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**THE COMIC-HUMANIZING CHARACTER OF  
CHARLIE CHAPLIN  
AND THE LITERATURE OF WORLD WAR I**

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Stephen Spender points out in his autobiography, *World Within World*, that “[his] parents and the servants talked of pre-war days, as poets sing of a Golden Age,”<sup>1</sup> and certainly for modern consciousness the pre-war world has assumed a somewhat mythical status. In many ways, the Edwardians and early Georgians tried to live the same myth that is now projected onto them in retrospect, but World War I came as an unnecessary, harsh reality and “knocked the ball-room floor from under middle-class English life.”<sup>2</sup> As the war continued from 1914 to its conclusion in 1918, the divergence of worlds and accompanying disillusionment became increasingly apparent. Memoirs written during this time, such as Arthur Graeme West’s *Diary of a Dead Officer* (1919) and C. E. Montague’s *Disenchantment* (1919), make the tragic opposition painfully clear—as Caroline E. Playne observes, a sort of “callous ignorance prevailed.”<sup>3</sup>

During this same time, the films of Charlie Chaplin began to be popularly recognized. Chaplin, in fact, appeared in films as early as 1914, but not until 1915 and 1916, perhaps the bleakest and most disillusioning moments of the war, did his real popularity emerge and he begin to work his way into modern consciousness.<sup>4</sup> Chaplin’s appeal, however, involves more than a momentary diversion from bleaker events, a bit of comic relief; his characters can be seen as focusing and identifying important social characteristics of the period, particularly in relation to the war and the experiences of the frontline soldiers, who were learning, as Ezra Pound suggests, that they were dying “for a botched civilization.”<sup>5</sup> Chaplin’s ability to describe simultaneously comic and tragic dimensions, while accenting what is human and sympathetic, allowed him to reflect the predicament society found itself in during World War I. Over the destructive landscape, Charlie Chaplin projected his comic and humanizing character.

In *Chaplin*, Roger Manvell points out the coincidence of Chaplin’s emerging film career and the beginning stages of the war:

The First World War, which was to commence in Europe within six months of Charlie's debut on the screen, was a watershed in the developing social attitudes of the greater mass of the people....The war...cut like a knife through the complacencies of the Victorian and Edwardian eras, and gave an entirely new slant to social values which had seemed to many, if not to most people, impregnable.<sup>6</sup>

Manvell goes on to describe the disillusionment that followed the war and to suggest that Chaplin spoke for this period, as, indeed, he did. This conflict between illusion and reality, in fact, still dominates our understanding of the period. On the one hand, pre-war society appears to be stable—civilization has “resolved itself from past history, correctly, like a sum”;<sup>7</sup> but there are also antithetical social realities that tend to belie this view. As Caroline E. Playne shows, these two forces, among others, rioted together, culminating in World War I.<sup>8</sup> The same conflict of forces is responsible for much of the literature of the period. The poetry written from 1912, the publication date of the first *Georgian Poetry*, through to 1922, the publication date of *The Waste Land* and, appropriately, of the last *Georgian Poetry*, describes a radical shift in perspective and poetic perception. The war is, perhaps, the major cause of this shift. Poetry prior to World War I, even given that the Georgians were in their historical context considered to be somewhat revolutionary, tended to express narrow and illusory perceptions. The so-named trench poets, if not already skeptical about civilization, were forced either to alter their perspectives or to become aware of a horrifying confirmation of their worst imaginings. As a result, a whole way of life, as well as the poetic mode which reflected it, was called into question. As Richard Ellmann says, “Eliot, after politely mocking Edwardian politeness in ‘Prufrock,’ becomes impolite in *The Waste Land*.”<sup>9</sup>

Chaplin, in this context, spoke more particularly for the war years. He is often identified as emblematic of the front-line soldier. Edmund Blunden, for example, uses the comic figure of Chaplin's tramp in his memoir, *Undertones of War*:

I remember the familiar song of my old companion Doogan, now for the last time, ‘Everybody's doing the Charlie Chaplin walk.’ He broke off, and without self-pity and almost casually he said, ‘It's the third time. They've sent me over, this is the third time. They'll get me this time.’<sup>10</sup>

On an immediate, physical level Chaplin's tramp mirrors the soldiers' problems and suffering. The expression, "everyone's doing the Charlie Chaplin walk," refers to the difficulty soldiers suffering from trench foot had in walking. But the allusion to Chaplin involves more than the physical parallel.

As Paul Fussell observes in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, popular forms of entertainment influenced the perception of the war experience. The use of various forms of entertainment as a means of escape, of course, was extremely important. More important, as Fussell points out, "the dramaturgic provided a dimension within which the unspeakable could to a degree be familiarized and interpreted."<sup>11</sup> Certainly, how one deals with the unspeakable is an essential question of this period, for the front-line soldier found the realities of war overwhelming.

The influence of the theatrical was, in fact, extensive. Not only were there live music hall acts in the rest areas, but "camp-kinemas," as they were called, brought various films, including Chaplin's, to the front-line soldiers. Lord Chandos, for example, sets up a reference to Chaplin in opposition to the harsher realities described in *From Peace to War*: "Cinema. Charlie Chaplin at a music hall. Quite admirably funny."<sup>12</sup> References to Chaplin also filtered down into the "folk songs" of the period, and almost every occasion stresses the connection between Chaplin and the common soldier. Children, both British and American, sang the following play song:

One, two, three, four,  
 Charlie Chaplin went to war,  
 He taught the nurses how to dance,  
 And this was what he taught them:  
 Heel, toe, over we go.  
 Heel, toe, over we go.  
 Salute to the King  
 And bow to the Queen  
 And turn your back on the Kaiserin.<sup>13</sup>

In the trenches the fighting troops sang another, even more interesting, song, which associates Chaplin's tramp with the front-line soldier:

For the moon shines bright on Charlie Chaplin  
 His shoes are cracking  
 For want of blacking

And his baggy trousers will want mendin'  
 Before they send him  
 To the Dardanelles.<sup>14</sup>

These allusions to Chaplin and his film characters point up his growing popularity, particularly among the troops. They are also emblematic of the need for some form of comic relief during this black time. Chaplin's films, however, spoke for more than the comic spirit. The quality and complexity of his presentation offered an interpretation of experience that the soldiers found sympathetic. Even in his early films, Chaplin was not satisfied with "custard pie comedies." The "little man" Chaplin projects is, in a real sense, a soul at the mercy of fate, of an alien environment. His humor, therefore, should be appreciated on several levels. As Raymond Durnat aptly observes, "a good joke includes all kinds of sub-jokes, that the conscious mind doesn't notice, but that the laughing mind does."<sup>15</sup> Durnat goes on to identify a curious aspect of Chaplin's films, particularly in relation to *It's A Dog's Life* (1918): "Such humor may be charmingly 'picturesque' nowadays, but it must have had a much more realistic edge for slum-and-immigrant audiences of the time."<sup>16</sup> This film, in fact, related closely to the war-time experiences of many soldiers. In the opening scene, Charlie faces a cold dawn trying to sleep in a corner on waste ground. The entire opening sequence could easily be relocated in the trenches, describing the soldiers' predicament. The bleak environment, the isolation and obvious suffering mirror the tragic consequences of the war experience. Chaplin, however, does not want to focus on the tragic level only. We are left with a sense of the sympathetic. As Manvell says, "The film is at once harsh and sentimental, sharp and sweet....it is a near perfect blend of laughter with a wholly realistic observation of the meaning of life in which destitution, hunger and unemployment predominate."<sup>17</sup> This applies equally to the soldier-audiences who watched Chaplin's films.

Chaplin tried to develop this dual quality in a more sophisticated comedy than was generally attempted. It was, in fact, in marked contrast to the Mack Sennett comedies of the day. Max Eastman, in *Enjoyment of Laughter*, describes comedy that derives from "playful pain," and he goes on to quote Chaplin as saying,

It seems to me that there are two different kinds of laughter.  
 Superficial laughter is one escape....Subtle humor shows you that

what you think as normal, isn't. This little tramp *wants* to get into jail. The audience thinks at first that he is ridiculous. But he isn't. He's right. The conditions are ridiculous. If I make them laugh that way, it's what I call subtle laughter.<sup>18</sup>

The interaction of personality with environment is essential to Chaplin's humor, and the same interaction is essential to the writers who deal with the war experience. The tramp figure, so often associated with the front-line soldier, was, in fact, developed during this time, especially in two films of 1915, *The Bank* and *The Tramp*. In these films the down-and-out character is more victim than victor. Circumstances and environment seem always to wear away at the human spirit. An essential humanity, however, is continuously maintained, a human sympathy. The David and Goliath allegories that form the basis of many of Chaplin's films show humanity, the David figure, triumphing over almost impossible adversity. We are reminded, as well, of Robert Graves's pessimistic poem about World War I, "Goliath and David," in which he reverses the outcome of the story. The soldier, David, is overwhelmed by the circumstances of war.

In relation to these characteristics, a pattern of conflict between illusion and reality often develops. *The Tramp* is an excellent case in point; in it, the tramp is caught between a romantic daze and the harsher truth of reality. This must have struck home in a number of ways to an audience of disillusioned soldiers. After the tramp learns that his love of the farmer's daughter, whom he has saved from thieves, is hopeless, he writes a farewell note and prepares to leave. At the conclusion he is a small figure isolated against the horizon, but he suddenly kicks up his heels and ambles off hopefully into the future. Implicitly, what is human and sympathetic surfaces again. The romantic vision is retained. In our own time, this same pattern is used by Samuel Beckett in *Waiting for Godot*, although the two tramps probably relate to the work of Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, "whose troubles with such things as hats and boots were notorious, and whose dialogue was spoken very slowly on the assumption that the human understanding could not be relied on to work at lightning speed."<sup>19</sup> The same, important conflict between romantic belief and disillusionment upon which Chaplin develops his tramp figure holds true.

Human values maintained in the face of a dehumanizing environment are particularly significant during the war years, as is the contrast between romantic illusion and reality. Chaplin's films spoke to both of these issues. As Robert Graves states in *The Long Week-*

*End*, describing Chaplin's later films, "Chaplin was no longer merely the funny little man with baggy trousers and the stick: 'The Kid' and 'The Gold Rush' had made him emblematic of the gay spirit of laughter in a cruel, crazy world."<sup>20</sup> Hart Crane also identifies this quality in Chaplin in his post-war poem, "Chaplinesque" (1922):

For we can still love the world, who find  
a famished kitten on the step, and know  
Recesses for it from the fury of the street,  
Or warm torn elbow covers.<sup>21</sup>

As I have shown, however, these same themes exist in the films Chaplin made during the war; they spoke to the same desires.

The writers associated with the war saw in Chaplin issues with which they were also concerned. Edmund Blunden's statement above relates to more than the "funny little man"; it alludes to the comic-tragic nature of his work in relation to the front-line soldier's predicament. Doogan, like Chaplin, is a victim of his environment. When he goes up to the front this time he is sure he will be killed. Given this sort of situation, how does one maintain any sense of human integrity? Graves describes the same concern in relation to Siegfried Sassoon and his own poetry: "We defined the war in our poems by making contrasted definitions of peace."<sup>22</sup> Blunden's narrative, and the poems that follow it, deal quite clearly with this problem and the contrasts implied in it. A short poem in *A Supplement of Poetical Interpretations and Variations*, for example, contrasts a romantic vision with the war landscape: "Trenches in the moonlight, allayed with lulling moonlight/ have had their loveliness." The poem concludes: "But O no, no, they're Death's malkins dangling in the wire/ For the moon's interpretation."<sup>23</sup> The quality of the poem is based upon the tension between perceptions. A like drama occurs in the narrative; what appears to be pastoral and human becomes alien and dehumanizing. The same issue evolves throughout the narrative, which also echoes *Pilgrim's Progress*. In this case the final goal seems to be the maintenance of human values, an essential innocence in the face of the destructive environment. The final sentences center on the conflict:

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 cata-

138 THE COMIC-HUMANIZING CHARACTER

clysmal railway cutting by Hill 60, came from that innocent green-wood. No destined anguish lifted its snaky head to poison a harmless young shepherd in a soldier's coat.<sup>24</sup>

We are reminded of Chaplin here, another innocent. He is the standard character of the ironic phase of Northrope Frye's system, the man who is victimized. He is also George Sherston, Siegfried Sassoon's persona, Robert Graves in *Good-bye to All That*, and Edmund Blunden.<sup>25</sup> Graves's narrative, in fact, is treated extensively by Fussell, his point being that of all the war memoirs Graves's is the "staggiest": "Graves eschewed tragedy and melodrama in favour of farce and comedy."<sup>26</sup> The comedy and farce, however, often center on victims and victimization. Suicide actually frames his life at the front: "This, it turned out, was the last dead man I saw in France and, like the first, had shot himself."<sup>27</sup> Wilfred Owen describes the same sort of situation in a letter to his mother:

But chiefly I thought of the very strange look on all the faces in that camp; an incomprehensible look, which a man will never see in England, though wars should be in England; nor can it be seen in any battle. But only in Etaples. It was not despair, or terror, it was a blindfold look and without expression, like a dead rabbit's.<sup>28</sup>

The soldier, like Chaplin's tramp, is described as a victim, one who lacks control over his own fate. Owen's poems, such as "Dulce Et Decorum Est" and "Anthem for Doomed Youth" in which the soldiers "die as cattle," deal with the loss of control, with victimization, in order to eliminate conventional attitudes toward the war. The former poem, in fact, enters on the assumption of responsibility, as well as a description of the soldiers as tramps: "Bent double, like old beggars under sacks."<sup>29</sup> In this poem, a vision of death haunts the author's dreams, with a combined sense of helplessness and guilt.

Chaplin's war film, *Shoulder Arms*, released on the eve of the armistice, shows even more definitely how he spoke for and to the experiences that defined the war years. The emotions common to all men in the trenches were epitomized by Chaplin's diminutive, sympathetic figure. The heroic action of the film, his penetrating German Army headquarters and, disguised as a German, arresting the Kaiser, is, as is often the case, a dream sequence. He awakens to find that he has gone nowhere and accomplished nothing. His is a no-man's-land of despair and emptiness. The war itself was defined by this same



inaction and conflict between romantic heroics and trench warfare. Apparently, Chaplin himself saw the connections between his films and the social experience that made up this time.

For the society, particularly British society, the "little man" did define the nature of their world, and, as we have seen, what is comic and sympathetic in his work represents what is human, and what is tragic represents what is alien, dehumanizing. This conflict of forces is recognized by the writers of the period and alluded to in their work. Within his humor, in fact, the troops identified the human qualities they wished to maintain. Hart Crane says much the same thing in "Chaplinesque": "We can evade you, and all esle but the heart;/ What blame to us if the heart live on."<sup>30</sup>

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Spender, *World Within World* (London, 1951), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Spender, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Caroline E. Playne, *The Pre-War Mind* (London, 1928), p. 36.

<sup>4</sup> Chaplin's popularity, of course, continued well beyond the war years. His most consistent success, in fact, spans from 1914 to 1940.

<sup>5</sup> Ezra Pound, *Collected Shorter Poems* (London, 1952), p. 208.

<sup>6</sup> Roger Manvell, *Chaplin* (Boston, 1974), p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> Spender, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Playne describes the failure of reaction primarily in terms of the various classes within society, but the conflict between illusion and reality is implicit in her argument.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Ellmann, "He Do the Police in Different Voices," *Golden Codgers* (London, 1973), p. 131.

<sup>10</sup> Edmund Blunden, *Undertones of War* (New York, 1928), p. 107.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford, 1975), p. 199.

<sup>12</sup> Oliver Lyttelton Viscount Chantos, *From Peace to War* (London, 1968), p. 157.

<sup>13</sup> Manvell, p. 159.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Long Week-End* (New York, 1940), p. 134.

- <sup>15</sup> Raymond Durnat, *The Crazy Mirror* (New York, 1969), p. 79.
- <sup>16</sup> Durnat, p. 80.
- <sup>17</sup> Manvell, p. 112.
- <sup>18</sup> Manvell, p. 107.
- <sup>19</sup> Hugh Kenner, *A Reader's Guide to Samuel Beckett* (London, 1976), p. 24.
- <sup>20</sup> Graves, *The Long Week-End*, p. 142.
- <sup>21</sup> Hart Crane, *The Collected Poems* (New York, 1966), p. 11.
- <sup>22</sup> Robert Graves, *Good-bye to All That* (New York, 1937), p. 232.
- <sup>23</sup> Blunden, p. 216.
- <sup>24</sup> Blunden, p. 209.
- <sup>25</sup> Paul Fussell makes this same point, but he does not follow through on the Chaplin allusion. See pp. 313-314 in *The Great War and Modern Memory*.
- <sup>26</sup> Fussell, p. 203.
- <sup>27</sup> Graves, *Good-bye to All That*, p. 243.
- <sup>28</sup> Wilfred Owen, *Collected Letters*, ed. Harold Owen and John Bell (Oxford, 1967), p. 368.
- <sup>29</sup> Wilfred Owen, *The Collected Poems*, ed. C. Day Lewis (London, 1963), p. 55.
- <sup>30</sup> Crane, p. 11.