as an opportunity to reorganize the world along more rational lines. The chaos and exhaustion of war will present the rationalist with a tabula rasa on which he can write large the triumph of reason. At the same time as he makes his sanguine arguments (and nowhere is the double-edged nature of that word more explosively appropriate than in relation to various enthusiastic reactions to the Great War) Wells--as imaginative writer--creates a novel that renders unmistakably the impossibility of this war resulting in anything commensurate with the destruction involved. Indeed Mr. Britling Sees It Through stands as a persuasive rebuttal of all the journalism Wells produces during the war, as well as an eloquent analysis of the self-deceptions that permit that journalism. Lawrence, again, was right: "...one sheds one's sicknesses in books--repeats and presents again one's emotions, to be master of them."[23] This split--between what the conscious mind recognizes and what the imagination renders--is explicit in Wells and implicit in almost all the other authors I examine. Students of literature will not

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[23] D.H.Lawrence, "Letter to A.W.McLeod," ?26 Oct, 1913, Collected Letters, ed. Harry T. Moore, 2 vols. (London: Heinemann 1962) 1: 234

be surprised at the suggestion that the conscious mind acts as censor, avoiding certain unacceptable visions. It is the imagination that will uncover "...that red wet/ Thing..." that we must never forget.

D.H.Lawrence writing to Catherine Carswell from his cottage in Cornwall (whence the ever-vigilant military authorities were to evict him) has this to say after one of his physical examinations for military service:

> ...I liked the men. They all seemed so decent. And yet they all seemed as if they had chosen wrong. It was the underlying sense of disaster that overwhelmed me. They are all so brave, to suffer, but none of them brave enough, to reject suffering. They are all so noble, to accept sorrow and hurt, but they can none of them demand happiness. Their manliness all lies in accepting calmly this death, this loss of their integrity. They must stand by their fellow man: that is the motto.[24]

"All so brave, to suffer, but none of them brave enough, to reject suffering." Any reading of written accounts of the Great War forces one to think carefully about Lawrence's claim. Implicit in most of them are some common judgments of the war: the conditions of the war are horrible; the conduct of the war is contemptible; the prolongation is to no discernible purpose. There is nothing that can possibly be gained commensurate to the suffering and destruction that is occurring. Yet not one of the well-known memoirists was able to "reject suffering". Why? One after another we see the memoirists recognizing the essential madness of the war. One after another we see them unable to

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[24] D.H.Lawrence, "Letter to Catherine Carswell," July 9, 1916, Collected Letters, ed. Harry T. Moore, 2 vols. (London: Heinemann 1962) 1: 459.

fashion any alternative to going back. One after another we watch them writhing in the existential inauthenticity of doing an act in which they no longer believe. That the action is one that may well result in death merely intensifies the terrible conflict.

Manning has written most memorably:

> War is waged by men; not by beasts, or by gods. It is a peculiarly human activity. To call it a crime against mankind is to miss at least half its significance; it is also the punishment of a crime.[25]

Similarily Freud--during the war--wrote:

> Think of the colossal brutality, cruelty and mendacity which is now allowed to spread itself over the civilized world. Do you really believe that a handful of unprincipled placehunters and corrupters of men would have succeeded in letting loose all this latent evil, if the millions of their followers were not also guilty?[26]

In essence the crime--the guilt--may well have been participating in a killing in which one did not believe. Soldiers may have deplored the war, but they did make it. It is that for which they are duly punished.

But to return to Lawrence's question. Why was no one able to reject the suffering? We will see many reasons in the course of our exploration of the various memoirs and novels. But finally we should register the realization that the clue to Lawrence's question lies implicit in his own comment quoted at the beginning of this essay. In some fundamental way we must look at the

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[25] F. Manning, The Middle Parts of Fortune (London: Peter Davies Ltd., 1977), author's prefatory note.

[26] S. Freud, A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis, trans. Jean Rivière (New York: Liveright Publishers, 1935), pp. 130-131.

ability of the mind not to recognize or articulate what is there, but rather to disguise or avoid that reality. We will discover that the reality of the Western Front was such that the rational mind shied away from a full recognition of what was happening there, and the implications of that. In some way, perhaps, people didn't "reject the suffering" because they hadn't quite experienced it. They didn't go behind the rational tactic of attrition to the imagined poem by Gurney. As the poem itself tells us, we have many reasons to cover over that red wet thing.

Women and the War

I have already suggested I began this exploration out of a sense that there was a story here that was extraordinary, a story I didn't and couldn't understand. How could men ask other men to do these things? How could men not see the futility, the blasphemy in what they were doing? How could the men themselves keep going back to it? With those questions in mind I naturally focussed on what the men--and, in this case, especially those men to whom writing was a usual means of expression--had to say about their experience. But this does not imply any lack of interest in women's experience in the war. There has been a great deal of very good work done in the last twenty years on gender issues in relation to this experience. Later on in this essay I express my debt more fully to pioneer commentators like Elaine Showalter and Sandra Gilbert who brought a new perspective to the study of the literature of the great war, and showed us many new things about

it. It is clear that the contribution of women writers to our sense of the war has not been properly recognized. And one can only be grateful for the explosion of work focussed on rectifying that situation.[25]

These texts written by women needed to be read. And in order to read them we had to confront a number of prejudices. We had to realize that the experience of the war could not be restricted merely to the experience of combat. We needed to refuse to prioritize one experience (say, the combatant) as central, and then judge other experiences against that 'norm'. As we read more and more of the texts it is my sense that binary notions of all kinds start to break down. Although it may well be true that, anthropologically, man is by nature a warrior, while woman stays at home and tends the hearth, nevertheless it is clear that this

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[25] Among the most useful studies of this topic are:

Cadogan Mary and Patricial Craig, Women and Children First: The Fiction of Two World Wars (London: Gollancz, 1978)
Cooper, Helen, Adrienne Auslander Munich, & Susan Merrill Squier eds., Arms and the Woman: War, Gender and Literary Representation (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1989)
Gilbert, Sandra, and Susan Gubar No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century. Vol 1, The War of the Words (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) Vol 2, Sexchanges (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989)
Goldman, Dorothy, ed., Women and World War 1: The Written Response (London: Macmillan, 1993)
---, Women Writers and the Great War (New York: Twayne, 1995)
Higonnet, Margaret Randolph et al. eds., Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987)
Showalter, E., The Female Malady (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987)
Tylee, Claire, The Great War and Women's Consciousness: Images of Militarism and Womanhood in Women's Writings, 1914-64 (London: Macmillan, 1990)

war started to deconstruct those gendered roles. Any survey of the literature written by women can find ample evidence that many women were as pugnacious and jingoistic as any man. As Showalter and Leed argue convincingly one of the main effects of the war was to feminize the men (see p. 93, below). And, obviously, much of the war literature written by males is full of a deep revulsion for that which they were forced to endure and to perpetrate.

Generally speaking as women's writing was examined more and more carefully we found exactly what we would expect to find. That is that women's writing is as various as men's. There are as many attitudes to the war expressed in the female voice as there are in the male. There are experiments with form. There are successes and there are failures. But the question that lurks behind much of this exploration is a central one. Can the experience of the war be divided along gender lines? Is there something in that war that only men can experience? Or only men who have been at the Front? The flip side of that question is whether women will have an experience of the war that is uniquely theirs. These questions lead us into troubled waters. Tylee suggests that if Fussell is right, when he speaks of the cultural significance of the Great War, then, since women were not allowed to bear arms, "women were prohibited from direct participation in their national culture." And therefore... "for an understanding of 'modern understanding' we remain dependent on men." (Tylee, p.8)

But if what I have been suggesting earlier in this introduction is true, then the best way into the heart of darkness represented by the trenches is through the imagination, and not necessarily through the rational mind. In that case it won't surprise us if women, too, can explore the dimensions of the nightmare with persuasive authority. And this is exactly what I would want to argue. After all, two of the novelists I discuss didn't serve in the trenches either. This does not, in my view, undermine their credibility.

This is, as I've suggested, a complicated (and contentious) area, and one that deserves a little more comment. For one of the clichés about the experience of the war is that in the end it was ineffable, impossible to put into language, something that could never be understood by someone who had not experienced it. And yet even as various writers make this claim, they make the claim in their writing about the war. They know they will communicate something. Literature has always known that something is lost in the telling of the story. And yet it has also always known that the story needs to be told. The obvious text to consider here is Conrad's Heart of Darkness. Conrad knows--Marlowe knows--that his words will never communicate the whole story: "Do you see the story? Do you see anything?", says Marlowe in real desperation. Language, attempts at communication, all are ambiguous. Do the drums mean war or peace or prayer? "Criminals", "rebels" "enemies", what do these words mean? The novella is as much about epistemological uncertainty as it is about moral uncertainty. So

we can't tell all of what "The horror! The horror!" may mean. And perhaps that is just as well. For this is a work of literature that knows that the price one pays for the understanding of whatever it is that Kurtz means, may well be prohibitive.[26] "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?" But from the beginning of literature we have sent the voyageurs into the darkness asking them to take the risk for us, and to bring back news of what they find. We know we will not understand it all, and we may well be thankful for that dispensation. We don't want to end up like Kurtz. But we will understand enough of it to learn and be edified. So while it is true we will not be able to experience exactly what soldiers on the line experienced, that doesn't, in my view, exclude any of us (of either gender) from being able to explore imaginatively what that experience was and what it meant.

I want to suggest that various women authors create deeply persuasive works of art that show there are many ways of experiencing the "front"; there are many ways of being there. In order to demonstrate this I want to comment briefly on three works by women, one "memoir" and two "novels" (although I do hope that by the end of this essay these categories will have been shown to be less distinct than they are normally considered to

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[26] Most readers will know that Ivor Gurney who wrote the poem "To His Love" that appears on pp.21-22 above, and who was a gifted composer as well as a writer, suffered a nervous breakdown while he was at the front, and spent the years from 1922 until his death in 1937 in an asylum. His poem recognizes the desperation of the need to forget. Gurney never could. Edward Thomas's wife, Helen, gives a very brief, but unforgettable, description of a visit to Gurney in 1932, in Time & Again, ed. Myfanwy Thomas (Manchester: Carcanet, 1978)

be): Vera Brittain's Testament of Youth, Rebecca West's The Return of the Soldier, and Virginia Woolf's Mrs Dalloway.[27]

In all three of these works there is a sense that seems to me to be central to many of the other accounts I have read: a sense that at the heart of the war is death, and horror, and sterility, a sense that there is no way to extricate those caught in its toils, no way to save them, a sense that there is nothing that counts to be won, that after this death there will be no rebirth, no resurrection. These three very different explorations seem to me to take us into a territory recognizably that of the male writers about the war. Of course each account--the product of an individual sensibility--differs from all others. But what is striking about these accounts is not their differences from those written by men, but their deep and haunting resemblances.

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Brittain is wonderfully eloquent about the genuine idealism that fuels both her life and, even more, Roland's determination to live up to his name, and to adopt the role of the chivalric hero. The inevitable disillusionment is fast. Roland quickly sees how different the reality is from what he had imagined. On his first leave at home he realizes, "very bitterly, that he didn't want to go back to the front." (Brittain, p.188) In order to

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[27] Vera Brittain, Testament of Youth (London: Gollancz, 1933)
Rebecca West, The Return of the Soldier (1918; rpt Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1980)
Virginia Woolf, Mrs Dalloway (1925; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964)

exist at the front he must stifle and deny precisely those sensibilities that seemed most attractive. What Vera must perceive is the distance that is necessarily coming between them. Roland writes to her:

> You seem to me rather like a character in a book or someone whom one has dreamt of and never seen. I suppose there exists such a place as Lowestoft, and that there was once a person called Vera Brittain who came down there with me.

Vera comments:

> After weeks of waiting for some sign of interested sympathy, this evidence of war's dividing influence moved me to irrational fury... (pp. 216-217)

But what is most striking is the degree to which Brittain's perception of the barriers between them enables her to see over them. She recognizes that "only a process of complete adaptation, blotting out tastes and talents and even memories, made life sufferable for someone face to face with war at its worst..." (p. 217) And she continues to Roland:

> ...the War kills other things besides physical life, and I sometimes feel that little by little the Individuality of You is being as surely buried as the bodies are of those who lie beneath the trenches of Flanders and France. But I won't write more on this subject. In any case it is no use, and I shall probably cry if I do, which must never be done, for there is so much both personal and impersonal to cry for here that one might weep for ever and yet not shed enough tears to wash away the pitiableness of it all." (p. 218)

But the war also kills physical life as surely as it kills individuality:

> ...the details of his end--so painful, so unnecessary, so grimly devoid of that heroic limelight which Roland had always regarded as ample compensation for those who were slain...Not even a military purpose seemed to have been served by his death...just to be shot like a rat in the dark!" (pp. 241-243)

Roland's death is merely the first of many deaths for Brittain. One by one every male who matters to her is consumed by the war. Her brother Edward's note to her on Geoffrey's death is an epitaph for all of them: "Dear child, there is no more to say; we have lost almost all there was to lose, and what have we gained?" (p. 347)

Brittain is eloquent about the way in which the home front must protect its ignorant illusions about the war. She is even more eloquent about the degree to which she has been stripped of hers:

> One had to go on living because it was less trouble than finding a way out, but the early ideals of the War were all shattered, trampled into the mud which covered the bodies of those with whom I had shared them. What was the use of hypocritically seeking out exalted consolations for death, when I knew so well that there were none?
> ...I knew now that death was the end and that I was quite alone. There was no hereafter, no Easter morning, no meeting again; I walked in a darkness, a dumbness, a silence, which no beloved voice would penetrate, no fond hope illumine. (p. 446)

By the end of the war Brittain's anguish and disillusionment would seem to be complete:

> 1919 seems a horrid year, dominated by a thoroughly nasty Peace. ...when the text of the treaty of Versailles was published in May, after I had returned to Oxford, I deliberately refrained from reading it; I was beginning already to suspect that my generation had been deceived, its young courage cynically exploited, its idealism betrayed, and I did not want to know the details of that betrayal.[28]

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[28] T.E.Lawrence expresses this sense of a betrayal perhaps more powerfully than anyone else:

> The morning freshness of the world-to-be intoxicated us. We were wrought up with ideas inexpressible and vaporous, but to be fought for. We lived many lives in those whirling campaigns, never sparing ourselves: yet when we achieved and

> At an inter-collegiate debate a Hindu student remarked that here, at any rate, was "the Peace that passeth all understanding"--and I left it at that. (Brittain, pp. 467,470)

She is bereft of her past and alienated from the present. (Her account of the distance between her and her fellow female students at Somerville is both funny and painful.) And yet even after all this Brittain's idealism is unquenchable.[29] She decides to switch from English to History at Oxford, hoping that the latter discipline will help her understand how the catastrophe of the war happened, and help her to try to prevent it ever happening again. But even as she makes this move she is, as she

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> the new world dawned, the old men came out again and took our victory to re-make in the likeness of the former world they knew. Youth could win, but had not learned to keep: and was pitiably weak against age. We stammered that we had worked for a new heaven and a new earth, and they thanked us kindly and made their peace.

T.E.Lawrence, Seven Pillars of Wisdom (1926; rpt. London: Jonathan Cape, 1946), pp. 22-23.

[29] Perhaps here is the best place to indicate the sort of debate I would want to have with Tylee's judgements of Brittain (Tylee, pp. 214-223). I agree that Brittain's grasp of the "social and cultural currents connected with women's political struggle for emancipation" may have been tenuous. And, as I make clear in what follows, I also agree that her political idealism seems a little naïve. (Not to mention the way in which it seems to deny, or even betray, the education she has just--with such pain and suffering--endured!) But Tylee accuses Brittain of continuing to see her band of noble warriors and their activities in a completely naïve and idealistic light. I do think one of Brittain's strengths is her ability to take us back to an age where idealism is still a vital possibility. I would want to put that sense of idealism in a different context than does Tylee. (cf my later comments on Crozier and Scott Fitzgerald pp. 132-133, below) But an uncritical or unmediated celebration of idealism is not, surely, what we find in Testament of Youth. She knows those 'sacrifices' have been made 'in vain'. As she has said, there will be "no Easter morning". Her sense of what has happened to that language--to those possibilities--is the same as, not antithetic to, Hemingway's.

says, "...as yet unaware that the War's repressions were already preparing their strange, neurotic revenge." (Brittain, p. 475) As does everyone else I discuss in this essay, Brittain shows us the gap between what her conscious mind is registering (crudely put--her persistent idealism manifest in the hope that we can prevent further wars through the study of history), and what her unconscious is registering:

> ...before I left the village to go home, I looked one evening into my bedroom glass and thought, with a sense of incommunicable horror, that I detected in my face the signs of some sinister and peculiar change. A dark shadow seemed to lie across my chin; was I beginning to grow a beard, like a witch? Thereafter my hand began, at regular intervals, to steal towards my face...(Brittain, p. 484)

That delusion persists until it becomes a "permanent, fixed obsession". What it seems to suggest is that at some level other than her conscious mind Brittain is convinced that the world she inhabits is one of nightmare, horror and monsters. And the whole weight of the preceding six hundred pages, the striking accomplishment of the novel, has been to render the pain and the loss and the absurd futility of what has gone on so strongly that we share her nightmare.

What I would want to claim, in the end, is that Vera Brittain has explored a world that is remarkably similar to those worlds we will explore with the male authors of the memoirs and novels I consider. It is a world of loss and vulnerability and impotence. And she has reached that world as much through her imaginative engagement with her fiancé, her brother and their friends as she has through her own remarkable activities.

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One of the most potent dimensions of the horror of the war has to do with what civilization is doing to the human body. It is as though the great war becomes the culmination of centuries of mistrust and denigration of the physical body. Organized religion and the industrial revolution between them seemed to have led us to a place where the most unspeakable and vile acts could occur on a daily basis to defile what we once recognized as the temple of the Lord.[30]

In The Return of the Soldier, Rebecca West gives us a wonderful description where we see that Margaret can gather Chris into a magic circle of peace and contentment:

> It was not utter dullness not to have anticipated the beauty that I saw. No one could have told.... They had taken the mackintosh rug out of the dinghy and spread it on this little space of clear grass...He lay there in the confiding relaxation of a sleeping child, his hands unclenched and his head thrown back so that the bare throat showed defencelessly...
> I have often seen people grouped like that on the common outside our gates, on Bank Holidays. Most often the man has

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[30] cf my discussion of Lawrence p. 284, below. Mary Borden shows powerfully that there is nothing gender-specific about a horrified awareness of what we were doing to the body:

> He said: "Come and help me a moment. Just cut this bandage, please." I went over to his dressing table. He darted off to a voice that was shrieking somewhere. There was a man stretched on the table. His brain came off in my hands when I lifted the bandage from his head. When the dresser came back I said: "His brain came off on the bandage." "Where have you put it?" "I put in in the pail under the table." "It's only one half of his brain," he said, looking into the man's skull. "The rest is here." I left him to finish the dressing and went about my own business.

Mary Borden, The Forbidden Zone (London: Heinemann, 1929), p. 142. Quoted in Cooper, Munich & Squier, pp. 127-128.

> a handkerchief over his face to shade him from the sun and the woman squats beside him and peers through the undergrowth to see that the children come to no harm as they play. It has sometimes seemed to me that there was a significance about it. You know... when under any sky one sees a mother with her child in her arms, something turns in one's heart like a sword and one says to oneself, "If humanity forgets these attitudes there is an end to the world." But people like me, who are not artists, are never sure about people they don't know. So it was not until now, when it happened to my friends, when it was my dear Chris and my dear Margaret who sat thus englobed in peace as in a crystal sphere, that I knew that it was the most significant as it was the loveliest attitude in the world. It means that the woman has gathered the soul of the man into her soul and is keeping it warm in love and peace so that his body can rest quiet for a little time. That is a great thing for a woman to do. (West pp. 143-144.)

But it is impossible to keep "warm in love and peace" in this world. And Margaret must decide to make a man of Chris. At the heart of this novel is the realization again of a "no exit". Chris has been able to save his body by an amnesia that takes him back to a pre-war state which evades both the war and, significantly, the death-in-life of his proper Edwardian marriage, and his proper Edwardian estate. But to escape through neurosis into a fantasy life is no answer. One cannot live in fantasy. Jenny realizes: "I had of late been underestimating the cruelty of things...Such a world will not suffer magic circles to endure."

> ...there is a draught that we must drink or not be fully human. I knew that one must know the truth. I knew quite well that when one is adult one must raise to one's lips the wine of truth, heedless that it is not sweet like milk but draws the mouth with its strength, and celebrate communion with reality, or else walk for ever queer and small like a dwarf. (West, p.182)

And so Margaret conspires to wake Chris from his amnesiac escape.

> He walked not loose limbed like a boy, as he had done that very afternoon, but with the soldier's hard tread upon the heel. It recalled to me that, bad as we were, we were yet not the worst circumstance of his return. When we had lifted the yoke of our embraces from his shoulders he would go back to that flooded trench in Flanders under that sky more full of flying death than clouds, to that No Man's Land where bullets fall like rain on the rotting faces of the dead.... (West, p.187)

We must register the full viciousness of the final lines of the novel. Kitty, Chris's wife, sucks her breath with satisfaction. "'He's cured!' she whispered slowly. 'He's cured!'" To be "cured" in that world--to be "normal"--is, if you're a Christopher, to be inevitably, inexorably, dead, and there is no possible escape from that. _Pace_ Claire Tylee, there seems to me to be nothing "pat" about this ending.[31] Surely it is obvious that this novel proposes no "dignified sanity" in Chris's "return". Rather, West has uncovered an Edwardian propriety that masks the kind of carnival of cruelty and suffering that F.M.Ford so brilliantly depicts in _The Good Soldier_.

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Virginia Woolf is another woman who has smelt something rotten at the centre of her society. What most commentators on

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[31] Claire Tylee, _The Great War and Women's Consciousness_ (London: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 142-150. Tylee offers an intelligent reading of the book. But when she suggests that the religious language of Jenny's recognition that Chris must face "reality" means that the novel itself supports that point of view, Tylee goes astray. Jenny is notoriously unreliable as a narrator. Although she never admits it, she is clearly in love with Chris. And her emotions in relation to Kitty are deeply contradictory. It is true that all three women agree that the return of the soldier is necessary. But that does _not_ mean that the novel "...finally appears to endorse Jenny's views and the snobbery and vanity that destroyed Chris's inner peace." (p.144)

Mrs Dalloway seem to miss is that, although Clarissa has defensively claimed throughout the novel that her parties are "for life", Virginia Woolf makes it clear that we need to look at the climactic party with a sceptical eye. It is true that Clarissa has an admirable openness to the fluid, shifting changeableness of life, and true too that she genuinely wants to celebrate that mysterious sense of life's possibilities she possesses. But it is also true that throughout the novel we gather a sense that is cumulative of something poisoned at the deepest springs of Clarissa's being. She is somehow distanced from that life she says she loves, just as she is distanced from all those with whom she might have intimate relationships. Clarissa's declared allegiance is to life. But at a deeper level she has a sense that life is terrifying, hostile, and she is haunted by a sense of dissolution, of death. "Oh! thought Clarissa, in the middle of my party, here's death..." (Woolf, 203) It is no accident that the guest of honour at this party is "her" Prime Minister, the man responsible for the political decisions which would have sent Septimus off to war. Nor is it an accident that another of the prominent guests is much more directly responsible for Septimus's death: Sir William Bradshaw, representative of all those forces of "proportion" and "conversion" which Clarissa so hates, but finally supports. It is clear that Clarissa identifies with Septimus in crucial ways:

> A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to

> communicate... (p. 204)

She knows that Sir William is "obscurely evil...capable of some indescribable outrage--forcing your soul...".(p. 204) Yet the burden of the novel has been to suggest that Clarissa cannot distance herself from this death that lies at the heart of her society. She wants her party to celebrate life. But her hold on life is too tenuous. And the conventions and proprieties that surround her mean that when she finally throws her party the wrong people turn up as guests of honour. We know she cannot remain loyal to her vision of what it is that matters. We know she will have to go back to standing at the top of the stairs, the perfect hostess, entertaining those who destroy Septimus and all that he represents. We know, in the end, she will go back to her attic. "There was a emptiness about the heart of life; an attic room." (p.35) She will go back to her single bed that, in steadily getting more narrow, is already turning into her coffin.[32]

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[32] My argument here suggests the degree to which I differ from Gilbert's argument in No Man's Land where she speaks of "Clarissa's triumphant survival" (315) and later, "Woolf portrays a country where women are not just triumphant survivors but also potential redeemers and potent inheritors. " (317) This seems to me to get the text precisely wrong. Woolf is deeply sympathetic to Clarissa, and sees much that is positive there. But there is no sense at all in the text that:

> ...the waste land of England might be mysteriously revitalized through the mystical communion between the dead soldier who had always wanted to "tell the Prime Minister" to "Change the world" and the woman survivor who ultimately speaks to the Prime Minster "for" him. (Gilbert & Gubar, 1989, p. 316)

But there is nothing in the text to suggest that Clarissa would or could speak to the Prime Minister "for" Septimus. Indeed the point

What these three texts offer does not seem to me to be defined by the gender of author or protagonist. They offer support for the classical sense of how the imagination works in terms of bridging the inevitable gap between subjectivities, (or between genders). (Shelley's "A Defense of Poetry", for instance, is a powerful statement of that notion.) What they recognize is that at the centre of the Great War there is an engagement with a death that is sterile, that leads to no new life. And it is a death in which the civilization behind it is, knowingly or not, deeply complicit.

This, then, is the thrust of the following essay. For a number of reasons discursive prose may not be the most effective way to discover what the Great War was like, what it meant. The truest witness, I argue, will be in the works of the imagination. And that witness may well surprise us.

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is made that the Prime Minister is one with Bradshaw and with Kilman in his commitment to proportion and conversion, to forcing the soul. And we know that in the end Clarissa's commitment to the social proprieties of her class and station will outweigh her loyalty to the unknown Septimus.

The Memoirs

We are aware that there are some general problems in writing history, especially in writing a history of a war. How, then, do we find out what happened? What it was like? What it meant? Instinctively, we may turn to an eye-witness. Our first discovery is that we cannot necessarily trust the memoirist who says: "I was there. I'll tell you what I saw." It's a brave promise. But we must beware. This is, of course, simply another example of what was the focus of the discussion in the introduction. Accounts of any kind are themselves interpretations of the events they describe, and never straight, objective descriptions of a reality <u>out there</u>. And just as they are interpretations, so in our reading of them we, necessarily, produce an interpretation of an interpretation. In relation to any account Heisenberg's principle is applicable: the instrument which enables us to see, may itself distort that which it makes visible. Firstly what the memoirist tells you may not be what he saw. He may well have a legion of reasons for colouring what he sees: his own political or philosophical persuasions, his sense of his own role or importance. Secondly he may not know what he saw. There is the whole problem of the possible gulf between what a man sees and what a man <u>thinks</u> he sees. A collection of eye-witness reports of any accident--let alone one of the magnitude of the Great War--enforces the danger of believing that what a man tells you he saw is, in fact, what he saw.

Moreover one cannot stress too strongly the point that these events are not given to us as they happen. Paul Fussell alerts us to an important truth; he is talking about his research at the Imperial War Museum:

> I was hoping to perceive and define a particular style in which Second World War writers rendered the ghastly material in their memories into understandable and thus conventional received plots, rhetorical figures, traditional idioms, and clichés. My encounters with such materials from the First World War had made it clear that without such conventional crutches, remembrance, at least remembrance transmissable to others, is not possible.[1]

Any honest memoirist admits to himself the creative powers of his own memory, and knows that his memoir will of necessity be composed as much of fiction as of fact. (See the conclusion to the section on the memoirs, especially the quotation from Sassoon's Siegfried's Journey quoted on pp. 193-194, below.) The "facts" are all recollected, ordered and shaped in memory, moulded in the imagination. (One major clue to the necessity for this distancing from the actual is that none of the famous memoirs is written until at least ten years after the end of the war. A number of memoirists confess they found it impossible to write the memoirs any earlier.) Leed notes:

> The signs of the repression of the war experience can even be found in the literary fate of the war. Very few war books were published in the 1920s. This period William Karl Pfeiler considered a "latency period" in which an experience that was too destructive of individual and collective

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[1] Paul Fussell, Writing in Wartime: The Uses of Innocence, 1987 Munro Beattie Lecture, Faculty of Arts Lecture Series #1 (Ottawa: Carleton University, 1987)

> selfhood was "forgotten" to be resurrected later in more "acceptable" form.[2]

We must examine these resurrections in some detail.

"Nobody told me", says Elizabeth. I have chosen texts that seem to me to try hard to tell us, texts that give us a sense of what the war was like from a variety of points of view. But, as I have already indicated, I am interested in much in what is not said, not recognized, as I am in what is. So some of these texts are examined as much for what they do not say as for what they do.

The first three memoirs I examine are included because they each give us a "reading" of the war that is important if we are to get a representative coverage. I start with a memoir that needs to be much better known that it is. And that will probably happen inasmuch as A.G.West's The Diary of a Dead Officer has recently been republished by the Imperial War Museum. West's memoir is of interest because he did not carefully rework it. There was no opportunity for editorial work; West was killed on active duty in 1917. As we have already noticed most of the well-known memoirs were printed at least ten years after the war. I shall argue that one of the things that happened in many of those memoirs--especially those most alive to the horror and destructiveness of the war--is that the ten year period was a sort of incubation period where, among other things, a fictional persona was created as a sort of proxy for the memoirist. I

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[2] Eric J. Leed, No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 191.

further suggest that one of the functions of this proxy is to allow the memoirist himself to evade the full recognition of his own vulnerability and impotence. What is so striking about The Diary... is that for obvious reasons no such a creation was possible. (Although we must always remember that The Diary..., as we have it, was edited by West's friend C.E.M Joad, whose own well-known pacifist views need to be taken into account as we explore what he chose to give us.) So this text we have is, in some ways, the most naked presentation of a descent into terror, impotence and the absurd. There can be no escape into the safety of art.

The next memoir considered is that of C.E.Montague, published in 1922. Again the date is significant. If Leed is right, then certain kinds of experiences require a certain time to be emotionally digested. Montague was a journalist by profession, and Disenchantment is very definitely the work of a jounalist. By that I mean, in spite of his own involvement in the war, Montague does nothing to try to render any of those scenes for us. Rather we get a journalist's summing up: a drawing of conclusions from evidence that is analytical rather than rendered live as it is in most of the other memoirs. So here again there is no real play between the voice of the conscious intellect and the voice of the imagination. Montague sees how destructive the war is, but he himself seems distanced from the destruction--observer not participant--not potential victim. That distancing allows a quiet and steady intelligence to probe at the various

issues the war brings up with a sceptical, hard-headed rationality.

The third memoirist I explore is Guy Chapman. His two memoirs give us a crucial reading of the war that must not be ignored. Chapman is the only memoirist I know who is clearly alive to the wild destruction of the war but can, nevertheless, write convincingly of what is in the end attractive, not to say compelling, about that experience.

The next six memoirs give us a fascinating picture of the growing complexity of the relationship between what the mind thinks and what the imagination renders. Generally speaking, the picture the imagination offers is deeply threatening. Generally speaking, the conscious mind needs to be reassuring. In the memoirs, as we shall see, this conflict between what the imagination renders and what the mind wants to say or thinks it ought to say, results in many interesting and revealing evasions. I include the first three memoirists of this group (i.e. Carrington, Glubb and Crozier) to give a sense of the way in which the mind is able <u>not</u> to see what is there. Carrington and Glubb are representative in their abilities to rationalize and evade what their own accounts present. They merely leave the contradictory testament of mind and imagination there, side by side, without ever quite recognizing the essential disparity revealed, or the implications of the contradictions. Crozier is a more interesting example. He is clearly anguished by his experience and responsibility. But he offers us the response of

the good soldier, and refuses to make explicit the questions that force themselves with increasing urgency against his disciplined sense of duty. (It is interesting to note that later in his career, in 1937, Crozier publishes The Men I Killed. There he explores his conversion to the classical pacifist position.) More sophisticated memoirists (i.e. Blunden, Graves, Sassoon) frequently are forced to create a persona through whom they can evade the intolerable paradoxes they confront and are psychologically unable to recognize. Invariably, I think, the created persona involves a simplification of the individuality of the creator. In the end the persona manages to fashion an escape from his experiences that is not really available to the memoirist himself.

I had originally thought I might order the memoirs chronologically. But that presents real problems. The various memoirs were worked over for very different periods of time. (The one worked on the longest, Glubb's Into Battle, is one of the least sophisticated, and least self-conscious.) Sassoon's three volumes cover an eight year period; would one intersperse accounts of those volumes with accounts written by other memoirists? Both Chapman and Carrington offer two memoirs separated by many years. But rather than reading the four memoirs chronologically, one tends naturally to pair the works by author. (It is interesting to note that, where we have more than one memoir by the same author, the passage of time seems to make very little difference in terms of what is presented. It seems that,

once committed to print, the memoirist isn't likely to change his perceptions or point of view.) In any case, a chronological ordering does not seem to offer much coherence.

I have ordered the memoirs I examine so that they move steadily to the confrontation that would always seem to be inevitable. The nightmare the imagination offers will not go away. Sooner or later the conscious mind must confront that explosive horror. As we come progressively closer to that confrontation we will see that the memoirs cope with it in a steadily more complex manner. What can we do about it? What can we say about it? What stories do the memoirists tell us as they deal with these issues? What stories do the memoirists tell themselves as they try to protect themselves from the realizations implicit in their memoirs?

What we learn, and what this study should make clear, is that such testaments must not be read as merely factual accounts of what has happened. They are much more complex than that, and must be read as fictional creations (and therefore truer than mere factual accounts). And they must be known by the rules we apply to the works of the imagination.

To establish this, and to establish what the various memoirs and novels render as true, I must look at each individual work in turn, allowing each to establish its own individual life and world. This imposes a somewhat uniform shape on the bulk of this essay: a succession of works dutifully lined up for inspection. There are, generally, two possible ways of discussing a subject

like the literature of the Great War. The first is to advance an argument and to illustrate it with excerpts from the literature. This approach has the advantage of allowing one a great deal of flexibility in making one's argument and in handling the literature and is, perhaps, the more alluring. The danger of it is that once you fragment a work of literature using bits of it to bolster an argument or demonstrate a point, you have already destroyed that which gives the work its special "truthfulness" in the first place: that is its imaginative integrity.[3] Removed from their context bits of literature may be used to support almost any argument. The second approach is to respond as fully as one can to the literature available, and allow the argument to make itself. It does seem to me that any general thesis is only as persuasive as are the readings of texts on which it rests. So I have tried to give a full sense of the various texts in front of us.

Aristotle said: "Poetry is something more philosophic and of greater import than history."[4] If there is any justification for

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[3] An amusing example of this is to be found in the occasional glimpse one gets of Polonius's advice to Laertes lifted from context, framed and hung as though it were a serious moral guide rather than--as it clearly is in context--a set of desperately fatuous, over-simplified platitudes completely insufficient to the moral complexity of the world of Hamlet.

[4] Aristotle, Poetics, 9. 145 1b. I hope it is clear that I don't see the historian and the reader of literature in adversarial roles. One of the best historians of our period has said: "Social history, like history itself, is a combination of taste, imagination, science, and scholarship. It reconciles incompatibles, it balances probabilities; and at last it attains the reality of fiction, which is the highest reality of all." G.

that claim the integrity of the "poetry" must be respected, the voice allowed to say its piece uninterrupted, and the "poem" itself not broken into pieces which are then used as evidence for other ends. The large amount of quotation in this essay results from a desire to peg the argument to a literature whose integrity can be seen to have been respected. As a critic one needs to show how and where the commentary originates. Once a full reading is offered, once we have a feel for the context created in each work, we may then construct some more general case. Properly that is the function of the conclusion although it is helpful if one offers a brief adumbration of the argument in an introduction.

Dangerfield, The Strange Death of Liberal England (New York: Capricorn Books, 1961), p 393.

We are, of course, working for the same end: to try to illuminate the past, and to try to understand both what it meant and, therefore, what it means. At the conclusion of the very fine book on the origins of the First World War from which I have already quoted Zara Steiner says:

> What still remains to be understood is why, after it became clear that the stalemate would be a long one, the casualty lists unbearable, and the decisions of the military futile, men continued to fight.... It may well be that, for reasons which the historian can only dimly perceive, Europe was deeply ready for war.... It may be that some profound boredom with the long years of peace and with the tedium of industrial life led men to volunteer for France and to find in that Hell a final confirmation of manhood. (pp. 256-6)

One may well question how much manhood was confirmed in the trenches. But it is clear that Steiner's suggestion here bears an interesting relationship with--for example--the imaginative world of Thomas Mann's The Magic Mountain or F.M.Ford's Parade's End. At their best the insights of literature and history intersect.

A.G.West

Of all the memoirs of the Great War none is more astonishing than Graeme West's Diary of a Dead Officer.[5] In less than seventy pages of text West refines various experiences of the war and confronts directly the various questions these experiences should, but so often don't, make unavoidable. None of the other memoirists moves as quickly or as directly to the fundamental questions this war poses. As I will suggest, all of the memoirists we examine evade the final and fundamental recognition of their own impotence. In fact they can do nothing effective about the war. In their memoirs they tend to evade a confrontation with that fact and its various implications, and they do so partly through the artifice of their own reworkings of their stories.

There is one further, related, point. For obvious reasons most of the memoirs we have of the war--and all of the well-known ones--are written by survivors of that war. It is clear that the

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[5] West,A.G., Diary of a Dead Officer (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1919) All further references are to this edition and will be noted in the text. The Diary... was edited by West's friend C.E.M. Joad. It is to his notes that we are indebted for most of our biographical information. See also: B. Russell, Autobiography, Vol. 11 (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1967), which includes two letters from Graeme West and one from West's fiancée Dorothy MacKenzie. In Alick West's autobiography, One Man in His Time (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969) West's younger brother gives us something of the family background.

very fact of survival necessarily colours the way in which the survivors see what they have survived. They now know that at least for themselves, personally, it was survivable, and this in turn may well influence what responses they now see as adequate or reasonable. Certainly it is clear that survival allows these memoirists the opportunity to polish not only their prose but, on occasion, their attitudes as well. But the experiences and attitudes of the survivors are only part of the story of that war. There are other voices that must be heard as well.

In Mark Helprin's wonderful A Soldier of the Great War[6] the main figure, Alessandro, is explaining to a curious youngster why he is not the best witness to the war. When the young man objects that, after all, Alessandro was there, he replies:

> "I know, but I survived. That puts me on a lower plane."
> "A lower plane?"
> "Lower than the one of those who perished. It was their war, not mine. I was able to walk out of it, leave it behind. Though God preserved me, the best stories were theirs, and these were cut short. The real story of a war is no story at all--blackness, sadness, silence. The stories they tell of comradeship and valor are all to make up for what they lacked. When I was in the army I was always surrounded by thousands of men, and yet I was almost always alone. Whenever I made friends, they were killed.
> If I describe what I saw of the war, you'll know it from the point of view of the living, and that is the smallest part of the truth. The truth itself is what was finally apprehended by those who didn't come back.

West's is one of the rare stories of "those who perished".

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[6] Mark Helprin, A Soldier of the Great War (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991), p.84.

We are alerted early to what is perhaps West's most significant characteristic: his independence of mind. He has been in the trenches for only two months when he writes:

> I have contracted hatred and enmity for nobody out here, save soldiers generally and a few N.C.O.'s in particular. For the Hun I feel nothing but a spirit of amiable fraternity that the poor man has to sit just like us and do all the horrible and useless things that we do, when he might be at home with his wife or his books, as he preferred. Well, well; who is going to have the sense to begin talking of peace? We're stuck here until our respective Governments have the sense to do it.(pp.12-13)

Such a perspective is unlikely to endear him to the more conventionally minded. On this occasion West spends only four months in France (Nov. '15--March '16); the next six months are spent in Scotland training to be an officer. (He had enlisted in a very conventional burst of enthusiasm in Christmas of 1914. His application for a commission had been refused because of his bad eyes; he was delighted when "more or less by ruse" he managed to get a private doctor to pass him as an enlisted man.) This six month period establishes the foundation of West's critique of the army.

West gets an unrelieved diet of what Graves calls "eyewash": the repetitive, unimaginative attempts, untouched by intelligence, to impose petty discipline. It is worse for West than it was for Blunden or Graves. They, at least, were in France. Ironically, the reality of the fighting worked to prevent the worst excesses of maddening irrelevance which were produced so often by those "instructors" removed from the fighting. In Scotland no such saving reality was at hand. West drily quotes

his C.S.M. lecturing the Company on its general and manifold unsatisfactoriness: "We must get rid of the habits we had acquired in the field and try and be soldiers again!"(p.42) It is not surprising that officers and N.C.O.'s found this far from the actual fighting were hardly likely to be among the brightest or most effective. Succinctly, West gives us a number of quick vignettes of the petty, mean, bullying, small-minded harassment that seems to be an inevitable result of giving a large number of men power over other men. The men are kept standing or drilling pointlessly in cold, wet and wind. They are forbidden to drink beer in town. Again and again the "viciousness and malice" of these "super-annuated old martinets" are manifested in tiresome tyrannies and restrictions. The insensitivity borders on cruelty, and flowers in revealing--and quite arbitrary--ways: "...many men with bad teeth were being detained at their work in camp, whatever their sufferings, until the doctor had gathered together a whole platoon to attend the dentist." (p.31) Or take the case of N.....:

> He had an abscess in a top molar and had to go down to the dentist. From him he had to get an estimate of the cost of treating the tooth. The dentist presented an estimate of 2/6 for cleaning out the tooth, and 2/6 for refilling it. This estimate N..... gave in to the authorities at camp and received it back a week after the day he had first gone sick with the second 2/6 crossed out--i.e. the Army were willing to pay the first but not the second.(p.39)

This humiliation and torment of the men through that area of exquisite private vulnerability--the teeth--is nicely revealing.

But discipline is necessary to facilitate training. What of the training that is the ostensible <u>raison d'être</u> for the camp?

The training is characterized by its inefficiency. The instructors are totally incompetent, and try to disguise or hide that incompetence by a rigid insistence on petty detail. The C.S.M. and Adjutant have just contradicted each other in their instructions:

> The authorities rushed foaming and heated up and down the ranks, pushing and thrusting men about, bawling and gesticulating like three peevish little boys playing with lead soldiers, and all wanting to do something different with them.(pp.27-28)

The potential officers are given endless instruction in the niceties of saluting drill:

> This morning we had saluting drill for half an hour. It was the most pitiably comic parade I have ever seen, even here. First we were drilled in platoons: our official way of carrying the stick was outlined, and a special drill, by numbers, drawn up, for tucking the stick under the arm, taking it into the hand again, and cocking it up in the air...
>
> After this, when it had been impressed on us how hot the C.O. was on saluting and looking officers straight in the eyes, "like a soldier, as man to man, not gazing into distant regions," we were formed up, both Companies A and B, in fours. Then about twenty men were put out in a wide circle with a diameter of about two hundred yards, and the whole two companies were marched around this circle. Each four went off separately at intervals of a few paces, saluting the twenty men on the circumference of the circle as they came to each of them. (pp.31-32)

"Circus managers", "peevish little boys playing with lead soldiers": the images of both the authorities and the men are revealing.

When the instruction is in skills that might conceivably be useful, the instructors are completely incompetent:

> As usual, Platoon drill under a man who didn't know the difference between column and line. A sergeant who, by his own confession, had never handled a short rifle was put on to instruct us in musketry..... More musketry from the same sergeant, who knew neither the right orders nor drill-book method of instructions. Asked by Captain R..... if he had given us a target, he said, "Yes, the field in front!" (pp.18-19)

So it goes. We understand West's nightmare:

> My feeling of impotent horror, as of a creature caught by the proprietors of some travelling circus and forced with formal brutality to go through meaningless tricks, was immensely sharpened by a charcoal drawing of C....'s called "We Want More Men!" showing Death, with the English staff cap on and a ragged tunic, standing with a jagged sickle among a pile of bleeding, writhing bodies and smoking corpses--a huge gaunt figure that haunted me horribly. (p.23)

One of the problems of any military training is that (*pace* Carrington q.v.) military theorists are versed only in wars that are already over. Especially in areas remote from the actual fighting the form of drill or the concepts of discipline become more and more patently anachronistic. West listens to a lecture on morale and physical drill:

> Points: Physical drill to be done in the trenches! It often could be done even under shell-fire. Never let a man off! Punish him for all offences, even the slightest. His pals'll chip him and he'll pull together.(p.38)

West comments:

> (Note total lack of comprehension of ordinary man's psychology; in an army where all the ranks were criminals or seducers and the officers all bloody bullies the regiment could only be kept up like this; nowadays such treatment engenders sheer hatred and makes men give the smallest they can without being caught; treated like gentlemen they would give all they could.) (p.38)

The cumulative effect of all this petty stupidity is disintegration:

> I knew how many of us did not feel fit here: this, combined with the stupidity of parading us for platoon drill or even physical drill in the wind and wet (we were sometimes kept an hour drilling in the pouring rain), and the ever-increasing viciousness and malice of the Adjutant and C.S.M. towards us, seemed to keep an almost personal field of terror hovering over our heads. The war and the Army had never looked so grim. The Army is really the most anti-social body imaginable. It maintains itself on the selfishness and hostility of nations, and in its own ranks holds together by a bond of fear and suspicion, all anti-social feeling. Men are taught to fear their superiors, and they suspect the men. Hatred must be often present, and only fear prevents it flaming out.(pp.22-23)

This kind of observation is the complete antithesis to that provided by Guy Chapman (see below p.84). We must remember that the war provides ample evidence for both.

Not only is the sense of community threatened. More importantly, at a deeper level the basic sense of self, of the individual, is under attack. It is commonplace that in any army the individual must give up many of his usual rights and responsibilities. But what makes West's vision so profound here is not only his acute perception of all that threatens the individual, but also his sense of why such a destruction of individuality is dangerous. Diary of a Dead Officer is filled with the awareness of the various ways in which the army can demean the individual, persuade or teach him that he should not, must not, think for himself. West counts the cost of such a social achievement.

For West it is astonishing that a society can create and support a reality as hideous as the war. The society pursues that war with no adequate articulation of the goals for which it is

fighting; it pursues it at a cost that is appalling, and it pursues it with the active and necessary support of the very individuals who have most to lose. The longer the war continues, the less sense it makes. Its senselessness is of a particularly malevolent sort. Most individuals, (especially most of the men actually involved), agree that it doesn't make sense. And yet they do nothing. Or rather, they continue to die. Why?

This is where West's history is so instructive. Men continue to die (in a manner that is brutal and hideous) for a cause more and more ambiguous partly because the whole system in which they have been living for some time is designed to stifle that sense of individual self which is necessary for any genuine individual act. And even when that sense is found, even when the individual does try to set his one voice against the madness, what he finds is simply that the vastness of all that is opposed to him is overpowering. Do what he will he cannot alter that reality. We will see others, most noticeably Sassoon, reach this conclusion. It should be pointed out that no one reaches it as directly, as lucidly, as does West. And no one else faces as nakedly the implications of his own impotence.

We have already seen that there is an unwillingness on the part of the various memoirists to follow their responses through to the conclusions that would seem to be inevitable. If things are as they seem to be then there are some questions one must ask about the necessity of the war and the conduct of it. Yet these questions are, for the most part, evaded. One feels the various

memoirists focussing on the day-to-day flux, focussing on it--one may feel--with a kind of desperation. Concentrating on the surface means you don't have to consider the depths. So all the memoirs spend much of their time describing any number of attacks--all of which are the same attack--any number of bombardments--all of which are the same bombardment. They give us instance after instance of the stupidity and hideous madness of the war. What becomes fascinating is the refusal to allow these specific instances to add up to some general case or response. West does not waste any effort repeating descriptions. His one account of being shelled captures all the horror necessary:

> I shall always remember sitting at the head of this little narrow trench, smoking a cigarette and trying to soothe the men simply by being quiet. Five or six little funk-holes dug into the side of the trench served to take the body of a man in a very huddled and uncomfortable position, with no room to move, simply to cower in into the little hole. There they sit like animals for market, like hens in cages, one facing one way, one another. One simply looks at his hands clasped on his knees, dully and lifelessly, shivering a little as a shell draws near; another taps the side of his hole with his finger-nails, rhythmically; another hides himself in his great-coat and passes into a kind of a torpor. Of course, when a shell falls on to the parapet and bores down into the earth and explodes, they are covered over like so many potatoes. It is with the greatest difficulty that we can shift the men into another bit of trench and make them stand up. (pp.67-68)

"Animals for market", "hens in cages", "potatoes"...the similes are powerful and disturbing.

Perhaps even more importantly West does not evade the necessity of asking some questions, being driven to some conclusions. He is speaking of ordinary officers:

> They are, as one knows, many of them worthy and unselfish men, not void of intelligence in trivial matters, and ready

> to carry through this unpleasant business to the end, with spirits as high as they can keep them, and as much attention to their men as the routine and disciplinary conscience of their colonel will permit. They are not often aggressive or offensively military. This is the dismal part of it: that these men, almost the best value in the ordinary upper class that we have, should allow themselves to suppose that all this is somehow necessary and inevitable;[7] that they should give so much labour and time to the killing of others, though to the plain appeals of poverty and inefficiency in government, as well national and international, they are so absolutely heedless. How is it that as much blood and money cannot be poured out when it is a question of saving and helping mankind rather than of slaying them? (pp.55-56)
>
> I am being pained, bored and maddened--and to what end? It is the uselessness of it that annoys me....What good, what happiness can be produced by some of the scenes I have had to witness in the last few days?...(p.57)
>
> Even granting that it was necessary to resist Germany by force of arms at the beginning--and this I have yet most carefully to examine--why go on?
>
> Can no peace be concluded?
>
> Is it not known to both armies that each is utterly weary and heartsick? Of course it is. Then why, in God's name, go on?
>
> It must be unreasonable to continue. The victorious, or seemingly victorious side, ought to offer peace: no peace can be worse than this bloody stupidity. The maddening thing is the sight of men of fairly goodwill accepting it all as necessary; this angers me, that men must go on. Why? Who wants to?...(pp.55-57)

The conclusion West comes to is the classic pacifist position:

> ...I feel quite clearly that I ought to have stood aside. It is these men who stand aside, these philosophers, and the so-called conscientious objectors, who are the living force of the future; they are full of the light that must come sooner or later; they are sneered at now, but their position is firm.
>
> If all mankind were like them there would not have been war. Duty to country and King and civilisation! Nonsense! For none of these is a man to be forced to leave his humanity on one side and make a passionate destroying beast

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[7] cf my discussion of Wells's, Mr. Britling Sees it Through, for a further exploration of this kind of sense of necessity and inevitability. (p. 264, below). West's impatience here with assumption of a necessary teleology parallels Nietzsche's in The Use and Abuse of History.

> of himself. I am a man before I am anything else, and all that is human in me revolts. I would fain stand beside these men I admire, whose cause is the highest part of human nature, calm reason, and kindliness.
>
> The argument drawn from the sufferings of the men in the trenches, from the almost universal sacrifices to duty, are (sic) not valid against this. Endurance is hard, but not meritorious simply because it is endurance. We are confronted with two sets of martyrs here: those of the trenches, and those of the tribunal and the civil prison, and not by any means are the former necessarily in the right....
>
> Yes! There was but one way for me, and I have seen it only when it was too late to pursue it. Even be the thing as necessary as you like, be the constitution of this world really so foul and hellish that force must be met with force, yet I should have stood aside, no brutality should have led me into it. Had I stood apart I should have stood on firm logical ground; where I was truth would have been, as it is among my friends now.
>
> To defy the whole system, to refuse to be an instrument of it--this I should have done.(pp.58-59)

The use of the conditional is significant. West had not "stood apart." What could he do now? What he discovers is exactly what Sassoon discovers too: that is the excruciating impotence of the individual who can perceive the malignant absurdity of the situation in front of him but who can neither alter that situation nor extricate himself from it.[8] His impotence is fully rendered in the comic and cruel honesty of his account of his attempts to actually make his declaration:

> On that evening I stayed up late and read B. Russell's "Justice in War Time," and went to bed so impressed with its force that I determined to stand out openly against re-entering the Army. I was full of a quiet strong belief and almost knowledge that I should not, after all, have to

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[8] cf "The truth is that in 1917 there was nothing that a thinking and sensitive person could do, except to remain human, if possible. And a gesture of helplessness, even of frivolity, might be the best way of doing that." George Orwell, Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters. 1920-1940 (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1970), p.575.

face the trial of entering a new regiment as an officer, and that Waterloo would not see me at 2.10 to go to W....In the morning I was still determined. I didn't go to church when asked to do so, but re-read B. Russell, and made up my mind to announce to the family at lunch-time that "I have come to a serious decision, long thought out, and now morally determined on. It will influence me more than you, and yet perhaps you ought to know of it. I am not going to rejoin the Army. There is no object, except the gratification of a senseless rivalry, in prolonging the struggle; it is beastly and degrading. Why do we go on fighting? I will not go on."

I really nearly did say it. Everybody thought me silent and depressed because I was returning to the Army. It was not so. However, I said nothing. I walked down to the tram with X...and Y..., and said nothing. And I returned, read Boon to Z...., and after much thought wrote to the Adjutant of the Battalion telling him I would not rejoin the Army nor accept any form of alternative service, that I would rather be shot than do so, and that I left my name and address with him to act as he pleased. Shortly after midnight I went down to the post with this letter and two more, one to J..., one to E..., telling them what I had done. I stood opposite the pillar-box for some minutes wondering whether I would post them--then put them in my pocket and returned home to bed.

Next morning my aversion was as great and my determination not to rejoin as strong as ever. This was Monday morning, the day I telegraphed I would rejoin. I thought I would tell the remainder of my family, Z.... and the maids. I didn't. I got furiously into my new uniform and went off after brekker to cash a cheque and get my hair cut and order a cab. As the barber cut my hair I determined I would go down and telegraph that I could not come to W...., and that explanations were following. I walked to a telegraph-office to do so--and bought two penny stamps and walked out again. I cashed a cheque for Ł10, saying in excuse that it might help me if I determined to desert. Then I went to order a cab, but thought at the last moment I would walk on to a telegraph office beyond the cab office. I turned back soon after I had passed the office and ordered the cab. This settled it, I thought. I returned home, packed, wrote to J..., had lunch, and half-communicated my state of mind to Z..., without letting her see how near I had come to fulfilling it. Then I read her some B. Russell, and shocked her sentiments a good deal by what I said. I departed in a state of cynical wrath against myself and the world in general, who would understand so little of what I meant. At Waterloo I met E...., who had been sent to Woolwich in mistake for W.....Seeing him so encouraged me that I forgot my woes for a bit.

As we drew near W...., horror of rejoining the Army was making me very miserable; moreover, I had been reading B. R.

> in the train, and was encouraged to believe that--as I put it to myself--I might yet quite succeed in keeping my mind and spirit straight, even if I could not induce myself to acknowledge it among my enemies and those who would be indifferent to me. I said to E...that I had come to think so differently now that I would not rejoin the Army were the war to begin, as it were, to-morrow, and that if I had the pluck I would desert now. I said I was under so many delusions when I joined at first; most of these had faded, especially religious ones. I had seen how utterly wide of Truth most of mankind--even accredited professors etc. --were in this matter, and thus was quite prepared to find them wrong about war in general and this war in particular. I found them fully as wrong as I expected, and was only anxious to dissociate myself from them in thought, if I daren't in action.(pp.50-52)

Nevertheless he goes back to France:

> What I have thought and read lately and from being with you, makes me doubt very much if I do well to go. This is the bitterest part of it.I do ill to go. I ought to fight no more. But death, I suppose, is the penalty, and public opinion and possible misunderstanding...You see how complicated it gets...I am almost certain I do wrong to go on--not quite certain, and anyhow, I question if I am of martyr stuff....(pp.54-55)

Seen this nakedly West looks almost pathetic. But the indecision, the hesitation, the ineffectual agonizing, and the final inability to act are all significant and representative. It is West, though, who makes explicit what we may see am implicit behind so many of the other memoirs. It is clear that there were very few who could stand up against the general, received truths. One is made very aware by the diary how alone any individual would be made to feel who seriously opposed the war; how impossible it would be to find any warm human support:

> I have mentioned the feeling against conscientious objectors, even in the minds of sentimental and religious people. Even R...speaks sneeringly of Bertrand Russell; no one is willing to revise his ideas or make clear to himself his motives in joining the war; even if anybody feels regret

> for having enlisted, he does not like to admit it to himself. Why should he? Every man, woman, and child is taught to regard him as a hero; if he has become convinced of wrong action it lands him in an awkward position which he had much better not face. So everything tends to discourage him from active thinking on this important and, in the most literal sense, vital question.(p.55)

Later, in France, West notes:

> S...., an officer here from Oxford, Nonconformist and, I think, religious, came back from a machine-gun course and remarked, half-ashamedly, that he had really come to the conclusion since he had been away that the war was really very silly, and we all ought to go home.
>
> Nobody took any notice of what he said, or else treated it laughingly; but I saw he meant it, and really had seen something new....
>
> I observed several more features in the common opinions concerning the war. G....said: "Fancy all this trouble being brought on us by the Germans." Universal assent.
>
> Then B..., the captain, remarked that it was really very silly to throw pieces of lead at one another, and from this someone developed the idea that our civilisation was only a surface thing, and we were savages beneath the slightest scratch.
>
> What no one seems to see is that our country may be at any rate partially responsible, or that those who, like conscientious objectors, refuse to debase themselves to the level of savages are worthy of any respect, intellectually, if not morally.
>
> One observes again the "It had to be!" attitude, which Hardy notes about the D'Urberville family.
>
> So it is. People will not really move a finger to mould even their own lives outside the rules of the majority or public opinion. No one sits down to consider the rightness of his every action, and his judgments on political action he takes from the papers. Independent judgment in private or public affairs is the rarest thing in the world. (pp.72-74)

It is no surprise that apropos of his pacifism West declares: "I am a creature caught in a net." And it is no surprise that the final outcome is of resigned, passive, unbelieving acquiescence in the powers that be: "I am almost certain I do wrong to go on--not quite certain, and anyhow, I question if I am of martyr stuff...." Thus West, like Sassoon and many others, goes back to

a war in which he no longer believes, and back to the possibility of a death than can have neither meaning nor value.

It is ironically appropriate that only at the very end of the diary do we get any echoes at all of the kind of positive factors that fill Chapman's accounts. The second-last diary entry is redolent of the sense of vitality the physically orientated, open-air life in the army can give, a vitality heightened by the steady contrast with immediate and total annihilation:

> I sit on a high bank above a road at H.....By my side stands a quarter of a bottle of red wine at 1.50 francs the bottle. The remaining three-quarters are in my veins. I am perfectly happy physically: so much so that only my physical being asserts itself. From my toes to the very hair of my head I am a close compact of pleasurable sensations. Now, indeed, it is good to live; a new power, a new sensibility to physical pleasure in all my members. The whistle blows for "Fall in!" I lift the remnants of the wine to my lips and drain the dregs. All the length of the march it lasts me, and the keenness, the compactness, the intensity of perpetual well-being doesn't even leave my remotest finger-tips. The silver veil of gossamer webs are round my hair, the juice of the autumn grape gladdening all my veins. I am the child of Nature. I wish always to be so.(p.75)

The last entry is full of the intimacy and the love he now feels for his fellow soldiers: "I am very happy. I love all the men, and simply rejoice to see them going on day by day their own jolly selves, building up such a wall of jocundity around me." (p.76)

But as we know, intimacy and love provide no protection against the war. Graeme West was killed on April 3 1917.

C.E.Montague

The book above all others which provoked Carrington's first memoir and against whose thesis both the Carrington memoirs fulminate (cf p.98 below) is C. E. Montague's Disenchantment.[1] Montague was a highly respected journalist who had worked on the Manchester Guardian since 1890. He volunteered in 1914; was at the front until 1916 when he was invalided home; and then served in intelligence and as a press officer until the end of the war. Disenchantment is clearly the work of a journalist. Montague tends to work in and from generalizations rather than particularizations. The detachment implicit here is evident in a number of ways in the book: he deals with the war carefully and methodically, chapter by chapter, each chapter dealing with one subject: the war and religion, the war and propaganda, etc. In most of the other memoirs the actual experiences of the war continually threaten to overwhelm the balance and poise of the book. That threat is not felt here. It is significant that Montague was able to write Disenchantment within four years of the end of the war. Clearly he has an unusual ability to hold the chaos at bay, to order it and find the language for it. Indeed Montague's very control may make the reader somewhat uneasy. On

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[1] C.E.Montague, Disenchantment (London: Chatto and Windus, 1924) All further references will be to this edition, and will be noted in the text.

occasion the tidy organization feels a little too neat for such a subject. The effort that control demands is made clear in the uncertain variability of tone. Too often it becomes self-consciously arch and heavily playful. It is when Montague's own disenchantment is directly and fiercely provoked, when it becomes white hot, that the writing is seen at its best. Then all those ponderous ironies are burnt off; the tone simplifies and clarifies; the prose hardens.

Montague opens with a brief survey of the early joys with which men enlisted and settled in to the army. The autumn air was full of notions of "rights", "valour", "faith" and "freedom". Rupert Brooke's sonnets echoed emotions widely felt. Once in the army men felt the liberating effect of having shed responsibility for themselves. They were part of a group dedicated to a great end. "Their lives had undergone an immense simplification." And physically (regular food, fresh air and exercise) they were filled with a bursting sense of well-being. This is the enchantment:

> To one recollection at least it has seemed that the New Army's spring-tide of faith and joyous illusion came to its height on a night late in the most beautiful May of 1915, in a hut where thirty men slept near a forest in Essex. Nothing particular happened; the night was like others. Yet in the times that came after, when half of the thirty were dead and most of the others jaded and soured, the feel of that night would come back with the strange distinctness of those picked, remembered mornings and evenings of boyhood when everything that there was became everlastingly memorable as though it had been the morning or evening of the first day. (p.10)

The disenchantment follows fast. Like West, Montague finds the experience of the training camps--ruled by the remnants of the Old Army--appalling. The n.c.o.'s of the Regular Army are seen as incompetent, dedicated to petty corruption, profiteering and "eyewash", against whose cynicism the idealism of the recruits breaks and falters. The officers are, if anything, worse: monuments of ignorance, flatulent self-satisfaction and anachronistic inefficiency. The litany of complaints against them culminates in hard bitterness. The soldiers "...talked of the failure of French; of the sneer on the face of France; of Staff work that hung up whole platoons of our men, like old washing or scarecrows, to rot on uncut German wire..." (p.26) The representatives of the military left behind in England are just as bad. "London, to any open eye, was grotesque with a kind of fancy-dress ball of noncombatatant khaki: it seemed as if no well-to-do person could be an abstainer from warfare too total to go about disguised as a soldier."(p.26) All the jobbers, shirkers and profiteers seem to have gathered there:

> It was, of course, an incomplete view of the case. Shall we have Henries, Fluellens, and Erpinghams at the hand of God, and no Bardolphs, Pistols, and Nyms? Our state was not really rotten by any means; only half-rotten, like others of man's institutions. Half the Old Army, at least, was exemplary... In the first weeks of the war most of the flock had too simply taken on trust all that its pastors and masters had said. Now, after believing rather too much, they were out to believe little or nothing--except that in the lump pastors and masters were frauds. From any English training-camp, about that time, you almost seemed to see a light steam rising, as it does from a damp horse. This was illusion beginning to evaporate. (pp.27-8)

There was much to speed on this evaporation. The war that had originally been seen as an escape from petty materialism was proving to be dominated by the material. The war that had been seen as an escape into idealism saw the death of idealism and--from the soldiers' point of view--the triumph of the profiteers and shirkers. At its very best life in the trenches--blanketed in the terminal weariness of aptly named fatigues--tended to drain away morale, faith and any high impulse. The impotence of the church stood fully revealed in its inability to instruct or shape the spiritual questions stimulated in and by this special harrowing.[2] The press is seduced. At the front "war correspondents were given the 'status', almost the rank of officers. Actual officers were detailed to see to their comfort, to pilot them about the front, to secure their friendly treatment by all ranks

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[2] It is true that the established churches (cf Crozier q.v.) had little to offer in this situation. Which is not to say that the best churchmen did not agonize. A fascinating glimpse of the effect of the war on a powerful religious sensibility is provided by Teilhard de Chardin in his letters. [See The Making of a Mind (London: Collins, 1965) and Writings in Time of War (London: Collins, 1968)] At heart Chardin's reaction parallels that of Glubb (q.v. p.117) in recognizing the joys and complexities of serving an incomprehensible God. The more de Chardin perceives the horrors of the war the more he sees it as a worldly challenge to his spiritual faith, and so the more strongly he reaffirms the spritual reality. The front is "the extreme boundary between what is and what is still in the process of formation." Since the latter is God's will, the pain and desolation invoved in attaining it must be necessary. Since despair is a sin against God, the appropriate response must not and cannot be that. Just as the conventional language of the nineteenth century worked to prevent any full-scale recognition of the conditions of the war as nightmare or madness, so too the strength of conventional religious notions insisted that that reality could not be as bad as it seemed, or if it were, it was just another way of being tested. (Again one is reminded of Scott Fitzgerald's recognition that the continuance of the war depended on the vitality of the idealisms behind it. cf p.133 below)

and at all headquarters. Never were war correspondents so helped, shielded and petted before."(p.100)[3] They become adjuncts of the Staff, protected from the harsh realities of battle in the same way as were the Staff. So their reports--jaunty, assured, full of "Boy's Own" rhetoric--betrayed the troops. "This, the men reflected in helpless anger, was what people at home were offered as faithful accounts of what their friends in the field were thinking and suffering." (p.102)

The reality was different:

> The winter after the battle of Loos a sentry on guard at one part of our line could always see the frustrate skeletons of many English dead. They lay outside our wire, picked clean by the rats, so that the khaki fell in on them loosely--little heaps of bone and cloth half hidden now by nettles and grass.(P.161)

Why did "all the little brown bundles lay where they did in the nettles and grass"? The first point Montague makes is that it has little to do with individuals. The mechanization and the scale

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[3] H.G.Wells, on one of these junkets, is guided around the trenches by none other than C.E.Montague of whom he gives an amusing sketch:

> At Amiens I was under the wing of C.E.Montague, the author of A Hind Let Loose, Disenchantment and Rough Justice. Montague was a curious mixture of sixth-form Anglican sentimentality (about dear old horses, dearer old doggies, brave women, real gentlemen, the old school, the old country and sound stock: Galsworthyissimus in fact), with a most adventurous intelligence. He was a radical bound, hide bound, in a conservative hide. He was a year younger than I, he had concealed his age and dyed his silvery hair to enlist at the outbreak of the war, he had accepted a commission with reluctance and I had been warned he was not the safest of guides.

Experiment in Autobiography (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1934), pp. 582-3.

of this war have removed the possibility of any individual being able to shape its course:

> When a great nation's army was only a few thousands strong the freak and the fluke had their chance. An Achilles or two, at the top of their form on the day, might upset the odds. But when armies are millions of men, and machinery counts for more than the men, the few divine accidents of exceptional valour cannot go far.(p.156)

As we look more closely at the situation we realize that there are a number of reasons why we can do very little to influence the eventual outcome!

> More and more, as the armies increase, must the law of averages have its own dreary way; glorious uncertainties wither; statistical "curves" of relative national fitness to win, and to stand the strain of winning or losing, overbear everything else...Whenever a war is declared you may say that now, in a sense, it is over at last; all the votes have been cast; the examination papers are written; the time has come for the counting of votes and adjudging of marks. Of course, we may still "do our bit," but the possible size of our bit had its limit fixed long ago by the acts of ourselves and our fathers and rulers which made us the men that we are and no more.(p.158)

Not only, of course, has our history made us the men we are now but of even greater importance our history has already determined our technological, industrial infrastructure which will be the most important factor in the war ahead. And our men? Montague is one of the very few commentators on the war who is critical of the average British Soldier. Not that he blames him personally: "Not they, but their rulers and 'betters', had lost their heads in the joy of making money fast out of steam, and so made half of our nation slum-dwellers." (p. 160)[4] And Montague insists that these

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[4] cf Winter:
... the poor physical condition of many men who presented themselves a recruits was taken as but one indication of the

"slum-dwellers" are inevitably less healthy, less quick-witted, less assured and confident, less brave and so less fine soldiers than--for instance--their materially richer colleagues from the Dominions. But it is for the leaders of these troops that Montague reserves his real spleen:

> Consider the course of the life of the British Regular officer as you had known him in youth--not the pick, the saving few, the unconquerably sound and keen, but the average, staple article made by a sleek, complacent, snobbish, safe, wealth-governed England after her own image. Think of his school; of the mystic aureole of quasi-moral beauty attached by authority there to absorption of all those energies and dexterities which, in this world of evolution towards the primacy of the acute, full brain, are of the least possible use as aids to survival in men and to victory in armies.(pp.161-162)

There is nothing in his educational background (and Montague suggests that the well-known Report on the infamous Staff work of the Boer War supports this claim) that prepares the average British Officer for any situation demanding hard work, flexibility, or originality of thought:

> These apprehensions were particularly apt to arise if you had spent an hour that day in seeing herds of the British "common people" ushered down narrowing corridors of barbed wire into some gap that had all the German machine guns raking its exit, the nature of Regular officers' pre-war education in England precluding the prompt evolution of any effectual means on our side to derange the working of this ingenious abbattoir. We had asked for it all. We had made the directing brains of our armies the poor things that they were.(p.164)

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legacy of urban poverty in pre-war Britain...
It is...not an exaggeration to suggest that in large parts of working-class Britain, though not amongst the middle class, there were before 1914 conditions of poverty and ill-health that today we associate with countries of the third world.
J.M. Winter, The Great War and the British People (London: Macmillan, 1985), pp. 9-10.

That is why the "little brown bundles" lie where they do.[5]

There is, of course, nothing in the Peace made, "as somebody said, with a vengeance", to lighten the disenchantment. Montague sees the implications of Versailles more clearly than most. He suggests that even Haig foresaw the difficulties. He quotes Haig's words to his troops as at long last the British Army reaches the Rhine: "I only hope that, now that we have won, we shall not lose our heads, as the Germans did after 1870. It has brought them to this." (p.188) Montague catches the irony of this final military victory over militarism. The authorities... "were as moonstruck as any victorious Prussian...our Press and our politicians parading at Paris in moral pickelhauben and doing the Prussianist goose-step by way of pas de triomphe..."(p.189) The general vindictiveness found little support among the active troops, but it had been made inevitable at home by such as Northcliffe and the poisonous effects of propaganda. The war had been fought that the militarism of Prussia should not rule the world, (or, at least, that was the official line):

> Now, in England, the old spirit of Prussia was blowing anew, from strange mouths. From several species of men who passed for English...there was rising a chorus of shrill yelps for the outdoing of all the base folly committed by Prussia when drunk with her old conquest of France. Prussia, beaten out of the field, had won in the soul of her conquerors' rulers; they had become her pupils; they took her word for it that

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[5] Montague's criticism of the average British officer-gentleman is echoed by many writers, most obviously, and bitterly, by H.G. Wells. It is interesting to compare Montague's analysis here with Carrington's claims quoted on pp. 108-112 of this essay. It is not surprising that Carrington was outraged by Disenchantment.

> she, and not the older England, knew how to use victory.(p.188)

And so the heritage of that war. Respect for authority (familial, political, military, social), for religion, for the press, is irreparably damaged. More fundamentally, "Civilization itself, the at any rate habitable dwelling which was to be shored up by the war, wears a strange new air of precariousness."(p.202) Montague sees that the war was merely the most major manifestation of changes that had begun to make themselves felt long before Aug. 4, 1914. Like Dangerfield he sees in the "suffragettes" and in the "treason" of Sir Edward Carson and the Unionists examples of the rule of civilization being threatened by direct militant action. Civilization is in one sense a bluff. "The total number of policemen on a racecourse is always a minute percentage of the total number of its thieves and roughs. The bad men are not held down by force; they are only bluffed by the pretence of it."(p.204) And it is so with society at large. The bluff has now been called:

> To a Europe exhausted, divided, and degraded by five years of return to the morals of the Stone Age it had suggested how many things are as they are, how many things are owned as they are, how many lives are safely continued, merely because our birds of prey have not yet had the wit to see what would come of a sudden snatch made with a will and with assurance.(p204)

Disenchantment is an effective little book. It lacks much of the power of the rendered memoirs--lacks the felt presence of the war that so often disturbs the prose of the other memoirists. What it gains is the sober sanity of a dry, sceptic sensibility

marshalling with steady logic and observation a persuasive case about the character and effects of the war. It also reminds us that some writers were able to see quite rationally and consciously the irrationality of the war. It is a shame there were not more like Russell, Shaw, Lawrence and Montague.

Guy Chapman

Guy Chapman is one of the most attractive of all the writers of memoirs of the war. I say that with some surprise inasmuch as he is someone whose memories of the war are--on the whole--positive. But Chapman's arguments are deeply persuasive in a way some of those I look at later, such as Carrington's and Glubb's, are not. Although there is some development in style, it is the similarity rather than any difference which is most striking about his two books: (A Passionate Pilgrimage 1933; A Kind of Survivor 1975).[1] In the former one senses that his response to the war is to some extent still inchoate, the prose somewhat mannered compared with that of his later book. There the prose is calm, balanced, poised and through it shines the candour, the emotional depths and the large humanity of the writer.

In both books, Chapman recognizes and notes what we have come to expect of any intelligent observer of the war: first of all the criminally bad leadership the British troops are given: "...ill trained men murdered by stupid generalship, by the folly

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[1] Guy Chapman, A Kind of Survivor (London: Gollancz, 1975) and ---, A Passionate Prodigality (London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson Ltd., 1933) All future references will be to these editions and will be denoted thus: A Kind of Survivor = KofS, A Passionate Prodigality = PP

of senior officers who had learned nothing in the last fifteen or so years." [2](KofS p.61) Secondly Chapman expresses a contempt for the non-combatant staff-officers "who had learned nothing, who considered that their red tabs entitled them to servility from the untabbed, who did not know what the infantryman did, only that such and such a battalion had 'let them down'." (KofS, p.72) Finally he explores the paradox frequently noted: whoever attacks successfully loses. "Arras, though bloody, at least showed that we could win, if not take any advantage of winning. But between then and the autumn of 1918, when the Germans had by attacking weakened themselves beyond recovery, how many comely, simple, essentially innocent young men were, to no purpose, killed?" (KofS, p.66) He sees and makes us see the dehumanization and mechanization of this war. "It had become an organized industry...and death was mechanical." (PP, pp.274 & 318)

The effect of all this is that the individual seems to have no control over his life or death; no way of making either meaningful. "Seems to", for Chapman makes some very interesting suggestions:

> Was it [his feeling for his battalion] not perhaps a subtler, even a vile, attraction? For long watching my Colonel, I believe--I do not think falsely--that he enjoyed the war, even in its most terrifying aspects. The worse the trial to be faced the more perfect became the balance of his nervous system and the greater the increase of his physical and moral power. This quiet level-headed man was lifted to a higher

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[2] C.S Forester's The General gives an essentially sympathetic and convincing portrait of one such senior officer who is characterized not only by his integrity and personal bravery but also by an inflexible, unimaginative and outdated approach to the war. This mentality particularly suits him for Haig's staff.

> plane, bewitched by apparitions. He seemed to be nourished by them, while to myself they brought only shrivelling fear.
> And yet, in spite of it, there grew a compelling fascination. I do not think I exaggerate: for in that fascination lies War's power. Once you have lain in her arms you can admit no other mistress. You may loathe, you may execrate, but you cannot deny her. No lover can offer you defter caresses, more exquisite tortures, such breaking delights. No wine gives fiercer intoxication, no drug more vivid exaltation. Every writer of imagination who has set down in honesty his experience has confessed it. Even those who hate her most are prisoners to her spell. They rise from her embraces, pillaged, soiled, it may be ashamed; but they are still hers. "J'avais beau me débarbouiller et me laver les mains en la quittant, son odeur restait en moi." (276-7 P.P.)[3]

How can the sensibility which perceives the horrors described above--which has seen mechanic death summoned by incompetent staff or dropping from the sky accidental as whimsy--say this about the war? Chapman's strength lies in his ability to answer this

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[3] Chapman's passion is not unique. Here is a more contemporary version from the Vietnam war:

> I was involved in the antiwar movement at the time and struggled, unsuccesfully, to reconcile my opposition to the war with this nostalgia [for the war]. Later, I realized a reconciliation was impossible; I would never be able to hate the war with anything like the undiluted passion of my friends in the movement. Because I had fought in it, it was not an abstract issue, but a deeply emotional experience, the most significant thing that had happened to me. It held my thoughts, senses, and feelings in an unbreakable embrace. I would hear in thunder the roar of artillery. I could not listen to rain without recalling those drenched nights on the line, nor walk through woods without instinctively searching for a trip wire or an ambush. I could protest as loudly as the most convinced activist, but I could not deny the grip the war had on me, nor the fact that it had been an experience as fascinating as it was repulsive, as exhilarating as it was sad, as tender as it was cruel.

Philip Caputo, A Rumour of War (New York: Ballantine, 1977), p.xvi

question. Persuasively he delineates the deadly charms of his mistress. He is conscious of them, and makes them explicit. Most writers are unwilling, one feels, to believe--let alone admit--that any experience so awful could also be seductive. They refuse to examine their souls, and so leave the fascination of war only implicit and usually disguised. Inevitably such a powerful unacknowledged force throws off the balance and poise of their works. Such may well be one of the problems in the work of such as Carrington and Glubb.

One of the most memorable characteristics of both of Chapman's volumes is the vibrancy with which he brings to life an emotion that almost all the other memoirists (and many of the novelists) mention, even if they cannot recreate it. That emotion is the one felt by the men in battle for each other. (And "men" here means not only the enlisted men but all of those fighting: officers, n.c.o.'s and men). "Can I find the right exact word for the kind of love I felt for a few men?" (p.75 KofS) No. Chapman can never quite find the "right exact" word. No one word would--or could--suffice. But he can and does create for us in these memoirs a cumulative picture of what that love means, of how it feels. The love starts from a perception of the simple dignity and worth of the English soldier:

> What nobody ever tells you plainly is that, so far as the English were concerned, the winner of the war was the stubborn faithful British soldier--not the generals. These men, not of rank or authority or great intelligence, who without flinching bore many months of war, the cruelties and the dangers, without fuss, were indeed conscientious warriors in contrast to the conscientious objectors whom we are somewhat unctuously or tearfully required to respect for--I

> forget for what--for the good reason they had for not becoming soldiers in 1914 (or 1939). When one saw the soldiers coming down from the trench line, and stood and counted them just in case one had been left behind, even, it might be, shot on the way by a stray bullet, what above all struck one was their--I can think of no better word--sincerity. They were real, they were decent, they were good. It is silly to ask what one means by these words--they are adjectives that strip away the verbiage. "Songe à quelle hauteur doit se tenir ce commandant pour être digne de mener de tels soldats"--Foch, speaking near Verzenay on 23 September 1914, recounted by Weygand in his _Mémoires_. At least one general who knew what he had seen. (p.74 _KofS_)

Earlier Chapman quotes Manning with approval: "They can say what they like, but we're a fucking fine mob." Chapman comments: "There is something to be said for the unimaginative monotony of the soldier's vernacular. It bars rhetoric." (p.73 _KofS_) Based on that steady perception of human worth--fed by the shared, acute sense of mortality--the love grows into something of great importance. And it is that love that gives these lives, these deaths, a meaning they cannot otherwise attain. The battalion is marching rhythmically, united, strong, to battle:

> The next hour, man, will bring you three miles nearer to your death. Your life and your death are nothing to these fields--nothing, no more than it is to the man planning the next attack at G.H.Q. You are not even a pawn. Your death will not prevent future wars, will not make the world safe for your children. Your death means no more than if you had died in your bed, full of years and respectability, having begotten a tribe of young. Yet by your courage in tribulation, by your cheerfulness before the dirty devices of this world, you have won the love of those who have watched you. All we remember is your living face, and that we loved you for being of our clay and our spirit. (pp.145-6 _P.P._)

Chapman feels that Manning's _The Middle Parts of Fortune_ is "without question one of the two greatest books to come out of the war." (p.73 _KofS_) (Annoyingly, he does not tell us what he thinks the other is.) He speaks of the way in which "the men, earthy,

coarse, violent in speech... come back to life in it and nowhere else... the love of man for man infuses this book, coarse and fierce." (p.282 KofS) He quotes Montherlant again and again with obvious approval: "Ce que vous regrettez dans la guerre, c'est l'amour; la guerre c'est le seul lieu où vous avez pu aimer puissament les hommes." (KofS p. 234) And, "Quelqu'un de mon âge a pu écrire que la guerre était 'la plus tendre expérience humaine qu'il eût vécu.' Vous entendez bien: tendre." Chant Funèbre pour les Morts de Verdun, 1925.(p.75 KofS)

It is not only his love for the men that makes Chapman's response to the war a complex and fascinating one. For the record of these war years is a "...record of an attachment, of belonging wholly to a living entity."(p.124 KofS) And that live attachment works to increase the vitality with which one lives. It gives one extra organs to perceive more finely. Chapman says that Teilhard de Chardin

> ...wrote that the invincible attraction of the front lines was that one discovered a lucidity not otherwise vouchsafed. "This heightening is not got without pain. All the same it is indeed a heightening. And that is why in spite of everything one loves the front and regrets it." I know what he is talking about. I had known that unsought sharpening of awareness, of the mind and body. Familiarity did not blunt it. I shall never see or hear so clearly again. (p.125 KofS)

Simply because it brings the possibility of death so close, makes it seem so unavoidable, the war hugely increases one's sense of life. Chapman, working on a book some eighteen years after the war, remembers a night "this day nineteen years ago" when he and a tiny percentage of his division escaped from the battle at Tower Hamlets. "It is only at moments that I realize how much less alive

I am than I was then. This is not to say that I have not since then known exultations, annihilating delights, deep happiness. Indeed I think I have had more than my share. What is missing is the sense, fleeting, beyond price, of living in every nerve and cell of one's body and with every ghostly impulse of one's mind. I am grateful to have had it." (p.159 KofS)

With all this as background we are not at all surprised when he writes:

> Apart from the badly-dressed young woman who came into Chapman and Dodd's office one bitterly cold January day in 1924 [this was Storm Jameson who became Chapman's wife] the battalion is the only wholly good thing in my life. To the years between 1914 and 1918 I owe everything of lasting value in my make-up. For any cost I paid in physical and mental vigour they gave me back a supreme fulfilment I should never otherwise have had. No great line of poetry, none of the many I have by heart, moves me as I am moved by a half-page of squared paper I kept by accident, creased, faded, discoloured, filled by eight lines scrawled in pencil:
>
> To Adjutant
>
> Please send as many
stretchers as possible
only a few men left
to carry on, no Officers
fit to carry on 2 Officers
Killed 2 wounded
please send reenforcements
as soon as possible
A Clark Sergt.
No 3 Coy
>
> (pp.280-1 KofS)

And so we get the valedictory telling over of the names of those who were with him at the front. Chapman counts over those who were with him and makes of them a select band. It is the experience of fighting together that creates that feeling, not the methods of

fighting. He talks of the siege warfare of the trenches as though it were another Troy, "but there was no Helen". And he continues to use that metaphor. If epic has any meaning the experience of the Great War was epic for Guy Chapman. And, to my mind, he produces something epic out of it. He notes with approval Jacques Meyer's comment: "La guerre, mon vieux, tu sais bien ce que c'était. Mais quand nous serons mort, qui donc l'aura jamais su? La guerre, mon vieux, c'est notre jeunesse, ensevelie et secrète." (KofS p. 76) Chapman makes us know his youth, disinters it, tells us its secret. He quotes William Soutar:

> But there shall dwell within his peace
> A sadness unannulled.
> Upon his world shall hang a sign
> Which summer cannot hide
> The permanence of the young men
> Who are not by his side.

What we find is that he has given us these young men--alive again--permanent in his imagination and ours.

Here is, perhaps, the appropriate place to point out how much Chapman's testimony to the complex emotions that the men discovered for one another in the trenches undercuts Paul Fussell's approach in The Great War and Modern Memory (London: Oxford University Press, 1975). The problem with Fussell's approach is that he is too insistent on concentrating on one aspect of what is there to the exclusion of other--often more important--aspects. (It would be silly to ignore or deny the tradition of homo-eroticism Fussell alludes to, or to deny the presence of a number of homosexuals among the more prominent writers of the war.) But Fussell, in devoting a whole chapter to

what he calls "Soldier Boys", puts the feeling of soldiers for each other into a context of homoerotic love (by which he means unconsummated homosexual love). This is to tangle us unnecessarily in contentious terminology, to falsify an important experience, and to beg a number of very complex questions. Is the feeling of physical tenderness, often manifested in touch or caress, proof of homoeroticism or homosexuality--repressed or not? Fussell's emphasis seems to suggest "Yes." Compare Chapman:

> Leave aside the love of parent for child, about which I know nothing. That leaves the other two common sorts. But the love for some of the men I lived with in 1914-1918 is a third sort, sexless in the accepted meaning of the term, completely devoid of the element of fear and strain in sexual love, whether for man or woman, fear of physical failure, of humiliation. Call it perhaps, essential love, the essence. Perhaps the true comment is made in Daniel George's Tomorrow Will Be Different, a mixture of that post-war mockery and despair by which the demobilised soldier hoped to repel the Furies:
>
> But, take it from me
> The poor bloody infantry
> Were monks.
> By God! now I come to think of it,
> We were homo-sexual in the loftiest sense
> With a love passing the love of women.
> (pp75-76 KofS)

Fussell writes about the various scenes of "Soldiers Bathing" which come out of the war (both in painting and in literature): "...it is doubtful that so many scenes of soldiers bathing would have been noticed and fondly recalled as significant if a half-century earlier the Uranians had not established the Boys Bathing poem as a standard type." (Fussell, p.303) But surely the picture of soldiers bathing is recurrent and significant because

it is a powerful and moving way of making us aware of the body--divine, beautiful, individual and achingly vulnerable--all that is hidden by the uniform--all that is used as mere material by the army--all that is destroyed by bullet or steel.

Fussell's insistence on seeing the whole question in the context of the Uranians and homo-eroticism badly tilts his response. But he is right to recognize that the question of sexuality is crucial here. Elaine Showalter argues:

> The Great War was a crisis of masculinity and a trial of the Victorian masculine ideal.... When all signs of physical fear were judged as weakness and where alternatives to combat--pacifism, conscientious objection, desertion, even suicide--were viewed as unmanly, men were silenced and immobilized and forced, like women, to express their conflicts through the body... That most masculine of enterprises, the Great War, the "apocalypse of masculinism," feminized its conscripts by taking away their sense of control. The constriction of the trenches, Sandra Gilbert suggests, was analogous to the tight domestic, vocational, and sexual spaces allowed to nineteenth-century women: "paradoxically, in fact, the war to which so many men had gone in hope of becoming heroes, ended up emasculating them...confining them as closely as any Victorian woman had been confined"[4]

We have already noted that the usual role of the warrior, offensive, thrusting once more into the breach, had altered, to be replaced by an impotent, immobile passivity. Leed argues persuasively that these role changes had important sexual implications:

> The indifference toward his own safety that Fuller noted in the veteran of trench warfare, the

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[4] Elaine Showalter, op. cit., pp. 171-174 passim. see too Sandra Gilbert, "Soldier's Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women, and the Great War," Signs 8 (1983). Both these analyses are reinforced and elaborated in Eric Leed's No Man's Land.

> "callousness" that many saw in veterans, Ferenczi saw evidenced in the sexual impotence or strongly retarded sexual desires of his patients. Almost all the patients in the neurological section of his hospital complained at some time or another "about their entirely dammed up, or very strongly retarded, sexual libido and potency."[5] In another quarter, on the western front, Lissman noted the same phenomenon. The war with its combination of terror and abstinence, its industrial discipline unrelieved by leisure or regular sexual activity, produced widespread impotence even in normal soldiers. "In the field not a few officers and men of previously sound nerves complained that at the beginning of their leave an erection was either completely lacking or very often extemely defective."[6] Ferenczi regarded this impotence that, in a few cases, lasted long into peacetime, as the most obvious sign of the ways in which war forced the withdrawal of libido from the objective world, the "internalization" of self, an increase in "narcissistic libido."[7]

One must move gingerly from specific, individual case-studies to cultural generalizations. Nevertheless it is clear that there is a crucial shift in sexual identity and sexual relationships occurring in this period. This is not the place for an essay on gender confusion in post-1920's literature, but a moment's thought makes it clear that there are some unambiguous patterns there. Woolf's <u>To the Lighthouse</u> is as much about the breakdown in conventional sexual roles as it is about anything else. Andrew, Mrs. Ramsay's favourite, goes off to the war and is--parenthetically--blown up. (Prue dies in childbirth.) Septimus Smith in <u>Mrs. Dalloway</u> has been reduced to impotence on

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[5] S. Ferenczi, "Uber zwei Typen der Kriegsneurosen," p. 140.

[6] Quoted in Hirschfeld and Gaspar, <u>Sittengenshichte des Ersten Weltkrigs</u>, p. 168.

[7] Eric Leed, pp. 185-6. (The previous two quotations are both taken from Leed.)

all levels by the war. Jake Barnes is impotent; Brett cuts her hair like a man. Clifford Chatterley is impotent, and, before Connie, Mellors had sworn off women sexually, admitting only to a deeply physical, but non-sexual, relationship with his men in the war. Impotence, the failure of traditional sexual roles, ambiguity as to what new roles might be appropriate, sexual violence, all of these fill post-war literature.[8]

The point that I am making here is that Fussell badly misreads this crucial issue. The crucial recognition is not that the soldiers' sexuality is homo-erotic. Chapman is, to my mind, completely persuasive both about the extraordinary strength of the love these men had for one another, and about refusing to accept a reductionist vision of this love as homo-erotic. Nevertheless I am also arguing that something very serious is happening to conventional sexual roles. At the heart of that happening is the widespread experience of impotence (both

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[8] Two quotations from Sassoon's diaries warn us of the sort of sexual hate that is growing throughout this period:

> ...all the music of the earth and of men's hearts must be destroyed, because man desires only the things that he has put behind him--killing, and the pride of women with child by a warrior. O their gluttonous eyes: I think they love war, for all their lamenting over the sons and lovers. (p.121)
>
> Poor heroes! If only they would speak out; and throw their medals in the faces of their masters; and ask their women why it thrills them to know that they, the dauntless warriors, have shed the blood of Germans. Do not the women gloat secretly over the wounds of their lovers? Is there anything inwardly noble in savage sex instincts? (p.171)
> Siegfried Sassoon, Diaries, 1915-1918, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (London:Faber and Faber, 1983)

specifically sexual and, more generally, in relation to the war). And finally, I am suggesting, that experience of impotence was not one that could be easily or consciously admitted. So it was repressed, available only to the language of the psychiatrist--or the artist.

Much has been made about the hostility toward women expressed by writers like Sassoon and Owen.[9] But James Logenbach persuasively argued that the battle between the sexes was a post-war construct rather than a contemporary truth.[10] And it does look as though Gilbert & Gubar rather overstate the case when they say "...the words of women propagandists as well as the deeds of feather-carrying girls had evidently transformed the classical Roman's noble patria into an indifferent or avaricious death-dealing matria" (Gilbert & Gubar, 1989, p. 285) The various

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[9] cf, especially, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, No Man's Land: Vol 2, Sexchanges (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), pp.258-323) It is clear that Gilbert and Gubar have a point when they suggest: "The war between the front and the home front...issued in an inextricable tangle of (male) misogyny and (male) homosexuality..." p. 302 But one must try to disentagle the various issues here with scrupulous care. To speak of that tangle is not the same as to posit a male vs female war.

[10]

> ...the Great War was not the point of origin for the rising tensions between men and women (any more that it was the origin of the modernist revolution in the arts), it quickly became perceived as such because people who lived through these troubled years (as well as the historians and literary critics who have documented them) were soothed by the idea that social tensions had a point of origin that was fixed and thrust upon them by powers divorced from personal experience.

James Longenbach, "The Women and Men of 1914," in Arms and the Woman, ed. Helen M. Cooper, Adrienne Auslander Munich, & Susan Merrill Squier (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), pp. 104-105.

writers expressed a real hatred of conventional thought--be it patriarchal or matriarchal--that uncritically supported the war, and seemed insensitive to the hideous suffering it entailed. God knows one could find ample evidence of that sort of insensibility without having to see the problem in gender-specific terms.

Charles Carrington

The memoir by "Charles Edmonds"[1] (pen name for Charles Carrington) attracts attention because it is so unabashedly candid about its aims:

> In this story of war there will be no disenchantment. No corrupt serjeant-majors stole my rations or accepted my bribes. No incompetent colonels failed to give me food and lodging. No casual staff officers ordered me to certain death, indifferent to my fate. After the war was over a fashion set in for decrying the efforts and defaming the characters of all those in authority in the war, but we never thought of such things in 1914, at least not in my regiment. Never were such splendid fellows assembled, never was such keenness to make order out of chaos, never was such blind hero-worship as we paid to any soldier who would teach us his trade. (pp.17-18 SW)

Those claims occur early in the book. Edmonds ends his book with a little essay on "Militarism" which again expresses his contempt for those who came to believe the war unnecessary, avoidable or stoppable, his admiration for the virtues taught by war, and his rejection of the argument that war caused any "disenchantment" among the active soldiers. We will return to these arguments later. First we must note an opposition that occurs with some frequency in books on the war. As I've already suggested, what a writer says in his discursive prose--his willed polemic as it were--is frequently belied by what his imagination expresses once he lets slip the reins of tendentious argument.

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[1] Charles Edmonds (Charles Carrington), A Subaltern's War (London: Peter Davies Limited, 1929) All future references will be to this edition (designated 'SW') and will be noted in the text.

It is instructive to note that on the whole Edmonds' two lengthy accounts of battles written during 1919 and 1920 rub shoulders somewhat awkwardly with the prose added later. For the accounts of the battle of the Somme and the third battle of Ypres ("Known to the soldiers as the Battle of Passchendaele") give an unmistakeable portrait of growing disenchantment. The soldier at Passchendaele is not at all the young soldier who went to join his battalion at the front in a mood "...far more like stepping out from the pavilion to bat for the first time in a match, than like waiting with horrid anticipation at the dentist's door." (p.20 SW) Nor is he the young soldier who reports of his first German raid:

> One night I took part in a highly organised raid on the German trenches and thoroughly enjoyed it, although it was a total failure costing twenty casualties. To lie breathless in the German wire with a storming party of volunteers, armed with clubs and made invisible in the darkness by having our faces blacked, was a splendid adventure; and who cared for the rifle bullets stabbing though the dark point-blank, as the Germans drove our wire cutters from their task? (P.26 SW)

It is not conceivable that he could now say of Passchendaele what he said of the Somme:

> What we saw of the battle was a failure. World-shaking bombardments which made our little memories of trench warfare ridiculous, hurricanes of shell-fire, hurled on us by the Germans in retaliation, glimpses through the smoke of attack and counter-attack on our right and left, came to nothing, till the regiments which had advanced in the morning crept back in the evening to their own lines, leaving three-quarters of their men dead or wounded in the German trenches. We were thirteen days in the line without a relief and without shell-proof dugouts. We lost seventy men killed and wounded by shell-fire; about one in seven of our numbers.

> I do not remember that we were in the least discouraged by the failure of our part of the battle. (My emphasis) (pp. 28-29 SW)

That sentence is almost as extraordinary as a statement he makes somewhat later in the book:

> The Somme battle raised the morale of the British Army. Although we did not win a decisive victory, there was what matters most, a definite and growing sense of superiority over the enemy, man to man. (p. 114 SW)

The description of Passchendaele is of a different quality.

> Every scrap of news coming down from Passchendael told of futile struggle with the swamps of the salient, of useless tanks bogged in the slime, of mismanaged partial attacks, of hopeless plans and angry generals, of great losses in men and small gains even in ground. (p.130 SW)

He describes with real candour his own gradual disintegration under heavy bombardment as he so nearly gives in to the ever-mounting scream of panic and terror:

> You think of absurd omens and fetishes to ward off the shell you hear coming. A strong inward feeling compels you to sit in a certain position, to touch a particular object, to whistle so many bars of a tune silently between your teeth. If you complete the charm in time you are safe - until the next one. This absurdity becomes a dark, overpowering fatalism. You contemplate with horror that you have made a slip in the self-imposed ritual, or that the augury sign of your own invention shows against you...
>
> You hold frenziedly on to the conversation; you talk a little too fast; your nerves grow tense, and while you continue to look and talk like a man, your involuntary muscles get a little out of hand. Are your knees quivering a little? Are you blinking? Is your face contorted with fear? You wonder and cannot know. Force yourself to do something, say something, think something, or you will lose control. Get yourself in hand with some voluntary action. Drum out a tune with your finger-tips upon your knee. Don't hurry--keep time--get it finished, and you will be safe this once. Here superstition and neurasthenia step in. Like the child who will not walk on the lines in the pavement and finds real safety in putting each foot on a square stone you feel that your ritual protects you. As the roar of an approaching shell rises nearer and louder you listen in inward frenzy to the shell, in outward calm to the conversation. Steady with

> those nervous drum-taps on your knee; don't break time or the charm is broken and the augury vain. The shell roars near...(Terrific explosion!) "God," you say with a gasp, dropping for an instant the mask of indifference. (pp.161-164 SW)

I have quoted this at length because this involvement in fetish and ritual is repeated continually in accounts of the war. Rationality is impotent as a defense against the particular terrors of this war, and so the psyche escapes into the irrational. Often the implications of such an escape go unrecognized and unacknowledged. The factors that make this terror resistant to the defenses of the rational are many. First of all is the mechanic or the industrial element. The Great War shows us the nightmare dimensions of the mad elephants that Dickens saw as the essence of Coketown. We finally discover just how heavy the human price is that the industrial revolution can demand. We watch as the machines devour the humans. The fact that industrialism itself seemed like the essence of rationality merely intensifies the nightmare. Secondly the terror is arbitrary, blowing up this one, leaving that one untouched. No rhyme, no reason. Thirdly the scale of the aggression mocks the frail individual being, and the small illumination of his mind. Fourthly the danger is unseen, hidden in trenches or the darkness, arriving from the mouths of unseen artillery. The eyes, of all our senses, seem to be the most direct conduit to the brain, to our rationality, and it is the eyes that are rendered helpless. The invisibility further removes the terror from an area our minds can work on. The ears are overwhelmed with

ceaseless and inchoate noise. And while it is true that the terror is characterized by being mechanic, arbitrary, on a scale that dwarfs human participation, invisible, enforcing immobile impotence, it is also true that the aggression is still the result of human agency, of human will. These tangled paradoxes were too complex for any ordinary mind to unravel.[2]

But the conventional Edwardian mind is not about to recognize its involvement in the "grotesque". Carrington describes a macabre little incident that sticks in the mind:

> (General Hutchinson) . . . talked cheerily to us, as always, and then pointed out a wounded Boche in a little hollow, a few yards away, whose legs were shattered and who was trying to walk on his knees with two crutches of broken timber. (p. 155 SW)

We will pick up on this scene in a minute, but what is unmistakeable is that these experiences--held against the ideals of the young subaltern fresh from England--lead inexorably to exactly that feeling of disenchantment Edmonds so fervently denies.

His description of his return to England early in 1918 is redolent of disenchantment:

> England was beastly in 1918; it was in the hands of the dismal and incompetent. Pessimism raged among those who knew nothing of the war; "défaitisme," the desire to stop the war at all costs, even by the admission of defeat, broke out among the faint-hearts; while those at home who still had the will to fight preferred to use the most disgusting means--to fight by lying propaganda, and by imitating the bad tradition of the German army which consistently made war against civilians. No wonder that a genuine and silent

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[2] See also the illuminating discussion of the 'uncanny' in Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, No Man's Land: Vol.2 Sexchanges (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), pp 267-269.

> pacifism was rising in the breast of the war-weary populations. Envy, hatred, malice and all uncharitableness, fear and cruelty born of fear, seemed the dominant passions of the leaders of the nations in those days. Only in the trenches (on both sides of No Man's Land) were chivalry and sweet reasonableness to be found. (pp. 187-8 SW)

Edmonds presumably would say that this disillusionment is different; this is civilian disenchantment. Yet the effort to separate the two fronts is betrayed even in his own prose. The urge to enforce the contrast leads Edmonds to some revealing hyperbole. "Chivalry"? "sweet reasonableness"? However much one sympathizes with the suggestion (and it is repeated endlessly) that it was at home that the poison of the war seeped in most deeply, one still must see the war clearly for what it is. What "chivalry" is to be found in that little hollow where the wounded Boche, both legs shattered, is trying to walk on his knees with two crutches of broken timber? Is it "sweet reasonableness" to know the next shell will kill you unless you can whistle the tune silently between your teeth? Edmonds is contradicted by his own report. He might have thought more deeply about the connections between what was happening on the home front and what was happening at the war.

"An Essay on Militarism" is no more persuasive. Edmonds argues justifiably enough that insufficient attention has been paid to what might be called the positives of war experience: soldiers who have fought side by side are initiates, "illuminati". Their shared experiences of the mysteries are such that a comradeship is formed "richer and stronger...than we have ever known since." (SW, p. 195) War in its intensity sharpens the

senses, and allows even the ordinary pleasures of life to roll mellow on the palate. Men like adventures, and dangers. Moreover the discipline and "esprit de corps" of an army are efficacious, give us a secure place in a hierarchy, and a clarity of purpose we may miss in the complexities of daily life.

There are incontestable truths here. But so many of Edmonds's arguments are unexamined and unqualified. Many of them are of the "beating your head against the wall is good, because it feels so nice when you stop" variety. And they are all couched in a prose whose logic is offensively specious:

> I have no patience with those prophets who denounce war on account of the discomfort of the trenches, who gloat over the mud and the cold, the filth and the disease, making them the principal charges against the decency of a soldier's life. What in the world do such things matter, and, if any unworldly considerations be taken, how they sink into nothingness? (sic) This is the charge laid by the comfortable folk, who hate war because it shakes them out of their routine; who have no sense of comradeship and no sense of adventure; who sit in armchairs glowing with vicarious pride over the hardships endured by Arctic explorers or shipwecked sailors, and squeal when such hardships come their own way. These are the folk whose motto is "Safety First"...; who hate war because it makes them live as miners, fo'c'sle hands or night-watchmen live in time of peace. (sic)
>
> One inevitable result of war is the death of many young men who might well have expected to live longer. Since to attain a rational attitude of mind towards death is the chief problem of human life, we may well consider the case of the young soldier who became acquainted with the problem earlier in life than is usual. Although we all know that we are seated at play with an opponent who is certain to checkmate in something less than three score and ten moves, the end seems so remote to most lads of eighteen that they don't really believe in it. Yet earthly life is a losing game which is to be played out with what propriety we can manage, and which should be lost without rancour. Soldiers learn to live and die in that fashion. It is virtuous and not vicious to be indifferent to death, provided that you are as indifferent to your own as to your neighbour's. Religious faith is rarely so strong as to support a man

> against selfish mourning when death takes his friends; but military honour, when it teaches him to go to his own death with a smile, helps him to a little virtue. To die young is by no means an unmitigated misfortune; to die gaily in the unselfish pursuit of what you believe to be a righteous cause is an enviable and not a premature end. Cardinal Mercier expresses this thought still more violently when he said: "How many of these young men who in the impulse of patriotism had the resolution to die well, might possibly not have had the resolution to live well"; and as we survivors of the war pass into a sordid unheroic middle age, it is not pity that we feel for those who died on the field of honour. God grant that we may be as lucky in the occasion of our death, and may meet it with a soldier's gay courage. (pp.200-202 SW)

To suggest that in the Great War we are considering those who died "gaily in the unselfish pursuit of what [they believed] to be a righteous cause" is to beg most of the questions that the literature of the Great War poses. Mercier's comment seems to me both presumptuous and fatuous. It reminds one of Sassoon's report of Ottoline Morrell quoting a "patriotic lady who had said to her, 'I am quite content that the men should be sent to die; it does such wonderful things to the souls of their women; makes them selfless.'"[3] Wonderful!

Too often Edmonds's arguments seem insensitive. He is arguing that this war is no worse than any of those which have preceeded it:

> War has three horrors--discomfort, fear and death. To the last of these three the ingenuities of science make no difference, nor can body and mind stand more discomfort or more terror than they could stand five hundred years ago. (p. 199 SW)

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[3] Siegfried Sassoon, Siegfried's Journey (1945; rpt. London: Faber and Faber, 1982), p.43.

It is a curious argument with alarming and disconcerting implications. Moreover it is, simply, wrong. Edmonds would have benefitted from a chat with Dr. W.H.R. Rivers at Craiglockhart, or any of the other doctors concerned with psychological disintegration. The ingenuities of science made a great difference to the horrors with which death came in the Great War. (And of course had dire effects on the discomfort and fear faced by the combatants.) It was technology that made the war primarily defensive rather than offensive. To attack, as most commentators point out at some point, is to court serious defeat. This one factor had incalcuable results. All the virtues normally associated with war had to be rethought. The war becomes static, immobile; the soldier passive rather than active; all the while horribly vulnerable, unable to do anything about it, impotent. W.H.R.Rivers suggests that the normal response to any situation that produces pain or fear is "some kind of manipulative activity." But any purposeful manipulative activity was precisely what was denied the soldiers. Gradually the individual loses a sense of himself as an autonomous actor in a manipulable world. Whether the body or mind can stand more now than it could five hundred years ago is moot. What is clear is that the mind certainly was asked to bear much more.

To all Edmonds's arguments the most effective response is to point to his two descriptions of the actual battles. Yes, the positives are there--very pale--(cf. Chapman's two books), but there is little going to death with a smile, little gay death or

gay courage. And too many of the questions are not thought through carefully enough. He is extolling military discipline and "esprit de corps":

> To be bound by an oath to the performance of a task; to carry it out with ritual and ceremony; to hold an exact place in a hierarchy, are natural undertakings for all men, and delightful to many. That the task may be irksome, the ritual silly and the officer feeble makes very little difference.(p. 197 SW)

We know and acknowledge the security and simplicity provided by any hierarchy like the army, and because we know and acknowledge those qualities we recognize the dangers therein.

Carrington publishes another version of the same story some thirty-six years later: Soldier From the Wars Returning.[4] His attitude remains surprisingly unaltered by time or history. The same basic assumptions are made; the same contradictions remain. He gives another brittle, vulnerable defense of the conduct of the war--a defense again belied by his own reporting.

This time, though, Carrington starts off on what looks like a promising tack in discussing "The Point of View", a story from The Green Curve, and Other Stories[5] by Swinton.

> The story gives three accounts of the same battle: the first is by a group of dogged but exhausted soldiers who for days have been fighting over the same shell-torn entrenchments, with a sort of resigned fury because they well understand that they are being sacrificed to create a diversion while the decisive blow is struck elsewhere; the second picture is of the staff officer at headquarters

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[4] Charles Carrington, Soldier From the Wars Returning (London: Hutchinson, 1965.) All future references will be to this edition (designated "SWR") and will be noted in the text.

[5] E.D.Swinton, The Green Curve and Other Stories (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1914), pp.23-24.

> sifting through whole files of messages from the battle-front and methodically recording the progress of the fight by sticking pins into a map, until suddenly he realizes that one message recounts the destruction of his own regiment and the death of his comrades; the third picture is of the Command General who, at the crisis of the battle, has gone fishing. Why not? He has made his dispositions and issued his orders and, until reports come in, he can exercise no further influence. Late in the day, cool, rested, and relaxed, he returns to take charge and to exploit his gains, having carefully secluded himself from the confusion and distress which a detailed view of some corner of the battlefield must have shown him. The fighting soldier's point of view, the staff officer's point of view, the general's point of view, are thus distinguished. (pp. 23-24, SWR)

It is, of course, true that the perspective of the fighting man is severely limited. And it is also true that of the memoirs we are considering only one is by a staff officer. We do well to remember the inevitable difference in point of view.

But this is not to argue that if the soldier complains of the mismanagement of the battle that he is necessarily wrong or the staff necessarily right. Carrington himself continues:

> Scientific warfare coolly conducted by commanders from positions where they could take a detached view was the accepted doctrine in all the 1914 armies. The principle was expressly stated in the Field Service Regulations of 1910, the little red book which Haig had authorized as Director of Military Training at the War Office and which every officer was supposed to study. Beautifully lucid and practical, the Field Service Regulations was a model textbook so far as it went, until contingencies appeared which it had not foreseen and did not provide for.(sic!) The section on reconnaissance is significant. Every junior commander, it insisted, must reconnoitre his own front, a personal responsibility that went as high as the major-generals who commanded divisions. But since the Commander-in-Chief could not possibly reconnoitre the whole front it would be better for him to train his officers to give accurate reports and to rely on them. If he went to look for himself at some particular sector he would be unduly influenced to give it his special attention at the cost of some other sector, which he had not seen and which might be more vital.

> The argument, convincing at first sight, explained the antipathy between the troops and their commanders which was so striking a feature of the First World War. Not only did this system weaken the trust of the Army in its leaders, since they were unseen and unknown, it also tended to delude the higher command. Operational staffs could do no more that "paint the picture", that is they constructed an ideal panorama of what the battle should be, if it were in fact as tidy as the marked maps in the operations room. But battles are never tidy. (p.24 SWR)

It is indeed arguable that the staff (and the Commander-in-Chief) had very imprecise notions of the actual battle conditions, and that this ignorance had much to do with the scale of the slaughter which occurred.[6] The anecdote concerning General Kiggell--Haig's Chief-of-Staff--is a sobering one: On the day after the final brutal assault on Passchendaele Kiggell paid his first visit to the fighting zone.

> As his staff car lurched through the swampland and neared the battle ground he became more and more agitated. Finally he burst into tears and muttered, "Good God, did we really send men to fight in that?" The man beside him who had been through the campaign, replied tonelessly, "It's worse further on up." [7]

On the whole Carrington's main concern is to defend the general staff against the various charges which history has levied against them:

> I am inclined to think that the First War commanders did pretty well, according to their lights, and the tendency to blame them for the crimes and follies of a whole generation now seems to be disingenuous. (pp.10-11 SWR) ...One of the

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[6] We might note Keegan's point that one of the most distinguishing characteristics of the battles of the Great War was the inability of the commanders to get any view of the action at all. Keegan, The Face of Battle (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), pp. 263ff.

[7] Leon Wolff, In Flanders Fields (London: Corgi, 1966), p. 264

> silliest gibes made by civilians against soldiers is that they always try to fight the last war. What else can they do? No general should gamble with men's lives on a speculation; he can only start with the equipment actually to hand and should use it in the way that experience has shown to be best. (p.20 SWR)

This is all nonsense. Haig goes on "gambling" with men's lives when it is not even a speculation that they will be killed.[8] If the "lights" of the commanders are bad lights, if they result in the unnecessary death of millions without causing the belief in the efficacy of the lights to waver one bit, one should indeed blame the holders of those lights for their crimes and follies. What is really breathtaking about Carrington's insensitivity is his ability to follow up his support for the generals with a story like this:

> The half-hearted German penetration into the gap was the beginning of the long and bloody Second Battle of Ypres. The local commander was Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien of the Second Army, who was already in bad odour with Sir John French because he had fought the Battle of Le Catreau against French's orders (and, what was more provoking, had won it). He withdrew from the exposed tip of the Ypres salient, which the new German advance had made untenable, and wanted to draw back his whole line to a well-sited position. This French would not allow, and decided to change this army commander, who had a knack of being right when the Commander-in-Chief was wrong. The anecdote told of 'Wully' Robertson, the ranker general, that he alone was bold enough to convey the Chief's decision to the fiery Smith-Dorrien with the plain words: "'Orace, yer fer 'ome", is authenticated. Horace went, and the British Army was

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[8] cf "In truth, the politicians and soldiers of the First World War were gamblers; not however in the sense of risk, but of obsession... As with a gambler, the concentration on each current play mentally obscured the total extent of mounting losses, prevented any sober and detached assessment of the mounting cost of further continued losses. So they went on deeper into the blood, the lies and the hatred." C. Barnett, The Swordbearers, quoted in Michael Thorpe, Siegfried Sassoon (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 294.

> obliged, on a point of honour, to hold the exposed Ypres salient for the duration of the war.(p.63 SWR)

Unfortunately Carrington seems to have a rather weak grasp of the elements of argument:

> The comical assertion that the generals were "donkeys" does not stand up to a moment's criticism. To begin with, they achieved the first object of a military commander, which is to gain and retain the loyalty of their men. When generals behave like "donkeys" their men refuse to follow them, as did the Russians, and, at the end of the war, the Germans. There was not a sign or hint in the British armies of political unrest until the war was won, from which it might be deduced that the men were "donkeys", but in respect of the officers only that they knew how to lead. The corps of professional soldiers, on the whole, lined up behind the school of Haig and Robertson who said from the beginning that the war would be long and hard and could be won only by fighting it out on the Western Front. Their appreciation proved to be correct [small lapse in logic here] and they won after fighting it out in the way they had foretold. Again, they carried the agreement of the soldiers with them in this unattractive programme. No one can make soldiers fight if they have no heart to fight. The French armies in 1917 decided that they had done enough and refused to follow their leaders into further mass-attacks. Not so the British, who still had confidence in their generals. Who were the "donkeys"? The men who ordered the attacks at Paschendael or the men who obeyed the orders although they knew that the Russians had stopped fighting and suspected that the French were resting on their arms? (p.105 SWR)

Carrington's brazen flouting of even the most elementary rules of logic is offensive enough. He hardly needs to repeat the curious and even more offensive suggestion that it was the soldiers who were the real "donkeys". To resolve the whole complex question of why the average English soldier (and officer) faithfully obeyed orders he well knew would probably kill him with this glib simplification is unworthy of even a rudimentary

intelligence.[9] The most superficial glance at various memoirs suggests the host of forces, some examined, some not, which tended to keep soldiers fighting: the British class structure and its inherited loyalties, tradition, training, lack of plausible alternatives, peer pressure, genuine loyalty and faithfulness to one's mates and to one's immediate superiors. I have yet to read one other memoir which suggests the men kept fighting because they really believed that the Generals knew what they were doing.

Haig is defended against all charges of incompetence on the rather extraordinary grounds that he "...made himself known to his two million soldiers by telepathy." (p.107 SWR) And so he was trusted. Against that sort of argument one again holds Carrington's own description. He is too young to go off with his original battalion in 1915. He bids them farewell thus:

> First let me write off the 9th York and Lancasters, whom I still recollect as a well-found, well-trained battalion. Ten months later, in the great holocaust of the 1st July 1916, they were in the leading wave of the assault made by the 8th Division against the German line at Ovillers. The bombardment had not been effective in destroying the German machinegun posts to right and left, and when the barrage lifted the machinegunners wiped out two brigades of the 8th Division as they marched straight to their front in unfaltering lines. So much for the prolonged cross-country training in open warfare. The 8th Division lost 5,500 men out of 8,500 who had gone into action: the German defenders lost 280 men. Colonel Addison and Major Lewis and almost all my friends died on the German wire. (pp. 76-77 SWR)

One wonders exactly what it would take to shake Carrington's faith in these "tactics".

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[9] cf Keegan's intelligent discussion of this point, The Face of Battle, pp. 274ff.

By now we recognize that any more profound response is unlikely, so we are not surprised when Carrington quite unself-consciously outlines his own war aims while mentioning the various possibilities of a negotiated peace: "We soldiers never had the slightest doubts about our war aims, which were to drive the German Armies out of France and Belgium and to give them such a pasting in the process that they would not again make unprovoked assaults on us or on our neighbours." (p.221 SWR) This is not, of course, an uncommon attitude. But it does, magnificently, miss some rather obvious points. By pasting the Germans and then imposing a settlement one merely reaffirms the efficacy and desirability of militarism. The whole concept of a total military victory really plays against the very values for which both sides claim they are fighting. Herman Hesse puts it very well indeed: He is speaking of the coming offensive in 1918:

> Everyone knows it and everyone, with the exception of a few sanguine political orators and war profiteers, is trembling at the thought. Concerning the outcome of this mass slaughter, opinions and hopes vary. In both camps there is a minority who seriously believe in a decisive victory. But one thing that no one endowed with a vestige of good sense can believe is that the ideal, humanitarian aims, which figure so prominently in the speeches of all our statesmen, will be achieved. The bigger, the bloodier, the more destructive these final battles of the World War prove to be, the less will be accomplished for the future, the less hope there will be of appeasing hatreds and rivalries, or of doing away with the idea that poltical aims can be attained by the criminal instrumentality of war. If one camp should indeed achieve final victory (and this purpose is the one justification offered by the leaders in their incendiary speeches), then what we abhor as "militarism" will have won out. If in their secret heart the partisans of war mean so much as a single word of what they have been saying about

> war aims, the absurdity, the utter futility of all their arguments staggers the imagination.[10]

Against the clear sanity of <u>that</u> Carrington's heavy handed ironies at the expense of Wilson's Fourteen Points are petty and pale.

Of course Carrington is interesting precisely because he does so constantly over-simplify this unsimplifiable reality to terms he can then manage. In that he is representative of many of the participants in the war. What are the possible responses to the war? "The answer I gave as a boy, and from which I have not since dissented, was that there were two reasonable courses and two only, to fight my way out, or to submit and to rely on the power of soul-force. I fought my way through." (p.222 <u>SWR</u>) It is that "two only" that indicates the way in which Carrington narrows down his reality to manageable proportions. But this narrowing may have some chilling implications:

> There were few genuine non-resisters, many of the conscientious objectors being persons who objected to fighting in that war, not to fighting in any war; and these got no more support from me than did my other Political opponents, the Germans. (P. 222 <u>SWR</u>)

One may have a great deal of sympathy for the young Carrington. (One has for any young man faced with this war.) And he is interesting because he is so representative; not least in the hint of frightening intransigence given in that last sentence.

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[10] Herman Hesse, "Shall There Be Peace? December 1917", from <u>If the War Goes On...</u>, trans. R. Manheim (New York, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1971), p.34.

John Glubb

Like Carrington, John Glubb in Into Battle[1] is very clear as to his purpose:

> At a time when survivors who actually fought in that war are becoming fewer and when the war itself is often misrepresented to support modern political propaganda, it seemed to me that these artless pages, written day-by-day in the trenches and bivouacs, might be not entirely lacking in interest. The present book is the result.
> I have endeavoured to avoid up-to-date comment, and simply to copy out verbatim the daily jottings of a young soldier, in all their simplicity, innocence and schoolboy language hoping thereby to preserve the daily vividness with which they were noted down. (p.3)

We must grant Glubb the leeway this claim implicitly demands. But we are still left with some unanswered questions. Glubb never tells us which modern political propaganda is being so sinisterly supported, nor exactly how the war is misrepresented to support it. Obviously he feels his account of the war represents a point of view opposed to the "modern political propaganda". Since he's conscious of that, he might have done better to confront the debate directly. Instead of that he suggests--just a touch disingenuously-- "a controversialist? me? oh no. I'm just giving the artless jottings of a schoolboy." Clearly it would be unfair to demand any very focussed analysis from this young soldier. But if the absence of such an analysis is the mature Glubb's point, one would like to have the mature

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[1] J. Glubb, Into Battle (London: Cassell, 1977) All further references will be to this edition and will be noted in the text.

Glubb's reflections to show us clearly wherein he differs from this callow youth, to show us exactly how he feels the war _should be_ represented.

What happens in _Into Battle_ is something that happens with great frequency to most of the participants in this, or perhaps any, war. Glubb knows and shows how the mind becomes preoccupied with the details of daily life: the logistics, rhythms and rituals of quotidian reality. On the whole, larger considerations are pushed aside. Questions about the purposes of the war, the morality of the war, the efficacy of command, are all ignored. The reasons for this are obvious. The overall implications of the war are simply too large, too weighty with ambiguities and despair, too complex to be contemplated often or steadily. Such a contemplation would squander time and energy, and would, in all probability, merely result in greater bewilderment. In any case what would be the point of such speculation? That reality is not going to be altered by any amount of individual contemplation. The soldier has no reason to believe he can alter the nature of the war by thinking about it; indeed he has every reason to believe he could not alter it in any way. Why waste the energy? Why dabble with the despair that such contemplation might well bring? No, do your duty; fix your eyes on the road one step ahead; perform each detail well.

One of the more complex and vital questions we must face in this exploration is how and why most men persevered in their commitment to a war that seemed so impervious to rational

questioning. Glubb alerts us to an important recognition. We must register that man has always experienced the temptation of self-sacrifice to a stern, demanding, incomprehensible master. In one way the more baffling the reality to be faced, the more tempting and liberating will be a total submission to it.[2] Glubb describes a moment on the Martinpuich road:

> No words of mine can describe the dreariness and hopeless desolation of the scene, wrapped in mist and rain. I sat down on a heap of broken brick and rubbish for a few minutes rest. A cold gusty wind blows the driving rain in my face....
>
> Suddenly I feel my whole self overwhelmed by waves of deep and intense joy, which it is impossible to describe. Never before had I experienced such a feeling of deep interior joy, so that I could hardly contain myself. I sat for what must have been several minutes, filled with the passionate joy of Heaven itself--then the feeling slowly faded away. I remembered how St. Francis of Assisi once said that perfect joy lay in being cold, hungry, exhausted and repulsed from the doors of every house at which one knocked. It was the depth of cold, misery, weariness and exhaustion of that day in Martinpuich, which had produced in me those waves of spiritual joy. I had given everything to do my duty and had held nothing back. (pp. 85-87)

The mature Glubb adds in parenthesis:

> (It is sixty years since that day on the Martinpuich road, but I have never forgotten the experience. For it taught me a lesson which it engrained in my soul. The knowledge I acquired from it is that real joy can only be won by the abandonment of self and by utter dedication to service. I have not lived my life on so exalted a level, but I have always known this to be true.) (p.87)

One respects such emotions. But one cannot allow such respect to obscure the questions that matter here. Almost every memoirist acknowledges the joy of service. Nevertheless that joy won by "the abandonment of self and by utter dedication to service" is one

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[2] cf p. 77 above for a description of Tielhard de Chardin and his particular submission.

that has been experienced by a wide variety of men, dedicated to a wide variety of service. Glubb seems to be suggesting that this joy is an absolute good. But of course it matters enormously in what service a man finds this joy. Precisely because this joy can be produced irrespective of the ends of the service in which it is found, it is dangerous. Too often it allows men to do that which they would not customarily do. We witnesses of the Holocaust are much more alert to the dangers of the joy of service than were earlier generations. But it is precisely this order of complexity that Glubb (like Carrington before him) evades. In this case he has brought his mature person into the story and we are entitled to ask for more penetration than he gives us here. His failure to acknowledge these complexities leaves us somewhat hesitant as to how to take similar failures of the younger Glubb. Are they merely examples of youthful exuberance: simple and innocent, carefully placed and judged by the mature Glubb? Or are they surprisingly representative of Glubb's mature reflections? Glubb says: "It is obvious, therefore, that, today, I do not share all the views I held sixty years ago, but I have avoided the temptation to interrupt the narrative with modern comments or footnotes." (p.3) Actually it is not "obvious" at all. That "therefore" implies a logical relationship that simply does not exist.

Glubb describes his trench as a charnel-house. Bleeding heads, truncated, rat-eaten limbs, boots inhabited by stray feet protrude from the walls. His reaction to all this is revealingly variable. "I often wish that some of those brilliant politicians

who raise the enthusiasm of crowds by denouncing other nations, could be brought round here to see what war really is." (p. 49) Yet continually one can see Glubb refusing to allow the enormity of the horrors surrounding him to register fully. He introduces his description of the panic caused by getting lost at night and fearing he has blundered into the Boche line by saying: "I had rather a fright one night..." That kind of reticent, well-bred sang-froid seems quite inadequate to the reality of the rotting corpses and the vividness of his disoriented panic. Even more interesting is Glubb's description of returning as a badly wounded stretcher case to England:

> It was a Sunday evening, when crowds used to gather at Waterloo Station to welcome the wounded. As I was carried out, the crowd surged around cheering and clapping...As [the ambulance] drew slowly away, girls ran out of the crowd and threw roses and flowers in on top of me...
>
> In the lighted streets, children ran after the car cheering, and women stopped and looked back to wave their hands. I made quite a triumphal entry into old London, and, in my exhaustion, the tears rolled down my cheeks. It was with a sudden wave of emotion that I realized that England cared... Now I knew that Britain's heart was in the war, down to the smallest details. (pp.192-3)

Again this account leaves a number of interesting questions unanswered. Exactly how does England care? What exactly does the crowd of girls throwing roses and flowers signify? _Is_ Britain's heart in the war down to the smallest detail? All the evidence, including this description, suggests that England knows very little about the realities of the war. It suggests, indeed, that the kind of emotion paraded here by the flower-throwing crowd becomes an easy replacement for, and evasion of, a serious awareness of the war. This is the sort of scene which allows these

crowds the pretence of doing their bit for the war even as it allows them to evade any deeper knowledge of it. It is a ceremony of charades. A couple of pages later, after some months spent recuperating, Glubb says: "I resented the superficial frivolity of London, pursued under the specious pretext of keeping up civilian morale." (p. 195) He might well devote more thought to the possible connection between this superficial frivolity and the scenes of public care and public heart as the hospital trains discharge their occupants.

Glimpses full of interesting possibilities are continually offered and then left unexamined. Roughly a month after Glubb's arrival in the trenches he meets his brigade commander who "...asked who I was. When I identified myself, he looked at me and said 'How old are you?' 'Eighteen, sir,' I replied. Turning to his Brigade Major, he said, 'By Jove! that's the age to go to war!'" (p.30) It is right that the Brigadier should turn to his Brigade Major and make his conventional remark rather than to Glubb himself. The move captures nicely the way in which the old community of officers reinforces itself, and reinforces itself with a concept of war patently unsuitable to these times. Is there any age at which it is suitable to go to <u>these</u> trenches? Glubb's age reminds us that Sassoon describes the trenches as "The hell where youth and laughter go". ("Suicide in the Trenches") The reinforcement of the conventional viewpoint depends upon excluding the fresher, untutored perceptions of the eighteen year old (who has just described to us his own horror at the omnipresent

carnage). But one is left wondering if Glubb caught any of these ironies. Or is he merely offering himself as he was then: eager to please and to be accepted by the Brigadier?

If Glubb is representative in his unwillingness or inability to examine fully the implications of the various scenes he describes, he is also representative in a more positive sense. Time and again we come in contact with emotions or perceptions familiar from other sources. Like all the other subaltern memoirists Glubb feels deeply his relationship with his soldiers. Whenever he is away from them, whether through a special posting or through severe wounds, his one desire is to get back. Late in the book he is describing the difference between McQueen, the C.O. now on leave, and himself. McQueen is dedicated, reserved, hard-working, serious. "My Cornish-Irish ancestry, on the other hand, had made me emotional. I really love my soldiers. I enjoy an occasional party, and used especially to revel in our gramophone, which McQueen had dumped before the Battle of Arras."(p. 169) It is like Glubb to parallel thus unconsciously his love for his soldiers with his love for parties and his gramophone, but it is also like Glubb to feel and express this emotion so simply and naturally.

Glubb also serves well as witness for one of A.J.P. Taylor's central theses of the war. Again and again he describes the inevitable frustration of a successful attack. Such a mechanized war depends heavily on supply lines. There is a continual, desperate need for ammunition, rations, barbed wire, sand-bags,

guns of all kinds. Any rapid advance means that the front quickly loses contact with the lines of supply. Inevitably the attacking forces, because of their very successes, find themselves at a disadvantage. They are so low on supplies and ammunition that the success of the inevitable counter-attack is virtually assured. To attack successfully is to court defeat. It is a nice irony in this most ironic war.

Glubb, then, is representative in more ways than one. He brings to life the texture of daily experiences, and fails to deal with the questions those experiences throw up. In speaking of Second Ypres he says: "By sheer dogged courage and endurance, it (the old Regular Army) had saved the Western world from the domination of German militarism." (p. 19) Perhaps, although one is reminded again of Tolstoy's point about the unreliability of "post hoc ergo propter hoc" historical arguments. One is also reminded of Hesse's point that, whichever side wins, "militarism" itself is the victor. It would be good to see some growing sense of irony, ambiguity and complexity as this young soldier lives through this war. But there is none at all. One is left a little unsure exactly how to take the ending:

> 11 November: This morning we visited a deserted farm nearby, where there was a loft full of hay which we comandeered. As I was standing below, watching the drivers throwing the hay out of the loft window, a mounted orderly rode up, and told us that the war was over. A dreadful blow! I was just beginning to enjoy it, and this will finish my dreams of the dashing column of pursuit. Raining as usual.
> 11 November-5 December: Alas, the war is over, at the moment when it was beginning to be exciting and enjoyable, after all these years. (p. 219)

F.P.Crozier

In The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston, Siegfried Sassoon offers a memorable challenge:

> ...if I am being caustic and captious about them [the Staff] I can only plead the need for a few minutes' post-war retaliation. Let the staff write their own books about the Great War, say I. The Infantry were biased against them, and their authentic story will be read with interest.[1]

F.P.Crozier in A Brass Hat in No Man's Land[2] most impressively takes up that challenge. At first one may suspect that we are getting exactly what Sassoon obviously expected: a conventional apologia for the conduct of the war. Certainly at first the language and the notions seem both predictable and unexamined: "We shall hear more of Bunny later, as he died gloriously, like a man."(P.22) This kind of conventionality seems to go along with an old-world sentimentality:

> When Lord K. asked the "backbone" of the past to come forward, in their old ranks, and as far as possible, their old corps, to help him...he knew his appeal would not fall on deaf ears. He was, as usual, right....never before had I set eyes on a more magnificant military spectacle than on the day I walked through the arch from the War Office to choose from the pick of the "backbone."... They are of all ages, from perhaps thirty-five to sixty-five. Those over sixty say they are forty, and if necessary hide their tell-tale medals. Those who must, lose their discharge papers, while the only thing that matters now is to "get there"--as it was in the days of old. Into this conspiracy against Anno Domini I enter

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[1] Siegfried Sassoon, The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston (1936; rpt. London: The Reprint Society, 1937), p. 439.

[2] F.P.Crozier, A Brass Hat in No-Man's Land (London: J. Cape, 1930) (All future references will be to this edition and will be included in the text.)

> with glee. I realise that if a youth of sixteen is justified (as he is) in swearing he is eighteen in order to serve his country, the veteran of fifty-five is even more justified in saying he is less in order to be able to each teach his junior. There are some three hundred non-commissioned veterans for me to choose from, and as I walk round the ranks my eyes fall on a familiar face. The body is a little stouter, but the cheery iron look is just the same.
> "Gorring!" I exclaim. His face lights up. "Come with me?" I ask.
> "Anywhere, sir," is the only reply, and not a muscle moves.(pp.30-31)

The question that becomes so interesting is exactly how an intelligent perceptive mind can allow so many of the attitudes Crozier describes, so much of the language used both by himself and others, to remain unexamined:

> General Nugent, taking the bull by the horns, assembles all the officers of our brigade in a village schoolroom where he delivers a strafe, not wholly deserved but very good for us, which I shall always treasure in my mind as the complete example of what can be said by the powerful to the powerless in the shortest space of time possible, consistent with the regulations of words and space for breathing, in the most offensive, sarcastic and uncompromising manner possible. (p.61)

Crozier obviously approves of this speech. One wishes he would justify a little more explicitly his claim that this tirade while not wholly deserved was, nevertheless, "very good for us." In these early pages a worry that the language is not being used with quite enough rigour is compounded by the varying and uncertain tone. Too often in describing some horror or injustice of the war Crozier seems to take refuge in a tight-lipped, "war is hell", kind of reticence which effectively precludes any analysis or exploration.

Our uncertainty about Crozier's response reaches its height in his description of the cowardly desertion of two men: one an

officer, Rochdale, the other a soldier, Crocker. Both are caught, tried, found guilty and sentenced to death. Arbitrarily the "higher ups" order Rochdale "released from arrest and all consequences." All Crozier can do is to refuse to accept him back to the regiment. Crozier is asked his opinion as to whether sentence of death should be carried out on Crocker. "In view of certain circumstances I recommend the shooting be carried out."(p.82) Crozier then describes in very exact detail the execution of the unfortunate Crocker. It is a curious and unsettling passage. We know from elsewhere in the book that Crozier must have felt a deep fury at the injustice of the situation. But he does not comment on that injustice at all. Nor does he elaborate on the "certain circumstances" which militate against Crocker. For a man as concerned as Crozier is with morale it is strange that he does nothing to examine this situation more fully. Later in the book we begin to suspect that his candid description of the execution of Crocker is a moment of self-flagellation, chastizing his own impotence in failing to secure an equitable conclusion. But at the moment our curiosity about Crozier's response is baffled. He ends the anecdote in a curiously evasive fashion: "We march back to breakfast while the men of a certain company pay the last tribute at the graveside of an unfortunate comrade. This is war."(p.84)

There is, however, a sequel to this story. In it Crozier demonstrates his deep sympathy for a figure like Crocker by lashing out furiously at judgemental civilians who remain ignorant

of the conditions of war which make breakdowns like Crocker's inevitable. The tirade itself is obviously a product of deeply-felt emotions even if the scene where it is delivered is somewhat unpersuasive; it is, in fact, one of the few scenes in the book where we feel Crozier creating a dramatic confrontation in order to vent his own emotions.

We may, then, feel certain hesitations as we begin this book. Yet early on we are alerted to the independence of Crozier's intelligence:

> I, for my part, do what I can to alter completely the outlook, bearing, and mentality of over a thousand men in as short a time as possible--for blood-lust is taught for purposes of war in bayonet-fighting itself and by doping the minds of all with propagandic poison. The German atrocities (many of which I doubt in secret), the employment of gas in action, the violation of French women, and the "official murder" of Nurse Cavell all help to bring out the brute-like bestiality which is so necessary for victory. The process of "seeing red,"...is elaborately grafted into the makeup of even the meek and mild, through the instrumentality of martial music, drums, Irish pipes, bands and marching songs. Sacred and artistic music is forbidden, save at Church, and even then the note of combat is struck. The Christian Churches are the finest blood-lust creators which we have and of them we made free use.(pp.42-3)

Crozier knows what this war demands: "In 1914 England changed her soul, otherwise she would have lost."(p.50) And no matter how professionally committed he may be to the war, he never allows that commitment to blind him to what is there:

> An old school friend, a battalion commander of another force, comes to see me. I take him up Elgin Avenue. He is not long from home, and is obviously ill at ease and timid, and does not understand the ropes. In the avenue, which is a main communication trench, we pass a rifleman carrying a sandbag full of something. I become suspicious. Thefts of rations and minor stores and comforts from the line are increasing. "What have you got in that bag?" I ask. "Rifleman Gundy," comes the

> unexpected answer. He is carrying down the only mortal remains of Gundy for decent burial in a bag which measures a few feet by inches! My friend looks puzzled and I explain. I see he is obviously upset and nervous...We wander on and our luck remains out, for, at the junction of Elgin Avenue and the fire trench we meet a man with a human arm in his hand. "Whose is that?" I ask. "Rifleman Broderick's, Sir," is the reply. "Where's Broderick?" is my next question. "Up there, Sir," says my informant, pointing to a tree top above our heads. There sure enough is the torn trunk of a man fixed securely in the branches of a shell-stripped oak...This is too much for my companion who desires to go back.(pp.94-5)

What we discover here, then, is an extraordinarily interesting combination. On the one hand we have the professional soldier who believes the war must be won, and is willing to pay the price for that victory. On the other we have a sensibility feelingly aware of the price that must be paid, a man with a soul that can be--and is--outraged. These two aspects of Crozier are usually mutually exclusive. In most cases a commitment to professional soldiery seems to go with an incapacity for outrage. And very often any real sensitivity to the horrors of the war insists that one question the necessity of "winning" it. Crozier, however, holds both these, usually contradictory, attitudes. The difficulty of so doing becomes apparent in a number of interesting ways.

In his role of professional soldier he can look on necessary death unappalled. He is in the middle of an attack:

> ...my eyes are riveted on a sight I shall never see again. It is the 32nd division at its best. I see rows upon rows of British soldiers lying dead, dying or wounded, in no man's land. ... My upper lip is stiff, my jaws are set. We proceed. Again I look southward from a different angle and perceive heaped-up masses of British corpses suspended on the German wire in front of the Thiepval stronghold, while live men rush forward in orderly procession to swell the weight of numbers in the spider's web. Will the last available and previously

> detailed man soon appear to do his futile duty unto death on the altar of sacrifice? (p.103) ...The attack on the right has come to a standstill; the last detailed man has sacrificed himself on the German wire to the God of War. Thiepval village is masked with a wall of corpses. (p.108)

Five pages separate these two mentions of the fate of the last detailed man. But the language here is significant: the "spider's web", "previously detailed", "futile duty"... these sufferers are victims of a pointless, arbitrary, preordained fate. The reversion to religious imagery intensifies our awareness of the sterility of these sacrifices; there will be no regeneration here. We can leave the resonant ambiguity of that "best" in the second line above to speak for itself. This suggestion of blind inevitability is amplified:

> The adjutant of the 10th tells me Colonel Bernard is no more. The colonel and half his men walked into the barrage of death during the advance. All died behind him as he resolutely faced the edge of the wood in an impossible effort to walk through a wall of raining iron and lead, which had lifted for us that brief five minutes....(p. 108) At 10 p.m. the curtain rings down on hell. The cost? Enormous. I have seventy men left, all told, out of seven hundred. (p.110)

Surely all that fruitless carnage--the hollow futility of those masses of corpses--will enforce the question: What is the point in making the "impossible effort to walk through a wall of raining iron and lead"? But not at all. The professional soldier holds firm. Well, almost firm; there is a later description:

> Next morning as I walk round the firing line I see a funny sight. Masses of German infantry, in close order, are approaching, six hundred yards away, while men from Middlesex and Wales pump lead into the human mass, killing by the score. Never was target like it, perhaps! And the marksmanship is good, the rapid fire excellent. "Even the third-class shots are in their element," says a subaltern to me. The machine guns mow down thousands. And in each British

> mouth is a cigar held at an angle, in the teeth, while in order to effect a balance, as it were, on the heads--at an opposite angle, rest the tin hats. (p.194)

A "funny" sight?[3] A chorus-line of music-hall comics: cigars in mouth, hats on tilt? The cheerful humour here is macabre, unbalanced.

Well, what judgements can he make? Is it all insanity? "My dugout door that night is like the entrance to a mad-house." Yet once more Crozier's "normal" vision reasserts itself. "War is a contradiction. The fighters seldom come out best, save in this, they keep their souls intact. And that is a possession which no man can take from them."(p.112) This notion is repeated. An officer who has given false information from a patrol he did not make goes out later to redeem himself. He does not return. "He had died for more than a bit of wire. He had saved his soul."(p.128) We may think we are beginning to learn what Crozier means by "soul". But just as we are about to acquiesce in this use of "soul" to represent that which a man saves by remaining true to his code Crozier uses the word in a way that betrays those meanings. There are two battalion commanders who are continually incapacitated by alcohol. Crozier arranges a "change of scenery" for them. "Although both were awarded the D.S.O., as a solace to their souls, yet their removal to realms of comfort at home strengthened the line, but undoubtedly weakened the home front and jeopardised the lives of youngsters."(p.129) Clearly these are not

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[3] cf my comments on Sassoon's use of the same word, p.188 below.

the same "souls" usually redeemed by honourable death. The confusion is worrying.

After the description of the enormous and fruitless slaughter at Thiepval Crozier says: "I am ordered, at midday, to organize a minor operation. This is a triumph, as I am the junior colonel of the brigade! We lose more men while I gain in reputation!...My star is high, even though the sufferings of others are great." (p.112) We know that Crozier is sensitive to the losses. But the difficulty of holding these various attitudes at the same time is caught in the real uncertainty of tone here.

As we proceed in the book we find that Crozier has an increasingly difficult time justifying the results of the war to himself. Indeed, as in the following example, we may feel the very conventionality of Crozier's response betrays--in such an individual sensibility--a real uncertainty. Crozier has met Madge on a boat back to England. She and her husband have been close friends of Crozier's; the husband has just been killed. Crozier takes her on the train with him once they reach England:

> We pass through the garden county of Kent, and as I look out of the window I say to Madge: "There are times when I think no war is worth the candle; yet, when I look on these green fields and fruit trees and gaze down the valley at Dunton Green towards Westerham, and then look over at you, immediately opposite me, and see your pink cheeks, pretty features and definitely positive countenance, I feel, anyhow, we must fight to the last man to protect those beautiful things!" (pp.170-171)

It was not clear in late 1917 that the Germans were threatening either the green fields of England or the pink cheeks of England's women.

Crozier's sensitivities to the sufferings around him intensify the strain of holding to the various justifications of the war. He goes home on another leave:

> My leave is temporarily darkened by a series of sad events. I visit two relatives who are sisters. They live together, one has two sons serving, both fresh from school in 1914; the other, one of similar age. These are their all--their husbands being dead. At 9 a.m., a death telegram arrives, at noon is brought another, while at 6 p.m., the final message announcing the death in action of the third boy is received. As I look on at this tragedy my mind expands!..."Ghastly," I almost shout-- "What can be done? Nothing yet--save win!" (p. 224)

One senses the despair of that stifled shout. The assurances of the professional soldier are being radically undercut by the perceptions of the outraged human being. One senses too, here, the first statement of a savage, self-generating, logic of the absurd. Since the suffering has been so ghastly it must not have been in vain, therefore the war must be won, therefore the suffering must continue. Early on in a passage already referred to Crozier has regarded the "propagandic poison" necessary in war with cold accuracy and equanimity: "The Christian Churches are the finest blood-lust creators which we have and of them we made free use." By late 1917 the equanimity is gone:

> I have heard it said that the British Empire was consolidated with the aid of 'baccy, beer and the Bible, plus the gallant efforts of the British soldier. I have no doubt about the latter; but the record of beer and the Bible in the war leaves me stone cold. Both sides suffered from alcoholic debauchery, while both used the Bible as propaganda for hate! (p.166)

Similarily Crozier's early observation: ("In 1914 England changed her soul, otherwise she would have lost.") was made without any particular deep anxiety. As the war proceeds the full implications

of this change of soul become more apparent. Gradually Crozier recognizes that no mere victory can justify the deep internal damage this change wreaks. The only outcome that can justify the suffering is the final and complete eradication of war:

> It is perfectly clear to me, that in the future, if a rumour of war is ever hushed or noised around, the peoples of the world must all rise up and say "No," with no uncertain voice: not because they are now denied any chance of real victory in the field which soldiers have been able to promise with reasonable certainty in the past, prior to 1914--in that respect, "the game is up"; but because of the havoc which is created in the ramifications of daily life among the young and innocent. A gamble in war might be excusable if only the players stood to suffer; but no man or nation has the right to gamble on the break-up of the moral fibres of society or of civilization itself. (p.155)

Ah, for the innocence of that naïvety.

Sassoon may well have been "caustic and captious" about the Staff, and certainly we can sympathize with his animus. But Crozier has proven to be a worthy spokesman for them. He has shown us this war from a different perspective; cast a cold and candid professional soldier's eye on all this wilderness of suffering; shown us that the Staff too was vulnerable to the ravages of war:

> And then I pass out of the Great War and as I stand on the leave boat for the last time, looking at Boulogne, I say to a companion who is beside me, "It may be for ever, in so far as this uniform is concerned, but there is a scar--unseen to any--slashed across my soul which will be with me to the end." Am I the only man, at this moment who feels this? (p.240)

It is our knowledge of that scar slashed across his soul that makes the "Epilogue" Crozier writes so poignant, so full of pathos. His vision of the tour of boy scouts through the Museum of Military Antiquities in the year 2119 (the 200th anniversary of the foundation of the League of Nations... and the extinction of

war altogether) reminds us of a crucial fact. This war--pointless and futile though it became--persisted for four years partly because of the vitality of the idealisms behind it. No one sees this more clearly than Dick Diver in F. Scott Fitzgerald's Tender is the Night:

> "See that little stream--we could walk to it in two minutes. It took the British a month to walk to it--a whole empire walking very slowly, dying in front and pushing forward behind. And another empire walked very slowly backward a few inches a day, leaving the dead like a million bloody rugs. No Europeans will ever do that again in this generation."
> "Why, they've only just quit over in Turkey," said Abe. "And in Morocco - "
> "That's different. This western-front business couldn't be done again, not for a long time. The young men think they could do it but they couldn't. They could fight the first Marne again but not this. This took religion and years of plenty and tremendous sureties and the exact relation that existed between the classes. The Russians and Italians weren't any good on this front. You had to have a whole-souled sentimental equipment going back further than you could remember. You had to remember Christmas, and postcards of the Crown Prince and his fiancée, and little cafés in Valence and beer gardens in Unter den Linden and weddings at the mairie, and going to the Derby, and your grand-father's whiskers."
> "General Grant invented this kind of battle at Petersburg in sixty-five."
> "No he didn't-he just invented mass butchery. This kind of battle was invented by Lewis Carroll and Jules Verne and whoever wrote Undine, and country deacons bowling and marraines in Marseilles and girls seduced in the back lanes of Wurtemburg and Westphalia. [4]

The epilogue to A Brass Hat in No Man's Land shows us, perhaps surprisingly, that even after four years of butchery that idealism was not dead. It was merely--still--naïve.

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[4] F.Scott Fitzgerald, Tender is the Night (1933; rpt. New York: Scribners, 1962) pp. 56-57.

Edmund Blunden

It is as well to admit frankly at the outset that of the memoirs Edmund Blunden's Undertones of War[1] is, for me, one of the more complex and puzzling. As we have seen, none of the memoirs of the Great War is as innocent or naive as the form might suggest; none of them is a straight reporting of observed incident. All of them are shaped, formed in one way or another by the author's sensibility, shaped, as well, by the (often unconscious) need to find some formalizing device to distance the experiences, halt the chaos, and keep it in focus. Nowhere is the individuality of the shaping sensibility more apparent than in Blunden. Here we have a complex, delicate, shifting play of tone and ironic effect. Experience, distanced by a prose that is often almost mannered, is rendered and commented on in the most indirect, oblique, and hesitant fashion; tonal shifts, gentle ironies hint, diffidently, wryly, at a path the reader's response might follow.[2]

It is the contrast between the weight and scale of what is being described and the lightness and delicacy of the sensibility and the language which describe it that gives this book its

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[1] E. Blunden, Undertones of War (1928; rpt. London: Oxford University Press, 1956) All future references will be taken from this edition and noted in the text.

[2] Both Dorothy Goldman and Margaret Higonnet suggest that this sort of indirection and allusiveness is essentially feminine. (cf Goldman, 1995, p.88-89, Higonnet p. 15) My sense is that there are really very few approaches or techniques that are gender-specific.

particular impact, and that provokes the continual questions one must answer as one reads it: the language is so...well, unusual here...ornate, balanced, wry...labouring under no discernible terror; how adequate is it for rendering that terror? Blunden says: "Of the White Mill, which artillery had been occupying, nothing but the crushed base was left, but the winged structure was easily fancied in that spring sun and wakened zephyr, a fair and blessed ghost." (p. 235) What is striking about that quotation is simply the audacity of the prose: "winged structure", "easily fancied", "spring sun", "wakened zephyr", "fair", "blessed". "Zephyr", for God's sake! To speak of the destructions of artillery in the same breath as zephyrs is to stretch our capacity for holding two mutually exclusive phenomena in our imagination at the same time.

This is what Blunden wants. Implicit throughout Undertones of War is the suggestion that perhaps we can and should look at the war from a quite new and different perspective. It is clear that the average sensibility is simply unable to formulate any adequate response to the experience of this war. Perhaps a complete change of perspective will prove beneficial? Perhaps one should try to see the war in a context which seems at first glance to be totally remote from it. Perhaps in this new context one will find new resources that will enable us to confront those horrors. Thus Blunden's attempt to render the war in the pastoral tradition, to use those conventions and motifs, to test the

bucolic.[3] The other, related tradition Blunden uses is that of the Romantic Sublime. Can we discover in the excesses of the artillery the kind of grandeur the Romantics found in the Simplon Pass?

The first comment one wants to make about these attempts is that they are clearly made in good faith. There is nothing meretricious or evasive about Blunden's tactics. This is quite obviously an attempt to be able to see the war more clearly. Nevertheless, we may still ask whether this approach <u>does</u> allow him further into the war. Does it open up new possibilities? What exactly happens when we try to hold in our imagination both the wreckage of the White Mill pounded into rubble by the artillery and its fair and blessed ghost floating in that spring sun and wakened zephyr? Elsewhere, Blunden writes of the beginning of a bombardment: "The officers not on definite duty would leave their dinner to stand and terrify their eyes with this violence." (p.16) But what happens when he tries to show us that which terrifies their eyes? What happens when he tries to terrify our eyes?

> On the blue and lulling mist of evening, proper to the nightingale, the sheepbell and falling waters, the strangest phenomena of fire inflicted themselves. The red sparks of German trench mortars described their seeming-slow arcs, shrapnel shells clanged in crimson, burning, momentary cloudlets, smoke billowed into a tidal wave, and the powdery glare of many a signal-light showed the rolling folds. The roarings and cracklings of the contest between artilleries and small-arms sometimes seemed

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[3] There is a fascinating and relevant chapter on "The Appropriation of Nature" in George L. Mosse, <u>Fallen Soldiers</u> (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990. pp.107-125.

> to lessen as one gigantic burst was heard.(pp.16-17)

Those colours, those round full shapes and rhythms do <u>not</u>, I think, terrify.

If this gentle sensuous language often fails to terrify, so too the frequent ironies operate to distance, to diminish, to make manageable those experiences. One suspects that in this diminishment the moment has, on occasion, lost its full flavour. It is hardly adequate to say about the year that had already featured Verdun, Arras, Aisne, Messines, and Menin Road and was about to witness Ypres III, "1917 was distasteful."-- even though one does recognize the wry humour and bitterness registered in that self-conscious understatement. To be able to be detached enough from the horrors of 1917 to manage that kind of humour implies some control of the horror. And we want to know exactly how, and by whose fiat, the explosive horrors of 1917 have been thus tamed.

But it would be churlish to allow these complaints to become too insistent. For Blunden has many characteristic successes. The young Blunden's departure for the front is one moment where the writer's quiet willingness to let the scene stand as its own comment, his uninsistence, works marvellously well:

> That evening, a lugubriously merry Highlander and a sturdy Engineer, to whom I had democratically appealed for help on some matter, who were themselves returning to the British Expeditionary Force next morning, asked me my age. I replied; and, discipline failing, the Scotsman murmured to himself "Only a boy--only a boy," and shed tears, while his mates grunted an angry sympathy.Then, "But you'll be all right, son--excuse me, won't you?--you'll be all right!"

> They were discussing the diminished prospect of a bombardment of Lille when I withdrew.(p.3)[4]

There are numerous other examples of Blunden's calm, almost flat descriptions gathering their particular power.

It is clear, too, that Blunden is capable of rendering clearly and unambiguously perceptions that are common to all of the memoirists. Sharp vignettes repeatedly drive home the essential, radical absurdity of the war. The stupidity of the staff manifests itself in the insistence on all the petty formalities of military life, in the exhausting harassments of repetitive, artificial training exercises, in all the "eyewash". Worse, some of the harassments were not petty: stubborn insistence that all officers take a nightly tour of no man's land--on principle, regardless of possible danger or potential gain--results in the quite unnecessary death of a valuable captain. It is not surprising then that "...one's mind was more filled with one's relation to superior beings behind us than to those who were not losing the war in front of us." (p.46)

As do most of the other memoirs, Undertones of War traces a journey to disillusionment. The "ignorance" and the "arrogance" (Blunden's words) of the staff are made chillingly clear: the attack on The Boar's Head salient, "...no doubt to render the maps in the châteaux of the mighty more symmetrical."(p.63), results in a massacre, in chaos and confusion, in the deep "bitterness of waste". The plank road becomes a nice symbol of

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[4] cf the different response accorded to Glubb. pp. 120-121 above.

the situation in which all these men are caught: "To leave it was to plunge into a swamp, to remain on it was to pass through accurate and ruthless shell-fire."(p.272) Blunden can see, and can make us see, the physical horror straight on: In the trenches he passes a young and cheerful lance-corporal who is making some tea. A minute later he hears a shell explode and a cry; he returns:

> ...the shell had burst all wrong. Its butting impression was black and stinking in the parados where three minutes ago the lance-corporal's mess-tin was bubbling over a little flame. For him, how could the gobbets of blackening flesh, the earth-wall sotted with blood, with flesh, the eye under the duckboard, the pulpy bone be the only answer?(pp. 73-74)

But this kind of explicitness is unusual for Blunden. (That description is bracketed by the quiet, but repeated, observation: "Cambrin was beginning to terrify.") More characteristic is the quiet, descriptive comment with the horror implicit, lying dormant for the moment: "Nearby was a pit, the result of much sandbag filling, among its broken spades and empty tins I found a pair of boots, still containing someone's feet."(p.79)

One of the impressive achievements of Blunden's prose is that through all this acute observation Blunden's own character, shy and reticent, shines through. The reticence manifests itself in his curious unwillingness to pass any definite judgments. In some ways this is a strength, for Blunden is able to let the rendered dramatics of his narrative do their own judging and to eschew the intrusive authorial pronouncement. But repeatedly we find that the monstrosity described would seem to demand an unambiguous judgment from the young Blunden, and that is what we

seldom get. What makes Blunden interestingly typical is that from the beginning we can see how unlikely his disillusionment is to produce any committed, articulate criticism of the war. We have already met the general whose insistence on the nightly tour of no-man's land has killed off a captain. The same general, who delights in inventing new army "forms" for all communications, cannot accept a report full of suggestive information, gained at great human cost, because it does not conform to the rigid specification of his "pro formas". After giving us this picture Blunden comments: "But I shall have much more to say of this singular man, whom we all found difficult and whom we honour." (p.24) In fact he does not have much more to say, and what he adds does nothing to alter our picture of the general, and certainly does nothing to resolve our profound confusion as to why Blunden (or anyone else) would "honour" him.

Just as Blunden is unwilling to pass judgement on specific characters so he is curiously hesitant about larger judgements of the war as a whole, judgements which his own experience rendered here would seem to make unavoidable. He mentions Sassoon:

> ...the battle cannot be post-poned longer. I had to thrust aside my Cambridge Magazine with Siegfried Sassoon's splendid war on the war in it; sent my valise along to the dump; and fell in, wondering how Sassoon could pass one or two technical imperfections (as I thought them) in his fine verse.(p.251)

It is interesting how in spite of that "splendid" the focus here moves from the thrusting aside, to the dump, to the "one or two technical imperfections" in Sassoon's fine verse.

Gradually we recognize that the habit of self-deprecation is deeply ingrained here, and will almost certainly prevent any conclusive judgments. What becomes interesting are the various means by which Blunden evades the judgments his experiences would seem to make unavoidable. He describes the country around Ypres:

> The foolish persistence of ruins that ought to have fallen but stood grimacing, and the dark day, chilled my spirit. Let us stop this war, and walk along to Beaucourt before the leaves fall. I smell autumn again. The Colonel who was showing Harrison the lie of the land betrayed no such apprehension. He walked about, with indicatory stick, speaking calmly of the night's shelling, the hard work necessary to keep the trenches open, and the enemy's advantage of observation, much as if he was showing off his rockery at home....(pp.105-6)

It is a fascinating and characteristic passage and one can only comment that in it the desire to stop the war gets the same attention as--seems about as important as--the Colonel's marvellous "indicatory stick". The prose indicates the real difficulty of focussing one's mind on what is, after all, the unthinkable: the end of the war. Blunden does become somewhat more vigorous in his complaint:

> I knew about Jeshurun, and how when he waxed fat he kicked, yet I am sorry to recall that my confidence ran a little too high in these easier conditions. First I began to air my convictions that the war was useless and inhuman, even inflicting these on a highly conservative general (an unnaturally fearless man) who dined with us one evening, and who asked me, "why I wasn't fighting for the Germans?" to which I answered with all too triumphant a simplicity that it was only due to my having been born in England, not Germany. Probably I was growing reckless after a year of war. (p.236)

Yet it is easy to see that that "vigour" is deeply undercut with characteristic humility. How typical for Blunden to preface his complaint with a recondite allusion to Jeshurun, thus tacitly

suggesting that he is aware that his criticisms come out of a callow and inflated self-importance. Exactly why, one wants to ask in some exasperation, is Blunden "sorry to recall"? is his confidence "a little too high"? is his simplicity "all too triumphant"? Why and how is this judgment "reckless"? Why does he ironically undercut his own critique? At the end of 1917, the year which has shown off better than any other the unimaginative rigidity of the British Command--rendered in the endless, fruitless destruction of troops--Blunden is offered six months' duty at a training school in England. "It seemed time I went." he says, "...I was uneasy in my job, and could not bring myself into the proper relations with my seniors."(p.311) How deeply characteristic are those tentative terms: "uneasy" and "proper relations"!

And yet there are some real virtues to this approach. The juxtasposition of the diffident, bucolic sensibility of the young Blunden (Bunny to his friends) to a reality manifestly inappropriate to it forces the reader into a continual process of critical re-evaluation. In the end one's response is fuller than it would be if the author had any more evident design upon the reader.

And if one does feel some exasperation with Blunden's unwillingness to define or to judge, one must also admit that that exasperation comes with the simplifications of hindsight. The tentative, hesitant uncertainties are characteristic of most of those involved in the war. Blunden notes:

> A peculiar difficulty would exist for the artist to select the sights, faces, works, incidents, which characterized the time. The art is rather to collect them, in their original form of incoherence. (p.231)

And so it is appropriate that Blunden ends with no clear and unambiguous summation or judgment, but rather with a marvellously evocative and complex image:

> But here is Buire-sur-Ancre, where we must change our train, and wait indefinitely for the next; and while we prowl inspectingly in the way of the fighting man round huts and possibly useful stores, the willows and waters in the hollow make up a picture so silvery and unsubstantial that one would spend a lifetime to paint it. Could any country-side be more sweetly at rest, more alluring to naiad and hamadryad, more incapable of dreaming a field-gun? Fortunate it was that at the moment I was filled with this simple joy. I might have known the war by this time, but I was still too young to know its depth of ironic cruelty. No conjecture that, in a few weeks, Buire-sur-Ancre would appear much the same as the cataclysmal railway cutting by Hill 60, came from that innocent greenwood. No destined anguish lifted its snaky head to poison a harmless young shepherd in a soldier's coat. (p.314)

Here the various ironies muted and indirect through the book are gathered in, made potent and pointed. We have learnt to love and respect the innocence and naïvité of this young shepherd. But we have learnt, too, the lesson this last paragraph elaborates: the shepherd's propensity for pastoral can both reinforce the clarity with which the war and its works are perceived (the contrast between the fecundity and beauty of nature and the sterility and horror of the war is made more than once), but it can also hide or mask that necessary clarity as, on one level, it does here. Blunden, chasing the naiad, once again underestimates the war's propensity for cataclysmic destruction. And we have seen enough

to know the real danger of that kind of naivité. We have known for a long time that the snake is not to be avoided.

What we recognize then is that our young shepherd has been unable to unify his experiences into any coherent whole. This is quite appropriate, for his experience is of a world that is fundamentally un-unifiable: a world that is irrational, mad. Indeed there comes a moment when we recognize that in all this unceasing din of huge and manic destructiveness the very fact of continued existence itself is proof of the dominance of the principle of absurdity. In Undertones of War--as elsewhere--there is a continual suspicion that this reality is so inhuman that it must be made or controlled by supernatural powers. Certainly it is inconceivable that any mere human being could organize this. (Again, the rational mind is being pushed toward the irrational. Again, we note the reason for the prevalence of the various manifestations of the supernatural: omens, portents, the golden virgin of Bethune who will fall only when the war is over...) There are two possible responses to a situation such as this: the one is to make the judgement, trust one's own sensibility, say the world is mad, and guard the coherence of your prose. If you cannot--or will not--make this judgment then the incoherence will manifest itself in your prose as well. We have already seen that Blunden refuses to make any full judgment. And so we won't be surprised to find the evasions, at least on occasion, identifiable in the prose rather than identified by it.

The way in which Blunden's characteristic irony works throughout the book is of interest here. The adjutant, Wallace, is badly wounded: "...his grave gallantry and quiet conversation as he lay there, while the stretcher-bearers came, were such that one wondered if, after all, the world in which these incidents happened was not normal."(p.81) Of course one of the larger ironies of the war is that so many of the actual participants, displaying as best they could their own particular "grave gallantry" and "quiet conversation", completely misled the public (and perhaps even themselves?) as to the "normality" of their activities. In any case one notices that Blunden's frequent ironies work in the same way as do the gallantries: they serve to normalize what is, essentially, excruciatingly abnormal. The irony itself is evidence of, and depends on, a certain distancing from the experience: a distance which gives the irony its point. But often that leisure is exactly what the perception would seem _not_ to allow.

On occasion, even if the irony does not tend to reduce or normalize, it seems merely inadequate to the experience. Blunden has filled the book with descriptions of the grotesquely unbearable lot of the infantry. At the end of the book, describing the troops' response to rumours of a new battle he says: "There is no pleasing your ancient infantryman. Attack him or cause him to attack, he seems equally disobliging."(p.307) There is not a shadow of doubt where Blunden's sympathies lie,

but his ironies here seem pathetically insufficient to the horrors he has already given us.

What is revealed in moments like these is that our young shepherd is really more than a little insecure about his own perspective. The uncertainty reveals itself in a number of ways. Here is a relatively early attempt to find a tone; we are being conducted through a ruined village: "The church maintains a kind of conceptional shape, and has a cliff-like beauty in the sunlight; but as at this ecclesiastical corner visitors are sometimes killed we may, in general, allow distance to lend enchantment."(p.126) It is a quick and clever little parody, but it jars, it feels inappropriate; we know too well that the "travelogue" can never take us to where we can see the "slow amputation of Passchendaele".

The uncertainty is further revealed in Blunden's habit of shyly avoiding our direct gaze. Often this leaves his emotions and his experiences strangely shadowy. One cannot doubt Blunden's love and concern for his men, but however much he speaks of the "friendship" of his battalion, "the heartiness of tried companions", the "exhilarations of wit and irony", he never renders them, never shows them there in the prose. He does try:

> Man, ruddy-cheeked under your squat chin-strapped iron helmet, sturdy under your leather jerkin, clapping your hands together as you dropped your burden of burning-cold steel, grinning and flinging old-home repartee at your pal passing by, you endured that winter of winters, as it seems to me, in the best way of manliness. I forget your name. I remember your superscriptions, "O.A.S." and "B.E.P.," your perpetual copying-ink pencil's "in the pink," "as it leaves me"; you played House, read Mr. Bottomley, sang "If I was a tulip," and your rifle was as clean as new from an armoury.

> It is time to hint to a new age what your value, what your love was; your Ypres is gone, and you are gone; we were lucky to see you "in the pink" against white-ribbed and socket-eyed despair. (p.212)

Blunden feels deeply the force of the "value" and "love" of the soldiers. But finally he is too much the harmless young shepherd really to be able to render them; he cannot quite get it all into focus. So, as here, all he can do is to join in the chorus of sentimentalizations: "...we were lucky to see you 'in the pink'" Often, indeed, the adopted pose seems insufficient to the moment. Blunden meets an old acquaintance:

> ...it was a sergeant-major, a fine soldier who lost his rank for drunkenness, won it again, and was now going over in charge of a party carrying trench mortar ammunition. A merry man, a strong man; when we had met before, he had gained my friendliest feelings by his freedom from any feeling against a schoolboy officer. Some N.C.O.'s took care to let their superior training and general wisdom weigh on my shyness: not so C. He referred to the attack as one might speak of catching a train, and in it a few hours later he showed such wonderful Saint Christopher spirit that he was expected to be awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross.(p.114)

The prose wrenches; the awkward attempt at wit (train/St. Christopher) aborts the powerful emotion.

These examples, and there are others, are chosen to indicate the kinds of difficulties that lie behind Blunden's chosen point of view. There are a number of dangers in the assumption of the role of harmless young shepherd. This is the first example we have of the creation of a persona who stands in for the memoirist. And we can see the way in which this persona helps Blunden evade certain questions, certain realizations, which would be extraordinarily threatening. As harmless shepherd he

cannnot continue to explore those "convictions that the war was useless and inhuman" (p. 236) What stands to Blunden's credit is that one feels that his assumption of that role is anything but complacent. The various ironies attached to the last image in the book serve to keep all the questions open. We know that the anguish for which he is destined will come. And we know that the guise of harmless young shepherd offers no real protection.

Robert Graves

Paul Fussell notes that Goodbye to All That[1] is not undisguised history. It is a carefully constructed facsimile of actual history that gets all its edge, polish and point not from any mimesis of the actual chaos of war, but rather from Graves's subtle and shaping wit. It is surely unnecessary here to demonstrate where and how often Graves has been candid about his preference for the dramatically appropriate as opposed to the demonstrably true. Long ago Graves declared himself one of those infatuated with and dedicated to the different order of truth a work of the imagination may possess. For Graves questions of fidelity to quotidian reality do not arise.

Goodbye to All That is framed in two ways. The first, and obvious, frame is that Graves includes just enough personal biography from before and after the war to allow us to see the war in some context. That is, rather than having the camera focus only on the war, thus making the war the defining entity of the world we see, Graves moves the camera back a little, lets us see the edges of the frame and thus reminds us that the war is not all, and that he as camera-man is controlling what we see. Secondly, we become aware as we read Goodbye to All That of the omnipresence of that controlling sensibility: the polished

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[1] Robert Graves, Goodbye to All That (1929; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960) All future references will be to this edition and will be noted in the text.

narrative line, the careful ironic balancings and juxtapositions, the sly humour and buttressing of his own prejudices. By the end of the book when Graves claims it is "undisguised history" we are aware of just how disingenuous Graves is, and just how much potentially explosive polemic lies disguised as history.

None of which is to deny that Graves can present a straight description when he wants to. As do all the other memoirists he gives us memorable scenes of the horrible inanity of the high command, and the wild chaos and destruction which so often result from the command's ignorance, folly or stupidity. He gives us too the apparently futile heroism of the troops and officers. It is impossible to forget Capt. A.L.Samson mortally wounded in one of the typically disastrous attacks:

> Samson lay groaning about twenty yards beyond the front trench. Several attempts were made to rescue him. He had been very badly hit. Three men got killed in these attempts; two officers and two men, wounded. In the end his own orderly managed to crawl out to him. Samson waved him back saying that he was riddled through and not worth rescuing; he sent his apologies to the company for making such a noise....
> At dusk, we all went out to get in the wounded, leaving only sentries in the line. The first dead body I came upon was Samson's, hit in seventeen places. I found that he had forced his knuckles into his mouth to stop himself crying out and attracting any more men to their death.(p.133)

Later, Graves offers another vignette:

> Going and coming, by the only possible route, I passed by the bloated and stinking corpse of a German with his back propped against a tree. He had a green face, spectacles, close-shaven hair; black blood was dripping from the nose and beard. I came across two other unforgettable corpses: a man of the South Wales Borderers and one of the Lehr Regiment had succeeded in bayoneting each other simulataneously. A survivor of the fighting told me later that he had seen a young

> soldier of the Fourteenth Royal Welch bayonetting a German in parade-ground style, automatically exclaiming: "In, out, on guard!"(p.175)

(I include the last sentence of this paragraph because it should be read in context. See pp. 159ff. below for a discussion of Graves's response to "parade-ground" discipline.)

Graves knows how to obtain maximum impact by juxtaposing his own kind of humour, wit and literary control with the brutal facts the prose renders. No one makes as many jokes out of the war as he does. But the very success of Graves's jokes enforces the question: do the jokes take us closer to the heart of the experience, or do they somehow betray it? Individually they seem, I think, to take us closer; involve us deeply in the black, macabre, comedy of the absurd that is one way of seeing this war. But their cumulative effect is somehow different. Implicit in the very skill with which Goodbye to All That is composed and constructed is the suggestion that the author of all this--the careful and clever stage-manager--is in control; this reality can be ordered, made dramatic with a touch of sardonic Welsh wit. But one of the salient characteristics of this war is that it was hardly shapeable or controllable. It is the old problem: the style of Graves's memoirs may be at variance with its substance.

Frequently we see Graves consciously shaping the scene he gives us by his habit of ironic juxtaposition:

> Private Probert came from Anglesey, and had joined the Special Reserve in peacetime for his health. In September, the entire battalion volunteered for service overseas, except Probert. He refused to go, and could be neither coaxed or bullied. Finally he came before the colonel, whom

he genuinely puzzled by his obstinancy. Probert explained: "I'm not afraid, colonel, sir. But I don't want to be shot at. I have a wife and pigs at home." The battalion was now rigged out in a temporary navy-blue uniform until khaki might be available--all but Probert. The colonel decided to shame him, and he continued by order, to wear the peacetime scarlet tunic and blue trousers with a red stripe: a very dirty scarlet tunic, too, because he had been put on kitchen staff. His mates called him "Cock Robin", and sang a popular chorus in his honour:

> And I never get a knock
> When the boys call Cock
> Cockity ock, ock,
> Cock Robin!
> In my old red vest I mean to cut a shine,
> Walking down the street they call me "Danger on the line"...

But Probert did not care:

> For the more they call me Robin Redbreast
> I'll wear it longer still.
> I will wear a red waistcoat, I will,
> I will, I will, I will, I will, I will!

So, in October, he got discharged as medically unfit: "Of under-developed intelligence, unlikely to be of service in His Majesty's Forces", and went happily home to his wife and pigs. Of the singers, few who survived Festubert in the following May, survived Loos in the following September. (pp.67-68)

Here the point made is obvious. Probert may have been jeered at, called "Cock Robin", and scorned as "medically unfit and of underdeveloped intelligence", but he's alive and warm to his wife and pigs. Perhaps we need a more exact sense of "intelligence"?

Graves often works on a more subtle level:

Beaumont, of whom I told you in my last letter, also got killed--the last unwounded survivor of the original battalion, except for the transport men. He had his legs blown against his back. Everyone was swearing angrily, but an R.E. officer came up and told me that he had a tunnel driven under the German front line, and that if my chaps wanted to do a bit of bombing, now was the time. So he sent the mine up--it was not a big one, he said, but it made a tremendous noise and

> covered us with dirt--and we waited for a few seconds for the other Germans to rush up to help the wounded away, and then chucked all the bombs we had.(p.98)

That seems, almost, like simple narrative. One's attention is riveted by the brutal accuracy of: "He had his legs blown against his back." It is because--after reading the paragraph--one's mind returns to <u>that</u> horror that one realizes one has just acquiesced in doing precisely the same thing to the Germans, acquiesced in just the way the soldiers have, angry perhaps, but matter of fact, everyday. We are complicit in denying the horror we have just been forced to recognize. It is a clever, not to say explosive, paragraph.

Not only does Graves make these various juxtapositions within sentences or paragraphs, but more generally the book itself juxtaposes the facts of the war against the attractive cleverness of Graves's prose. So, for instance, we don't really notice the blunt statistics of the war, quietly noted, never obtrusive, disguised in the colourful narrative, until suddenly their cumulative weight stuns us:

> At least one in three of my generation at school died; because they all took commissions as soon as they could, most of them in the infantry and Royal Flying Corps. The average life expectancy of an infantry subaltern on the Western Front was, at some stages of the war, only about three months; by which time he had been either wounded or killed. The proportions worked out at about four wounded to every one killed. Of these four, one got wounded seriously, and the remaining three more or less lightly. The three lightly wounded returned to the front after a few weeks or months of absence, and again faced the same odds. Flying casualties were even higher. Since the war lasted for four and a half years, it is easy to see why most of the survivors, if not permanently disabled, got wounded several times....(pp. 54-55)

> In the course of the war, at least fifteen or twenty thousand men must have passed through each of the two line battalions, whose fighting strength never stood at more than eight hundred. After each catastrophe the ranks were filled up with new drafts from home, with the lightly wounded from the disaster of three or four months before, and with the more seriously wounded of earlier ones. (p.78)
> ...in eight months the battalion had lost its full fighting strength five times over.(p.80)

Graves's sensibility stays sharp and perceptive:

> Wounded and prisoners came streaming past in the half-light. I was shocked by the dead horses and mules; human corpses were all very well, but it seemed wrong for animals to be dragged into the war like this. (p.173)

This perception--the corpses of animals seem more unnatural and more horrifying than those of soldiers--is one that recurs often in writing about the war. The implications in terms of the way in which the soldiers think of themselves are suggestive.

Clearly Graves knows exactly what he is doing. Via these juxtapositions he leads us into the area of the absurd, of the black comedy they foreshadow. This is a comedy which may reveal itself in what Fussell appropriately calls music-halls turns (though it is music-hall with a dead weight at the bottom):

> Two young miners, in another company, disliked their sergeant who had a down on them and gave them the most dirty and dangerous jobs. When they were in billets he crimed them for things they hadn't done; so they decided to kill him. Later, they reported at Battalion Orderly room and asked to see the adjutant. This was irregular, because a private is forbidden to address an officer without an N.C.O. of his own company acting as go-between. The adjutant happened to see them and asked: "Well, what is it you want?"
> Smartly slapping the small-of-the-butt of their sloped rifles, they said: "We've come to report, sir, that we're very sorry, but we've shot our company sergeant-major."
> The adjutant said: "Good heavens, how did that

> happen?"
> "It was an accident, sir."
> "What do you mean, you damn fools? Did you mistake him for a spy?"
> "No, sir, we mistook him for our platoon sergeant."
> So they were both court-martialled and shot by a firing squad of their own company against the wall of a convent at Bethune. Their last words were the battalion rallying-cry: "Stick it, the Welch!..." The French military governor was present at the execution, and made a little speech saying how gloriously British soldiers can die.(pp.93-94)

Even the one line vignettes are full of the absurd. The Second Battalion has just taken a large number of Saxon prisoners: "One prisoner got a stern talking-to from 'C' Company sergeant-major, a Birmingham man, shocked at a packet of indecent photographs found in the man's haversack."(p.170) There is always this disparity between all that forms our expectations--our traditions, our language--and the circumambient reality of the war. Most often Graves exploits this disparity for the comedy inherent in it. And even at his most serious one may suggest that behind the straight reporting of a situation one can hear a black, manic laugh. How can people still act, talk, think like this? Why are the various responses so ill-suited to the actuality of war? The discrepancy is absurd.

One of the most egregious examples of this absurdity is the letter to the Evening Post by "Little Mother". I will not quote it; it is already well enough known[2], and certainly Fussell's judgement is accurate: "It is sentimental, bloodthirsty, complacent, cruel, fatuous, and self-congratulatory, all at

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[2] The full text of "Little Mother's" letter may be found in Goodbye to All That, pp. 189-190.

once..."[3] Representative as it is of one kind of civilian response it tells us much of the enormity of the gulf separating civilian from soldier. With its example before us we can understand the deep mistrust of rhetoric produced by the Great War. The responses Graves reproduces to this letter show that even such a blatant example of inflated, rhetorical attitudinizing finds some eager readers:

> "I have lost my two dear boys, but since I was shown the 'Little Mother's' beautiful letter a resignation too perfect to describe has calmed all my aching sorrow, and I would now gladly give my sons twice over."
>
> A Bereaved Mother (p.191)

Graves has quoted Little Mother et al. to justify his claim

> England looked strange to us returned soldiers. We could not understand the war-madness that ran wild everywhere, looking for a pseudo-military outlet. The civilians talked a foreign language; and it was newspaper language. I found serious conversation with my parents all but impossible. (p.188)

The recognition that one of the serious effects of the war was to create a frightening gulf between those doing the actual fighting and those at home is common to almost all of those who write about the war. The reasons are legion, but one especially has an appropriate, ironic ring to it. Until 1916 Britain's army was entirely volunteer. To maintain the flow of volunteers, and the war-like spirit of the populace who must encourage the volunteers, the government had to depend more and more on propaganda; on bloodthirsty exhortations to defeat the foul,

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[3] Paul Fussell, The Great War and Modern Memory (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975) p. 216.

blood-stained perpetrators of unimaginably bestial atrocities.[4] This degraded Xenophobia is reinforced by the impotent fear and pain of those at home. No one captures the essential perversion of all this more clearly than Rudyard Kipling whose "Mary Postgate" gives us a frightening portrait of a dear, old-maid governess who has lost her favourite charge in the war, and who sits and watches a German air-man who has crashed in her backyard die in agony; the pleasure of that spectacle gives her a sexual climax.[5] For the fighters such emotions merely increase the distance they feel from their "home". They had quickly recognized that the fellows in the trench opposite were not their true enemies. It was clear that the real enemies were whoever kept the war going: the vocal pro-war group which included, for reasons we have already glanced at, most civilians. Hence the damaging alienation of soldiers from the "home" they were told they were fighting for.

Too often the real bestiality seems to occur away from the trenches. Graves gives another example from a training ring:

> Troops learned...that they must HATE the Germans, and KILL as many of them as possible. In bayonet-practice, the men had to make horrible grimaces and utter blood-

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[4] It should be noted that the government didn't confine its propaganda attempts to this level alone. They had a very impressive list of "respectable" propagandists in their stable. cf. Peter Buitenhuis, "Writers at War; Propaganda and Fiction in the Great War", University of Toronto Quarterly, 4 (1976) pp 277-295. and, more recently, Buitenhuis, The War of Words (Vancouver, U.B.C. Press, 1987)

[5] Rudyard Kipling, "Mary Postgate", A Diversity of Creatures (New York: Doubleday, Page and Co., 1917)

> curdling yells as they charged. The instructor's faces were set in a permanent ghastly grin. "Hurt him, now! In at the belly! Tear his guts out!" they would scream, as the men charged the dummies. "Now that upper swing at his privates with the butt. Ruin his chances for life! No more little Fritzes!...Naaoh! Anyone would think that you loved the bloody swine, patting and stroking 'em like that! BITE HIM, I SAY! STICK YOUR TEETH IN HIM AND WORRY HIM! EAT HIS HEART OUT!"
>
> Once more I felt glad to be sent up to the trenches. (pp.195-196)

If the rhetoric that exists away from the trenches--both civilian and military--seems false, the soldiers who get to the trenches quickly find out the reality that lies behind these various masks. But most of those at home never get to see how fundamentally dishonest the language is. When one considers that the words and values at stake ("home", "honour", "bravery", "civilization") are of central importance to any society, one realizes just how important this contamination of language is. I have suggested that Graves, with continual recourse to his various withdrawals, maintains authorial control, but there are still some interesting and important questions to ask. And they are questions that are not easy to answer. For Graves can mask his actual response to any particular situation he is describing, and simply retire behind the carefully contrived narrative flow. Take for instance his response to the emphasis on traditional discipline in the two battalions of the Royal Welch, and in the army generally. He sees the lunacies which result when the notion of traditional discipline is carried to extremes. Senior officers harrass their junior officers on the principle that "chasing the warts...[would make them]...better soldiers."; a senior officer

is outraged because he overhears a soldier address a lance-corporal by "his Christian name"; another pursues a private soldier down the street, "kicking his bottom because he had given a slack salute." And yet, even though Graves sees these absurdities with his unfailingly sharp and sardonic eye, he never allows any easy judgements to be made, especially not the easy anti-military judgements which become popular, not to say automatic, in any period after a war. For Graves is too aware of the connection between discipline and battle efficiency. The basic point is made to a Canadian protesting at the never-ending arms drill:

> Spokesman stepped forward once and asked what sense there was in sloping and ordering arms, and fixing and unfixing bayonets. They said they had come across to fight, and not to guard Buckingham Palace. I told them that in every division of the four in which I had served--the First, Second, Seventh and Eighth--there were three different kinds of troops. Those that had guts but were no good at drill; those that were good at drill but had no guts; and those that had guts and were good at drill. These last, for some reason or other, fought by far the best when it came to a show--I didn't know why, and I didn't care. (p.156)

Not only does the drill teach the soldier to respond automatically--thus, the theory goes, ensuring he will make the appropriate move even under the stress of danger or chaos--but, perhaps more importantly, the perfecting of arms-drill makes each individual feel a part of one large, living, single being. This is what gives him the regimental pride that Graves and his colleagues agree was "...the strongest moral force that kept a battalion going as an effective fighting unit; contrasting it particularly with patriotism and religion."(p.157)

Nevertheless it is clear that there is a diminishing rate of return to the continual enforcement of rote discipline. In describing some of the worst excesses Graves makes it clear that that point has been reached and that morale, far from being enhanced, is actually threatened. Is rigorous discipline good for an army's fighting efficiency or does it always carry with it the inevitability of its own _reductio ad absurdam_? Where is the dividing line between increased efficiency and pride and the automaton's mechanic nature and lack of self-respect? These are important questions, and Graves's narrative compels us toward them.

Central to any concept of discipline is the notion of giving up responsibility for oneself. That men were so willing to do this--and to such a degree--is both the glory of the Great War and one of its most terrifying and shocking characteristics. One might have hoped that someone like Graves--individualistic, with an iconoclastic attitude toward the traditions and the pieties of the general public--would be just the man to explore this paradox a little more fully. Unfortunately he makes no attempt to pursue these questions.

As I have suggested the question of discipline has major implications but is not, perhaps, of major interest in itself. What is of undeniably central importance is the question of Graves's overall judgement of the war itself. This judgement is complicated by Graves's involvement in Sassoon's response, and is, characteristically, disguised by Graves's ironies and

narrative control. It is Sassoon who forces the issue by publishing his famous declaration explaining his reasons for refusing to serve further in the army.[6] As far as we are aware Graves is in fundamental agreement with Sassoon's position. Some ten pages before Graves discusses Sassoon's declaration, he has said:

> We were now wondering whether the war ought to continue.It was said that, in the autumn of 1915, Asquith had been offered peace terms on the basis of status quo ante, which he was willing to consider; but that his colleagues' opposition had brought about the fall of theLiberal Government and its supersession by the "Win-the-War" Coalition Government of Lloyd George. Siegfried vehemently asserted that the terms should have been accepted; I agreed. We no longer saw the war as one between trade-rivals: its continuance seemed merely a sacrifice of the idealistic younger generation to the stupidity and self-protective alarm of the elder.
> (p.201)

Yet his reaction to Sassoon's action is a curiously convoluted one. He says: "I entirely agreed with Siegfried about the 'political errors and insincerities' and thought his action magnificently courageous. But..." Graves has two "Buts" and they are: First, Sassoon is in "no proper physical condition to suffer the penalty which the letter invited: namely to be court-martialled, cashiered, and imprisoned." Secondly, "I also realized the inadequacy of such a gesture. Nobody would follow his example, either in England or in Germany. The war would inevitably go on and on until one side or the other cracked."(p.214) Graves immediately uses his influence to persuade the War Office not to take up the gauntlet Sassoon has

[6] For the text of Sassoon's statement see below p. 178.

thrown down, not to press the matter as a disciplinary case. (Sassoon and his pacifist friends like Russell and Morrell wanted the matter to go to a military court. They needed to get as much publicity as possible, and the prosecution for pacifism of a holder of the M.C. would provide them with that.) Instead Graves persuades the War Office to give Sassoon a medical board. He meets Sassoon:

> we discussed the political situation; I took the line that everyone was mad except ourselves and one or two others, and that no good could come of offering common sense to the insane. Our only possible course would be to keep on going out until we got killed.(p.215)

It is a full moment. For Graves is offering a breathtaking example of the "sanity" required by this war: "Our only possible course would be to keep on going out until we got killed."! It is the matter-of-fact tone in which Graves delivers this message of despair and nihilism that is particularly horrifying. The scene that ensues at the medical board is just as macabre:

> Much against my will, I had to appear in the role of a patriot distressed by the mental collapse of a brother-in-arms--a collapse directly due to magnificent exploits in the trenches. I mentioned Siegfried's "hallucinations" of corpses strewn along on Piccadilly. The irony of having to argue to these mad old men, that Siegfried was not sane! Though conscious of a betrayal of truth, I acted jesuitically.(p.216)

Of course the comedy of the absurd does not end here. For once found mentally unbalanced, the soldier cannot return to the trenches in Flanders, but is sent instead to Craiglockhart, an asylum in Edinburgh, where a genuine humanist, Dr.W.H.R.Rivers, is in command, and where the patients devote themselves to such peaceful activities as poetry and golf. Graves sees both the

irony of the overall picture and the "jesuitical" nature of his own response. And he clearly feels some further judgement is necessary. For he allows Sassoon to make the obvious points:

> In a letter to me he reprehended the attitude I had taken in July, when I reminded him that the regiment would either think him a coward, or regard his protest as a lapse from good form. It was suicidal stupidity and credulity, he wrote, to identify oneself in any way with good form; a man of real courage would not acquiesce as I did. I admitted, he pointed out, that the people who sacrificed the troops were callous bastards, and that the same thing was happening everywhere...(pp.225-226)

Graves's <u>ad hominem</u> response--that Siegfried has killed a lot more Germans in France than he has--is irrational and irrelevant. And here the debate is broken off. Graves seems to feel no need to resolve the vital question of his own moral response to the war or to Sassoon.

Finally the armistice halts this macabre drama:

> In November came the Armistice. I heard at the same time of the deaths of Frank Jones-Bateman, who had gone back again just before the end, and Wilfred Owen, who often used to send me poems from France. Armistice-night hysteria did not touch our camp much, though some of the Canadians stationed there went down to Rhyl to celebrate in true overseas style. The news sent me out walking alone along the dyke above the marshes of Rhuddlan (an ancient battlefield, the Flodden of Wales), cursing and sobbing and thinking of the dead.
>
> Siegfried's famous poem celebrating the Armistice began:
>
> Everybody suddenly burst out singing,
> And I was filled with such delight
> As prisoned birds must find in freedom...
>
> But "everybody" did not include me.(p.228)

Graves's reaction ("cursing, and sobbing and thinking of the dead.") was not an unusual one. The end of the war brought home to many the hopeless futility of that gigantic spasm of

destruction. As long as the war continued one could say: "Ah, but when the war is over..." Now the war was over, and, with the evidence that surrounded one, one had to face the question of what, precisely, it had accomplished. This was what one had fought for. In spite of the London Armistice Day celebrations Graves's disillusionment was shared by many.[7]

Goodbye to All That is an assured and skilful performance. Because of its carefully shaped ironies, carefully modulated effects, it is one of the best introductions to the war literature. Central to the experience of this war was the perception that under/behind everyday appearance the most unimaginable horrors were taking place. Behind a rhetoric still sweetened with terms and notions from the past there lay a monstrous reality. The war insists that we peer carefully at what is offered us, and try to distinguish appearance from reality.

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[7] D.H. Lawrence, not surprisingly, makes the most effective denunciation:

> I suppose you think the war is over and that we shall go back to the kind of world you lived in before it. But the war isn't over. The hate and evil is greater now than ever. Very soon war will break out again and overwhelm you. It makes me sick to see you rejoicing like a butterfly in the last rays of the sun before the winter. The crowd outside thinks that Germany is crushed forever. But the Germans will soon rise again. Europe is done for: England most of all the countries. This war isn't over. Even if the fighting should stop, the evil will be worse becase the hate will be damned up in men's hearts and will show itself in all sorts of ways which will be worse than war. Whatever happens there can be no peace on Earth.

David Garnett, The Flowers of the Forest (London: Chatto and Windus, 1955). pp. 190-191. Quoted in Paul Delany, D.H.Lawrence's Nightmare (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1978) p. 385.

This is just why Graves is so suited to his subject. For the artful twining of fact and fiction in Goodbye to All That is such that the reader must stay alert, guard his own sensibility, refuse to be seduced. This is also why the question of Graves's own response to the war is so interesting. I have already been critical of Blunden for being unable to shape a response adequate to the experience he renders. But Blunden at least is candid about this failure. Graves is anything but candid. (And of course he would regard the demand for candour from an artist as ridiculous.) The question of what one has to say about the war is a crucial one. The question of what judgements one makes is also crucial. Sassoon and Graves seem to be telling the same story. So we want to know precisely how and why Graves acts as he does vis a vis Sassoon's declaration. We are not satisfied. The persona who narrates this tale meets any direct question with an artful and dexterous sleight-of-hand. Time and again Graves makes a timely retirement behind his own prose. It is at these critical moments that the possible conflict between Graves's style and his substance noted earlier becomes of crucial importance. Because here he both betrays and is betrayed: is betrayed by his style which implies a control over this experience we know he cannot have, and thus he betrays both his loyalty to Sassoon and his own true knowledge of the war.

Siegfried Sassoon

As we have seen, most of the memoirists use one device or another to distance and thus control the matter of their art. Siegfried Sassoon's use of such a device is more obvious that most. The narrator in both Undertones of War and Goodbye to All That is clearly distinct from the author. But he is, nevertheless, called by the author's name. Sassoon fictionalizes himself as George Sherston. However much the persona of George Sherston develops, and his development is clear over the three volumes, there is always a more obvious gap between author and persona in Sassoon's work than there is in any of the other memoirs we have looked at. The side of Sassoon that writes the war poems never really finds expression in Sherston. Sherston never offers us such a direct anger, or such a focussed, apparently confident response. One cannot imagine Sherston saying:

> I'd like to see a Tank come down the stalls,
> Lurching to rag-time tunes, or 'Home, sweet Home',
> And there'd be no more jokes in Music-halls
> To mock the riddled corpses round Bapaume.
> "Blighters"

We will come back to this question of the relation between persona and author later.

The early Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man[1] is flawed by a variable, uncertain tone and a sensibility that lapses on occasion into an unplaced sentimentality. There is a point to this, for Sassoon wants to give us a sense of both the lovely, indolent, pastoral world he lived in, and the essential lack of serious purpose that characterized that life. And we do get a sense of both these aspects. But the prose is never poised enough to become an acute and consistent commentary on either.

Sassoon is somewhat self-conscious about his attempts to "frame" his story. Defending his decision to omit real names he says: "...somehow I feel that if I were to put them on the page my neatly contrived little narrative would come sprawling out of its frame."(p.519) Later he adds: "I am always reminding myself to be ultra-careful to always keep my story well inside the frame."(p.546) Well, from the beginning we have been aware of the frame and have, for the most part, discounted it. Here, more than in most of the memoirs, we feel we are face to face with a sensibility responding much as it did then: openly, candidly, freshly. However we respond to the framing device, it is that sensibility we learn to trust. And we trust it mainly because of its artlessness and transparency.

I want to move fairly directly to the centre of Sassoon's

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[1] From now on I shall speak of what were originally published as three books: Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man(1928), Memoirs of an Infantry Officer(1930), and Sherston's Progress(1936) as the one volume The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston. (1937; rpt. London: Reprint Society, 1940) All future references will be to this edition and will be noted in the text.

achievement: grappling with the vital question of "What can I do about the war?" But it is important to approach that question as Sassoon himself did. So we move gently from the early, easy, aimless hedonism of fox-hunting, point-to-point, and cricket into the further adventures of the army. Often it seems as though some, at least, of the values of the former life may be preserved: the comradeship, the enjoyment of the outdoor, physically demanding life.

Sassoon renders much of what was positive in army life; much, that is, of what makes so many of the participants in this war look back on their experience years later as somehow the most important of their lives. It is, as we've already learned from Chapman, essentially a question of intensity.: "Never before had I been so intensely aware of what it meant to be young and healthy in fine weather at the outset of summer." (p.288) "The idea of death made everything seem vivid and valuable."(p.418) It is a question, too, of belonging in a deep, inarticulate way to a community dedicated to mysteries forever guarded from the uninitiate--a community whose shared experience is inviolate. The sense of heightened intensity of life combined with the sense of love for one's fellows results in some very powerful emotions:

> ...I was rewarded by an intense memory of men whose courage had shown me the power of the human spirit--that spirit which could withstand the utmost assault. Such men had inspired me to be at my best when things were very bad, and they outweighed all the failures. Against the background of the War and its brutal stupidity those men had stood glorified by the thing which sought to destroy them... (pp.461-462)

There is, of course, something very positive in the sense of a

genuine community. (And the delight of so many of the memoirists in the community they find in the war gives us an interesting insight into a possible absence of vital community in the society from which they came.) But any community demands a price from its adherents, and the payment of that price may be potentially dangerous because the commitment of one's individuality to the community can too easily become an evasion of responsibility for the self. Sassoon is honest enough to admit this. (And one calls attention to it here because that evasion is so often implicit in the willingness with which the individuals go to war, and is too seldom made explicit.) Thus one gets the irony of Sassoon returning to France for the second time, and saying as he goes to the War:

> Sometime in the second week of February I crossed to Havre on a detestable boat named Archangel. As soon as the boat began to move I was aware of a sense of relief. It was no use worrying about the War now; I was in the Machine again, and all responsibility for my future was in the haphazard control of whatever powers manipulated the British Expeditionary Force. (p.396)

But if Sassoon records some positive aspects of participation in this war, on the whole his attention is riveted on those aspects of the war toward which he is more critical. One of the attitudes most common to those who write of the war is in relation to the home front. One's response to the battle front was of necessity complex: rage and despair mixed with an impotent inability to suggest any very precise alternative way of dealing with the Germans, all this complicated by loyalties felt to fellow soldiers. At least the home front with its obvious

villians--profiteers, most non-combatant brass hats, jingo propagandists--could be unequivocally scorned and hated. What is rare and valuable is the attempt to understand why and how the unmistakeable rottenness set in. (Vera Brittain's Testament of Youth is extraordinarily sensitive and acute on this subject.) Sassoon makes some revealing suggestions about the home front.

First of all it is clear that the information the home front received about the conditions of the war was hardly exact.[2] As we have seen, until 1916, Britain alone among the belligerents was dependent upon a Volunteer Army. A Volunteer Army depends upon civilian morale. One needs to guard the morale of the society generally: the mothers, fathers, wives, sweethearts, and bosses who supported and encouraged the volunteers. That morale would not have been served by literal truths about conditions in the trenches. Secondly it was unthinkable that all the past suffering could have been for nought. For these reasons it was, as Sassoon put it, "unpatriotic to be bitter"(p.364); the dead must be seen as heroes, not as cold carrion butchered in folly. For the sacrifices to have been meaningful, victory must ensue. (Therefore, of course, the suffering must continue.) Furthermore those writing for the home front were non-combatants. One can imagine them feeling quite honestly that they were doing their bit by contributing to the general morale by enhancing the image of

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[2] cf. the various accounts of the stage-managing of journalist's visits...especially in Wells's Experiment in Autobiography and Shaw's What I Really Wrote About the War. cf. too, Montague, above pp.77-78.

the heroic British soldier.

Thus the older generation was encouraged to believe in the war, in the brave heroism of our boys, in the bestial atrocity of the Hun. Furthermore the parents too were impotent; unable to help in any overt way. So the repressed fear, bitterness and hurt manifest themselves in an unrealistic hatred of the Hun, the insistence on a good side and a bad side, a refusal to see the situation as it appeared more and more clearly to the soldiers of both sides: a situation in which it was really all soldiers against everyone else. Sassoon says: "For middle-aged persons who faced the War bleakly, life had become unbearable unless they persuaded themselves that the slaughter was worthwhile." (p.484) "What could elderly people do except try and make the best of their inability to sit in a trench and be bombarded? How could they be blamed for refusing to recognize any ignoble elements in the War except those which they attributed to our enemies?" (p.499) (It can be seen how all these feelings would militate against any attempt to search for a negotiated peace, and how they would, therefore, be instrumental in prolonging the war.) There is also the British upper-class habit of evading or avoiding personal confession.[3] British reticence meant that very often the real horror and tragedy of the war were never communicated. It is a combination of all these factors which results in the black comedy of scenes like this:

...there was that tall well-preserved man pushing his son

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[3] cf my discussion of Parade's End (p. 223 ff.)

> very slowly across the lawn in a long wheeled bed. The son was sallow and sulky, as he well might be, having lost one of his legs. The father was all solicitude, but somehow I inferred that the pair of them hadn't hit it off too well before the War. More than once I had seen the son look at his father as though he disliked him. But the father was proud of his disabled son, and I heard him telling one of the nurses how splendidly the boy had done in the Gommecourt attack, showing her a letter, too, probably from the boy's colonel. I wondered if he had ever allowed himself to find out that the Gommecourt show had been nothing but a massacre of good troops. Probably he kept a war map with little flags on it; when Mametz Wood was reported as captured he moved a little flag an inch forward after breakfast. For him the Wood was a small green patch on a piece of paper. for the Welsh division it had been a bloody nightmare... (p.371)

Nothing could be more macabre than this picture of a father proud for all the wrong reasons of a son who will of necessity hate his father the more his father takes pride in him. We know already that the relationship between father and son is fraught at best. It is not fanciful to suggest that at moments like this the war injects its poison in a profound and profoundly vulnerable area. There is a wonderful vignette in Graves which resonates. Graves reports on Sassoon's opposition to the war:

> He wished he could do something in protest, but even if he were to shoot the Premier or Sir Douglas Haig, they would only shut him up in a mad-house like Richard Dadd of glorious memory. (I recognized the allusion. Dadd, a brilliant nineteenth-century painter, and incidentally a great-uncle of Edmund and Julian, had made out a list of people who deserved to be killed. The first on the list was his father. Dadd picked him up one day in Hyde Park and carried him on his shoulders for nearly half a mile before publicly drowning him in the Serpentine.) (Graves, p.211)

We will find that this theme of the relationship between father and son continues to haunt the literature of the war.[4]

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[4] see my discussion of Wells below.

Sassoon has a precise ear for the absurdities of the home front; witness his portrait of the aristocratic Lord and Lady Asterisk who have allowed their own home to be used as a convalescent home for officers. They are incredible, and yet one has the daunting suspicion that they just might be true.

> Outwardly emotionless, she symbolized the patrician privileges for whose preservation I had chucked bombs at the Germans and carelessly offered myself as a target for a sniper. When I had blurted out my opinion that life was preferable to the Roll of Honour she put aside her reticence like a rich cloak. "But death is nothing," she said. "Life after all is only the beginning. And those who are killed in the War--they help us from up there. They are helping us to win." Expecting no answer, she went on with a sort of inflexible sympathy (almost "as if my number was already up", as I would have expressed it), "It isn't as though you were heir to a great name. No; I can't see any definite reason for your keeping out of danger.(pp.465-466)

Is it possible?

> Lady Asterisk happened to be in the room when I opened the letter. With a sense of self-pitying indignation I blurted out my unpleasant information. [Sassoon's Second Battalion had taken part in an attack..."Viewed broadmindedly, the attack had been a commonplace fragment of the War. It had been a hopeless failure, and with a single exception all officers in action had become casualties."] Her tired eyes showed that the shock had brought the War close to her, but while I was adding a few details her face became self-defensively serene. "But they are safe and happy now," she said. I did not doubt her sincerity, and perhaps they were happy now. All the same, I was incapable of accepting the deaths of Ormond and Dunning and the others in that spirit. (p.470)

"Self-defensively" is precisely right.

One may make real attempts to understand the home front. Nevertheless one is clearly committed elsewhere: "I wanted to be [at Arras or the Somme] again for a few hours, because the trenches really were more interesting than Lady Asterisk's rose-garden." (p.462) Certainly no understanding can ever

reconcile oneself to the sight of the war-profiteers and various shirkers who are most obviously in evidence at the home front. "Perhaps, after all, it was better to be back with the battalion. The only way to forget about the War was to be on the other side of the Channel." (p.270) (Wonderful claim! Again these nudges in the direction of the absurd.)

But of course being on the other side of the Channel will not enable us "to forget about the war." Sassoon comes into the demolished village of St. Martin-Cojeul during the battle of Arras:

> As we entered it I noticed an English soldier lying by the road with a horribly smashed head; soon such sights would be too frequent to attract attention, but this first one was perceptibly unpleasant. At the risk of being thought squeamish or even unsoldierly, I still maintain that an ordinary human being has a right to be momentarily horrified by a mangled body seen on an afternoon walk, although people with sound common sense can always refute me by saying that life is full of gruesome sights and violent catastrophes. (p.425) (cf Carrington, above pp. 103-104)

(We shall see some more of this "common sense" later.) But this kind of pressure, this deep and radical confusion (what is ordinary? acceptable?) results in a growing sense of madness, of the surreal:

> ...I opened a door and found myself in a Guard Room. A man, naked to the waist, was kneeling in the middle of the floor, clutching at his chest and weeping uncontrollably. The guard were standing around with embarrassed looks, and the Sergeant was beside him, patient and unpitying. While he was leading me to the blanket store I asked him what was wrong. "Why, sir, the man's been under detention for assaulting the military police, and now 'e's just 'ad news of his brother being killed. Seems to take it to 'eart more than most would. 'Arf crazy, 'e's been, tearing 'is clothes off and cursing the War and the Fritzes. Almost like a shell-shock case, 'e seems. It's his third time out. A Blighty one don't last a man long nowadays, sir." As I went off into the gloom I could

still hear the uncouth howlings. (pp.396-397)

This picture gathers its explosive force from the juxtaposition of that "patient and unpitying" Sergeant (and one recognizes how necessary those qualities must have been) and the naked man clutching his chest and howling. What ignites the charge is the recognition that in a fundamental way the appropriate response to the whole situation is the naked man's.

The absurd haunts everything, floats delicately (and sometimes not so delicately) behind each and every observation. The Major describes how to deal with Conscientious Objectors: "The other [C.O.] was some humble inarticulate wretch who refused to march. So the Major had him tied to the back of a wagon and dragged along a road until he was badly cut about. After a few hundred yards he cried enough, and afterwards turned out to be quite a decent soldier. Made good, and was killed in the trenches." The last sentence, with all its implications, echoes in the mind. Later Sassoon attends lectures on Trench Warfare. "At my first lecture I was astonished to see several officers on crutches, with legs amputated, and at least one man had lost that necessary faculty for trench warfare, his eyesight. They appeared to be accepting the absurd situation stoically; they were allowed to smoke."(pp.458-459) What is particularly horrifying about this pervasive context of the absurd is that it effectively undercuts the possibility of asking any of the vital questions. Sassoon looks out over a battlefield:

> ...wherever we looked the mangled effigies of the dead were our _memento mori_. Shell-twisted and dismembered, the Germans

> maintained the violent attitudes in which they had died. The British had mostly been killed by bullets or bombs, so they looked more resigned. But I can remember a pair of hands (nationality unknown) which protruded from the soaked ashen soil like the roots of a tree turned upside down; one hand seemed to be pointing at the sky with an accusing gesture. Each time I passed that place the protest of those fingers became more expressive of an appeal to God in defiance of those who made the War. Who made the War? I laughed hysterically as the thought passed through my mud-stained mind. But I only laughed mentally, for my box of Stokes gun ammunition left me no breath to spare for an angry guffaw. And the dead were the dead; this was no time to be pitying them or asking silly questions about their outraged lives. Such sights must be taken for granted, I thought, as I gasped and slithered and stumbled with my disconsolate crew. Floating on the surface of the flooded trench was the mask of a human face which had detached itself from the skull. (p.435)

The suffering will not let up. Even the positive aspects of life with the battalion noted above are limited and demarcated by the fragility of mortality. Whatever love can be created, whatever vividity stoked, whatever bonding relationships forged.."a single machine-gun or a few shells might wipe out the whole picture within a week. Last summer the First Battalion had been part of my life; by the middle of September it had been almost obliterated... On the other side of the curtain, if I was lucky, I should meet the survivors, and we should begin to build up our little humanities all over again."(p.421) It is awful; it is madness. Above all, it seems stupid. Sasson gives us a brilliant precis of the average infantryman's reaction to the staff, capturing exactly the contemptuous scorn whose very bravado reveals some small, inchoate, inarticulate fear that there may be mysteries here unshared by the fighting soldier:

> The Brigadier and his Staff (none too bright at map-references) were hoping to satisfy (vicariously) General

> Whincop (who'd got an unpopular bee in his bonnet about the Rum Ration, and had ordered an impossible raid, two months ago, which had been prevented by a providential thaw and caused numerous deaths in a subsequently sacrificed battalion).
> Whincop was hoping to satisfy the Corps Commander, of whom we know nothing at all, except that he had insulted our Colonel on the Doullens Road. The Corps Commander hoped to satisfy the Army Commander, who had as usual informed us that we were "pursuing a beaten enemy", and who had brought the Cavalry up for a "break-through". (It is worth mentioning that the village which was now our Division's objective was still held by the Germans eight months afterwards.) And the Army Commander, I suppose, was in telephonic communication with the Commander-in-Chief, who, with one eye on Marshal Foch, was hoping to satisfy his King and Country. Such being the case, Wilmot and myself were fully justified in leaving the situation to the care of the military caste who were making the most of the Great Opportunity for obtaining medal-ribbons and reputations for leadership; and if I am being caustic and captious about them I can only plead the need for a few minute's post-war retaliation. Let the Staff write their own books about the Great War, say I.[5] The Infantry were biased against them, and their authentic story will be read with interest. (p.439)

Yet the continual suffering does enforce the questions: who made the war? Who is responsible? Thus we arrive at what is surely the most interesting aspect of The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston: Sassoon's attempt to do what the whole war seems designed to prevent: to take his destiny into his own hands, to accept the responsibility of and for himself, to do something about the war.

Sassoon has already registered the feeling of impotence which is characteristic of all those who tried to fashion some personal alternative to the situation:

> I leant on a wooden bridge, gazing down into the dark green glooms of the weedy little river, but my thoughts were powerless against unhappiness so huge. I couldn't alter

[5] cf F.P.Crozier above p.123.

> European history, or order the artillery to stop firing. I could stare at the War as I stared at the sultry sky, longing for life and freedom and vaguely altruistic about my fellow-victims. But a second-lieutenant could attempt nothing--except to satisfy his superior officers; and altogether, I concluded, Armageddon was too immense for my solitary understanding. (pp.360-361)

That is true, and deeply felt. But its truth does nothing to lessen the need to act--even though one's actions will be fraught with intimations of impotence. So, finally, Sassoon's famous declaration:

> "I am making this statement as an act of wilful defiance of military authority, because I believe that the War is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it. I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers. I believe that this War, upon which I entered as a war of defence and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest. I believe that the purposes for which I and my fellow soldiers entered upon this War should have been so clearly stated as to have made it impossible to change them and that, had this been done, the objects which actuated us would now be attainable by negotiation. I have seen and endured the suffering of the troops, and I can no longer be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust. I am not protesting against the conduct of the War, but against the political errors and insincerities for which the fighting men are being sacrificed. On behalf of those who are suffering now I make this protest against the deception which is being practised on them; also I believe that I may help to destroy the callous complacency with which the majority of those at home regard the continuance of agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realize." (p.496)

It is the voice of bluff common sense that answers Sassoon's declaration, and each time answer is made we see more and more clearly the pattern of the absurd behind it. The response of Sassoon's Colonel is typical:

> He wasn't a lively-minded man at the best of times, and he didn't pretend to understand the motives which had actuated me. But with patient common-sense arguments, he did his best to persuade me to stop wanting to stop the War...It was

> absolutely impossible he asserted, for the War to end until it ended--well, until it ended as it ought to end. Did I think it right that so many men should have been sacrificed for no purpose? "And surely it stands to reason, Sherston, that you must be wrong when you set your own opinion against the practically unanimous feeling of the whole British Empire."(pp.507-508)

The implication of the various responses is always that such a declaration is--as Sassoon puts it--"a breach, not so much of discipline as of decorum."(p.504) Against this kind of polite, tolerant neglect the futility of the declaration becomes evident:

> Wandering along the sand dunes I felt outlawed, bitter and baited. I wanted something to smash and trample on, and in a paroxysm of exasperation I performed the time-honoured gesture of shaking my clenched fists at the sky. Feeling no better for that, I ripped the M.C. ribbon off my tunic and threw it into the mouth of the Mersey. Weighted with significance though this action was, it would have felt more conclusive had the ribbon been heavier. As it was, the poor little thing fell weakly on to the water and floated away as though aware of its own futility. One of my point-to-point cups would have served my purpose more satisfyingly, and they'd meant much the same to me as my Military Cross.
>
> Watching a big boat which was steaming along the horizon, I realized that protesting against the prolongation of the War was about as much use as shouting at the people on board that ship.(pp.508-509)

The ribbon on the water is an evocative image. The decoration can't even be thrown away with a satisfying gesture. The awareness of futility can only sap the resolve to persist. It is at this point that Sassoon's old friend Robert Graves re-enters his story.

We have already seen how Graves organizes the medical board to nullify Sassoon's protest. The medical board is perhaps the most telling and resonant scene in all the memoirs. The board wants Sassoon to recant and admit his declaration to be merely the product of a nervous breakdown so that they can send him to

Craiglockhart. If he refuses and insists on standing by his declaration the army will declare he has had a nervous breakdown, and send him to Craiglockhart. Whatever he does, he can do nothing. Whatever he says, he can say nothing. The modern age has arrived, not least in this pre-echo of that terrifying notion that an asylum is the most appropriate place for those with attitudes unacceptable to the authorities.

The question of whether or not the Army would have acted as Sassoon thought it would is a moot one. Would the army have quietly spirited him away, or would it have given him the publicity he desired by court-martialling him? Sassoon gave up his public protest in part because he was persuaded that the army would merely quietly incarcerate him. Twenty years later Sassoon thought Graves had lied (in insisting that the War Office would <u>not</u> court-martial him) to save him from martyrdom. Graves insisted he had told the truth. C. Hassall in his biography of Edward Marsh (Churchill's secretary, and one of those whom Graves had approached) says Graves <u>did</u> lie: "At this juncture the War Office had no grounds whatever for not proceeding with disciplinary action."[6] But, of course, that were indeed some grounds for not proceeding. The War Office may well have decided that they could ill-afford the publicity attendent upon any court-martial of the holder of an M.C.

It is of great significance that rather than meeting

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[6] Hassall, Charles, <u>Edward Marsh</u> (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1959) p. 417.

Sassoon's declaration with rage and overt opposition the authorities handle him in a peculiarly twentieth-century manner: he is answered by a voice which sounds quite reasonable but is, in fact, deeply irrational. The neglect that looks benign is malign. The situation is pure Kafka: man is in the grip of totalitarian forces terrifying because the completeness of their control is not overt but covert. The enemy is never identifiable, challengeable. In the process of trying to grapple with unidentifiable forces we give them their very existence. In the best existential fashion we create them by acting as if they were there. Gradually _we_ become the enemy.

As we have seen the various pressures become too great and Sassoon gives in. But the story cannot end with this earlier and more innocent version of Catch-22. (Since Yossarian doesn't want to fight he is sane and therefore must fight; since Sassoon doesn't want to fight he is crazy and therefore doesn't have to fight.) The war is omnipresent and reclaims its own. In any case it is never easy to relax into a situation of the absurd.

> The prospect of being imprisoned as a war-resister had also evaporated. To wake up knowing that I was going to bicycle off to play two rounds of golf was not a penance. It was a reward. Three evenings a week I went along to River's room to give my anti-war complex an airing.(p.521)

> While I continued to clean my clubs, some inward monitor became uncomfortably candid and remarked "This heroic gesture of yours--'making a separate peace'--is extremely convenient for you, isn't it? Doesn't it begin to look rather like dodging the Kaiser's well-aimed projectiles?" Proper pride also weighed in with a few well-chosen words. "Twelve weeks ago you may have been a man with a message. Anyhow you genuinely believed yourself to be one. But unless you can prove to yourself that your protest is still effective, you are here under false pretences..."(p.537)

Not only does the feeling of the absurd triviality of his activities rankle, but gradually deeper forces begin to exert their pressures. To oppose the war requires a very firm sense of self. One must oppose as a unique individual almost all the received opinion of the day. To do so is no easy matter, and there is much that continues to militate against the sense of self and the sense of rightness that are necessary. Sassoon, (echoing A.G. West, q.v.), says at one point:

> Recognizing the futility of war as much as ever, I dimly realize the human weakness which makes it possible. For I spend my time with people who are, most of them, too indolent-minded to think for themselves.(p.604)

What we discover now are the various pressures that make it extraordinarily difficult to think for oneself. First of all there is the sense we have already noted of the complete futility of opposing the war. "The War was too big an event for one man to stand alone in."(p.421) The attempt to oppose the war necessarily involves one in all the unresolvable chaos of a reality too large, too complex, too manifold to be grasped. Who is responsible for the war? Can it be stopped? How can it be stopped? To grapple with these questions is, as Sassoon discovers, to grapple with ghosts. One loses one's footing in a sea of hypotheses, an endless plethora of possibility. In all this contingency there is only one touchstone of reality. And that, of course, is the one undeniable, vital experience that continues away from this morass of unanswerable questions: the experience of the war itself. So we come back to the experience that is common to so many of our

soldier/writers--the realization that the only reality they are sure of is the war. And if it is only the war that is real, protests against the war are exactly what they seem: futile attempts to evade reality. "Reality", says Sassoon at Craiglockhart "was on the other side of the Channel, surely." (p.525)

We may now summarize the forces operating against Sassoon and his declaration of opposition to the war. First, he is aware of the impotent futility of his gesture. Secondly, the protest which came out of a sense of love and care for his fellow soldiers results in an untenable absurdity: Sassoon playing golf, confined to a peaceful asylum, his tenure of that position guaranteed as long as he persists in his pacifist attitudes. Thirdly, the protest necessarily confronts him with a sea of complexities against which any one stance seems necessarily naïve and simplistic: a specific and private response to a problem that is terrifyingly general. Finally all these situations attack his sense of the reality and worth of his unique self and his unique values. The conclusion is inevitable and, inevitably, absurd. It may not hold as a syllogism but the psychological motivation is persuasive: if you are crazy to want peace then to prove you're sane you must want war. "Killed in action in order to confute the Under-Secretary for War, who had officially stated that I wasn't responsible for my actions. What a truly glorious death for a promising young pacifist!..." (p.541)

So Sassoon returns to the war: "I still sat there with my

golf bag between my knees, alone with what now seemed an irrefutable assurance that going back to the War as soon as possible was my only chance of peace." (p.541) Again the significant move into the absurd.

I have said the conclusion is inevitable. And so it is. But there are at least two figures whose role in this denouement will bear further examination. The first is a Dr. Macamble who bursts in on Sassoon at Craiglockhart, and later in a hotel in Edinburgh tries to persuade him to abscond from the hospital, and take a train to London. There he will be examined by an "eminent alienist" and pronounced entirely responsible for his actions, thus circumventing the army's plot to neutralize the original declaration. Sassoon's reaction to the man and to the suggestion (even though the eminence of this particular alienist turns out to be located "in the popular rather than the pathological press--the Daily Mail, in fact.") is, I would suggest, very interesting. From the first Sassoon reacts to Dr. Macamble with prickly animosity. Macamble has arrived at Craiglockhart to discuss "the whole question of the 'Stop-the-War Campaign.'" It is quite clear that Sassoon would much rather play golf. This is a curious reaction for a protester already deeply concerned about the good faith of a protest which seems to have resulted only in putting him in a safe and comfortable position. It seems rather convenient that Sassoon finds Macamble so unprepossessing that he can explain his reactions on the grounds of a deep-seated personal antipathy. I'm not convinced that we see anything quite that repellant. Sassoon's

reaction to Macamble's advice is also interesting:

> "Good Lord, he's trying to persuade me to do the dirty on Rivers!" Keeping this thought to myself, I remained reticent and parted from him with the heartiest of handshakes...have I been too hard on him? Well, I can only say that nothing I can do to Doctor Macamble could be worse than his advice to me--had I been imbecile enough to act on it.(p.533)

There are a lot of reasons why that advice might be thought to be bad. But Sassoon doesn't give us any. And it is a measure of the strength of the various forces and influences already mentioned that Sassoon can thus glibly dismiss--without any discussion or exploration--this suggestion of a way in which he could make his declaration stand.

Rivers is a more important and, I think, a very complex figure here. It is not glib psychologizing to suggest that for Sassoon Rivers fills the role of the father he can scarcely remember. (Sassoon's own father left his mother some five years after he was born.) Certainly throughout these memoirs there has been the recurrent apparition of a male authority figure. Sassoon invariably sees those to whom he is closest (from Dixon to Milden to Tyrel to Rivers) in this role. It is also clear that here--as in life--Rivers is a wonderfully accomplished, deeply humane man. But the role he is called upon to fill is a deeply ambiguous one. For Rivers as representative of his society must persuade Sassoon that being a pacifist is--if not crazy--at least psychologically inappropriate--and that he must learn to want to return to the trenches of France. (One can imagine the comments of a psychiatrist like R.D.Laing on that situation). One questions neither the sincerity of Rivers' humanity nor the genuineness of

his regard for Sassoon. Both are vindicated in the delicacy with which he handles a situation bristling with difficulties:

> ...life, with an ironic gesture, had contrived that the man who had lit up my future with a new eagerness to do well in it should now be instrumental in sending me back to an even-money chance of being killed.(pp.548-549)...I had said good-bye to Rivers. Shutting the door of his room for the last time, I felt behind me someone who had helped and understood me more than anyone I had ever known. Much as he disliked speeding me back to the trenches, he realized that it was my only way out. And the longer I live the more right I know him to have been.(p.554)

It is, again, a crucial moment. Exactly why is Rivers right? It is interesting that Sassoon does not tell us--especially interesting because this is, after all, the central question of his narrative. One can however speculate. We have already noted the many and varied forces brought to bear upon any critic of the war. Partly, perhaps, Rivers is merely realistically acknowledging their weight. Those forces are reinforced by Sassoon's very real feeling of loyalty to his fellow soldiers and his insecurities in relation to the good faith of his protest. In fundamental ways he is a social being. And the price of admission to the society is the acceptance of the absurdity which is war. And this is what Rivers urges.

So Sassoon returns to the trenches. It is an act of absurdity: he is going to do the "normal" thing: get killed in the trenches, thus vindicating his own sanity in the somewhat glazed and cock-eyed regard of the world. It is an act of bad faith: "I should be returning to the war with no belief in what I was doing..."(p.549) It is fascinating and revealing that Rivers--the man who urges such an act--should be accepted so unquestioningly

as arbiter of sanity, as measure of normality.

It must be understood that I am not claiming that Rivers' advice was wrong. Or that he was not the advanced, humane doctor his reputation suggests. I am saying the advice was fraught with unexamined assumptions about normality and reality--assumptions which the very existence of the war makes questionable.[7] Sassoon has tried to ask some of the questions. What is significant is how quickly, almost gratefully, he stops.

Sassoon returns to the trenches, is wounded once more and once more invalided home to England. He returns still aware that none of the complexities has been resolved, still feeling the war to be a _pis aller_ and finding again the possible escape from that _pis aller_ both irresistably alluring and yet guilt-inducing. As he leaves the war he remains faithful to it in an important way. His last memory is this:

> And I remember a man at the C.C.S. with his jaw blown off by a bomb--("a fine-looking chap, he was," they said). He lay there with one hand groping at the bandages which covered his whole head and face, gurgling every time he breathed. His tongue was tied forward to prevent him swallowing it. The War had gagged him--smashed him--and other people looked at him and tried to forget what they'd seen....(pp.652-653)

So much of Sassoon's writing is driven by the need to be loyal to that vision--not to forget that _that_ is what the war does.

Clearly now no neat conclusion is possible. The ending of _Sherston's Progress_ is marvellous in its compact complexity.

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[7] Rivers himself came to recognize this later in his career. cf. _Conflict and Dream_ "The 'Reproachful Letter' Dream" (London: International Library of Psychology, Philosopy and Scientific Method, 1923)

Sassoon has been "tearing himself to pieces" over all the agonizing unresolvables of his war. He can find no way out:

> And then, unexpected and unannounced, Rivers came in and closed the door behind him. Quiet and alert, purposeful and unhesitating, he seemed to empty the room of everything that had needed exorcising.
> My futile demons fled him--for his presence was a refutation of wrong-headedness. I knew then that I had been very lonely while I was at the War; I knew that I had a lot to learn, and that he was the only man who could help me.
> Without a word he sat down by the bed; and his smile was benediction enough for all I'd been through. "Oh, Rivers, I've had such a funny time since I saw you last!" I exclaimed. And I understood that this was what I'd been waiting for.(p.655)

Well, that captures all the warmth, trust, humanity and love of their relationship. Rivers's quiet smile and Sassoon's use of the word "funny" tell us much about their feelings for each other. We share Sassoon's delight and relief at the reassuring presence of Rivers. But we also know that there is an essential ambiguity in Rivers' ability to be reassuring: he is so because, by virtue of his compelling seniority (Sassoon's "funny" is very much the word a child uses to its parent, a junior to his senior to describe something whose complexity he cannot quite articulate.), he can allow Sassoon to rejoin the majority and majority opinion without the feeling of betraying his principles. (It is worth while remembering that Sassoon is nearly thirty-two at the time.) This aspect of Rivers' prowess is never analyzed; the Sherston of the book is clearly too dependent, too confused, and indeed too much in need of Rivers to attempt such analysis. Sassoon's achievement has been to create this sensitive, prickly, angry, confused young man, make him exemplary, touch him with most of the experiences

common to the war, elucidate brilliantly the double bind such men were caught in--the impossibility of approving of the war--the impossibility of effectively protesting against it--leave him in the necessarily unresolved complexity, and make us, finally, care very much about him.

Conclusion

It is worthwhile to end this chapter by making some comparisons between the individual authors of some of these memoirs. There are those who genuinely value the experience of the war. They find both irreplaceable and irrecoverable what they have experienced in the war: the love of one comrade for the other, the satisfaction of being a member of one large, organic body dedicated to a common end, the intensity and vividness of life under the constant threat of instant death, the recurrent examples of selflessness and heroism. They find these positives outweigh the negatives of the remorseless slaughter, the endless death. Chapman is the best of these; he is able to render startlingly the heroic delights. He works so well because he denies nothing; he is honest with what he sees, committed to the positive, but feeling the weight of the negative. If we are foolish enough to ignore the evidence of a Chapman we will never understand why so many men continue to go to war.

Apologists like Glubb or Carrington are much less persuasive than Chapman. They are, however, representative not only in their "pro patria" rhetoric, but also in the clarity with which the disjunction between their conscious judgements and their unconscious renderings appears. But neither is able--as is Chapman--to hold in steady focus both the positives and the negatives of this war. The enactments of the horrors that are

there heavily outweigh the Newbolt-like enthusiasms. And the inability to face clearly what is there is betrayed by frequent lapses into a sort of nostalgia-tinged rhetoric of the nineteenth-century Empire.

Others, like Blunden, know that the stale pieties of the Victorian era won't do. And Blunden tries to make the war make sense by holding hard to his own individual sensibility: modest, quiet, self-deprecating, undemanding. He possesses a vein of steel, and has recourse to an honourable tradition supporting his unique sensibility against the horrors that threaten to inundate it. The attempt is to refuse to give in to the war's hectoring immediacy, to try to put this chaos in some older, traditional context, but to put it in that context while remaining true to what it is. My own feeling is that finally Undertones of War confronts us with the deep incongruity of a mind trained and committed to visions of the pastoral and the classical faced with the reality of this war. In the end Blunden must create his innocent young shepherd to escape from the war back to the pastoral. It is impossible to focus steadily on "the eye under the duckboard". No spring can ever bring those "gobbets of blackening flesh" back to life. There is a way in which the harmless young shepherd can never quite grasp the reality of the experience his imagination keeps presenting to him. But at least as long as he sticks to his persona he doesn't need to confront the terrifying truths of his own vulnerability. As a shepherd he won't become one of the "unfound", nor have to confront the

implications of that possibility. Blunden may fail to convince us that his new role will lead him to a "tranquillized valley", but the failure stands open and candid. He holds true to what he perceives.

Graves presents us with some real difficulties. On first reading Graves's is easily the most enjoyable of the various memoirs. His vignettes are sharp and pointed; the wit is clear. Gradually though one's feelings change. More than any other of the memoirists, Graves started off with what one might call the advantage of an iconoclastic background. After all, as he carefully lets us know, he resigned from the cadet corps at Charterhouse! One might expect, then, that he would mount the clearest and firmest attack on the war. Far from it. As I've already suggested, Graves's book is a masterpiece of personal evasion. We never once feel in Graves the kind of moral agonizing which Sassoon and West express so movingly. We never really feel that Graves will do something because he believes in it. And when we want to explore these kinds of suspicions more fully we find Graves stepping--more nimbly than anyone else--behind the mask of his very accomplished prose. Of all the memoirists Graves seems to be the professional survivor. He is a prophetic figure. He looks like the Joycean artist escaping into silence, exile and cunning. (With the emphasis, of course, on the latter.) But he is finally more modern than that. (As, of course, was Stephen Dedalus. It is as impossible to imagine Stephen silent as it is to imagine Graves without language.) His artist hasn't

disappeared leaving his creation to stand on its own; with a plausible, friendly, Welsh grin he stands in full view, misdirecting the attention of the audience. The prose exists not to try to capture a truth, but to try to make a desperately unsafe world safe for the moment for the author.

As I've suggested none of the memoirists ever faces up fully to his own impotence; they and/or their personae all evade that recognition. This is understandable. It must be psychologically very difficult indeed to face the fact that you are very likely to suffer pain and death to no discernible purpose, and that you can do nothing about it. Graves retires behind his Welsh music-hall manner, disguising his own impotence and betrayals behind wit and comic inventiveness. Sassoon dissembles less; his giving over of responsibility to Rivers is unmistakeably there. But Sassoon himself seems neither to recognize nor to analyze that acceptance of some <u>other's</u> authority. His account clearly enforces various questions. His evasion of those questions is made painfully clear.

Sassoon has more to offer on the essentially fictional or creative aspect of the memoirist's activities:

> It needs no pointing out that there is an essential disparity between being alive and memoirizing it long afterwards. But the recorder of his vanished self must also bear this in mind, that his passage through time was a confused experiment, and that external circumstances had yet to become static and solidly discernible. An eminent Victorian has told us that we read the past by the light of the present; concerning our means of interpreting the present he said nothing, so I infer that he found it unreadable. I myself am inclined to compare the living present to a jig-saw puzzle loose in its box. Not until afterwards can we fit the pieces together and make a

> coherent picture out of them. While writing this book I have often been conscious of this process. In relation to his surroundings my younger self seemed to be watching a play performed in a language of which he couldn't understand more than an occasional word. His apprehensions of the contemporary scene were blinkered, out of focus, and amorphous as the imagery of a dream. I have felt that throughout the journey described in this book he was like someone driving a motor-car on a foggy night, only able to see a few yards ahead of him. Nevertheless I have contrived to reconstruct an outline which represents everything as though it had been arranged for him beforehand. I have aimed at unity of effect, even when it entailed making him appear somewhat stupider than he actually was, and have thus created an illusion that the traveller was controlling his circumstances instead of being helplessly entangled in them. [my emphasis]. I can only suggest that somebody with more metaphysical ability than I can command should investigate this discrepancy between the art of autobiography and the rudimentariness of reality. Can it be that the immediacy of our existence amounts to little more than animality, and that our ordered understanding of it is only assembled through afterthought and retrospection? But I am overstraining my limited intelligence, and must extricate myself from these abstrusities.[1]

I have been suggesting that the most interesting memoirs have been embroiled in creating "an illusion that the traveller was controlling his circumstances instead of being helplessly entangled in them." The more acutely aware the memoirist is of the degree to which he is helplessly entangled, the more complex the creation of illusions becomes. In part the persona exists to rescue the memoirist from the intolerable suggestions of his own impotent implication in madness. In their own voice, in their own personae, the memoirists can't quite get the language right. Not surprisingly, for the right language is the language of nightmare and suicide, and yet the daylight, conscious mind still demands

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[1] Siegfried Sassoon, Siegfried's Journey 1916-1920 (1945; rpt. London: Faber and Faber, 1982) pp. 223-224.

the proprieties of sense and decorum. Once established, the personae themselves pursue a variety of evasive tactics to avoid the recognition that they are involved in madness, and that they can do nothing about it. As readers we must approach the central figures of the memoirs as fictional characters whose words and thoughts can never be taken simply at face value, but must be judged in and by the imagined context they inhabit. It is in that region that we will discover the truths of the experience; truths that, for various reasons, remain hidden to the conscious mind.

Once we move entirely into the fictional world--once we free the persona from the constraints placed upon him as a direct representative of his creator--our expectations of rationality, our sense (ever more desperate) that somehow the persona _should be_ located in the daylight world, we find a freer and fuller exploration of impotence in the face of madness. Both _Mr. Britling..._ and _Kangaroo_ are cases in point.

There are two related phenomena that fill the fiction of the Great War. The first is best rendered by Manning's _The Middle Parts of Fortune_. In that novel Bourne repeatedly refuses promotion to the rank of officer. This is not only a symbolic refusal to accept responsibility for what is going on around him. At a deeper level the refusal is a recognition that no effective power is available. Unconsciously one remains in the ranks so that the outward form will conform to the actual condition of impotence. (There are interesting pre-echoes here of the career of T.E.Lawrence.) Secondly there are any number of novels that

end with the hero deciding to die; that is, they render with no evasion the huis clos that faces the participant in this war. Aldington's Death of a Hero is an obvious example. Indeed the fiction continually approaches areas of despair the memoirs, for reasons of self-protection, cannot explore. A.P.Herbert's The Secret Battle gives us a brave hero unjustly condemned and executed for cowardice. It is a death created in part by the malicious enmity of some fellow officers. The narrator, significantly, is both outraged and impotent.

Since my focus is on the tension between the conscious mind and the rendering of the imagination, I do not explore the extraordinary richness of the poetry of the Great War. The best poets of the war are freed, I think, from the prosaic necessity of reintegrating their renditions of shocking nightmare (we may think again of Gurney's "To His Love") back into the daylight context of the individual who must continue living, haunted by those threats. What the poem offers us is simply those moments of recognition. We do not see the struggle of the conscious mind to defend itself against them. That is why so many of these poems are of such extraordinary power. That is also why, I think, the poets did not need the latency period we have already noted. The poets get to the language of nightmare much more quickly than do the prose writers.

Owen's "Strange Meeting" knows the war is about madness, and that we discover in the hell that we have made that those we kill are our brothers, our selves. The central character in Remarque's

<u>All Quiet on the Western Front</u> is forced to lie in a shell-hole for twenty-four hours with the soldier he has just killed. He begins to hallucinate, promising that he will marry the Frenchman's widow, and take over his job as a printer. It is a recognition that he has killed his displaced self; his life, now, must be the Frenchman's. Rosenberg's "Dead Man's Dump" knows the dead are earth, and that we are either the corpse just dying, seeing the life we cannot reach from the awful, impotent, helpless perspective of lying flat on our backs gazing up at the onrushing wheels, or we are the driver of the limber, somehow responsible, but again impotent, as we drive over the corpses through the caverns of hell.

The Novels

I have chosen three novels to discuss. Ford's Parade's End, is the most eloquent novel we have about the transition from pre-war Europe into the war. Ford shows us how at least one level of European society was ready for--and indeed needed--the war to come along. The historian of the causes of the Great War needs to study Ford at least as carefully as he studies Lord Grey. Wells demonstrates again the split between the conscious mind and the imagination. Mr. Britling Sees It Through makes an extraordinary contrast with the discursive prose Wells is writing at the same time as he writes this novel. It is the most compelling contemporaneous fictional account of the war from the perspective of the home front I know. Finally, Lawrence's Kangaroo registers some of the deep damage the war has inflicted on the psyche of Europe. Lawrence knows the war was "Nightmare", and knows and shows the central lesson of that war: individual impotence. These three novels survey the situation leading into the war, the war itself, and some of the results of the war. Needless to say each of them strikes me as being memorable in its own right.

I discuss each of the novels in some detail. As I suggested in the Introduction, if literature does indeed, as Aristotle and others suggest, possess a unique kind of truthfulness, it does so only if its particular life is respected. A work of literature should not be crudely pillaged for useful or attractive

fragments. If certain "truths" about the great war emerge from these novels they can only emerge out of a rendered sense of the full, living complex of the novel's life. If, in the pages that follow, we occasionally seem to lose sight of the actual war it is not through a failure of concentration.

Parade's End

It is a commonplace that Ford Madox Ford's novels have not had the critical attention they deserve. I want to look closely at Parade's End and try to establish the characteristic manner in which Ford's imagination works. Secondly, by examining the central characters I want to outline the main concerns and perceptions of the novels. Finally I want to suggest that the suggestions made about the war are worthy of intense scrutiny. In the early pages of the novel we recognize that, faced with the demands life makes upon him, Christopher Tietjens is impotent. This is where the role the war plays in these novels becomes critical. For contrary to common opinion (and contrary, too, to Ford's own opinion)[1] that role is highly ambiguous. The war is of course deplored in all the usual ways. But the novels also tacitly recognize that Christopher is saved by the war. It is made painfully clear in the course of the novels that Christopher cannot deal with the confusions of his pre-war life. Only the

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[1] "I hope, in fact, that this series of books, for what it is worth, may make war seem undesirable." Introductory letter to A Man Could Stand Up. Or, more fully: "I have always had the greatest contempt for novels written with a purpose...But when I sat down to write that series of volumes, I sinned against my gods to the extent of saying that I was going to write--to the level of the light vouchsafed me--to write a work that should have for its purpose the obviating of all future wars." It Was the Nightingale (New York: Octagan Books, 1975) p.225. Yet another example of the artist within defeating the polemicist?

war, by overtly smashing all the complexities Christopher cannot deal with, can liberate him. Rather than mourning the coming of war and the smashing of civilization that coming both made manifest and contributed to, the novels suggest the quite unconscious ways in which the war was both necessary and, indeed, welcome. I have already quoted Zara Steiner:

> What still remains to be understood is why, after it became clear that the stalemate would be a long one, the casualty lists unbearable, and the decisions of the military futile, men continued to fight....It may well be that, for reasons which the historian can only dimly perceive, Europe was deeply ready for the war...
> (Steiner, p.265)

Parade's End is most suggestive about the way in which Europe may well have been "deeply ready for the war..." It is one of the best enactments we have of a world strangling in its own outmoded, inefficacious forms, powerless to free itself, finally liberated by an apocalyptic smash-up. I am suggesting, then, that Parade's End gives us a significantly different perspective on the war from that provided by the various memoirs we have considered. There the war imposes impotence. Here, in some ways, the war reveals a different face and liberates. Nevertheless the novels are also eloquent about the actual nature of that smash-up, the cost we must pay, the various losses we have sustained.

To clear up one small, but vexing, problem first. When I speak of Parade's End I am thinking of that imaginative world created by the first three Tietjens novels: Some Do Not..., No

More Parades and A Man Could Stand Up.[2] I omit The Last Post from direct consideration, though I do allude to it on occasion, without being sure that one can answer the question as to whether or not it is a legitimate part of Parade's End. Can an author retroactively extirpate one of his novels? Can he declare what was once a sibling to be no longer a member of the family? My own response is an unequivocal "No". In any case Ford's famous comment on the question is, of course, quite characteristic: "I strongly wish to omit The Last Post from the edition [the Tietjens novels in one volume]. I do not like the book and have never liked it and always intended to end up with A Man Could Stand Up."[3] This quotation is characteristic inasmuch as it manifests Ford's unquenchable propensity to alter historical fact to suit present need. Nevertheless it seems clear to me that The Last Post is not naturally a part of the imaginative world of Parade's End for the following reasons: In the first three volumes the war--even where it is not the ostensible subject--is of great importance. This is not so in The Last Post. Secondly, the central character of the first three volumes, Christopher Tietjens, practically disappears in The Last Post. This change is dislocating; its purpose unclear. Thirdly The Last Post presents us with a number of neat

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[2] The novels were originally published by Duckworth in London in 1924, 1925, 1926 and 1928 respectively. My references will be to The Bodley Head Ford Madox Ford (London: Bodley Head, 1963) Vols. III & IV, and will be designated thus: Some Do Not: SDN, No More Parades: NMP, A Man Could Stand Up: MSU. The edition of The Last Post: LP is Duckworth's, 1928.

[3] "The Saturday Review of Literature." August 2, 1941, p.14

resolutions of the various central conflicts and questions of the first three novels: Christopher's father did not commit suicide, and did not, of course, father Valentine Wannop. The boy, Mark, is Christopher's son; Sylvia does really have a heart of gold under her rough exterior, is moved by the sight of impending maternal bliss, will give Christopher his divorce, and thus enable him to marry Valentine Wannop. But the heart of Ford's accomplishment in the earlier novels has been to render social and spiritual dislocations of a weight, complexity and persuasiveness that make such neat resolutions seem facile and factitious. Finally, most of The Last Post is concerned with characters and problems which are of little relevance to the central issues of the first three novels: (eg. Mark Tietjens' health and his relationship with his former mistress, now wife.)

What are the central issues of the first three novels? One wants to tread with some wariness here for Ford is nothing if not endlessly indirect. His world is one of continual ambiguities. The relation of appearance and reality, language as revealer and/or distorter of truth, the endless misunderstandings human communication is plagued with, all these issues are central to Ford. "...It's difficult to make myself plain." says Tiejens. Campion answers: "Neither of us do. What is language for? What the hell is language for?" (NMP p.250)

All these issues are built into the very structure of Ford's novels. For within this carefully reticulated structure each moment appears and reappears, seen first in one light then in

another, from a different angle, in a different hue. Pluck at one incident and the whole structure quivers. Whatever the truth is, if it ever is ascertainable, it is only so gradually, cumulatively. Hence that characteristic joy of reading a Ford novel: the slow, hesitant, careful building up of a never quite complete picture. Ford shares with the post-Impressionists the conviction that the whole truth is to be most nearly approximated by looking at the object (the moment) from a variety of viewpoints and putting all these viewpoints on the one canvas. So both time and space become dislocated, relocated.

It is Ford's perception of the omnipresence of these ambiguities which gives his vision the unity it has. In a light vein they are at the base of the wiry, exact social comedy that moves with fine control from moments of real delicacy and subtlety to moments of surprisingly broad--not to say gross--slapstick. Ford proceeds to render a not uncommon awareness: the central ambiguities of our lives are the axes along which turn both our comedies and our tragedies. So those moments of social comedy move precisely and inexorably into much deeper social tragedy. And those moments in turn (eg. the portraits of Edith Ethel and Macmaster which I will analyze more fully in a moment) are connected to the overall failure of humanity bodied forth in the Great War.

Once we realize how carefully structured these novels are we start to realize with what precision Ford has left various ambiguities unresolved, various loose threads unknotted. In the

analysis which follows I have found it necessary to quote with some frequency. Again the complex structure of the novels necessitates this inasmuch as individual threads so often follow such torturous routes. Most of the available Ford criticism flounders badly on the Tietjens novels. Unwilling to deal with the complexities the very structure of the novels insists upon most critics content themselves with merely trying to recount the narrative line. Of course the inevitable happens, and since they are not paying close and scrupulous attention to the prose they not only miss the joys of Ford's technique but they get the facts wrong as well.[4]

To talk of narrative line or, indeed, of character means that we must reintegrate a picture back to the (perhaps specious?) wholeness of our usual expectations. Ford has carefully disintegrated that picture into the disjunctions of everyday life. But to make judgements of a character we must view him to some extent as a given, not as something in the process of becoming. There are deep problems here. One agrees with Ursula's judgement of Gudrun even as one registers the paradox there!

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[4] Among the critics vulnerable to this charge are: Kenneth Young, Ford Madox Ford (London: Longmans, 1956), William Carlos Williams in Ford Madox Ford; Modern Judgements, ed. R. Cassell (London: Macmillan, 1972), and J.Meixner, Ford Madox Ford's Novels (Minneapolis, University of Minneapolis Press, 1962). Alfred Kazin's review in "The New York Review of Books" (Nov. 22, 1979) of the one-volume edition of Parade's End (New York: Vintage, 1979) is riddled with errors of fact. Even Arthur Mizener in The Saddest Story: A Biography of Ford Madox Ford (New York: World Publishing Company, 1971)--by far the most accurate of the various critics--makes a number of minor errors.

> Then there started a revulsion from Gudrun. She finished life off so thoroughly, she made things so ugly and so final. As a matter of fact, even if it were as Gudrun said, about Birkin, other things were true as well. But Gudrun would draw two lines under him and cross him out like an account that is settled. There he was, summed up, paid for, settled, done with. And it was such a lie. This finality of Gudrun's, this dispatching of people and things in a sentence, it was all such a lie.[5]

Ford's art is particularly suited to rendering the process of becoming on two levels: both as the character gradually makes himself by his various actions, creates his own character by what he does, and as the character gradually reveals himself to those around him. But the technical expertise which fills these novels cannot be left as the major justification of them. Although we must heed Ursula's caveat, we must also make judgements of the characters around us. What we have to do with Ford's art is to reconstitute our picture of what he offers us and ask it what--with all that technique--it has to say.

What the novels first offer is social comedy. The slapstick of the suffragette chase is Chaplinesque:

> Another scream, a little farther than the last voices from behind his back, caused in Tietjens a feeling of intense weariness. What did beastly women want to scream for? He swung round, bag and all. The policeman, his face scarlet like a lobster just boiled, was lumbering unenthusiastically towards the two girls who were trotting towards the dyke. One of his hands, scarlet also, was extended. He was not a yard from Tietjens.
>
> Tietjens was exhausted, beyond thinking or shouting. He slipped his clubs off his shoulder and, as if he were pitching his kitbag into a luggage van, threw the whole

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[5] D.H.Lawrence, Women in Love (1921; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960) pp.297-298.

> lot between the policeman's running legs. The man, who had no impetus to speak of, pitched forward on to his hands and knees. His helmet over his eyes, he seemed to reflect for a moment; then he removed his helmet and with great deliberation rolled round and sat on the turf. His face was completely without emotion, long sandy-moustached and rather shrewd. He mopped his brow with a carmine handkerchief that had white spots. (SDN p.89)

The scene with the Rev. Duchemin in full scatological flow captures the marvellously comic sang-froid of the English haute-bourgeoisie at their most polite--the most egregious social faux-pas is simply ignored; one pretends it has not happened. And the scene is capped with a nice little picture of quite absurd violence. Macmaster, quivering with desire to save Mrs. Duchemin from the Reverend's coprophilial monologue, acts:

> With caution and with hot rage he whispered into the prize-fighter's hairy ear that was held down to him:
> "Punch him in the kidney. With your thumb. As hard as you can without breaking your thumb..."...
> Mr. Duchemin thought that the arrow of God struck him. He imagined himself an unworthy messenger. In such pain as he had never conceived of he fell into his chair and sat huddled up, a darkness covering his eyes.
> "He won't get up again," Macmaster whispered to the appreciative pugilist. "He'll want to. But he'll be afraid to."
> He said to Mrs Duchemin:
> "Dearest lady! It's all over. I assure you of that. It's a scientific counter-irritant." (SDN p.128)

These scenes are the background for what is the richest source of comedy in the novel: the relationship of Edith Ethel and Macmaster. The characters of these two provide their own comedy. Macmaster is calculating, sycophantic, modish and flatulently self-satisfied with his artistic pretensions. He is the sort of man who knows he ought to be attracted to--indeed wants to be attracted to--a woman who is "...tall, graceful, dark,

loose-gowned, passionate yet circumspect, oval-featured, deliberate, gracious to everyone around her. He could almost hear the very rustle of her garments." (SDN p.23) Unfortunately, "...he had had passages when a sort of blind unreason had attracted him almost to speechlessness toward girls of the most giggling, behind-the-counter order, big-bosomed, scarlet-cheeked. It was only Tietjens who had saved him from the most questionable entanglements." He is, finally, vulgar; and it is much to Ford's credit that he can so subtly and craftily demonstrate Macmaster's essential vulgarity through the self-styled critic's responses to Rossetti and the pre-Raphaelites. It is not, perhaps, surprising that a character who is experiencing such a major gulf between the actual objects of his desire and the ideal objects he fantasizes will respond so fully to Rossetti's brand of spiritual, notionalized sensuality.[6]

Edith Ethel has her own deep hypocrisies:

> "Oh, no, Valentine," she said, using her deeper tones. "There's something beautiful, there's something thrilling about chastity. I'm not narrow-minded. Censorious! I don't condemn! But to preserve in word,

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[6] It is interesting to speculate on the change in Ford's attitude to Rossetti and the pre-Raphaelites. He himself had written monographs on both these subjects. [The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (London: Duckworth and Co.,1906), Rossetti (London: Duckworth and Co.,1902)] And he is firmly positive (albeit balanced and judicious) about both subjects. Not once in these monographs does he seem to note any characteristics of the pre-Raphaelites or of Rossetti that make them so attractive to characters like Edith Ethel or Macmaster. It is perhaps a little hard on Rossetti to make him responsible for what people like these make of him. But, at least to this reader, the implicit criticism of Rossetti in Some Do Not... is much more persuasive than the blandness of the explicit judgements.

> thought and action a lifelong fidelity...It's no mean achievement..." (SDN p.110)

Valentine's comment is precise: "You mean like an egg and spoon race." Edith Ethel's first meeting with Macmaster concludes thus:

> Their lips met in a passion of pity and tears. He removed his mouth to say: "I must see you this evening...I shall be mad with anxiety about you." She whispered: "Yes! Yes!... In the yew walk." Her eyes were closed, she pressed her body fiercely into his. "You are the...first...man..." she breathed.
>
> "I will be the only one for ever," he said....
>
> "We must wait." He added fiercely: "But tonight, at dusk!" He imagined the dusk, under the yew hedge. A shining motor drew up in the sunlight under the window
>
> "Yes! yes!" she said. "There's a little white gate from the lane." She imagined their interview of passion and mournfulness amongst dim objects half seen....(SDN pp.131-133)

It is fine social comedy, and more than justifies Christopher's earlier accusation that the poem of Rossetti's Macmaster quotes is merely another one of these "attempts to justify fornication." "What is loathsome", Christopher continues, "is all your fumbling in placketholes and polysyllabic justification by love. You stand for lachrymose polygamy."(SDN p.29)

Macmaster's attempts to meet this accusation reveal him as an insecure, shallow poseur. They are completely undercut by the fact that the scene of squashy, adolescent "passion" we have just quoted ends with a reprise of the Rossetti poem, and a complete surrender on both parts to the voluptuousness of a "True Romance" sentimentality. Fumbling at plackets indeed! Nothing in the novels is more delightful than the nice exactness with which Ford captures Edith Ethel's and Macmaster's sexual hypocrisies and

relates them to their confessed loyalty to the pre-Raphaelites. (The "Gug Gums" which Mr. and Mrs. Macmaster call each other is what Rossetti called Elizabeth Siddall.)

> "War, my good fellow," Tietjens said...."is inevitable, and with this country plumb in the middle of it. Simply because you fellows are such damn hypocrites. There's not a country in the world that trusts us. We're always, as it were, committing adultery--like your fellow!--with the name of Heaven on our lips." He was jibing again at the subject of Macmaster's monograph. "...war is as inevitable as divorce...."(SDN p.32)

It is this movement here that is critical. The qualities we have seen as ridiculous in Macmaster--qualities identified for the social comedy--are now seen in the next dimension up as it were. Macmaster may be a self-deceiving fool filled with the worst, sentimentalized, hypocritical cant of the pre-Raphaelites, but he is also an increasingly important cog in the machine of government. And his domestic qualities may well infect the more general health.[7]

This is, of course, what happens. For gradually the poisons which Edith Ethel and Macmaster handle with such dexterity seep out, gather other poisons to them, and begin to attack Tietjens and all he represents. It is not so much the direct, overt attacks by Edith Ethel which threaten. But the atmosphere generated by

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[7] Thus, for instance, the sexual confusions that fill these novels are echoes on a smaller scale of the confusions that rend the society generally. One of the accomplishments of the novels is the manner in which examples of the former unerringly elicit our consciousness of the latter. (cf. for example, the assault of Perowne and General O'Hara on Sylvia's bedroom which may well remind us that comparable figures attacking at the Front met with comparable successes.)

both Edith Ethel and Macmaster is an atmosphere conducive to the growth of all that works in opposition to Christopher Tietjens. Indeed the direct attacks of Edith Ethel are so violent, so vicious they tend to leave the reader rather puzzled. Why this rending passion? Whence all this motiveless malignancy? It is Edith Ethel as representative of a way of being--of an attitude in society--that points to the real danger.

Again, the social comedy has broadened to something much more serious. That movement occurs with most of the subjects touched upon in the novels. The mutual misunderstandings which plague the characters are at first amusing--only gradually do we see that this lack of communication may be literally fatal. (Christopher's later obsession with communication in the army carries deep resonances.) The gossip, at first absurd, becomes monstrous. The pretentions of the boobies become mortally dangerous. The folly and flabby insincerities of the government become lethal. The analysis of this world is that it deserves what we know it is going to get.

This is the world which puts Christopher Tietjens through hell. It is a world full of hypocrites and self-servers, of misdirections and misunderstandings. It is a world where the bonds of family have slipped so far that close relatives have no real knowledge of one another. The distance between Christopher and his father is beautifully caught in the scene where Christopher speaks his less-than-twenty-words concerning his relationship with his wife. There is a savage irony in

Christopher's immediate reaction to this scene: "Tietjens considered that his relationship with his father was an almost perfect one. They were like two men in the club--the only club; thinking so alike that there was no need to talk."(SDN p.16) There is, of course, or there becomes, a colossal need to talk, but that habit has never been established.

This is a world where even truth becomes an instrument of distortion or misunderstanding. Again it is typical that Ford makes a serious point by a moment of social comedy. Christopher tries to disentangle Macmaster from one of his characteristically inappropriate liaisons with a bookmaker's secretary, and is immediately suspected of the "amour" himself. The truth merely compounds the confusion: "He [Christopher] had told the exact truth, but he was not sorry to be disbelieved. The General said: 'Then I'll take it that you tell me a lie meaning me to know that it's a lie. That's quite proper." (SDN p.95)

There are various places where the forces which operate against Christopher focus. Sylvia Tietjens is one of the most important. She is a fine creation. At first her hate for Christopher may seem as motiveless as Edith Ethel's. But Ford succeeds in giving us a very precise sense of exactly what it is that drives Sylvia to distraction, to a fury so intense that she must rend everything within reach--including herself. There is first of all Sylvia's own masochistic delight in being ravished. Sylvia's sexuality is a mess. It veers wildly on the worn tick-tack of masochism/sadism. Memories of being violently

ravished (the fact that she's pregnant adds to the thrill) make her writhe and groan in deliciously ambiguous sensuality. There is, of course, no chance of Christopher--with all his nineteenth century proprieties--answering this need in her. And so her sensual obsession with him expresses itself in the sadistic mode. And that in turn is brilliantly linked with her memory of beating the fat, white, passive bulldog to death:

> I remembered the white bulldog I thrashed on the night before it died...A tired, silent beast...with a fat white behind....Tired out....You couldn't see its tail because it was turned down, the stump....A great, silent beast....The vet said it had been poisoned with red lead by burglars.... It's beastly to die of red lead....It eats up the liver... And you think you're better for a fortnight. And you're always cold...freezing in the blood-vessels....And the poor beast had left its kennel to try and be let in to the fire....And I found it at the door when I came in from a dance without Christopher....And got the rhinoceros whip and lashed into it. There's a pleasure in lashing into a naked white beast...Obese and silent, like Christopher...I thought Christopher might....That night....It went through my head....It hung down its head....A great head, room for a whole British encyclopaedia of mis-information, as Christopher used to put it. It said: "What a hope!" ...As I hope to be saved, though I never shall be, the dog said: "What a hope!"...Snow-white in quite black bushes....And it went under a bush....They found it dead there in the morning....You can't imagine what it looked like, with its head over its shoulder, as it looked back and said: "What a hope!" to me....Under a dark bush. An eu...eu...euonymus, isn't it?...In thirty degrees of frost with all the blood-vessels exposed on the naked surface of the skin... It's the seventh circle of hell, isn't it? the frozen one....The last stud-white bulldog of that breed....As Christopher is the last stud-white hope of the Groby Tory breed...(NMP p.160)

It is, of course, the combination of her own biting sexual appetite ("I thought Christopher might...") with the passive non-resistance to her lashes which provokes her into further displays of wild sadism. Significantly this memory and this

identification of Christopher with the dog is one that recurs continually to Sylvia. It is clear that Christopher's English Gentleman's ability to control so perfectly the demands of his own sensuality is another steady provocation of Sylvia. (The urgency of her own appetite is beautifully caught in the scene at the front where Sylvia is haunted by a wonderful image: "There occurred to her irreverent mind a sentence of one of the Duchess of Marlborough's letters to Queen Anne. The duchess had visited the general during one of his campaigns in Flanders. "My Lord," she wrote, "did me the honour three times in his boots!" (NMP, p.188)

Against all of Sylvia's need for thrill, electric excitement, nervous stimulation there is opposed Christopher's control, stolidity, inertness. Christopher has honed those qualities to the stage where they are most effective as offensive weapons. Indeed he recognizes that: "I am damn good at not speaking", he says. And so Sylvia's desperate need to elicit some, any, response: "By the immortal saints," she exclaimed, "I swear I'll make his wooden face wince yet." (NMP, p.117) Christopher's response to this desperation is to retreat even further behind his mask of politeness thus in turn increasing Sylvia's frustration and rage. Indeed at some metaphysical level Christopher's inertness enforces a complete impotence on Sylvia. She can say or do nothing that will be registered by Christopher. She is living in a void: neither actions nor words have any effect. We sense the terror that must be hers.

Add to all this Sylvia's tight awareness of having sinned against all the proprieties, and her recognition that in all his actions Christopher merely shores up those proprieties a little more strongly, and we begin to understand her characteristic rage:

> "...oh, Christopher Tietjens, have you ever considered how foully you've used me!"
> Tietjens looked at her attentively, as if with magpie anguish.
> "If," Sylvia went on with her denunciation, "you had once in our lives said to me: 'You whore! You bitch! You killed my mother. May you rot in hell for it....' if you'd only once said something like it...about the child! About Perowne! you might have done something to bring us together...."
> Tietjens said:
> "That's, of course, true!"
> "I know," Sylvia said, "you can't help it...But when, in your famous county family pride--though a youngest son!--you say to yourself: And I daresay if... Oh, Christ!...you're shot in the trenches you'll say it... oh, between the saddle and the ground! that you never did a dishonourable action...And, mind you, I believe that no other man save one has ever had more right to say it than you...."
> Tietjens said:
> "You believe that!"
> "As I hope to stand before my Redeemer," Sylvia said, "I believe it....But, in the name of the Almighty, how could any woman live beside you...and be for ever forgiven? Or no: not forgiven: ignored!...Well, be proud when you die because of your honour. But, God, be humble about...your errors in judgment. You know what it is to ride a horse for miles with too tight a curb-chain and its tongue cut almost in half.... You remember the groom your father had who had the trick of turning the hunters out like that....And you horse-whipped him, and you've told me you've almost cried ever so often afterwards for thinking of that mare's mouth.... Well! Think of this mare's mouth sometimes! You've ridden me like that for seven years...."(SDN pp.216-217)

With the understanding generated by a passage like this comes what can only be called a certain respect. Christopher feels it too: Sylvia is one of "only two human beings he had met

for years whom he could respect." He respects her for "sheer efficiency in killing." She's "a good hater." With this respect goes too a certain sympathy. General Campion makes an important point. Tietjens asks:

> "...what is a man to do if his wife is unfaithful to him?" The general said as if it were an insult:
> "Divorce the harlot! Or live with her!...Only a beast" he went on, "would expect a woman to live all her life alone in a cockloft! She's bound to die. Or go on the streets...What sort of a fellow wouldn't see that? Was there any sort of beast who'd expect a woman to live...with a man beside her....Why, she'd...she'd be bound to....He'd have to take the consequences of whatever happened." The general repeated: "Whatever happened! If she pulled all the strings of all the shower-baths in the world.!" (NMP, p.250)

So we do feel sympathy for Sylvia, and we understand her grim determination to wring some response from Christopher. It is true--in a fashion--that Sylvia loves Christopher, (though hardly "soppily" as Mark would have it, Sylvia is seldom soppy!) But in a case like this "love" is simply insufficient as a term. It is an old dialectic: tenderness has failed--lost its potency--and pain has become an irresistible tool with which to inflict intimacy. Sylvia makes it clear early on that she is dedicating herself totally to the inflicting of that pain. But there is a danger in presenting a figure so obsessed. For the example of any extreme of behaviour can be terrifying or mesmerizing or moving as long as we have some window into it allowing us some comprehension of the forces operating to make it so extreme. The danger is that if this extreme is held too long or pushed too far the behaviour, rather than being horrifying, suddenly becomes

simply silly. And Sylvia does at times, in the mono-minded pursuit of inflicting pain on Christopher, become almost silly. Her threat to the priest, Father Consett, that she will torment Christopher by..."Corrupting the child!" verges on nineteenth century melodrama. That hint of melodrama is reinforced by the extraordinary threat with which Father Consett replies: to carry out a kind of unilateral exorcism. All this silliness is compounded by Mrs. Satterthwaite saying "Was it necessary to threaten her with that? You know best, of course. It seems rather strong to me...Of course that's your affair, Father," Mrs. Satterthwaite continues, "You hit her pretty hard. I don't suppose she's ever been hit so hard." (SDN pp.57-58)

But the melodrama does reveal the extremities to which Sylvia's passion pushes her. Continually her ice-mask cracks, her marvellous control is threatened by her need to see Christopher react. At first it may seem as though Sylvia becomes merely repetitive in her repeated attempts to touch the quick of Christopher. Worse, at times Sylvia seems to lack any genuine creativity in her nastiness. A woman of her intelligence should be able to keep more abreast of the game, concede the points already lost, change her tactics when necessary. She doesn't do this, and as we listen to her list of petty harassments, drawing all Christopher's pay out of their joint account, stopping his mail, accusing him of stealing sheets, we may begin to lose some of the respect we once had for her. But it is important that we recognize that it is part of Ford's conception of the character

of Sylvia that she should be unable to control these excesses. She is agonizingly aware of her lack of control. In Rouen she is thinking of Father Consett: "That is what you would say, father...Have mercy on them, for they know not what they do... Then have mercy on me, for half the time I don't know what I'm doing." (NMP, p.158) These repeated examples of desperate silliness do body forth the weight of her despair and anguish.

What is important about Sylvia as Christopher's main adversary is that at least Christopher knows her as an opponent--knows that she is threatening. This clarity is refreshing in a novel where so many of the threats to Christopher turn upon misunderstandings or confusions. At their lightest these misjudgments are rather fun: Macmaster visualizing Edith Ethel as the ideal mate for Christopher while Christopher sees Valentine Wannop as particularly appropriate for Macmaster. But the misjudgments quickly become much more weighty than that. Sylvia ponders: "How was it possible that the most honourable man she knew should be so overwhelmed by foul and baseless rumours?"[8] If there's a certain irony in Sylvia asking that question, it is, nevertheless, one which must be answered. And the answer starts with an incredible proliferation of misconceptions.

So much depends upon Mark completely misjudging his brother and persuading his father to share in this misunderstanding. How believable are all these misjugements? Can the members of a

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[8] A pre-echo of Kafka? Kafka is another author fascinated by the efficacy of untruth. "Someone had been telling lies about Joseph K."

family know each other so ill as to believe quite extraordinary rumours about their respective son and brother? How can Mark and his father believe the unspeakable Ruggles? (Mark especially, inasmuch as he has been living with Ruggles for twenty years and must know something about his character.) Would Valentine Wannop really believe that Christopher had slept with Edith Ethel and, indeed, impregnated her? Valentine "...considered with seriousness that, men being what they are, her lover respecting, or despairing of, herself had relieved the grosser necessities of his being--at the expense of Mrs. Duchemin, who had, no doubt, been only too ready."(SDN p.332) "Grosser necessities of his being"?! And once that had been straightened out could Valentine ever believe that Christopher on his return to England after the war would phone and ask Edith Ethel to effect a reunion between Christopher and her? Just how much of a pantaloon is old General Campion? How seriously can we take his hyperbolic outrage when he hears Sylvia's absurd accusation that Christopher is a socialist?

One must be wary with this sort of questioning. Ford does attempt to mollify our doubts and hesitations. He captures that combination of Yorkshire reticence, pride and stubbornness that so hampers communication within the family. (Though it is interesting how quickly and completely Christopher and Mark seem to be able to establish communication at their first real attempt.) And perhaps it is possible to be as Campion is: a fine far-sighted officer, willing and able to fight against the military policy of those now in charge, but also a short-sighted

almost wilfully blind, doting old fool in relation to Sylvia. Certainly he demonstrates an unforgiveable credulity in his acceptance of Sylvia's slanders of Christopher whom he has known all his life. Nevertheless some doubts remain. Why is Christopher so sure that that one word "Paddington" spoken at dawn in Sylvia's clear voice had cut their union "...as the tendon of Achilles is cut in a hamstringing..."? Why does it only occur to him somewhat belatedly that "Miss Wannop, too, might not have meant their parting to be a permanency."? Why is this world filled with such a number of unanswerable questions?

One way of examining this question is by looking more closely at the figure who is the focus of all these misunderstandings. Ford makes it clear that there is much in Christopher himself which contributes to the persistence of the confusions. At first the characteristics of Christopher Tietjens of Groby, the last true Tory and English Gentleman, seem only to be the focus for a very mild irony. Sylvia sums up Christopher wittily and not unkindly: "...he's so formal he can't do without all the conventions there are and so truthful he can't use half of them."(SDN,p.46) Christopher is a gentleman[9] and as a

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[9] Though heaven knows what we are to make of Christopher's criterion for gentility: "she was the daughter of Professor Wannop and she could jump! Tietjens held very strongly the theory that what finally separated the classes was that the upper could lift its feet from the ground whilst common people couldn't." (sic Some Do Not, p.113) cf The extraordinary description of the young man arriving for what he hopes (he is very mistaken) will be a steamy sexual rendez-vous with Sylvia: "He had come in like a stallion, red-eyed, and all his legs off the ground:"(SDN, p.184) Is the significance in whether it is your feet or your legs that are off the ground?

gentleman has a full and onerous set of pre-established rules of conduct. There is nice comedy in the portrait of Christopher who as Tietjens of Groby is too much set apart from his surrounding world to enjoy any kind of competition with it. (I was going to say..."too far above", but that is really the wrong metaphor; the Tietjens are better than the common ruck, of course, ça va sans dire, but even to suggest the possibility of a comparison would be to insult the Tietjens, and miss their unique sense of otherness...so not "above" but "apart") Not, of course, that Christopher is not an athlete. He does permit himself experimental shots on the golf course (playing against himself and thus not demeaning himself in any way.) And..."he liked playing tennis. Real Tennis. But he very rarely played because he couldn't get fellows to play with...that beating would not be disagreeable..."(MSU,p.371) It is appropriate that it is "real" tennis, and instructive that the outcome threatening any contest seems to be Christopher's inevitable victory.[10] Again the

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[10] We might compare Tietjens as golfer with Ford's version of himself:

> "You know what the third hole (at Littleton-on-Sea) is like...a good player such as I was would carry the ridge and find the green below. I recently did so, but my ball was lost. After a prolonged search for it by all concerned, I was on the point of giving it up when I happened to look in the hole, and there it was. I said to myself: When one can play as well as that, golf ceases to be a sport and becomes a mere matter of mechanics. With play of such excellence and accuracy one might as well pick up the ball and walk over to the hole and drop it in. I felt that golf had no further charms for me, and I have now abandoned it." (Mizener, p.xvii.)

movement characteristic of Parade's End takes place and we move from a light social satire that plays over Tietjens' aloofness --he is Christopher Tietjens of Groby, "no man could give him anything, no man could take anything away from him"--to a much more serious consideration of the characteristics and the implications of that "superiority". Christopher's gentlemanly demeanour and reticence cover a great deal. "For the basis of Christopher Tietjens' emotional existence was a complete taciturnity--at any rate as to his emotions. As Tietjens saw the world, you didn't 'talk'. Perhaps you didn't even think about how you felt."(SDN,p.15) Perhaps! One is--significantly--reminded of an earlier English gentleman who didn't think much about how he felt:

> "I only wondered what you felt," she murmured gently. During the last few days, as it happened, Charles Gould had been kept too busy thinking twice before he spoke to have paid much attention to the state of his feelings. But theirs was a succesful match, and he had no difficulty in finding his answer.
> "The best of my feelings are in your keeping, my dear," he said lightly; and there was so much truth in that obscure phrase that he experienced toward her at that moment a great increase of gratitude and tenderness.[11]

While one might observe that this quotation is what Curtis Brown alleges Ford said, and might perhaps be exaggerated, it has--in that extraordinary image of Ford by Ford--a ring of authenticity.

[11] J. Conrad, Nostromo (1904; rpt. New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1961) p. 60

The fate of Charles Gould is, of course, instructive. Ford expands on these--perhaps particularly English--characterisitics:

> It has been remarked that the peculiarly English habit of self-suppression in matters of the emotion puts the Englishman at a great disadvantage in moments of unusual stress. In the smaller matters of the general run of life he will be impeccable and not to be moved; but in sudden confrontations of anything but physical dangers he is apt--he is, indeed, almost certain--to go to pieces very badly....in the face of death--except at sea, by fire, railway accident, accidental drowning in rivers; in the face of madness, passion, dishonour or--and particularly--prolonged mental strain, you will have all the disadvantages of the beginner at any game and may come off very badly indeed. Fortunately death, love, public dishonour and the like are rare occurrences in the life of the average man, so that the great advantage would seem to have lain with English society; at any rate before the later months of the year 1914.(SDN,p.224)

It is the combination of Christopher's gentility, his unexamined emotions and the various moral precepts he believes to be incumbent upon gentility ("No one but a blackguard would ever submit a woman to the ordeal of divorce."[SDN,p.15]) that so unfits him for the confrontation with the world, with Sylvia, and with Valentine. Again he deals with these situations--or tries to--with a code of unvarying laws; laws that by the end of the novels border on a set of unexamined clichés: "It was better for a boy to have a rip of a father than a whore for a mother!" (SDN,p.100) As usual, we first observe these characteristics of Christopher in the comic mode: Christopher and Valentine are lost in the fog, Valentine scrambles up into the cart:

> Before she was quite up, Tietjens almost kissed her. Almost. An all but irresistable impulse! He exclaimed: "Steady, the Buffs!" in his surprise...It was as if for a moment destiny, which usually let him creep past

> somehow, had looked at him. "Can't," he argued with destiny, "a man want to kiss a schoolgirl in a scuffle...." His own voice, a caricature of his own voice, seemed to come to him: "Gentlemen don't..." (SDN,p.173)

And as usual we quickly perceive the very serious implications of his, sometimes comic, reliance on old saws. Consistent with the Christopher we know is that characteristic in him which prevents him from seeing what a mess he is making. I have accused him a number of times of not examining himself, his emotions, the codes by which he lives. Certainly the vision he has of himself does not open up the possibility of new truths occurring to him: "Why, if he, Christopher Tietjens of Groby, had the need to justify himself, what did it stand for to be Christopher Tietjens of Groby? That was the unthinkable thought."(NMP,p.80)

It is, then, Christopher's ideas of the behaviour requisite to a gentleman, combined with his obvious extreme emotional innocence, which makes him take the extraordinary step of marrying someone as twisted as Sylvia. The vision of Christopher mooning and bumbling over his fastidious proprieties as he prepares to marry Sylvia is wonderfully macabre. And of course it is the same set of characteristics that prevents him from dealing effectively with her. I have already suggested that one of Ford's victories here is the way in which he makes us feel sympathy for Sylvia as Christopher's increasingly misjudged attempts to deal with her, meet her, or answer her, simply tighten the screws on her frustration. All Christopher's superficial saws ("A gentleman must...") are, of course, full of gross errors of judgement. And

those clichés all rest on some more fundamental inabilities to see what is there in front of him. Consider this attempt of Christopher's to come to some judgment of Sylvia:

> "....I believe you to be a good woman. One that never did a dishonourable thing." ...
> "You mean to say that you don't think I was wicked when I...when I trepanned is what mother calls it?..."
> He said loudly:
> "No!...You had been let in for it by some brute. I have always held that a woman who has been let down by her man has the right--has the duty for the sake of her child--to let down a man. It becomes woman against man: against one man. I happened to be that one man: it was the will of God. But you were within your rights. I will never go back on that. Nothing will make me, ever!" (SDN,p.218)

The confusions here reflect the difficulties that inhere when traditional roles break down: there is no solid ground for judgement. Even when Christopher judges Sylvia adversely his criteria are suspect: "A mother who made scenes before the servants! That was enough to ruin any boy's life..."(NMP,p.81) Gradually we are forced to realize that in many of the most important areas of Christopher's life--his relationship with his wife, the needs of his son--he judges very poorly.

Sylvia, outraged at Christopher's emotional control, accuses him of being emotionally impotent. And that is a fear that plagues Christopher himself. But from the beginning it is as clear that Christopher has emotions, strong ones, as it is that they are repressed. All of this is rendered in those opening conversations with Macmaster about Sylvia: "The brandy made no difference to his mentality, but it seemed to keep him from shivering."(SDN,p.18) What Christopher has to fear is what we may

call Casaubon's law: repress your feeling for too long, and when you finally release the control instead of the flood you expect you may find only a dry whisper. Certainly Christopher does little to know his emotions, examine them, exercise them, or keep them healthy. And there are moments when we question the vitality of his emotional life. Sylvia sees him in the hotel in France:

> It came to her with extraordinary gladness--the absolute conviction that he was not corresponding with Miss Wannop. The absolute conviction...If he had come alive enough to do that he would have looked different. She did not know how he would have looked. But different... Alive! Perhaps self-conscious: perhaps...satisfied... (NMP,p.123)

Others of Christopher's desires dovetail with these repressions. He sees very clearly that his desire to join the French Foreign Legion is another manifestation of his desire for sainthood. And that desire in turn is, at least in part, only a desire for the simplicity of living a life with no wordly entanglements:

> You would have six months of training in the desert and then be hurled into the line to be masssacred without remorse...as foreign dirt. But the prospect seemed to him one of deep peace: he had never asked for soft living and now was done with it.... Obviously he might survive; but after that tremendous physical drilling what survived would not be himself, but a man with cleaned, sand-dried bones: a clear mind. His private ambition had always been for saintliness...his desire was to be a saint of the Anglican variety. (SDN, p.284)

He is like Yeats' St. Anthony:

> O what a sweetness strayed
> Through barren Thebaid,
> Or by the Mareotic sea
> When that Exultant Anthony
> And twice a thousand more
> Starved upon the shore
> And withered to a bag of bones!
> What had the Caesars but their thrones?

"Demon and Beast"

His desire for spiritual purity is complemented by the more mundane desire for a gentleman's privacy, and dignity:

> For, as he saw it, English people of good position consider that the basis of all marital unions or disunions is the maxim: No scenes. Obviously for the sake of the servants--who are the same thing as the public. No scenes, then, for the sake of the public. And indeed, with him, the instinct for privacy--as to his relationships, his passions, or even as to his most unimportant motives--was as strong as the instinct of life itself. He would, literally, rather be dead than an open book.(NMP,p.70)

Christopher runs the risk, literally, of killing his emotional life in a confused attempt to maintain his privacies. Ironically, it is precisely his attempts to guard what he sees as his privacies that make him so vulnerable to the various slanders that are spread about him and his personal life, that push his private life into the public domain.

All of this suggests the fashion in which it may be possible to question Christopher's emotional potency. It is not, as Sylvia would have it, that Christopher has no emotions. But it is clear that Christopher cannot admit his emotions, make them articulate, and so shape or work with them. It is because Christopher is so enigmatic to most people that they will and can believe even the most incredible of the stories that Sylvia circulates.

But these misunderstandings lead us to some central questions. Valentine Wannop asks Christopher if Sylvia's accusation that Edith Ethel is his mistress is true:

> "Damn it all, how could you ask such a tomfool question? You! I took you to be an intelligent person. The only intelligent person I know...Don't you know me?"(SDN, pp.276-277)

Well, all of Ford's novels suggest that to know someone is a very complex, very difficult accomplishment. But at first glance it may seem that the problem with Christopher's question is that the answer to it is difficult not because of certain irreducible aspects of the human state, but rather because of various silly lies and confusions that are simply obscuring the central issues. Surely at this stage of the novel it is simply no longer interesting to suggest that Edith Ethel is Christopher's mistress. Even the most rudimentary knowledge of Christopher rules that possibility out. And yet, time after time, the possibility is re-introduced. But the point that is being made (here and elsewhere) is that these confusions exist in a large part because Christopher himself is so confused about himself, about--in this case--his own sexuality. Christopher never really gets an answer to his question, in part because he cannot see himself and his situation clearly enough to grasp the need for a response (or to grasp the major ambiguities and complexities that such a question points toward).

Gradually we perceive that in spite of an almost complete surface plausibility Christopher and his world are being subject to a firm and pointed critique. Take the portrait of Mark. He has his father's interesting ability to accept even the grossest calumnies of his brother with nary a demur. That aspect of Yorkshire reserve is never the focus of the novel's attention.

What is the focus is the sentimentality that lies at the heart of the relationship between Mark and Christopher. The sentimentality depends upon making Mark and Christopher both stolidly unsentimental types: strong, dour, stubborn, reserved North-Riding Yorkshiremen, and then allowing them, as they ostensibly continue with their hard-bitten manner, to indulge quite surreptitiously in wet seas of sentimentality:[12]

> "Got your knife into me?" Mark asked.
> "Yes. I've got my knife into you," Christopher answered. "Into the whole bloody lot of you, and Ruggles and ffolliot and our father!"
> Mark said: "Ah!"
> "You don't suppose I wouldn't have?" Christopher asked.
> "Oh, I don't suppose you wouldn't have," Mark answered. "I thought you were a soft sort of bloke. I see you aren't."
> "I'm as North Riding as yourself!" Christopher answered.
> ...
> "You won't forgive father?"
> Christopher said:
> "I won't forgive father for not making a will. I won't forgive him for calling in Ruggles. I saw him and you in the writing-room the night before he died. He never spoke to me. He could have. It was clumsy stupidity. That's unforgiveable."[13]
> "The fellow shot himself," Mark said. "You usually forgive a fellow who shoots himself."
> "I don't," Christopher said. "Besides, he's probably in heaven and won't need my forgiveness. Ten to one he's in heaven. He was a good man."
> "One of the best," Mark said. "It was I that called

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[12] This combination of a tough, laconic exterior and an extraordinarily sentimental interior is something that Ford may have passed on to Hemingwy. It runs through the centre of a novel like A Farewell to Arms.

[13] This scene recalls, of course, the earlier scene of Christopher and his father at the club, and drives home the ironies discussed above.

> in Ruggles though."
> "I don't forgive you either," Christopher said.
> "But you _must_," Mark said--and it was a tremendous concession to sentimentality--"take enough to make you comfortable."(_SDN_,pp.269-271)

(Ford is being particularly disingenuous here. The sentimentality that fills this passage has nothing to do with Mark trying to make Christopher take enough to make him comfortable.)

> "There's one thing more," Mark said. "I suppose the boy is your son?"
> "Yes, he's my son," Christopher said.
> "Then that's all," Mark said. "I suppose if you're killed you won't mind my keeping an eye on the youngster?"
> "I'll be glad," Christopher said.
> They strolled along the Embankment side by side, walking rather slowly, their backs erected and their shoulders squared because of their satisfaction of walking together, desiring to lengthen the walk by going slow. Once or twice they stopped to look at the dirty silver of the river, for both liked grim effects of landscape. They felt very strong, as if they owned the land!
> ...He [Christopher] was aware that his brother desired to stay with him as long as possible. He desired it himself.(_SDN_,pp.269-274)

(Here is the technique in miniature: it is the juxtaposition of "dirty," "grim" and "strong" with all that "desire" that gives the sentimentality its particular pungency.) All this is capped by the marvellous and monumental sentimentality of crusty old Mark giving Valentine her much-needed hundreds, promising her to get Christopher posted to a safe job with transport, and all the time assuring her about Christopher: "...he's my brother all right!" and, "...don't give it to old Christopher too beastly hard about his militarist opinions...Remember, he's going out tomorrow, and he's one of the best." None of which is to deny the genuine sentiment that lies underneath this exchange. But we do

recognize that the sentimentality itself allows the characters to evade certain daunting questions. (What is the relationship between Mark's willingness to believe the worst of Christopher so easily and the facility with which he lapses into a sentimental love?)[14]

The love of Christopher and Valentine is a love that is created in an allusive and indirect dialectic. It is the space between them as much as the links joining them which defines that relationship. Their greatest and most passionate love scene is in the wonderful comedy of their mutual decision that they are the sort who do not consumate their passion illicitly.[15] It would be churlish and wrong-headed to ask for a weighty analysis of that love. And for most of the novels we are content to accept that relationship as it is offered. Ford runs into serious trouble only when he tries to become explicit about what has been implicit so succesfully:

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[14] Again one must point out in fairness to Ford that at the very end of Some Do Not... he does, glancingly, recognize that that sentimentality is there. He still refuses to analyze it or its implications.

[15] Valentine agrees with Christopher's hesitation: "...Too ...oh...private!" she says. It's an interesting choice of words, and may remind us that Christopher and Valentine still think of their world as one where private and public space do not threaten or contradict each other. One of the ways of characterizing the world they are moving into would be to suggest that the proper relationship between public and private space has completely broken down. Public matters translate themselves into hideous private demands. Private behaviour contradicts public show. (Campion's willingness to perjure himself in court has interesting implications.) For further discussion of this interesting question see Lyn Bicker, "Public and Private Choices" in D. Goldman, Women and World War 1, (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1993)

> But, in these later days, much greater convulsions had overwhelmed her. It sufficed for Tietjens to approach her to make her feel as if her whole body was drawn towards him as, being near a terrible height, you are drawn towards it. Great waves of blood rushed across her being as if physical forces as yet undiscovered or invented attracted the very fluid itself. The moon so draws the tides.
>
> Once before, for a fraction of a second, after the long, warm night of their drive, she had felt that impulsion. Now, years after, she was to know it all the time, waking or half waking; and it would drive her from her bed. She would stand all night at the open window till the stars paled above a world turned grey. It could convulse her with joy; it could shake her with sobs and cut through her breast like a knife.
>
> Every word that he had spoken amongst the massed beauties of Macmaster furnishings had been a link in a love-speech. It was not merely that he had confessed to her as he would have to no other soul in the world--"To no other soul in the world," he had said!--his doubts, his misgivings and his fears: it was that every word he uttered and that came to her, during the lasting of that magic, had sung of passion. If he had uttered the word "Come" she would have followed him to the bitter ends of the earth; if he had said, "There is no hope," she would have known the finality of despair. Having said neither, he said she knew: "This is our condition; so we must continue!"(<u>SDN</u>,p.330)17

D. H. Lawrence at his very best can write convincingly of sexual passion partly because he gives us all of the rest of the relationship, sensual, emotional, cerebral, that goes into such a moment, and places and judges it. (Though even Lawrence has his troubles with moments like these--with trying to become too explicit--cf. "Excurse" in <u>Women in Love</u>.) Unfortunately Ford gives us very little with which to place these ponderous forces.[16] But what we do know is that the difficulties that

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[16] cf. Graham Greene's extraordinary judgement: <u>The Good Soldier</u> and the Tietjens novels are "...almost the only adult novels dealing with the sexual life that have been written in English. They are almost our only reply to Flaubert." Leaving aside the question of whether an English answer to Flaubert could ever

plague the love of Christopher and Valentine derive from Christopher's own uncertainties. In A Man Could Stand Up we have Christopher wondering whether Valentine might have married a War Office clerk. He reassures himself: "Valentine Wannop, who had listened to his conversation, would never want to mingle intimately in another's."[17] By this stage we may well be

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be "an adult novel dealing with sexual life" Greene's judgement is still astonishing. The attitude to sexuality most frequently expressed in Ford's novels is articulated by Christopher's son Mark in Last Post:

> ...the dominion of women over those of the opposite sex was a terrible thing. He had seen the old General whimper like a whipped dog and mumble in his poor white moustache... Mother was splendid. But wasn't sex a terrible thing...
> (LP, p.73)

[17] Characteristically Ford has Christopher use language and thought close enough to that already used by Sylvia (NMP p. 127) to make us wonder if it is being done on purpose. This is a problem that frequently recurs in these novels: one character takes over--with no apparent justification or attempt at plausibility--another's words, preoccupations or phrases. This happens with the use of "cats and monkeys" which first appear in Christopher's mind: "He remembered the words of some Russian: 'Cats and monkeys. Monkeys and cats. All humanity is there.'" (Cassell [op. cit.] notes the phrase is from James's "The Madonna of the Future" [the actual quotation there is: "Cats and monkeys, monkeys and cats; all human life is there!"--Ford quotes it at least twice in his book on James.] and, perhaps, originally from Turgenev.) The same phrase suddenly re-appears in the mouth of Mrs. Wannop: "...there you are working yourself to death to save the nation with a wilderness of cats and monkeys howling and squalling your personal reputation away..." The words "Napoo finny" are used first by Edith Ethel to describe exactly what she is going to do with the relationship between her husband and Christopher. Some thirty pages later Valentine uses the same phrase to describe what will happen to her chastity as soon as Christopher speaks the word, or looks the look. Admittedly is was a common enough phrase at this time, but in the novel it is only used these two times, and the second use does point us back to the first. Why? (Christopher uses it in the more usual context--the war--in No More Parades.) There is also the problem of the idea of the curse on Groby and its relation to the

beginning to feel no little impatience with Christopher. After what has passed between Christopher and Valentine why is there this sort of estrangement? Is Valentine--leaving her emotions for Christopher out of the question--even remotely likely to have married a War Office clerk? Why has Christopher never written to Valentine? "If he stopped one or went dotty....Wouldn't it make it infinitely worse for her to know that his love for her had been profound and immutable?" (MSU,p.423) Really Christopher. Think! More and more we are forced to confront the various confusions and misjudgments that lie behind the Tietjens of Groby facade.

Finally the complexities of Christopher's temporizing become Byzantine. Late in A Man Could Stand Up we discover that Christopher now says that he fabricated the quarrel with Mark (the pretext was that Mark had believed Ruggles' slander of Christopher) so that he could refuse the family money, so that he would have no responsibility to Groby, so that he could live with Valentine Wannop. The passage is well worth quoting in full.

> He had refused to take any money from Brother Mark on the ground of a fantastic quarrel. But he had not any quarrel with Brother Mark. The sardonic pair of them were just matching obstinacies. On the other hand you had to set to the tenantry an example of chastity, sobriety, probity, or you could not take

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felling of Groby Great Tree which occurs to both Sylvia and Mark though no communication takes place between them. There is the Italian proverb about trees, houses and doctors that occurs quite independently to Mark and to the young Mark. All of these instances call attention to Ford himself, make one wonder what he is doing, or trying to do, and seriously disrupt the consistency of the point-of-view in the novels.

> their beastly money. You provided them with the best Canadian seed corn; with agricultural experiments suited to their soils; you sat on the head of your agent; you kept their buildings in repair; you apprenticed their sons; you looked after their daughters when they got into trouble and after their bastards, your own or another man's. But you must reside on the estate. <u>You must reside on the estate</u>. The money that comes out of those poor devils' pockets must go back into the land so that the estate and all on it, down to the licensed beggars, may grow richer and richer and richer. So he had invented his fantastic quarrel with Brother Mark: because he was going to take Valentine to live with him. You could not have a Valentine Wannop having with you in a Groby the infinite and necessary communings. You could have a painted doxy for the servants' hall, quarrelling with the other maids, who would want her job, and scandalizing the parsons for miles round. In their sardonic way the tenants appreciated that: it was in the tradition and all over the Riding they did it themselves. But not a lady: the daughter of your father's best friend! They wanted Quality women to <u>be</u> Quality and they themselves would go to ruin, spend their dung-and-seed money on whores and wreck the fortunes of the Estate, sooner than that you should indulge in infinite conversations...So he hadn't taken a penny of their money from his brother, and he wouldn't take a penny when he in turn became Groby. Fortunately, there was the heir...Otherwise he could not have gone with that girl! (<u>MSU</u>,pp.421-422)

The confusions here are revealing. First of all there are the confusions about time. In fact Christopher has his quarrel with Mark well <u>before</u> he comes to his decision to live with Valentine. Secondly the suggestion that one must set an example for one's tenants is quickly belied by the admission that in fact it is quite acceptable to keep a painted doxy. What Christopher really says here is you should look after your tenants, and provide them with a Quality woman they can admire if not emulate. We may well wonder about his decision to leave Groby to Sylvia's ministrations. She is not--we can say dryly--an example of

chastity, sobriety or probity. Is she offered as an example of genuine Quality? What the argument comes down to is that it is somehow better for the tenantry--one owes it to feudalism--for Christopher to live with Sylvia, and have doxies on the side, than it is for him to live with Valentine.

What is worrying about all this is that one begins to suspect that this is not about _Christopher's_ anachronistic notions of feudal proprieties, rather we begin to feel that this is merely _Ford_ tossing off some rather silly fantasies about the world of "quality". What one might want to say of Christopher is that he--with his background--is the very man to cut through all this sort of sham and hypocrisy, and demonstrate what real morality is. One is aware that it is precisely this sense of the convoluted complexities that insists upon the various compromises and temporizing in the world of Ford's novels. Nevertheless one may long for the direct vigour of--say--Lawrentian criticism. One can imagine his comments on the passage quoted above. In _Some Do Not_ Christopher actually voices an objection to the endless calumnies he has suffered under: he has just announced to Ruggles that he is going to resign from their club on a matter of principle:

> "Oh, I say!" he [Ruggles] had said. "Not that...You couldn't do that...Not to the _club_!...It's never been done...It's an insult...."
> "It's meant to be," Tietjens said. "Gentlemen shouldn't be expected to belong to a club that has certain members on its committee."
> Ruggles' deepish voice suddenly grew very high.
> "Eh, I say, you know!" he squeaked.
> Tietjens had said:

> "I'm not vindictive.... But I _am_ deadly tired: of all old women and their chatter." (_SDN_,p.353)

Compare that last line of Christopher's to Mellors's comment uttered under somewhat similar circumstances: "Folks should do their own fuckin', then they wouldn't want to listen to a lot of clatfart about another man's." "Clatfart" is wonderful, and one wishes on occasion that Ford or Christopher had a little of that directness.

I want now to turn to what seems to me the major question one must ask of Christopher. This has to do with his relationship to the war. And this discussion will pick up a number of issues already introduced. Early on in _Some Do Not_ Valentine accuses Christopher:

> "...you've worked everything into absurd principles... _You_ want to be a Nenglish (sic)[18] country gentleman and spin principles out of the newspapers and the gossip of horse-fairs. And let the country go to hell, you'll never stir a finger except to say I told you so." (_SDN_,p.171)

Christopher tries to defend himself: "Principles are like a skeleton map of a country--you know whether you're going east or north." But it is clear that the accusation rankles. About one

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[18] A formulation like "Nenglish" is not nearly as unusual as it ought to be in any of the editions of _Parade's End_. They are all full of ridiculous mistakes which make nonsense of the language. The Bodley Head edition is bad enough--the new American edition by Random House (which uses the same text as Penguin) is much worse. The problem is compounded by Ford's own penchant for both playing games with proper names (Mackenzie/McKechnie) and for simply confusing them. (Is Christopher's son 'Tommy' or 'Michael'? What are his brothers' names? Is it 'ffolliott' or 'folliott' or ffolliot?) While one would like to argue that the general confusion about names is quite appropriate in novels where identity is so ambiguous, it is clear that many of the confusions are simply a result of Ford's own carelessness.

hundred pages later, after his long intimate conversation with Valentine, he returns to it:

> "...But you see.... Don't you see?"...
> "No! What am I to see?"
> "That I'm certainly not an English country gentleman now; picking up the gossip of the horse markets and saying: "let the country go to hell, for me!"(SDN,p.297)

Well, how does he feel about principles? What is his responsibility to his country?

I am interested first of all in the machinations whereby Macmaster earns his knighthood. Chrissie has almost as a joke--a jest with which to wile away the time--"in the merest spirit of bravado" (SDN,p.313)--provided Macmaster with a set of figures whereby one can demonstrate to our allies (the French) that their losses are really only more or less a normal year's depreciation. (It is also worth noting that this is the first mathematical test that Christopher has undertaken since his injury. His ability to complete it "successfully" heralds his mental recovery from the wounds.) Those who want to direct all the British resources to the "true" seat of Britain's interests--the Near East--propose to use these figures to justify their abandonment of their French allies. Indeed so much importance is attached to this justification that Macmaster gets his knighthood because of it. Now Christopher's position here is very ambiguous. He believes firmly that the British have a moral and pragmatic responsibility to honour their commitment to the French. He wants the single command, which his figures oppose, and realizes how necessary it

is to the army. He knows how misleading his figures are. Valentine says to him:

> "But weren't you arguing about your own convictions?"
> He said:
> "Yes, of course I was. In the lightness of my heart! It's always a good thing to formulate the other fellow's objections." ...
> "But isn't it dangerous? To show these people how to do it?"
> He said:
> "Oh no, no. No! You don't know what a good soul little Vinnie is. I don't think you've ever been quite just to Vincent Macmaster! He's as soon think of picking my pocket as of picking my brains. The soul of honour!" (SDN, p.314)

Christopher could not be more wrong. And this of course enforces some further questions about Christopher's relationship with Macmaster. Exactly why does Christopher "like" Macmaster? Why keep him, help him, guard him? As we become more and more aware of the little awfulnesses of Macmaster's character this question may well become more pressing. And there is never really a very satisfactory answer. The one that is offered is curious; one would like to see it followed up. Christopher allows Macmaster to be his closest acquaintance because Macmaster is so indubitably of inferior class that he need feel no obligation, and Christopher need fear no suggestion of equality. Macmaster senses this accurately when Christopher says to him "Damn it! I don't even know if the child's my own."

> That confidence...had pained Macmaster so frightfully, it was so appalling, that Macmaster had regarded it almost as an insult. It was the sort of confidence a man didn't make to his equal, but only to solicitors, doctors, or the clergy who are not quite men.(SDN,p.26)

Mark puts it more crudely in The Last Post:

> It was their failure as Tietjens that they liked toadies... He himself had bitched all their lives by having that fellow Ruggles sharing his room. Because he could not have borne to share with an equal...Christopher had had, for toadies, firstly Macmaster...(LP,p.283)

If this is true one would like to see the analysis carried further, especially by Christopher. And even after Macmaster has betrayed Christopher and used his figures--thus (in Christopher's view) prolonging the war and the hideous suffering of those at the front--still Christopher's judgment is curiously muted, indirect: Tietjens cannot look Macmaster in the eye. "He had felt ashamed. He had felt, for the first time in his life, ashamed!" (SDN,p.354) Ford leaves it carefully ambiguous whether Tietjens is ashamed of Macmaster or of himself. In any case Tietjens, recognizing Macmaster's deep embarrassment, consoles him:

> Tietjens patted him on the shoulder, Macmaster being on the stairs above him.
>
> "It's all right, old man," he had said--and with real affection: "We've powlered up and down enough for a little thing like that not to...I'm very glad...."(SDN, p.355)

And after some hesitation, he leaves, thinking a phrase curiously reminiscent of one he had once used to Macmaster about his marriage to Sylvia: "'A backstairs way out of it', he had thought...."

It is, as I say, a muted judgment, and it is unclear how far, if at all, it extends to Christopher's own actions. What responsibility does Christopher accept? For if he is to be Christopher Tietjens of Groby, or even just Christopher Tietjens, one thing that will be certain is that he will have to learn, as he finally does at the end of A Man Could Stand Up, that "...he

had to take Responsibility. And to realize that he was a fit person to take responsibility."(p.362) Sylvia has tried much earlier to tell him this. After describing the home front full of ignoble politicians and boodlers she finishes up:

> "And...it's your fault. Why aren't you Lord Chancellor, or Chancellor of the Exchequer, instead of whoever is, for I am sure I don't know? You could have been, with your abilities and your interests. Then things would have been efficiently and honestly conducted." (NMPpp.178-9)

The war is, of course, central to this whole discussion for it is against the background of the war that both Christopher and his society must define themselves. Ford economically captures the essence of that war. Christopher comments on: "the muddle-headed frame of mind that...lets us into wars with hopelessly antiquated field guns and rottenly inferior ammunition."(SDN,p.101) Sylvia sees it as "a general carnival of lying, lechery, drink and howling...."(SDN,p.211) And, with the exception of some few soldiers at the front who are doing the actual fighting, there is little in the novels to contradict these judgments:

> Intense dejection: endless muddles: endless follies: endless villainies. All these men given into the hands of the most cynically care-free intriguers in long corridors who made plots that harrowed the hearts of the world. All these men toys: all these agonies mere occasions for picturesque phrases to be put into politicians' speeches without heart or even intelligence. Hundreds of thousands of men tossed here and there in that sordid and gigantic mud-browness of mid-winter... (NMP,pp.15-16)

Continually we are forced to feel the mad, agonized fear and repression of those involved in the fighting. That pressure is

finally released in surreal visions. Again Sylvia is forced to see it:

> ...She seemed to be in the very belly of the ugly affair... It moved and moved, under your eyes dissolving, yet always there. As if you should try to follow one diamond of pattern in the coil of an immense snake that was in irrevocable motion....It gave her a sense of despair.... And she began to have a sense of the infinitely spreading welter of pain, going away to an eternal horizon of night... (NMP,p.186)

Christopher, not surprisingly, is haunted by it:

> Above the shadows the mist behaved tortuously: mounting up into umbrella shapes. Like snow-covered umbrella pines.
>
> Disagreeable to force the eye to examine that mist. His stomach turned over...That was the sacks. A flat, slightly disordered pile of wet sacks, half-right at two-hundred yards. No doubt a shell had hit a G.S. wagon coming up with sacks for trenching. Or the bearers had bolted, chucking the sacks down. His eyes had fallen on that scattered pile four times already that morning. Each time his stomach had turned over. The resemblance to prostrate men was appalling. The enemy creeping up...Christ! Within two hundred yards. So his stomach said. Each time, in spite of the preparation.
>
> Otherwise the ground had been so smashed up that it was flat: went down into holes but did not rise up into mounds. That made it look gentle. It sloped down. To the untidiness. They appeared mostly to lie on their faces. Why? Presumably they were mostly Germans pushed back in the last counter-attack. Anyhow you saw mostly the seats of their trousers. When you did not, how profound was their repose! You must phrase it a little like that--rhetorically. There was no other way to get the effect of that profoundness. Call it profundity!
>
> It was different from sleep. Flatter. No doubt when the appalled soul left the weary body, the panting lungs.... Well, you can't go on with a sentence like that....But you collapsed inwards. Like the dying pig they sold on trays in the street. Painter fellows doing battlefields never got that intimate effect. Intimate to them there. Unknown to the corridors in Whitehall... Probably because they--the painters--drew from living models or had ideas as to the human form...But these were not limbs, muscles, torsi... Collections of tubular shapes in field-grey or mud-colour they were. Chucked about by Almighty God! As if He dropped them from on high to make them flatten into the earth.

(MSU,pp.318-319)

Ford's technique is of interest here. "...you can't go on with a sentence like that..." Polished or finished prose somehow won't do for this experience. The language fragments; the vision becomes impressionistic; the fear and incoherence of the experience are vividly rendered.

This, then, is the triumph of the boodlers, of the politicians, and "arrivistes" for whom Christopher has always felt such deep contempt. This, then, is the final collapse of that world of eighteenth-century civilization that Christopher Tietjens of Groby loved. This collapse too has been given to us first in terms of a social comedy that only gradually resolves itself into black, macabre death. Christopher's world ends for the first time with the florid vulgarity of the two "city" men (revealing identification) at the golf club discussing Gertie who is "'ot stuff": "Macmaster realized that, for these Tories at least, this was really the end of the world. The last of England!"(SDN,p.78) It is also the "last of England" for Mark when Christopher tells him that his bank has made a mistake: "It was to him almost unbelievable that a bank could make a mistake. One of the great banks. The props of England." (SDN, p.272) On its next appearance the end of the world is a much bleaker affair. O Nine Morgan has just been killed:

> Was he, he said to himself, to regard himself as responsible for the fellow's death? Was his inner mentality going to present that claim upon him? That would be absurd. The end of the earth! The absurd end of the earth...Yet that insignificant ass Levin had that evening asserted the claim to go into his,

> Tietjens of Groby's, relations with his wife. That was an end of the world as absurd! It was the unthinkable thing, as unthinkable as the theory that the officer can be responsible for the death of the man.... (NMP,p.87)

The war does seem to be both the final physical smashing up of Christopher Tietjens' world, and the manifestation of a process of disintegration that has been going on since at least the end of the eighteenth century. Before going out again to the front Christopher says to Valentine: "I'll admit I'm probably not much good. But I've nothing to live for; what I stand for isn't anymore in this world."(SDN,p.294) And yet, with nice ambiguity, the war is the saviour of Christopher. One way it saves him is by providing the only society he can be a part of. Only in the army can Christopher commit himself to a body of men working in a common cause and find himself generally liked and respected for what he is:

> He had been the Younger Son, loafing, contemptuous, capable, idly contemplating life, but ready to take up the position of the Head of the Family if Death so arranged matters. He had been a sort of eternal Second-in-Command.
>
> Now: what the Hell was he? A sort of Hamlet of the Trenches? No, by God he was not...He was perfectly ready for action. Ready to command a battalion. He was presumably a lover. They did things like commanding battalions. And worse!(MSU,p.415)

More importantly, by so overtly smashing the society in which Christopher lives, by providing opportunities for such as Perowne and General O'Hara to indulge in all their characteristic squalid lechery, by providing the solution in which the Macmasters of the world rise to the top, by allowing Sylvia the opportunity to pull the strings of so many shower baths to such effect, by

accomplishing all this the war enables Christopher to disentangle himself from Sylvia and the society to which he felt himself linked by bonds of history. Before the war makes all Christopher's moral anachronisms so patently irrelevant he is impotent in relation to Sylvia. It is no accident that Christopher decides he wants to go to the front mainly to escape Sylvia. It is the war that frees him in any number of ways. When Sylvia visits Christopher at the front it looks very much as though her attempt to seduce Christopher will be succesful. (Given Christopher's "principles" had he been re-seduced by Sylvia that would have been the end of him.) There is a wonderful irony in the fact that it is Perowne's assault on Sylvia's bed-room that saves Christopher from what would indeed have been a fate worse than death. (The war then takes care of Perowne in a way Christopher never could.) Finally it is the emotions generated by the war, erupting in the frenzy of the celebrations of Armistice Day, which bring Valentine to him in his Gray's Inn apartment. It is revealing that even at the end of these novels it is Valentine who acts, cuts through the tangles of hesitations and ambiguities, and joins Christopher, and not vice-versa.

The role the war plays in liberating Christopher is central. Christopher, who believed that one didn't talk, has learned, on a number of levels, the importance of communication. His obsession as an officer is with keeping communication open between the troops. The justification for his desire to marry Valentine is wonderful:

> You seduced a young woman in order to be able to finish your talks with her. You could not do that without living with her. You could not live with her without seducing her; but that was the by-product. The point is that you can't otherwise talk. You can't finish talks at street corners; in museums; even in drawing-rooms. You mayn't be in the mood when she is in the mood--for the intimate conversation that means the final communion of your souls. You have to wait together--for a week, for a year, for a lifetime, before the final intimate conversation may be attained...(MSU, p.415)

Christopher, whose notion of a community was limited to the model created by his Club (or his estate) is now part of an extraordinarily different kind of community. (We remember again the memoirists.) He is one of the "Pals". And to realize the distance we have come all we need do is register the full flavour of the Pals' final reunion. It is a scene of the surreal macabre: Christopher's rented room, stripped of furniture, filled with drunken, diseased cripples and neurotics. Compare that scene with the opening scene of the novels: Christopher and MacMaster safe, secure and sure of their power in the railway carriage! By the end of the novels we are firmly located in a drawing-room unrecognizable to the nineteenth century...

"What I stand for isn't anymore in this world." What does Christopher stand for? Well that is, of course, ambiguous: the eighteenth century, a specific identity: Christopher Tietjens of Groby, the true radical Toryism, principles, values, probity. But there is too a kind of wilful anachronism, an inability to confront emotionally complex issues with clear and cogent cerebration, a tendency to fall back on aphorisms instead. There is also a deep and hurtful alienation from society. As we look

more closely at what Christopher stands for we may well find these ambiguities proliferate. Speaking of himself Christopher says: "You see, in such a world as this, an idealist--or perhaps it's only a sentimentalist--must be stoned to death. He makes them so uncomfortable. He haunts them at their golf."(SDNp.295) Is Christopher an idealist? or a sentimentalist? Is that exactly why "they" are out to get him? Christopher again: "It is probably because a hundred thousand sentimentalists like myself commit similar excesses of the subconscious [Christopher has been "slobbering" over a leaf from a rose-tree that represents both Valentine and England to him] that we persevere in this glorious but atrocious undertaking." [the war](NMP,p.96) How exactly is this "undertaking" glorious? In what way can he be thought of as fighting for England or Valentine? In fact, he has been fighting because his England is no more and Valentine is, as he puts it, what he can't have.

What does Christopher stand for?

> "...it is not good to have taken one's public-school's ethical system seriously. I am really, sir, the English public schoolboy. That's an eighteenth-century product. What with the love of truth that--God help me!--they rammed into me at Clifton and the belief Arnold forced upon Rugby that the vilest of sins--the vilest of all sins--is to peach to the head-master! That's me sir. Other men get over their schooling. I never have. I remain adolescent. These things are obsessions with me."(NMP,p.248)

He stands for the eighteenth century? or for the virtues of Rugby? "My problem will remain the same whether I'm here or not. [He's talking of suicide.] For it's insoluble. It's the whole problem of the relations of the sexes." (NMP,p.249) How are all

these suggestions to be related? Does Ford know? What _is_ Christopher's problem?

I've spoken earlier about the ambiguities of Christopher's assumption, or refusal, of responsibility. (And it is worth reiterating that it is only the war that finally confronts Christopher with a situation where he can and does accept his direct responsibilities.) Perhaps his major difficulties with responsibilities to his son, his wife, Valentine Wannop, Groby, his country and most of all, of course, to himself are related to his major difficulty with identity. What does he stand for? What are the pertinent threats to his individuality? Who is he?

It is right to end this discussion with a question. One registers again how central to Ford's vision is the open-ended situation, the ambiguous, the questionable. Finality is a lie; summations too neat to be true; each reality has a thousand facets.

What is of the utmost significance here is the relationship that exists between all those unresolved ambiguities and complexities, and the war itself. I have suggested that Christopher is really unable to analyze carefully and precisely what is wrong with his pre-war life. Certainly he seems unable to take control of his most intimate affairs and reshape them. Christopher is the true Conservative and as such he is aware, as Ford is aware, of the deep need for social forms to shape, control and order chaotic, anarchic human passions. Indeed so deeply is he committed to those forms that he himself cannot go against them

even when his continued observance of them is, as it is in the case of his relationship with Sylvia, patently absurd. I must not be thought of as making light of this internal conflict that plagues Christopher. For that battle between the needs of human passion and the necessary demands of social form and discipline is an eternal one, and of enormous significance to us. What I am suggesting is that Christopher is quite unable to resolve it. And so he really needs the war to smash the forms he cannot smash, to give him a freedom he cannot build himself. It is for these reasons that the war plays such an ambiguous role here.

I have argued in the section on the memoirs that the essential recognition they enforce is of impotence in the face of nightmare. Parade's End is aware of that aspect of the war. 0 Nine Morgan's death is arbitrary, absurd. His blood "makes your fingers stick together impotently." But the central focus of the novels offers a different perspective. In many ways the war that ended by enforcing impotence began in a promise of liberation. One of the provocative achievements of Parade's End has been to suggest to us some of the reasons why Europe may have unconsciously welcomed the war as it did.

Mr. Britling Sees It Through

Mr. Britling Sees It Through[1] is not an entirely succesful novel. Some of the characterization is shallow and predictable. And frequently the core of the novel--the intractable fact of the war--refuses to be digested by the imagined world of the novel and breaks through the fictional body. There is also an unsophisticated surrender to the seductiveness of sentimentality. But this weakness, while it is often damaging (for instance in the portraits of Cecily and Mr. Direck, or in Hugh's descriptions of the brief life and sticky end of the Cockney, Jewell), directs us toward the novel's real strength. It is the simple unsophisticated evocation of paternal love that makes Mr. Britling... so memorable. We feel Britling's love for his son Hugh in and through the hideous agonies of fear he suffers as this hostage to fortune goes forth to the wars. "...the love of children is an exquisite tenderness: it rends the heart." (p.57,1.2.10) says Mr. Britling early in the novel. At this point he has little notion of just how exquisite that rending can be.

One of Wells's sharpest perceptions is that it is Mr.

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[1] H.G.Wells, Mr. Britling Sees It Through, (1916; rpt. as Mr. Britling, London: W.Collins, no date given.) Future references will be to this edition, and will be given by page number and then the Book, Chapter and Section thus: 1.1.1. The novel will be referred to throughout as Mr. Britling....

Britling's love for his son that forces him to misread so badly the malevolence of the situation in 1914. The misreading, of course, makes that reality much more threatening. It is because Britling loves Hugh so, that he cannot believe the war will continue long enough to consume his son. The irony is that because people fooled themselves in this way they allowed their participation in and support of the war to continue, thus in turn contributing to the prolongation of the war and ensuring the consumption of their sons. The final strength of Mr. Britling... is that it sees clearly that war kills our sons. That seems an extraordinary claim, for surely that perception is obvious. Yet much war literature is filled with the oblique efforts at evading both such a realization and the implications such a realization enforces. One thinks of that sunny, macabre scene in Sassoon of the proud, doting father wheeling his wounded son around the hospital grounds, the son hating and resenting his father's pride, seeing it--rightly--as the kind of blinkered response that manifests ignorance of the reality of the war. In Back to Methuselah Shaw gets the point exactly. The Parson Haslam says about the politicians of the Great War: "To me the awful thing about their political incompetence was that they had to kill their own sons." Lubin, one of the characters in the play, is a fairly transparent portrait of Asquith, whose son Raymond was killed in the war. Predictably the response to Shaw's accusation, both when the play opened and, indeed, in times closer to our own, is to

condemn Shaw for his "tastelessness".[2] Mr. Britling... refuses to blink the fact of death, and it is kept focussed there by the love Mr. Britling has for his son. It is that steadiness of focus which then insists on certain questions.

Wells evokes the early Brookesian sense of adventure and duty, and captures too the deep ignorance that went along with that. It is in Mr. Britling himself that we get the most interesting example of that combination:

> "My eldest boy is barely seventeen," he said. "He's keen to go, and I'd be sorry if he wasn't. He'll get into some cadet corps of course--he's already done something of that kind at school. Or they'll take him into the Territorials. But before he's nineteen everything will be over one way or another. I'm afraid, poor chap, he'll feel sold...." (p.195,2.2.1)

Well, before he's nineteen Hugh does feel sold. But not because everything is over. It is a macabre and complex irony, and it lies beneath the Sassoon and the Shaw already quoted. Here the more the love, the greater the need on the father's part to believe in illusions about the conditions of war. So the more the love the more the fathers can urge their sons forth to a war which will consume them. Of course the sons found it difficult to forgive their fathers for what must have seemed like, and indeed in some ways was, wilful blindness. This perception is expressed with the greatest bitterness in Wilfred Owen's "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young". When the father (Abram) is offered a surrogate

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[2] cf Stanley Weintraub, Journey to Heartbreak (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1971), p.302.

sacrifice for his son (Isaac) by an angel of the Lord he turns it down: "But the old man would not so, but slew his son,/ And half the seed of Europe, one by one."[3]

Britling has horrible premonitions, but as we have already seen happening elsewhere the rational consciousness, trained to accept public rhetoric, represses the nightmares:

> ...what he perceived very clearly and did his utmost not to perceive was this qualifying and discouraging fact, that the war monster was not nearly so disposed to meet him as he was to meet the war, [Britling is prepared to sacrifice himself in the battle against German militarism] and that its eyes were already fixed on something beside and behind him, that it was already only too evidently stretching out a long and shadowy arm past him, towards Teddy--and towards Hugh....
> The young are the food of war....
> Mr. Britling did his best to brazen it out. (p.195,2.2.1)

He brazens it out by repressing his awareness that the war's appetite is for Hugh; that it is repression is evidenced by the recurrent appearance of Britling's talisman: Hugh's youth. "He was ashamed of his one secret consolation. For nearly two years yet Hugh could not go out to it. There would surely be peace before that...."(p.242,2.2.6) As Teddy leaves Britling says: "'It's a mean thing, I know, it has none of the Roman touch, but I am glad that this can't happen with Hugh--' He computed. 'Not for a year

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[3] If the fathers are not actively killing their sons their inability to prevent the slaughter calls forth deep contempt. Sassoon gives us another perspective on fathers which takes us back to a theme we are already familiar with:

> I watched them toddle through the door--
> Those impotent old friends of mine.

"The Fathers"

and three months, even if they march him into it upon his very birthday....It may all be over by then....'"

It is at least in part because Britling can thus mistakenly convince himself that Hugh is not in any present danger that he can go on entertaining notions of the possible overall benefits the war may provide:

> Mr. Britling was in a phase of imaginative release. Such a release was one of the first effects of the war upon many educated minds. Things that had seemed solid for ever were visibly in flux....
> As Mr. Britling had sat at his desk that morning and surveyed the stupendous vistas of possibility that war was opening, the catastrophe had taken on a more and more beneficial quality. "I suppose it is only through such crises as these that the world can reconstruct itself," he said.[4]
> (p.170,2.1.7)

This is a particularly strong justification for Britling (and for Wells) and demands further comment.

The psychology of the liberals, originally implacably opposed to war, by late 1914 vociferously committed to it, makes a fascinating story.[5] Britling reveals the internal conflicts of the liberal confronted by this war: "He hadn't realized before he began to talk how angry and scornful he was at this final coming into action of the Teutonic militarism that had so long menaced his world. He had always said it would never fight--and here it was fighting! He was furious with the indignation of an apologist

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[4] This description of Britling's state of mind is a direct reflection of Wells's own beliefs at this point of the war. cf Experiment in Autobiography (London: Gollancz, 1934)

[5] See, especially, my discussion of Irene Cooper Willis and Douglas Goldring at the end of this chapter.

betrayed." (p.150,1.5.13) Thus we arrive at the explosive irony of the rationalist so outraged by this outburst of the irrational that he surrenders completely to his own most irrational impulses:

> When he thought of the broken faith that had poured those slaughtering hosts into the decent peace of Belgium, that had smashed her cities, burned her villages and filled the pretty gorges of the Ardennes with blood and smoke and terror, he was filled with self-righteous indignation, a self-righteous indignation that was indeed entirely Teutonic in its quality, that for a time drowned out his former friendship and every kindly disposition towards Germany, that inspired him with destructive impulses, and obsessed him with a desire to hear of death and more death and yet death in every German town and home... (p.238,2.3.5)

Generally speaking, the liberals had to justify (to themselves and to others) their about-turn in relation to their most fundamental articles of faith. There were a number of arguments made, (many by Wells himself), and Britling employs most of them. Perhaps the most important is the one already glanced at. The chaos and destruction of the war will provide a tabula rasa on which the rule of reason will be writ large. The spirit of Militarism will stand self-condemned; its hideous and inefficacious destructiveness readily apparent to all with an eye to see. It will indeed be the "war to end war."

> Mr. Britling was full of the heady draught of liberal optimism he had been brewing upstairs. "I am not sorry I have lived to see this war" he said. "It may be a tremendous catastrophe in one sense, but in another it is a huge step forward in human life....Now everything becomes fluid. We can redraw the map of the world." (p.169,2.1.6)

Linked to this notion is that of the war as tonic. Surely, feels Britling, the scourge of war will provide the impetus which will inevitably sweep away all the old petty inefficiencies, chicaneries, dishonesties and jealousies that have plagued Britain

for so long: the reliance on the old school-tie network, the preeminence of style over substance. Surely the war will provide an invaluable stimulus to reinvigorate all our lives:

> Perhaps mankind tries too much to settle down. Perhaps these stirrings up have to occur to save us from our disposition to stuffy comfort. There's the magic call of the unknown experience, of dangers and hardships. One wants to go. But unless some push comes one does not go....But now I feel suddenly that we are living intensely. (p.167,2.1.5)

Again we see the deep ironies of the very virtues of a sensibility (dissatisfaction with the smug indolence and inequities of the status quo, a thirst for vitality and vigour) leading to this most dangerous of conclusions.

Of course there are problems with the whole argument which the liberals (both Wells and Britling) ignore. Why should we believe it will be the rationalist who is turned to in this time of chaos and unreason? History seems to suggest otherwise. Exactly how does a military victory demonstrate the folly of militarism? Man has always bruised himself on the paradoxical notion of making peace by fighting war. "'War makes men bitter and narrow' said Mr. Carmine. 'War narrowly conceived,' said Mr. Britling. 'But this is an indignant and generous war.'" (p.169, 2.1.6.) It is dangerous reasoning, and it leads to some startling conclusions. Britling speaks of his fear that the war will be over too soon! "Neither the force nor the magnitude of the German attack through Belgium was appreciated by the general mind, and it was possible for Mr. Britling to reiterate his fear that the war would be over too soon, long before the full measure of its possible benefits could be secured."(p.181,2.1.14)

And yet even this first flush of enthusiasm is tinged with the odd doubt and hesitation. Deep down there is always the horrid fear that all the justifications for this as the war to end all war merely disguise the fact that it is simply a war like any other.[6] "This war could be seen as the noblest of wars, as the crowning struggle of mankind against national dominance and national aggression or else it was a mere struggle of nationalities and pure destruction and catastrophe."(p.155,1.5.14) Given the sacrifices already offered the suspicion that it might be the latter is simply intolerable. And so a vicious cycle is set up: the war must not be merely futile carnage. For it not to be that we must be fighting for the right. The war becomes a

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[6] Sassoon's response to Wells's insight suggests its power:
On New Year's Eve I was alone in my hut reading Mr. Britling Sees It Through, which was more of a revelation to me that anything I had met with, and seemed to light up the whole background of the War. Someone was speaking his mind fearlessly; and since it happened to be the mind of H.G.Wells I devoured his pages in a rapt surrender of attention. Finally I came to a startling passage that checked my rapid reading. For several minutes I sat staring at the words. Then I copied them carefully into the small note-book in which I recorded my nocturnal rumination. I was in the panoramic and retrospective state of mind induced by New Year's Eve, and this was what one of England's most powerful imaginations told me.

> "It is a war now like any other of the mobbing, many-aimed cataclysms that have shattered empires and devastated the world; it is a war without point, a war that has lost its soul; it has become mere incoherent fighting and destruction, a demonstration in vast and tragic forms of the stupidity and ineffectiveness of our species..."

The words are alone on the flimsy little page. I didn't venture to add my own commentary on them. But I am moderately sure that I remarked to myself, "That's exactly what I'd been thinking, only I didn't know how to say it!" Siegfried Sassoon, Siegfried's Journey, 1916-1920 (1945; rpt. London: Faber, 1982), pp. 40-41.

holy crusade[7], and the reasons for continuing it and the conduct of it must be unquestioned. All the blame for the war must be German. Since the Hun alone is responsible the war must continue until he is completely vanquished. So the potent irony we have been examining in a number of its varieties. The liberal, most aware of the potential suffering and destruction of war, ends by being its most diehard supporter. In all of these instances we can see how and why the liberal may mislead himself. Indeed Britling is a fine example of the profound way in which any rationalist may mislead himself when faced with human history:

> It was rare that he really seemed to be seeing the war; few people saw it; for most of the world it came as an illimitable multitude of incoherent, loud, and confusing impressions. But all the time he was at least doing his utmost to see the war, to simplify it and extract the essence of it until it could be apprehended as something epic and explicable, as a stateable issue.
>
> ...even now with his country fighting he was still far from realising that this was a thing that could possibly touch him more than intellectually. He did not really believe with his eyes and finger-tips and backbone that murder, destruction, and agony on a scale monstrous beyond precedent were going on in the same world as that which slumbered outside the black ivy and silver shining window-sill that framed his peaceful view. (p.178, 2.1.12)

At this point in the novel it is still unthinkable to suggest that the truth of the matter is that the war <u>is</u> an "illimitable multitude of incoherent, loud and confusing impressions" and is <u>not</u> anything "epic and explicable...a stateable issue." Once again the rationalist is tempted by his very rationality into a commitment to the irrational.

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[7] cf the discussion of Irene Cooper Willis's <u>England's Holy War</u>, p. 251, below.

These reflections go some way to explaining why the liberals came to support the war, and how that support involves interesting repressions and tangled complexities of mutually supporting fallacies. Indeed historically most liberals once having given their support to the war continued to do so to the bitter end. We have seen many of the reasons for that. Such is not the case with Mr. Britling. Why?

There is a moment when Britling has worked himself up to Teutonic belligerence; Hugh suddenly joins in the conversation: "Mr. Britling turned his eyes to his eldest son with a startled expression. He had been speaking--generally. For the moment he had forgotten Hugh." (p.193, 2.1.18) It is Britling's love for Hugh which keeps him balanced between abstracted notions of the war and its specific actuality. Always beneath Britling's bright verbosity and boundless will to see the positive side there is the sense of nightmare, of something infinitely precious horribly threatened. It is that love which forces Britling to cast a cold and sardonic eye on the war efforts of his government. There is the inevitable recognition that the coming of war has not changed the character of the government. Mr. Britling spends a futile forty-eight hours trying to enlist in the service--any service--of his country. He returns home: "The essential process of the interval had been the correction of Mr. Britling's temporary delusion that the government of the British Empire is either intelligent, instructed or wise."(p.197, 2.2.1) More daunting perhaps is the recognition that the coming of war has not changed the character of the army

either! Hugh's letters to his father seethe with fury at the complacent stupidity, wastefulness and ineffectiveness of the army and its officers. And it is Hugh's presence that, insisting on the possibility of loss, of death, focusses Britling's attention on the full reality of the war. He can never forget the price he may be asked to pay.

That threat concentrates his mind with savage clarity on the situation around him. Again it is worth noting that for obvious reasons it was generally considered unpatriotic to be critical of the government or of the military command. Moreover many liberals now committed to the war had to avoid rethinking the various critical attitudes they once advanced. So it is important that Britling maintains an independent and critical attitude. And it is his paternal love that fuels his questioning:

> He writhed with impotent humiliation...
> How stupidly the world is managed...We were too stupid to do the most obvious things; we were sending all these boys into hardship and pitiless danger; we were sending our children through the fires to Moloch, because essentially we English were a world of indolent, pampered, sham good-humoured, old and middle-aged men. (So he distributed the intolerable load of self-accusation.)... They were butchering the youth of England. Old men sat out of danger contriving death for the lads in the trenches. That was the reality of the thing. "My son!" he cried sharply in the darkness...
> Our only hope now was exhaustion. Our only strategy was to barter blood for blood--trusting that our tank would prove the deeper...
> While into this tank stept Hugh, young and smiling...
> The war became a nightmare vision. (p.272, 2.4.8)

(It is most significant that it is his love for his son that has carried our arch-rationalist into this "nightmare vision" of "impotent humiliation".)

We have already commented on the relationship between father

and son in this essay. In a fundamental way Wells recognizes that one's love for a child is vitally linked to one's faith in the present and the future. Conversely any deep despair in the present cuts at the very roots and origin of our life. Britling is tempted by despair: "'I who have loved life,' he murmured, and could have believed for a time that he wished he had never had a son..." (p.252,2.3.12) Later he shares his despair in both the military and the politicians with a young staff-officer named Raeburn.

"'You've got no sons,' said Mr. Britling.

'I'm not even married,' said Raeburn, as though he thanked God."(p.300, 2. 4.15)

What the newly critical eye perceives is frightening indeed. Wells perceives that the damage the war inflicts is not confined to the battle front. There, at least, the damage is explicit; at home it is more disguised and for that reason, perhaps more dangerous. "Under that strain the dignity of England broke, and revealed a malignity less focused and intense than the German, but perhaps even more distressing." (p.243, 2.3.7) When he turns to the army his perceptions are just as daunting. Britling perceives what Montague perceives: the Army is now reaping the whirlwind of its reliance on an anachronistic class system to provide its leaders. There has been no realistic training for those leaders. A deep and unconsidered mistrust of any original thought prevails. There is a reliance on tradition and style in the place of innovation and substance. The failure in the army parallels the failure of the politicians:

> The same lax qualities that had brought England so close to the supreme imbecility of a civil war in Ireland in July, 1914, were now muddling and prolonging the war, and postponing, it might be for ever, the victory that had seemed so certain only a year ago. The politicians still intrigued, the ineffectives still directed. Against brains used to the utmost their fight was a stupid thrusting forth of men and men and yet more men, men badly trained, under-equipped, stupidly led.(p.295, 2.4.15)

And always comes the agonized refrain: "Meanwhile...our boys--get killed." Hugh's perceptions of the army reinforce his father's disillusionment. The question of sandbags is a minor example of a lack of imagination or thought:

> When you snatch a peep at them [the Germans] it is like a low parti-coloured stone wall--only the stones are sand-bags. The Germans have them black and white, so that you cannot tell which are loopholes and which are black bags. Our people haven't been so clever--and the War Office love of uniformity has given us only white bags. No doubt it looks neater. But it makes our loopholes plain.(p.286, 2.4. 13)

Hugh, of course, is sniped through one of those loopholes. It is important to realize just how much Hugh's perceptions matter to Britling:

> It came with a shock to him, too, that Hugh should see so little else than madness in the war, and have so pitiless a realisation of its essential futility. The boy forced his father to see--what indeed all along he had been seeing more and more clearly. The war, even by the standards of adventure and conquest, had long since become a monstrous absurdity. Some way there must be out of this bloody entanglement that was yielding victory to neither side, that was yielding nothing but waste and death beyond all precedent. The vast majority of people everywhere must be desiring peace, willing to buy peace at any reasonable price... (p.295, 2.4.15)

It is his love for Hugh that has forced Britling to recognize the world of this war as a world of nightmare, of the absurd. It is indeed Hugh who has "forced his father to see..." in more ways than one. And Hugh's most explicit judgement of the war lies at

the very heart of the novel:

> "Somehow the last spell in the fire trench has shaken up my mind a lot. I was getting used to the war before, but now I've got back to my original amazement at the whole business. I find myself wondering what we are really up to, why the war began, why we were caught into this amazing routine. It looks, it feels orderly, methodical, purposeful. Our officers give us orders and get their orders, and the men back there get their orders. Everybody is getting orders. Back, I suppose, to Lord Kitchener. It goes on for weeks with the effect of being quite sane and intended and the right thing, and then then suddenly it comes whacking into one's head, 'But this--this is utterly _mad_!' This going to and fro and to and fro and to and fro; this monotony which breaks ever and again into violence--violence that never gets anywhere--is exactly the life a lunatic leads. Melancholia and mania... It's just a collective obsession--by war. The world is really quite mad. I happen to be having just one gleam of sanity, that won't last after I have finished this letter. I suppose when an individual man goes mad and gets out of the window because he imagines the door is magically impossible, and dances about in the street without his trousers, jabbing at passers-by with a toasting fork, he has just the same sombre sense of unavoidable necessity that we have, all of us, when we go off with our packs into the trenches..."(p.291, 2.4.14)

"...unavoidable necessity"...the war seemed that to almost everyone. Since it couldn't be avoided it must be made plausible; hence the attempts to transform this malignant lunacy into something sensible. It takes the twentieth century, as it takes Britling, some time to learn that the language appropriate to this war is that of madness, absurdity and nightmare.

The death that is at the heart of all this comes inevitably:

> He drew the telegram from his pocket again furtively, almost guiltily, and re-read it. He turned it over and read it again...
>
> _Killed_.
>
> Then his own voice, hoarse and strange to his ears, spoke his thought:
>
> "My God! how unutterably silly...Why did I let him go? Why did I let him go?" (p.316, 2.4.22)

Of course there is no adequate answer to that question. Britling's

stunned paralysis is caught in his agonized struggle to decide what news of this magnitude should elicit as a tip he gives to the girl who brings it. The paralysis can't last, and Britling must cope with his knowledge of Hugh's death:

> "I'm not angry. I'm not depressed. I'm just bitterly hurt by the ending of something I had hoped to watch--always--all my life," he said. "I don't know how it is between most fathers and sons, but I admired Hugh. I found exquisite things in him....And then," he said with tears in his voice, "all this beautiful fine structure, this brain, this fresh life as nimble as water--as elastic as a steel spring, it is destroyed...."
>
> "An amazement...a blow...a splattering of blood. Rags of tormented skin and brain stuff....In a moment. What had taken eighteen years love and care...." (p.338-9, 3.1.9)

Just as the threat to Hugh focussed Britling's attention on the conduct of the war, so it is the felt horror, pain and loss of Hugh's death that focusses Britling's mind on some central (but too seldom asked) questions. Britling writes to the German parents of his son's friend:

> What have we been fighting for? What are we fighting for? Do you know? Does anyone know? Why am I spending what is left of my substance and you what is left of yours to keep on this war against each other? What have we to gain from hurting one another still further? Even if we were dumb and acquiescent before, does not the blood of our sons now cry out to us that this foolery should cease? We have let these people send our sons to death. (p.363,3.2.4)

The war must be stopped. How? Again, to try to answer that question is to enforce the recognition of one's own impotence. Wells grapples honestly with that. We watch Britling try to come to terms with what has made the war. But the pressure of such an attempt breaks down the formal integrity of the novel. The end is merely fragments shored against the ruin.

Nevertheless Wells remains loyal throughout--loyal to Hugh's

death and the questions that death provokes. The desperation of the search is measured in the enormous implausibility of the final resolution. For Wells is constitutionally unable to conclude with Hugh's vision of lunatic nightmare. (Though the number of times terms like "madness", "nightmare', "absurd", "monstrous" appear is significant.) He is just as constitutionally incapable of leaving Britling writhing in his "impotent humiliation". (Like the soldier memoirists Wells cannot face any full acceptance of that impotence.) So at the end all questions are brought back to the bosom of a God who suddenly appears...as <u>ex machina</u> as any God ever did.

This is a fascinating novel. Wells is usually condemned as a novelist on the, usually justifiable, grounds that he cares only for the ideas of his novels. Lawrence's criticism of Wells is one that has been repeated often enough in a variety of forms: "One thing Wells lacks--the subtle soul of sympathy of a true artist."[8] Too often his novels become tracts; characterization suffers; he has no sense of the human heart. Yet here is a novel written in 1916 which renders more clearly than any other contemporary novel an important part of the emotional torment of the war. It is, as I've suggested, the pain of Hugh's death that keeps the novel focussed on those questions that so often do not get asked: "What are we fighting for?...What have we to gain from hurting one another still further?" <u>Mr. Britling...</u> is a Wells novel informed

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[8] D.H.Lawrence, "To Blanche Jennings," 6 March, 1909, <u>Collected Letters</u>, ed. H.T.Moore, 2 vols. (London: Heinemann, 1962) 1: 51.

by the heart. And it gives us a fascinating example of the relationship between willed polemic and imagined literature. As much as anything it is Wells's imaginative feeling into Britling's agony over Hugh that undercuts Wells's own, already declared, support for the war.

I want to add a note here about the relationship between Wells's imaginative fiction and his polemical prose. More than anyone else Wells offers an obvious opportunity to test the claims I have made throughout this essay about the contrast between what the imagination renders and what the conscious mind sees or thinks it sees. Wells was a prolific journalist during the war, publishing numerous articles in The Daily Chronicle, The Daily News and Nation, and The Daily Mail. Most of these articles are reprinted in the three books he published during the war: What Is Coming? (1916), War and the Future, (1917), and In the Fourth Year, (1918). The first and last of these books concern various adumbrations of Wells's intelligent, if somewhat overly optimistic, vision of a League of Nations and other innovations that will be needed to run the new world. It is War and the Future[9] that is of particular interest here, not only because these articles were published in the same year as Mr. Britling..., but also because it is here that he tries to deal most directly with the actualities of the war.

The contrast War and the Future offers to Mr. Britling... is

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[9] H.G.Wells, War and the Future (London: Cassell, 1917) All further references will be to this edition.

startling and suggestive. The cumulative effect of the novel is depressing in a number of ways. There is (and this is the strength of the book) no belief that the way in which this war is being conducted will lead to inevitable victory. More importantly there is more and more the feeling that the notion of "victory" is deeply inappropriate. Whatever the results of the war they will not and cannot be commensurate with the destruction which has earned them. These doubts are too often lacking from War and the Future.

From the beginning Wells makes it clear that he is not one of those who thinks that an immediate peace can bring anything of value. Peace negotiations now, urged by "simple-minded pacifists", will only "save the face of Germany". "A peace [now] would be no more than a breathing time for a fresh outrage upon civilisation." (p.11) Wells has, as we have seen, entertained high hopes for this war as "the War that will end War". For it to end prematurely, before such a conclusion is reached, would make a mockery of all the destruction that has already been suffered. So the war must continue.

Wells's extraordinary belief in the efficacy and final victory of the rational may well be related to his own scientific background. Scientific method and scientific priciples had liberated Wells from the dreary squalor of his own deprived background. For the rest of his life Wells believed that what the scientific method had done for him it could do for the world. But Wells never quite realized the problems implicit here. From

Faustus on man has had to pay a price for success at science. Part of that price is that he tends to forget that he is both Apollonian and Dionysian. Pleased by and proud of his accomplishments as shaper and maker, excited by the promises these accomplishments hold out, he forgets how much the irrational is also an inalienable part of his makeup. So Wells supported Britain's involvement in the war because he saw that apocalypse primarily as an opportunity to refashion a new world of rationality, peace and sanity. That is, his belief in the efficacy of the rational urged him to make his commitment to the irrational.

It is Wells's insistence on the drawbacks and dangers of a premature peace that earns for him the hatred, contempt and accusations of betrayal from those who would originally have hoped to find Wells, good socialist and Fabian as he was, on their side. Douglas Goldring in his book Reputations[10] mounts an effective attack on what he sees as Wells's betrayal. Goldring's general case is set forth with pungent anger, and since his central target includes all those who wrote propaganda for the government, and since that class includes, as we have already seen, almost all of the better-known writers of the day it is worth quoting at length:

> But there is something more in our national apathy towards the deeds which are done in our name than mere spiritual numbness. There is a deeper cause even than the reaction after victory. It is to be found in that deliberate

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[10] Douglas Goldring, Reputations (London: Chapman and Hall, 1920)

poisoning of the wells of human feeling, that organised campaign of lying and incitement to hatred (and thus to "atrocity"), which began in August 1914 and continues even now, nearly two years after the cessation of hostilities. In this campaign our greatest newspapers have mobilised the ablest members of their staffs; in it, also, some of our most influential novelists and imaginative writers have engaged with all the energy and skill at their command. Even so, it would never have succeeded as it did if the honest and the decent elements in the English writing fraternity had all united to oppose it. Had they spoken out instead of keeping silence, it is true they might not have "saved their skins," but they might have done something to clear our national good name of one of its darkest stains. And they might also have preserved us from that disease of indifference which has caused a nation as sound at heart as our own to allow its irresponsible Government to murder millions of poor people by a misuse of the Blockade.

To go over in one's mind the names of the men who have been prominent in British war journalism is calculated to give any honest man a respect neither for Britain nor for its journalists. To many men of the younger generation who fought in the War, it now seems incredible that during their absence the inciters to hatred and slaughter could ever have contrived to get such a strangle-hold on public opinion. The "Pacifists" are not similarly bewildered. We know that they were able to do it by battening on the terrors and prejudices inevitably occasioned by warfare, and by inflaming the passions of the mob by atrocity stories and distorted news. And we know that they were able to do it because of the active help, or the tacit connivance, of the men whose reputations as leaders of thought or as national spokesmen stood highest with the community.

Insurgent youth is not going to waste its time denouncing the "arm-chair" militarists. It is probably that many of these were quite honest and sincere; at all events, they did not sin against the light. But what is to be said of the "intellectuals," the sham progressives, the Higher Thinkers who throughout the War yoked themselves tamely to the capitalist-driven car of State, took Government jobs, and regularly--from the democratic standpoint--sold every pass? Had these men possessed sufficient moral courage they could soon have made the Censorship unworkable. Not even the Coalition could have continued with all the organs of Radical opinion closed down and all the exponents of Radical ideas silenced or in gaol. Had there been any real show or resistance, any real backbone among our leading democratic publicists, Mr. George and his confrères would have been compelled to make some concessions to the national sense of decency.

I am not speaking now as a "defeatist." I believe that such concessions would in no way have impaired the efficient

> conduct of the War, while they would certainly have improved the chances of a clean and democratic settlement. And if, by the courageous expression of Liberal principles, we had given the German moderates something better to hope for than the "knock-out blow," there is little reason to doubt that they would have been able to exert such pressure on their Government as would have resulted in the ending of the War many months earlier than November 1918. A little courage, a little resolute plain-speaking, and not only might thousands, perhaps millions of lives have been saved, but the world might have been preserved from that nightmare of horror, that frightful menace to our entire civilisation which has been secretly concocted in Paris and blasphemously labelled "Peace." (pp.82-85)

Irene Cooper Willis in her strongly intelligent and suggestive book England's Holy War[11] is in some ways even more damning than Goldring. The main tenor of her book is to suggest the self-deception and even self-destructiveness of the liberal who believes that he can attain liberal ends by pursuing the war with Germany. The betrayal of liberal ideas at Versailles suggests that she is right.

Wells supports his belief that the war should continue with all the "invincible hopefulness" of Britling's "sanguine temperament". In War and the Future Wells argues continually that everything is fine; we are winning the war; the Germans, ridiculous as they are, are about to collapse. A couple of quotations will suffice to give the flavour of Wells's prose. He is describing some troops returning after a battle:

> As we drew near I saw that they combined an extreme muddiness with an unusual elasticity. They all seemed to be looking us in the face instead of being too fagged to bother. Then I noticed a nice green helmet dangling from one youngster's bayonet, in fact his eye directed me to it. A man

[11] Irene Cooper Willis, England's Holy War (New York: Knopf, 1928)

> behind him had a black German helmet of the type best known in English illustrations; then two more grey appeared. The catch of helmets had indeed been quite considerable. Then I perceived on the road bank above and marching parallel with this column, a double file of still muddier Germans. Either they wore caps or went bareheaded. There were no helmets among them. We do not rob our prisoners but--a helmet is a weapon. Anyhow, it is an irresistible souvenir. (p.124)

The archness of those last two sentences is irritating. All journalists felt that need to keep up the morale at home by thus misrepresenting the truth and actuality of the war. (Compare this passage with Hugh's agonized awareness of the essential insanity of the war.) Wells becomes even more insensitive:

> I was afraid that I might see some horribly wounded man or some decayed dead body that would so scar my memory and stamp such horror into me as to reduce me to a mere useless, gibbering, stop-the-war-at-any-price pacifist...(p.183-184)
>
> The real horror of modern war, when all is said and done, is the boredom. To get killed or wounded may be unpleasant, but it is at any rate interesting...(p.191)

There is probably some link between Wells's belief that the war should continue and his misrepresentations and insensitivities in relation to the actual conditions of that war. There may also be a link between that belief and his insistence in this book that all the blame for the war is German. There is an important passage in Mr. Britling... where Britling goes to visit his aunt who has been mutilated and fatally wounded in a Zepplin attack. After her death Britling indulges himself in an orgy of sadisitic hate-mongering directed at the airmen who have dropped the bombs which killed her. (There are obvious similarities here to Kipling's "Mary Postgate".) "Altogether fifty-seven people had been killed or injured in this brilliant German action. They were all civilians,

and only twelve were men." One of those injured is a "mutilated child [who] had screamed for two hours before she could be rescued from the debris which had pinned her down....and already the German airmen were buzzing away to sea again, proud of themselves, pleased no doubt..." (pp.249-250, 2.3.11) But in the novel this exaggerated reaction is therapeutic. As Britling indulges in it he comes to see how essentially false it is to lay all the blame for these deaths and tortures at the hands of the German airmen. Finally he sees:

> ...that the men who had made this hour were indeed not devils, were no more devils than Mr. Britling was a devil, but sinful men of like nature with himself, hard, stupid, caught in the same web of circumstance...This thing was done neither by devils nor fools, but by a conspiracy of foolish motives, by the weak acquiesences of the clever, by a crime that was no man's crime but the natural necessary outcome of the ineffectiveness, the blind motives and muddle-headedness of all mankind. (pp. 251-252, 2.3.11)

Such a perception is noticeably lacking from Wells's journalistic writings. Indeed, as we have seen, it is the anti-German hate-mongering that most infuriates Goldring. Ford Madox Ford must, unfortunately, also be mentioned when we look at the topic of hate-mongering. His two books of propaganda are extraordinary: Between St. Denis and St. George and When Blood is their Argument.[12] That such a genuinely, and internationally, cultivated man could descend to such muck-raking, and always as a good European, is evidence of just how powerful the temptation was to

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[12] Ford Madox Ford, Between St. Denis and St. George (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1915)
---, When Blood is their Argument (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1915)

blame the situation on the other side. Of course, as Goldring points out, the hatred and bitterness engendered here prolong the war, make the peace more difficult, encourage the "Hang-the-Kaiser" fanatics and finally abet the travesty of Versailles.

Much later Wells realized how badly he had misjudged the situation. In Experiment in Autobiography (1934) he writes:

> ...I was reluctant to admit how gravely I had compromised myself by my much too forward belligerence and my rash and eager confidence in the liberalism, intelligence and good faith of our foreign office and war office in the first month or so of the war. My pro-war zeal was inconsistent with my pre-war utterances and against my profounder convictions. As I recovered consciousness, so to speak, from the first shock of the war explosion and resumed my habitual criticism of government and the social order, I found myself suspect to many of my associates who had become pacifists of the left wing. Whatever I wrote or said went to an exasperating accompaniment of incredulity from the left, and I felt all the virtuous indignation natural to a man who has really been in the wrong. I was in the wrong and some of the things I wrote about conscientious objectors in War and the Future were unforgivable.(pp.579-580)

What is significant here is the degree to which even at that time his journalistic writings are belied by his imaginative achievements. There is an important lesson in the awareness that true sanity lay with the imagination.

Kangaroo

Paul Delany in his very fine book D.H.Lawrence's Nightmare says of Lawrence: "His refusal to mention the war in Women in Love--though in a sense that book is one of the most remarkable war novels in English--reflected his determination to keep up a one-man imaginative boycott of the popular consciousness."[1] It may well be that Lawrence's silence in Women in Love came out of an imaginative boycott, though certainly Lawrence was vocal enough about his response to the war in most of the other forms available to him. But as I have argued throughout this essay an experience so colossal in its actuality and its implications takes some time to be digested by the imagination. (Indeed I am arguing that the imagination of western civilization is still trying to digest the full implications of the Great War.) There is, certainly, a cultural despair in Women in Love but it is in Kangaroo[2] that Lawrence imaginatively explores the depths of the damage done to his sensibility by the war.

The novel has a number of obvious failings. With the exception of Harriet and Somers none of the characters is fully

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[1] Paul Delany, D.H.Lawrence's Nightmare (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1978) p.x

[2] D.H.Lawrence, Kangaroo (1923; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977) All future references will be from this edition and will be noted in the text.

imagined. Too often Lawrence's own frustration with his central issues leads him to offend against his own criteria. We sense his own thumb in the pan, and we hear the author himself, weary or petulant, voicing his impatience. But Kangaroo also has a number of assured successes. Most importantly Lawrence gives us, in his portrait of Richard Lovat Somers, a convincing picture of a brave and complex sensibility bruised and injured by the war. At first glance it seems that the two chapters in which Somers recalls his wartime experience in England are only tenuously connected with the Australian subject matter of the novel. In fact the experiences of those two chapters are central to the personality and beliefs of Somers, and central, too, to one of the main questions the novel confronts: the possibility of political action. (The other question is the problem of the relationship between men and women. For the most part I am going to ignore this aspect of the novel, though I will suggest that at heart the two problems are linked.)

Somers has left a Europe he believes is "...done for, played out, finished."(p.18) This exhaustion of spirit reveals itself not only politically but also personally:

> There came dreary and fatuous letters from friends in England, refined young men of the upper middle class writing with a guarded kind of friendliness, gentle and sweet, of course, but as dozy as ripe pears in their laisser aller heaviness. That was what it amounted to: they were over-ripe, they had been in the sun of prosperity too long, and all their tissues were soft and sweetish. How could they react with any sharpness to any appeal on earth? They wanted to hang against the warmest wall they could find, as long as ever they could, till some last wind of death or disturbance shook them down into earth, mushy and over-ripe...(pp.168-169)

The first and most important thing Somers wants from Australia is complete privacy. _Noli me tangere_ is the cry of a number of Lawrentian characters, bruised beyond endurance by the brusque handling of the world: "...he started with a rabid desire not to see anything and not to speak one single word to any single body..."(p.24) And so the nice comedy of Somers resisting the various attempts at neighbourliness. Yet the attempt to be self-sufficient is doomed. (And that is nicely adumbrated in Somers's tribulations with the taxi. Jack advises Somers:

> "...they'll do you down if they can...I have a motor-bike, so I can afford to let 'em get the wind up. Don't depend on 'em, you see. That's the point." (p.24)

"It is, I'm afraid," answers Somers who must, of course, "depend on 'em".) One sympathizes with Somers's profound desire for lonely independence, and yet that desire is frustrated by even more profound needs:

> "I haven't finished with my fellow-men...I want if possible to send out a new shoot in the life of mankind - the effort man makes forever, to grow into new forms...I want to do something with living people, somewhere, somehow, while I live on the earth. I write, but I write alone." (p.77)

This novel, as is all of Lawrence's work, is filled with a passionate commitment to the notion of the individual, filled too with a burning hatred and contempt for all the various social forces which limit or cripple that sense of individuality. Yet Lawrence is much too fine a novelist to fall into any easy opposition of individual to society. His novels render the recognition that the individual is both nourished by society and must, finally, accept his responsibility to it. "Somers was

English by blood and education, and though he had no antecedents whatsoever, yet he felt himself to be one of the responsible members of society..."(p.27) (Hence in part his exasperation with those who are content to hang passively, parasitic on society, and ripen into rottenness.) So the constant tension in Somers: impelled away from all the trammels of society and yet, repeatedly, compelled back again to his commitment to man. (Hence, too, Harriet's frustration: "You don't like people. You always turn away from them and hate them. Yet like a dog to his vomit you always turn back."[p.77]) The main goal of Somers's Australian Odyssey is to explore the various possibilities of fulfilling his responsibility. The war has shown that the tried and conventional approaches will not serve. Can there be a new type of political organization?

Kangaroo and Struthers offer political possibilities to Somers, and all three of these men share important fundamental notions. The old democratic system has been shown to be bankrupt. As it now operates it is based upon a debased and debasing grovelling for votes. Politicians will voice any slogan they think may prove popular. If the slogan is taken up they hold to it; if it is ignored they drop it. Such a constant appeal to the lowest common denominator has resulted, among other grotesqueries, in making money the highest value in the society. The three men are united in their deep contempt for materialism: "You've got to put the control of all supplies into the hands of sincere, sensible men who are still men enough to know that manhood isn't the same

things as goods." says Somers. And later Struthers makes the same point:

> All this theoretical socialism started by Jews like Marx, and appealing only to the will-to-power in the masses, making money the whole crux, this has cruelly injured the working people of Europe. For the working people of Europe were generous by nature, and money was not their prime passion. All this political socialism--all politics, in fact--has conspired to make money the only god. It has been a great treacherous conspiracy against the generous heart of the people.(p.223)

The three are agreed that we need a new polity--one based on genuine values--based as Kangaroo suggests on "... the profound reverence for life, for life's deepest urges..."(p.125) Of course Kangaroo and Struthers offer different paths to this conclusion. Kangaroo shares a number of basic notions with Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor. The average man is not capable of accepting the responsibility of and for himself. He must be loved by a benign father who will order his material life and give him decent values, specific goals. The father, who must have direct, untrammeled authority, will give man what he needs, lead him away from the inert nullity of mere possessions into the steady growth that is necessary to all life. It is at heart a religious vision, one which concerns itself with the values by which we live. It is no accident that Kangaroo aligns himself with two other passionate religious men: "That's what I do want; apart from all antics and ant-tricks. '<u>We have lighted such a fire this day, Master Latimer</u>.' Yes, and we'll light another." (p.137) (Ridley and Latimer, the two famous Protestant martyrs, remain in Lawrence's mind. There is another passing reference to Latimer later on.)

Struthers does not look to a Grand Inquisitor to determine the ultimate values and lead society to them. Rather he has a vision of a new society shaped and informed by a recognition of the deep solidarity that can exist between its constituent individuals. The new "cohesive principle" will be the love of a man for his mate. "Show us how to believe in one another, with all our hearts. Show us that the issue isn't just the wage issue, or who holds the money. It's brother-love at last, on which Christ's Democracy is bound to rest. It's the living People. It is man to man at last."(p.223)

Somers is vitally attracted by both Kangaroo and Struthers and the visions they propose. (One feels Lawrence's lack of a deep imaginative commitment to these figures in the lack of any extended exploration of the differences between them.) But finally, inevitably, Somers's answer is a non-serviam. He cannot commit himself to either political vision. Why?

It is no accident that the chapter in which both Kangaroo and Struthers beg Somers to join their respective causes is followed immediately by the two chapters in which Somers describes his experience in England during the war. For it is the experience related here which is the most powerful determinant of Somers's inability to make commitments. (The lasting power of this experience makes itself felt in the texture of the novel itself. The chapter following those describing Somers's war-time experience is called "Bits". The title accurately describes the content of the chapter in which the imaginative life of the novel

completely breaks down, and is replaced by random quotations, irrelevant incidents and awkward instances of direct authorial intrusion.) But it is clear why this experience has this order of power. It seems to undercut everything. In a fundamental way the war has destroyed Somers's belief in democracy:

> It was in 1915 the old world ended...the integrity of London collapsed, and the genuine debasement began, the unspeakable baseness of the press and the public voice, the reign of that bloated ignominy, John Bull.
> No man who has really consciously lived through this can believe again absolutely in democracy. (p.240)

More importantly perhaps, the war has destroyed Somers's ability to believe in any form of political action:

> He felt broken off from his fellow-men. He felt broken off from the England he had belonged to. The ties were gone. He was loose like a single timber of some wrecked ship, drifting over the face of the earth. Without a people, without a land. So be it. (p.287)

In Somers's eyes the people at home during the war had degenerated into a mob. The war released the inhibitions on violence, hate and destructiveness, and the forms into which these energies poured, on the home front, the press, the public voice, were debased, indecent:

> We hear so much of the bravery and horrors at the front. Brave the men were, all honour to them. It was at home the world was lost. We hear too little of the collapse of the proud human spirit at home, the triumph of sordid, rampant, raging meanness.(p.241)

The war reveals to Somers that the individuals are all too eager to give up the responsibility for their own hearts, their own decency, all too ready to submerge their own individuality into mob-hate or vengeance:

> Yet he had no conscientious objection to war. It was the whole spirit of the war, the vast mob-spirit, which he could never acquiesce in. The terrible, terrible war, made so fearful because in every country practically every man lost his head, and lost his own centrality, his own manly isolation in his own integrity, which alone keeps life real. Practically every man being caught away from himself, as in some horrible flood, and swept away with the ghastly mass of other men...(p.236)

Somers realizes that it is the individual's sense of self that is the prime target of the war mentality. No wonder he objects to allowing the army to probe his fundament and handle his privates. There was a revealing moment at a conference at Tufts University in 1985 on Lawrence called "Creativity and Conscience". It came during James C. Cowan's paper on "Lawrence and Touch". Cowan said:

> In a passage in "The Nightmare" in Kangaroo Lawrence's persona, Richard Lovat Somers's reaction to his preinduction physical examination at a late stage in the First World War is so filled with rage that it borders on the irrational. On his first examination, early in the war, Somers is treated with gentlemanly courtesy, but he experiences the later examination as willful humiliation:
>
>> The elderly fellow then proceeded to listen to his heart and lungs with a stethoscope, jabbing the end of the instrument against the flesh as if he wished to make a pattern on it. Somers kept a set face. He knew what he was out against, and he just hated and despised them all.
>> The fellow at length threw the stethoscope aside as if he were throwing Somers aside, and...strolled over to the great judgement table. (281)
>
> In the next section "a young puppy, like a chemist's assistant", approaches him:
>
>> ...he came forward close to him, right till their bodies almost touched, the one in a navy blue serge, holding back a little as if from the contagion of the naked one. He put his hand between Somers' legs, and pressed it upwards,

> under the genitals. Somers felt his eyes going black.
> "Cough," said the puppy. He coughed. (281)

Somers is ordered to turn around and "Bend forward-further-further" so that the medical man can look at his anus (282). To most men who have undergone similar examinations without any lasting sense of humiliation, Somers response is bound to seem paranoid:

> Never would he be touched again. And because they had handled his private parts, and looked into them, their eyes should burst and their hands should wither and their hearts should rot. So he cursed them in his blood...(261)

This may be the most extreme reaction to a hernia and rectal examination on record.[3]

At this point there was a general laugh from the audience. "Yes," the laugh said, "poor old Bert, always so close to hysteria." That response suggests that Kangaroo needs to be much better known that it is. The brief comment that needs to be made is this: It may well be that Somers's response to the physical examination seems "irrational", "paranoid" and "extreme". But the point the novel makes so powerfully is that Somers's response is the appropriate one to this situation. And that indeed irrationality, paranoia and extremism were more appropriate responses to the challenges of the Great War than any degree of well-bred civility. Of course the upper-middle class rugger boys, long accustomed to hi-jinks in the showers, saw nothing untoward

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[3] I am quoting from the published version of the paper in the "D.H.Lawrence Review" Vol. 18, number 2-3. 1986.

in bending over or coughing for the good doctor. And of course they, with no hint of the irrational or the paranoid, formed column of route to be merrily moved up the line to death. What Somers registers is that the army is announcing in nicely symbolic terms precisely what it will do. In handling his privates and probing his fundament the army warns that it will invade, desecrate and pollute the most fundamental privacies of the individual. "The terrible, terrible war, made so fearful because in every country practically every man lost his head, and lost his own centrality, his own manly isolation in his own integrity, which alone keeps life real." (p.236) Somers stands for the sanctity of the temple of the Lord; it is that sanctity the doctors desecrate. And that desecration is only a tiny foretaste of what will occur in the trenches. No wonder "Somers felt his eyes going black." (I should point out that Prof. Cowan himself recognized that more needed to be said about Somers's reaction: "...Somers is responding, more than anything else, to the manner in which he is being touched, as a thing to be objectified and known, rather than an human and subject, a person to be treated with sensitivity and consideration.")[4]

Somers has seen what happens to political organizations without individual centres. (Thus his horror at the self-

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[4] It's worth noting that J.M.Winter's discussion of these physical examinations (Winter, 1986, pp.50-64) points out that the medical officers were more concerned with meeting their quotas than with doing any real medical examination. They tended to treat the inductees with condescension and contempt. One understands Somers's suspicion and rage.

abnegation which was so much a part of the way in which the brave men went to war: "Awful years--'16,'17,'18,'19--the years when the damage was done. The years when the world lost its real manhood. Not for lack of courage to face death. Plenty of superb courage to face death. But no courage in any man to face his own isolated soul, and abide by its decision. Easier to sacrifice oneself."[p.237]) This experience--the individual destroyed because of the collapse of his individuality--the body politic, unanchored by any conscious commitment to firm individuality, degenerating toward mob rule--prevents the possibility of any political commitment. Somers sits on a train up to London full of soldiers and sailors: "...Somers sat there feeling he had been killed... He had always <u>believed</u> so in everything--society, love,

friends. This was one of his serious deaths in belief."[5] Finally all he has left is himself:

> Richard Lovat had nothing to hang on to but his own soul. So he hung on to it, and tried to keep his wits. If no man was with him, he was hardly aware of it, he had to grip on so desperately, like a man on a plank in a shipwreck. The plank was his own individual self.(p.247)

There are three major reasons why Somers's response to the blandishments of a Kangaroo or a Struthers is an inevitable _non serviam_. The first becomes obvious when Jaz asks Somers:

> "Do you yourself see Kangaroo pulling it off?"...
> "If he's got a proper backing, why not?" Somers answered.
> "I don't say why not. I ask you, _will he_? Won't you say how you feel?"
> Richard sat quite still, not even thinking, but suspending himself. And in the suspense his heart went sad, oh so empty, inside him. He looked at Jaz, and the two men read the meaning in each other's eyes.
> "You think he won't?" said Jaz, triumphing.

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[5] We may find echoes of this trip in "Tommies in the Train" where Lawrence gives us a haunting and powerful sense of dislocation, of the way in which "things fall apart":

> Which then is it that falls from its place
> And rolls down the steep?
>
> Is it the train
> That falls like a meteorite
> Backward into space, to alight
> Never again?
>
> Or is it the illusory world
> That falls from reality
> As we look? Or are we
> Like a thunderbolt hurled?
>
> One or another
> Is lost, since we fall apart
> Endlessly, in one motion depart
> From each other.

None of the questions is answered, or, perhaps, answerable. What we are left with is separation, loss.

> "No, I think he won't," said Richard.
> "There now. I knew you felt like that."
> "And yet," said Richard,"if men were men still--if they had any of that belief in love they pretend to have--if they were fit to follow Kangaroo," he added fiercely, feeling grief in his heart.(pp.176-177)

Somers's grief points to a major problem. One can change a political system by fiat. But to change the individual constituents who make up--and must administer and continue--the system is much more difficult. Somers says:

> Sometimes I feel I'd give anything, soul and body, for a smash up in this social-industrial world we're in... And then when I realize people--just people--the same people after it as before--why, Jaz, then I don't care any more, and feel it's time to turn to the gods.(p.180)

So on the first level Somers cannot join Kangaroo or Struthers because he believes that unless the integrity of the individual can be established and nourished, political action will degenerate into mob appeasement. And the mobs will be nightmare facsimiles of the mobs he confronted in England during the war. How can the individual find that centre? Certainly part of the attraction of both Kangaroo and Struthers has been that their visions do involve a change of heart among the people: a move away from the dead, separating numbness of materialism toward some organic principle which will revitalize society. Yet still Somers cannot pledge himself. Why does he mistrust these programmes so deeply, so intuitively? That question directs us toward a second and more vital level of disagreement Somers has with Kangaroo and Struthers.

Somers sees Kangaroo and Struthers operating out of an insufficient sense of the human being. Their politics are based, to use the simplest (if obviously insufficient) term, on love. Somers has had enough of love. For love as it is now used has become merely a servant to the ego. As an ideal, love leads us not into some new and brave unknown--not towards something genuinely worthy of reverence--but rather merely back to stale repetitions of our own narcissistic demands. Man needs, more desperately than he needs anything else, something greater than he to worship, something that can genuinely compel his awe. Love cannot do that for Somers. Neither, of course, can the God of Love. Two millenia have domesticated even that once strong, dark god of blood sacrifice--changed him into a mere lamb. ("Really, I suspect Jesus of having had very little to do with sheep, that he could call himself the lamb of God. I would truly rather be the little pig of God, the little pigs are infinitely gayer and more delicate in soul."[6])

Furthermore love as an ideal ignores so much more that is in man: his need for freedom, his need for power, his predilection toward violence, his need to hate (we see all of these in Somers). By giving man love as his ideal we force him to repress these other instincts, and so they warp and sicken or, finally, explode in uncontrolled rage. (Hence Somers's deep suspicion of Kangaroo using his "love" to garner "power"). And hence his deep fear of

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[6] D.H.Lawrence, "To S.S.Koteliansky," 11 May, 1917, Collected Letters, ed. H.T.Moore, 2 vols. (London: Heinemann, 1962) 1: 512.

both Kangaroo and Struthers. Why had the "fear of the base and malignant power of the mob-like authorities" come back to him? "...perhaps it was this contact with Kangaroo and Willie Struthers, contact with the accumulating forces of social violence."(p.288)

Jack's case illustrates Somers's analysis. He has joined Kangaroo's party not only for Kangaroo's love, but, in part at least, for the power, authority and discipline of the digger's organization. His own need for violence has been neither acknowledged nor shaped. Hence when it explodes it does so in a particularly perverse fashion:

> "Cripes, there's <u>nothing</u> bucks you up sometimes like killing a man--<u>nothing</u>. You feel a perfect <u>angel</u> after it....Having a woman's something, isn't it? But it's a flea-bite, nothing, compared to killing your man when your blood comes up."(p.352)

(One hastens to add that this scene contains some of Lawrence's least persuasive writing. He has not created Jack sufficiently to make us see this murder, or this extraordinary response to it, as a necessary or appropriate function of Jack's character. It is factitious. Lawrence is making his point by using Jack as a puppet.)

Any God confined to the pale white egoism of love can never teach the whole man a necessary reverence. "Any more love is a hopeless thing, till we have found again, each of us for himself, the great dark God who alone will sustain us in loving one another."(p.221) This is the old, dark, sensual, ithyphallic god of the body as opposed to the Christian god of pure spirituality. He is a god of the irrational and passional self. The "irrational"

is most important. Rationality, like love, speaks to only a limited aspect of the human being, and that perhaps an aspect of limited importance:

> Of course it was all necessary, the conscription, the medical examination. Of course, of course. We all know it. But when it comes to the deepest things, men are as entirely irrational as women...
> There is no arguing with the instinctive passional self. Not the least use in the world. Yes, you are quite right, quite right in all your contentions. But! And the But just explodes everything like a bomb.
> The conscription, all the whole performance of the war was absolutely circumstantially necessary. It was necessary to investigate even the secret parts of a man. Agreed! Agreed! But-- (p.289)

So the dark god of the irrational and passional self is the only God Somers can worship. And this God cannot be worshipped in congregations; he can only be worshipped alone. "Whatever your relativity, that's the starting point and the finishing point: a man alone with his own soul: and the dark God beyond him."(p.310) It is only through this God that man can make and save his soul. Kangaroo and Struthers both offer their followers false gods; the individual souls of their adherents can never be made firm, integral; their revolutions are doomed.

There is a third reason why Somers cannot pledge himself that has nothing to do with the war. At heart he is, simply, a man of imagination not of political action. (As I suggested in the introduction to this essay, there is a way in which the imagination speaks to the essential individual just as the politician speaks to the generalized collectivity.) Listening to Jack explaining Kangaroo's aims..."Somers was silent, very much impressed, though his heart felt heavy. Why did his heart feel so

heavy? Politics--conspiracy--political power: it was all so alien to him. Somehow, in his soul he always meant something quite different, when he thought of action along with other men." (p.105) What his soul is remembering here is his experience in Cornwall. There, in the harvest activities presided over by the dark, inarticulate, Celtic gods Somers had found a moment of genuine community. But that moment too had disappeared, extinguished in part by the war. Those possibilities are never on offer in Australia.

All these various forces dovetail and ensure that Somers will remain isolated. But Somers himself is never as conscious of any of this as he might be. Repeatedly, warmed by the passion of a Kangaroo or a Struthers he comes close to commitment. Repeatedly, at the last moment, he evades. In fact from the very beginning Somers knows that however tempted he may be by the friendship offered by Jack or by Kangaroo he will never be able to accept:

> Before Somers went down to George Street to find Jack and to be taken by him to luncheon with the Kangaroo, he had come to the decision, or to the knowledge, that mating or comradeship were contrary to his destiny. He would never pledge himself to Jack, nor to this venture in which Jack was concerned.(p.120)

He has other Gods to worship. Yet again and again he allows himself to be almost seduced. It is the falseness of Somers's position that makes him so "venomous", so "perverse" when he finally rejects the various offers. Lawrence emphasizes Somers's perversity; he repeats these judgments a number of times. It is a complex situation. For if there is part of Somers which thinks he is free to choose a commitment and therefore acts as though he

possessed this freedom there is another part that simply cannot pledge. "You don't like to commit yourself?" asks Jaz. "Not altogether that. I'd commit myself, if I could. It's just something inside me shakes its head and holds back."(p.176) We know that inarticulate something has been given much of its strength by Somers's experiences in the war; we know too that it has much to do with Somers's dark gods. But Somers is never able to articulate or to recognize how these various factors work. Instead of giving a voice to the something that prevents his commitment, he repeatedly pretends that his refusal to join is simply the result of rational disagreement. But the strained over-vehemence of his rhetoric gives him away. His accusations are exaggerated: "Kangaroo was the mob, really. See his face in a rage. He was the mob. Oh, God, the most terrifying of all things. And Struthers? The vengeful mob also."(p.293) That's not quite right, and the overstatement is revealing:

> That was now all he wanted: to get clear. Not to save humanity or to help humanity or to have anything to do with humanity. No--no. Kangaroo had been his last embrace with humanity. Now, all he wanted was to cut himself clear. To be clear of humanity altogether, to be alone. To be clear of love, and pity, and hate. To be alone from it all. To cut himself finally clear from the last encircling arm of the octopus humanity. To turn to the old dark gods, who had waited so long in the outer dark.(pp.293-294)

If Kangaroo is a representative of the octopus humanity it must be admitted that Somers himself has invited much of its many-armed attention.

It is because Somers doesn't fully know or understand himself that the political arguments he has with Kangaroo never really

come into focus. The issues are never made clear. When Kangaroo says, "I want to hear your case against me", Somers's response is revealingly vague and general. He does not address the political issues at all, nor does he offer any pointed criticism of Kangaroo's ideas. The only criticism of Kangaroo's Grand Inquisitor pretensions, for instance, is Somers's general accusation that Kangaroo wants to be a Jehovah.In fact Somers is really telling Kangaroo to drop all political ambitions: "Don't want to save mankind."(p.233) That's all very well for Somers to say; it's a lesson he himself has yet to learn. There are too many unresolved confusions within Somers himself for him to be able to diagnose confusions in others. He has a deep contempt for politics and politicians. Harriet says: "You've said thousands of times that politics are a game for the base people with no human soul in them." Somers himself says: "I really don't care about politics. Politics is no more than your country's housekeeping. If I had to swallow my whole life up in housekeeping, I wouldn't keep house at all..."(p.71) Of course on one level Somers is right. But the whole point about Kangaroo and Struthers is that they are trying to create a further dimension to political activity--trying to make it more than mere housekeeping. Somers never gets that quite clear.

So far at least it is clear that Lawrence is fully aware--or in the process of writing has become aware--of the various weaknesses in Somers. It is important to acknowledge however that there are moments when Lawrence's identification with Somers

tempts him into interfering in the relationship between Kangaroo and Somers in exactly the way that Lawrence as critic would never allow. Somers goes to see Kangaroo in a mood of perverse antagonism: "It frightened the big man, this perverse mood... And yet, as an individual, he was attracted to the little fellow now, like a moth to the candle: a great lumbering moth to a small, but dangerous flame of a candle."(p.229) The danger here is in the note of self-congratulation...("small, but dangerous..."), and a hint of a too-easily-dismissive image: ("a great lumbering moth")...Have we seen that in Kangaroo?

We must be careful of this line of argument. Criticism of Lawrence is plagued by those who forget that if Lawrence does on occasion allow his mouthpiece to hector and badger to unacceptable lengths he also creates balancing characters who identify and puncture the verbosity with mordant accuracy. ("Somers had preached at her, like a dog barking, barking senselessly. And oh, how it had annoyed her."[p.386]) If Lawrence is sometimes not quite fair to Kangaroo he is nevertheless quite clear-sighted about just how confused Somers's reaction is. We have already seen that Somers's case against both Kangaroo himself and his politics is not in itself very convincing. Indeed by the end of the novel Somers is only able to resolve his own attitude to Kangaroo's politics by misrepresenting them:

> "Now, Kangaroo," said Richard, "is in a false position. He wants to save property for the property owners, and he wants to save Labour from itself and from the capitalist and the politician and all. In fact, he wants to save everything as we have it, and it can't be done. You can't eat your cake and have it..."(p.334)

That is not an adequate representation of Kangaroo's political aims. And of course the final and most desperate appeal Kangaroo makes is not political at all but personal. And here Somers's need to evade commitment is made irrefutably clear. Kangaroo is dying:

> "Good-bye, Lovat!" said Kangaroo in a whisper, turning his face to Somers and reaching out his hand. Richard took the clammy, feeble hand. He did not speak...Grief, torture, shame, seethed low down in him. But his breast and shoulders and face were hard as if turned to rock. He had no choice.
>
> "You've killed me. You've killed me, Lovat!" whispered Kangaroo. "Say good-bye to me. Say you love me now you've done it, and I won't hate you for it." The voice was weak and tense.
>
> "But I haven't killed you, Kangaroo. I wouldn't be here holding your hand if I had. I'm only sorry some other villain did such a thing." Richard spoke very gently, like a woman.
>
> "Yes, you've killed me," whispered Kangaroo hoarsely.
>
> Richard's face went colder, and he tried to disengage his hand. But the dying man clasped him with suddenly strong fingers.
>
> "No, no", he said fiercely. "Don't leave me now. You must stay with me. I shan't be long--and I need you to be there." There ensued a long silence. The corpse--for such it seemed --lay immobile and obstinate. Yet it did not relax into death. And Richard could not go, for it held him. He sat with his wrist clasped by the clammy thin fingers, and he could not go.
>
> Then again the dark, mysterious, animal eyes turned up to his face.
>
> "Say you love me, Lovat," came the hoarse, penetrating whisper, seeming even more audible that a loud sound.
>
> And again Lovat's face tightened with torture.
>
> "I don't understand what you mean," he said with his lips.
>
> "Say you love me," the pleading, penetrating whisper seemed to sound inside Somers's brain. He opened his mouth to say it. The sound "I--" came out. Then he turned his face and remained open-mouthed, blank.
>
> Kangaroo's fingers were clutching at his wrist, the corpse-like face was eagerly upturned to his. Somers was brought-to by a sudden convulsive gripping of the fingers around his wrist. He looked down. And when he saw the eager, alert face, yellow, long, Jewish, and somehow ghoulish, he knew he could not say it. He didn't love Kangaroo.
>
> "No,' he said, "I can't say it."(pp.369-370)

It is a brilliant scene, forcing us to register the injustice of Kangaroo's accusation, and the blatant nature of his black-mailing, but also the personal impotence and lack of generosity in Somers. Jack makes the point to which Somers has no reply:

> "That's why I think you were a bit hard on him. I do love him myself, so I can say so without exaggerating the fact. But if I hated the poor man like hell, and saw him lying there in that state--why I'd swear on a red-hot iron I loved him, I would...If a man can't speak two words of pity for a man in his state, why, I think there's something wrong with that man. Sorry to have to say it. But if Old Harry himself had lain there like that and asked me to say I loved him I'd have done it. Heart-breaking it was..." (p.372)

The bitterness of Somers's impotence is revealed in his petulant valediction: "'No,' said Richard to himself, thinking of Kangaroo. 'I don't love him--I detest him. He can die. I'm glad he is dying. And I don't like Jack either. Not a bit. In fact I like nobody. I love nobody and I like nobody, and there's an end of it, as far as I'm concerned...'"(p.373) Clearly Lawrence is made a little uneasy by Somers's flinty intransigence. Certainly we need some excuse for the unpersuasive coda we are offered in which Harriet maintains that, after all, Somers is "absolutely heart-broken" by Kangaroo's death. The fact is that Somers is completely unable to make any commitment to the world of men. The future he faces is bleak and desolate: "It was only four days to New Zealand, over a cold, dark, inhospitable sea."(p.394)

Perhaps now is the appropriate moment at which to make a comment regarding Somers's and Harriet's relationship. Somers has, as I've suggested, discovered his political impotence. He has no

faith in the possibility of political action. Without the individual centre there can be no public polity. Similarily without that individual centre there can be no love. There are some crucial difficulties here. (These are difficulties which are implicit in all Lawrence's suggestions concerning the manner in which the individual must pledge himself to something "other".) The healthy individual ego is not an end in itself, it is merely a necessary beginning. And in order to stay healthy that ego must commit itself to--draw sustenance from and revere--something greater than itself. The first problem is to try to discover what that something greater is. That problem is made more difficult by the recognition of the dangers of false gods. "Love" , "King and Country", have proven false; why should we trust Somers's "dark gods"? In both the private and the public sphere there is some difficulty with how and where the dark gods manifest themselves. In his relationship with Harriet, Somers maintains that they give their directions through the husband. (Ah for the days of <u>that</u> innocence!)

The second problem is to know how to commit yourself to something greater without betraying the necessarily independent, individual soul. These questions bedevil both private and public relationships. The chapter where Lawrence explores the personal relationship most fully--"Harriet and Lovat at Sea in Marriage"--is delightful. In spite of the deep seriousness of Lawrence's concern the language is not weighed down into sermon but remains light, poised and pointed. (It is in some ways reminiscent of

another, earlier, warm and witty chapter focussing on the same question: "Mino" in Women in Love.) But the problems themselves are merely versions of the problems which underly the political questions. "'...believe in me,' he said desperately. 'I know you too well,' she replied. And so, it was an impasse." (p.195) But the criticism of Somers continues:

> He did not yet submit to the fact which he half knew: that before mankind would accept any man for king, and before Harriet would ever accept him, Richard Lovat, as a lord and master, he, the self-same Richard who was so strong on kingship, must open the doors of his soul and let in a dark Lord and Master for himself, the dark god he had sensed outside the door.(pp.195-196)

It is true that there is something stiff-necked and unyielding about Somers throughout. For all his talk of his dark gods we see little of Somers relaxing his wilful hold on his own egocentric consciousness. (Indeed Somers's case alerts us to the extraordinary courage with which--later on--Lawrence submits so completely, and so movingly, to his own dark gods. "Reach me a gentian, give me a torch!/ let me guide myself with the blue, forked torch of a flower/ down the darker and darker stairs, where blue is darkened on blueness...") We may well feel that an element in Somers's intransigence toward Kangaroo is his own terror at any submission. The very vehemence of Somers's rejection of Kangaroo is in part a function of the degree to which Kangaroo's ideals--("I should try to establish my state... with the profound reverence for life, for life's deepest urges as the motive power."[p.125])--could, or should, command Somers's loyalty. At the deepest level the ability to make personal or

public commitments is the same. Certainly Somers has reasons enough to be wary of any commitment. But part of Lawrence's genius has been to show us that the fault is not all external. The damage is internal to Somers as well.

We know why Somers must remain loyal to his dark gods. In his vision <u>everything</u> that man builds must be anchored to a bedrock of individuality. Until man can learn how to nourish that individuality further attempts to build either public or private society are doomed. Ideals which involve the abnegation of the individual (Christian, the sacrifice for King and Country) are misguided and dangerous. Yet we also know that Somers cannot surrender even to his own dark gods as gladly as he must. There is a sense of vulnerability that incapacitates him from dealing candidly with the external world; hence his prolonged flirtations with Kangaroo and Struthers. Too often we feel Somers using his necessary loyalties to the dark gods as an excuse for evading personal commitments. (It may be suggestive that in the rather frightening novel where Lawrence explores the proper submission to the dark gods--<u>The Plumed Serpent</u>--there is no character who is a representation of Lawrence himself; no alter ego of Lawrence's ever submits.) But whatever the pressures that result in Somers's isolation, there are always major forces directing him back, again and again, to the possibility of society:

> The purest lesson our era has taught is that man, at his highest, is an individual, single, isolate, alone, in direct soul-communication with the unknown God, which prompts within him. ...
>
> But just as a tree is only perfect in blossom because it has groping roots, so is man only perfected in his individual being

> by his groping, pulsing union with mankind. The unknown god is within, at the quick. But this quick must send down roots into the great flesh of mankind...
> ...It is the individual alone who can save humanity alive. But the greatest of great individuals must have deep, throbbing roots down in the dark red soul of the living flesh of humanity. (p.332)

Poor Somers--poor Lawrence--tormented and tortured by the endless task of trying to root the individual in a society inimical to him.

There are two brief, but revealing, comparisons that can be made with Women in Love. There is the moon which recurs again and again in Lawrence's writing: pure radiance, untouched, untouchable, inhuman, sinister, the magna mater, the mystic "other". Birkin stones the reflection of the moon trying to get rid of it forever. But finally he turns away from the moon, brought back from its deathly otherness to the warming human otherness of Ursula. Somers, after Kangaroo is killed, also confronts the inhuman moon. It is significant that this time there are no human voices to call him back:

> No animate answer this time. The radium-rocking, wave-knocking night his call and his answer both. This God without feet or knees or face. This sluicing, knocking, urging night, heaving like a woman with unspeakable desire, but no woman, no thighs or breast, no body. The moon, the concave mother-of-pearl of night, the great radium-swinging, and his little self. The call and the answer, without intermediary. Non-human gods, non-human human being.(p.375)

Secondly the ceaseless tension that Somers is under, tempted by the deep desire for comradeship and the making of a society, recoiling away back to his own individual dark gods, is revealed, as we've already seen, in his baffled and inconsistent responses

to the various offers made to him. In <u>Women in Love</u> it is Birkin who continually reaches out, trying to make contact; Gerald who hesitatingly puts him off. It is significant that Somers adopts both the position and also, often enough, the language of Gerald. When Birkin suggests a pledge between them Gerald puts him off: "We'll leave it till I understand it better..." Somers is evasive in the same way, and in the same language, as Gerald is: "Let's leave it, Jack...wait till I feel sure." With the death of Gerald Birkin recognizes that his search for a deep, passionate commitment with another man has failed. (One aspect of his desire for a union with Gerald is that it is a final effort at some link with society.) But Birkin is not yet ready to give up hope, to admit a complete defeat:

> "...to make it complete, really happy, I wanted eternal union with a man too: another kind of love," he said...
> "You can't have two kinds of love. Why should you!"
> "It seems as if I can't," he said. "Yet I wanted it."
> "You can't have it, because it's false, impossible,' she said.
> "I don't believe that," he answered.[7]

Somers has no such moving courage left. His courage is a much bleaker one. It needs to be; he has surrendered to Ursula's view.

Somers has an interesting theory of nightmares: "He always considered dreams as a kind of revenge which old weaknesses took on the victorious healthy consciousness..." (p.109) <u>Kangaroo</u> has been the bringing to bear of the imagination onto the intractable nightmare of the war. That is not to suggest that Somers (or

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[7] D.H.Lawrence, <u>Women in Love</u> (1921; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960) p. 541.

Lawrence) has been able to heal himself. But by pursuing that nightmare and cleaving close to it he has discovered some of the damage the war has inflicted. Much of the literature of the Great War tries to cover up the damage of that war. Lawrence cannot heal himself. The damage may be irreparable. But he has, at least, gone a long way to discovering the extent of his wounds.

Conclusion

Much of my argument here has focussed on the uniqueness of the Great War, and has suggested that the literature which comes out of it was an heroic attempt to grapple with a new and almost unrecognizable reality. There is much to be said for such a perception: the enormous scale of the war, the hideous impersonal mechanization of the war, the conditions of the war--the trenches, the mud, the sink and cesspool of those static lines, the statistics of the war--thousands dead, a few yards gained, or lost, the pointlessness of the war. Middle class, western civilization hadn't seen that before. Surely Nietzsche was right. We have at last separated Dionysus from Apollo; we have denied and repressed Dionysus for too long, and now we are hapless victims of the revenge of our own Dionysus upon us: destruction without meaning or resonance. Surely this experience was unique; was, as Henry James saw it, the end. Six days after war was declared he wrote in a letter to Rhoda Broughton:

> You and I, the ornaments of our generation, should have been spared this wreck of our belief that through the long years we had seen civilization grow and the worst become impossible. The tide that bore us along was then all the while moving to <u>this</u> as its grand Niagara--yet what a blessing we didn't know it. It seems to me to undo everything, everything that was ours, in the most horrible

retroactive way.[1]

Nevertheless we must also recognize that the Great War may have been given too much credit for putting out the lamps of Europe. It is arguable that many of those particular lamps were already failing before Aug. 14, 1914. Surely one can see the seeds of the death of Henry James's civilization in the work of such as Lyell, Darwin, Marx, Freud, Rutherford and Einstein, in the novels of Dostoevsky, Mann and Conrad (even, indeed, in the works of the Master himself.) Certainly one can see the strange flowers of those seeds already blooming before the war, filling the old studies and conservatories with strange and troubling odours. The European psyche had been troubled by bad dreams well before August 1914.

There were serious problems with or without the war. Doubts about the omnipotence of the rational, hints of the absurd, of madness and impotence, all of these had begun to appear. Indeed in one way the Great War was a sort of teaching device for those who had trouble reading the various languages of the arts. It made literal and actual what before had been metaphoric. If you didn't understand the fragmentation addressed in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (or in the Impressionists) a quick trip to the front might help. <u>Notes from Underground</u> should have alerted us to the limits of rationality, the perversity of the human spirit and the need to listen to subterranean voices. <u>Death in Venice</u> reminds

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[1] Henry James, to Rhoda Broughton, 10 August, 1914, <u>The Collected Letters</u> ed. Percy Lubbock, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1920)

us that a faith in the rational will and nineteenth century civilization may well prove impotent when faced with man's inalienable darker desires. Heart of Darkness supplements that vision and ends with a warning that was, of course, ignored. Marlow has returned to Europe:

> I found myself back in the sepulchral city resenting the sight of people hurrying through the streets to filch a little money from each other, to devour their infamous cookery, to gulp their unwholesome beer, to dream their insignificant and silly dreams. They trespassed upon my thoughts. They were intruders whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretence, because I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew. Their bearing, which was simply the bearing of commonplace individuals going about their business in the assurance of perfect safety, was offensive to me like the outrageous flauntings of folly in the face of a danger it is unable to comprehend.[2]

Some fifteen years later these commonplace individuals were indeed confronted with the "folly" of their "assurances of perfect safety". They found themselves in a landscape where the endless, pointless blasting that fills Heart of Darkness was multiplied a thousand fold. The prophetic power of the imagination is haunting. And if we missed the points of the novels here was the war to give us all those lessons in crude and unavoidable fashions.

Whenever we ask someone to die for someone, or something, else we are approaching metaphysical questions, questions of faith. For the promise that lies behind any demand for sacrifice is that death can bring new life, a redemption, a resurrection.

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[2] Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness (1902; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973) p. 102.

And certainly this war started in a climate where such faith was widespread:

> And he is dead who will not fight;
> And who dies fighting has increase.
>
> Julian Grenfell "Into Battle"

But there is a sense in which that extraordinary outpouring of faith was the last gasp of a world-order already collapsing. Clearly much of the early enthusiasm for the war came from a sense that civilization now offered only bourgeois, materialistic challenges; here at last was an opportunity for genuine heroism, here at last was a genuine spiritual challenge. (A significant amount of the early poetry celebrating the coming of war is filled with vague religious symbolism.) There is a huge irony in the fact that what was seen as an escape from materialism and cynicism into idealism involved this most materialistic of wars, this war where disillusion became so widespread, where the illusions of our civilization finally perished.

These questions involve a further issue and that is the relationship between public and private space. If we can believe in the public space, in the _res publica_, in the _patria_ then we can willingly sacrifice to and for it. But so much of the literature we have looked at suggests that it is precisely this "public" sense that is being destroyed. Again it is helpful to remind ourselves that this is not the first time we have recognized such tensions. To take one obvious example Shakespeare's second tetralogy (_Richard II, Henry IV pts. 1&2, Henry V_) charts (among other things) the calling into question of the legitimacy of the

"patria". Henry IV is agonizingly aware of the precariousness of his claim to the throne. (It is based on political expediency and the force of his army.) Henry V inherits that uncertainty with his crown. The questions come to a head in the night scene where Henry V walks disguised among his soldiers and listens to them argue about the "justice" of his cause, and the implications in relation to the sacrifice they are being asked to make. Haig would have heard very similar questions had he had even a little touch of Harry in the night. (It is no accident that quotations from Henry V fill the literature written by the soldiers of the Great War.)

In any case it is clear that there is a major shift occuring at this time (a shift that both affects and is affected by the Great War) in relation to the way we perceive our patria, in the relationship between public and private space. Ford's novels trace the passing of the true Tory philosophy, where the leaders accepted their moral responsibilities to and for those they ruled. This organic model of a "body" politic has vanished. Those leaders have been replaced by the Macmasters. The new and crucial department in the government is the Department of Statistics. Abstracted figures, leeched of any moral quality, can be used to prove anything. The essence of politics becomes as Somers sees it: a materialistic grab, mere housekeeping. The "republic" ceases to be a living community which both demands and gives loyalty, which has a spiritual dimension and which can therefore make certain

demands.[3] Instead it is secularized, and becomes only the setting within which each individual citizen is free and expected to seek his own satisfaction. Self-interest is now seen as a perfectly appropriate driving force of "society" (by which we mean more and more the "economy"), and a worthwhile guiding principle for the individual. Freedom and equality are the values that replace spiritually sanctioned goals. But "Freedom for what?" "Equality of what?" These are questions too seldom addressed. These are the sorts of problems that plague Somers. But they are not confined merely to him and his confrontation with the Great War. It is out of this collapse of "public" space that we get the characteristic "modern" voice: individual, querulous, fraught with intimations of impotence on all levels, uneasy in its relationship to the state even, indeed, to the culture which gives it its language.

In one way Nietzsche's "God is dead" announces the death of any spiritually sanctified polity, and the birth of the secularized state. In that state there are no transcendent independently established values; all is relative. Choice is now beyond good and evil and involves mere subjective "value-judgements". Politics, unanchored by any moral hierarchy, devolves into either bathetic emptiness (in Lawrence's world read Horatio Bottomley) or into frightening, because unexamined, pseudo-religion (the dreams of Struthers or Kangaroo). Secularized

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[3] Allan Bloom's book The Closing of the American Mind (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987) has much to suggest about the implications of what he sees as the gradual secularization of society in the nineteenth and twentieth century. My discussion here is indebted to his provocative book.

authority is now consensual and contractual, but that implies serious limitations on what that authority may demand. The "father" of the fatherland is now recognized as a secularized Abram busily preparing his son for an unnecessary execution. Etymology suggests that our "patriotic" emotions will have much to do with our feelings for our father. And we have already seen just how jeopardized those feelings have been. By the end of the war there is little reverence left for the father figures; the larger authority they represent is also undercut.

If those charged with the public weal have lost their credibility, the public voice, too, is contaminated. The great words by which we live have been bled of their meaning. Public rhetoric has been debased. In this context we won't be surprised to find soldiers starting to question the very notion of a patria, to doubt any "sacrifice" made in its name. This mistrust is expressed as cogently as anywhere in Hemingway's A Farewell to Arms:

> I did not say anything. I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain. We had heard them, sometimes standing in the rain almost out of earshot, so that only the shouted words came through, and had read them, on proclamations that were slapped up by billposters over other proclamations, now for a long time, and I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it. There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of the places had dignity. Certain numbers were the same way and certain dates and these with the names of the places were all you could say and have them mean anything. Abstract words such as glory, honour, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of

regiments and the dates.[4]

Without a belief in the rightness of the cause, what should be meaningful sacrifice becomes, as Hemingway suggests here, mere waste, garbage. It is not a perception unique to Hemingway:

> 'Stetson!
> 'You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!
> 'That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
> 'Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year? (Eliot)

"Mistah Kurtz--he dead."(Conrad) "'Like a dog!' he said; it was if the shame of it must outlive him." (Kafka) "Before nightfall a shocked and respectful world received the news of his decease." (Mann. The irony here is particularly biting.) The literature of the period is filled with scenes of reduced, squalid, pitiful death, death which leads nowhere, which opens into no new possibility of growth. "We are not making a sacrifice, we _are_ the sacrifice" says MacIlwaine in McGuiness's astonishing _Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Toward the Somme_.

The final scenes of both _A Man Could Stand Up_ and _Kangaroo_ resonate in the mind. We have returned from the war and moved into a new world. The sea we face in the twentieth century is certainly no sea of faith. It is "cold, dark and inhospitable." Our beliefs are shaken. Our drawing rooms empty of furniture, of the artefacts of our culture. We have moved into Beckett territory. We are

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[4] Ernest Hemingway, _A Farewell to Arms_ (1929; rpt. New York: Scribners, 1957) p. 185.

dispossessed. We have no relationship with our "patria"; our public roles and responsibilities have vanished. Our homes are temporary; we are in transit. Our friends are grotesques, cripples, class-less. Our relation with the other is fraught, ungrounded in any social structure. Our sexual relationships are highly problematic. There are no children. This is strange and threatening territory. None of the available maps produced by minds biased by and toward rationality is of much help in introducing us to this unknown landscape. It is the imagination that has explored the Great War and delivered us into the twentieth century.

The question that haunts Elizabeth in Birdsong is how we can tell the story of "the lost", "the...unfound"? How do we know those whose "names [are] teeming, reeling, over surfaces of yards, of hundreds of yards, over furlongs of stone"? It is clear that the story of those names is a very difficult one to tell. Indeed, as we have seen, there is no one story. But what I have focused on is the threat that lies at the centre of the war: the threat of becoming one of the lost. I have tried to discover in these texts the various dimensions of that threat. I have explored how and why the full weight of the threat is evaded. The rational mind finds it difficult to focus on the kind of appalling violence that is at the heart of this story. It is, I have been arguing, the imagination that keeps the nightmare before us. As John Bullock goes up the line for the first time Williamson writes: "Every man thought secretly, I cannot be killed." (Williamson, p.47) Later,

under an artillery attack: "He felt himself becoming liquid and dead in the mud." (Williamson, p.115) The mind will hold to its secret belief; the imagination will make us <u>feel</u> that liquidity and death.

The readings I offer of the various texts are, of course, only provisional. But through those texts we have come to know many of the "unfound", and the territory they inhabited. And we have recognized the degree to which the conscious mind, self-defensively, resists that knowledge. The various texts seem to me to complement each other effectively in the exploration of this argument.

Zara Steiner can speculate that there may be "reasons which the historian can only dimly perceive [that] Europe was deeply ready for war." Ford's <u>Parade's End</u> explores some of those reasons. And, perhaps, helps us to understand the last few lines of Shaw's <u>Heartbreak House</u>:

> Mrs Hushabye. But what a glorious experience! I hope theyll [the Zeppelins] come again tomorrow night.
> Ellie [radiant at the prospect] Oh, I hope so.[5]

Wells demonstrates clearly that the imagination can render the madness and horror of the murder of our children in a way the conscious mind strives to avoid. And finally Lawrence starts to explore some of the deeper implications of the damage this nightmare has wrought.

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[5] G.B.Shaw, <u>Heartbreak House</u> (1919; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964) p. 160)

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