

Literature and World War I

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'As swimmers into cleanness leaping':¹ the image in which Rupert Brooke projected the high aims of early autumn 1914 remains vivid in cultural memory, among other reasons, for the profound irony it affords in historical retrospect. To greet the hideous futility of four years of trench warfare as a cleansing pleasance of late summer? The gesture magnetises our attention in the same way that the impact of an accident seems to be caught most powerfully when, looking back, we see an expression of unsuspecting happiness immediately preceding it. Just so, however, the pattern of contrast that Brooke forms might be dismissed as a heuristic, really just a useful fallacy, insofar as it allows us to feel a meaning in history that may not be borne out by the facts. As any detailed account of English political and cultural history will indicate, the years preceding the outbreak of the Great War resist assimilation to that myth of the 'Golden Summer of 1914'. In *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, for instance, George Dangerfield proposes that the war, far from shaking the foundations of English society, actually helped to preserve the status quo by diverting the energies of a social revolution being threatened by the workers' and women's movements, not to speak of the steadily escalating menace in Ireland.² The 'Golden Summer' theory may be met with equal scepticism when it is applied to literary history: the decorous measures that Brooke presents in his exemplary instance of Georgian poetics were being countered as a prevailing standard, most notably by an increasingly robust avant-garde – a term that signals a militarisation of culture already under way *avant-guerre*. Yet the larger outlines of political and cultural history are formed by relative sizes, proportionate masses. The majority status that the Liberal Party enjoyed establishes a framework of social values and political practices that comprise a mainstream attitude. A similarly representative strength may be found in

¹ 'Peace', in *The Collected Poems of Rupert Brooke* (1915; New York: Dodd, Mead, 1925), p. 7.

² George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (1935; New York: Putnam's, 1980), passim, esp. pp. 408–25.

the literary sensibility of a group of poets who take their name from the reigning English king. Georgian Liberalism remains a valid, practicable frame of reference for assessing what was at issue and at stake in August 1914, and an account of the fate its representative poetry met in the trenches may begin to focus the difference the war made in relevant aspects of English national life.

The sonnets gathered in 1915 in Brooke's *1914* (the title-date already frames the *early* war as the moment of high emotional occasion) find a tonic chord in 'The Soldier'. The speaker foresees his death in a 'foreign' war and idealises the experience, striking the deep keynote of Georgian nationalism:

If I should die, think only this of me:
 That there's some corner of a foreign field
 That is for ever England. There shall be
 In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
 A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
 Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
 A body of England's, breathing English air,
 Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.³

Euphemism is fluent, including among its obvious improvements the 'richer dust' of a decaying corpse but asserting as well some essential continuity between the beautified conditions of arcadian 'England' (the word recurs six times, in varying formations, over the short course of a fourteen-line poem) and the 'foreign' circumstance of this continental war. Brooke thus extends the imaginative claim of Georgian nationalism to its revealing extreme, a verge and limit at which its establishing outlook is at once exaggerated and typified.

At this ideal extremity, Brooke's poem opens the space in which the realities of war will intervene – inevitably, in subsequent years. Ivor Gurney offers his riposte in 'To His Love', an elegy uttered as a sort of Georgianism *manqué*. A strategic use of rhetorical negatives indicates all in English pastoral that does *not* accommodate the untoward event of the subject's death in alien lands:

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

³ Brooke, 'The Soldier', in *Collected Poems*, p. 111.

Knew it, on Severn river
 Under the blue
 Driving our small boat through.

You would not know him now . . .

While Gurney can dub his ‘not’s and ‘no’s into the idiom of Georgianism, its topographies control the poetic feeling in the piece, even – or especially – in being forgone. The dominant voice holds its greatest potential for expression, then, when its tongue is tied. The military interment service of the final stanza begins thus with nervous words, exclamatory stammering:

Cover him, cover him soon!
 And with thick-set
 Masses of memoried flowers –
 Hide that red wet
 Thing I must somehow forget.⁴

The enjambment in the final line brings the heavy stress of that building rhythm down hard on ‘Thing’ – a word that offers its ultimate subject, the loved body of the fallen soldier, its generic non-specificity, which is remarkably, shockingly, movingly inadequate.

What has failed as Georgianism, of course, is a stylised, idealised product – the air-brushed, country-day Englishness of the high-gloss coffee-table book. This sensibility stems from conditions that include cultures genuinely lived in, however, a real *gens*, local habitations and their names. If these inward continuities of place are generalised outward into the Englishness of Georgian nationalism, their memory is present in one of the convention’s unconventional representatives, an Anglo-Welsh fellow-traveller. Edward Thomas is the radical who returns to the root, who testifies to the greater depths of his British tradition, and, in doing so, witnesses the profounder crisis its spirit meets in the current circumstance.

Thomas’s ‘A Private’ recasts the poetic location of ‘The Soldier’, repeating the situation of an Englishman dead in an alien land but extending its commemoration in a homelier poetic dialect:

This ploughman dead in battle slept out of doors
 Many a frosty night, and merrily
 Answered staid drinkers, good bedmen, and all bores:
 ‘At Mrs Greenland’s Hawthorn Bush’, said he,

⁴ In P. J. Kavanagh, ed., *Collected Poems of Ivor Gurney* (Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 41.

'I slept'. None knew which bush. Above the town,
Beyond 'The Drover', a hundred spot the down
In Wiltshire. And where now at last he sleeps
More sound in France – that, too, he secret keeps.⁵

The differences from Brooke's sonnet extend from the particularised realities of the landscape to the living form of the poem: an oral historian's anecdote, it 'turns back' on itself at the end like a good countryman's joke. Yet the two pieces show a common method and aim. Superimposing the topographies of the foreign field and the native terrain, Thomas is also attempting to establish some continuity between his character's English background and his distant death. In this way he offers his own writ, some silent warrant, for the event that occasions the poem. The rationale is indeed 'secret' – the wordplay on 'Private', combining with the military rank's official character, capitalises this motif and raises it to an entitled prominence. This quiet confidence draws upon the resources of a most intimate dominion, the England of the mind that Thomas has built out of his own closely local knowledge.

This ideal Englishness speaks a whispery, nearly mystic idiom, however, and its limiting condition may be witnessed when Thomas attempts to extend it into the discursive circumstances in which the ideological war was actually fought. In 'This is No Case of Petty Right or Wrong', he addresses the mass media of this first mass conflict. He disclaims the totalisations that total war enforced on the discourse – the exaggerations that stimulate the required popular involvement, the hate campaigns, the cartoon enmities, all in all, the mechanism of oppositional thinking and the bogus extremities it effected:

I hate not Germans, nor grow hot
With love of Englishmen, to please newspapers.
Beside my hate of one fat patriot
My hatred of the Kaiser is love true:–
A kind of god he is, banging a gong.

Overriding those false dichotomies of demagogic politics, Thomas disables the claims of the 'versus habit' in the first line of his finale, where he offers his own apologia for the English cause:

But with the best and meanest Englishmen
I am one in crying, God save England, lest
We lose what never slaves and cattle blessed.

⁵ In R. George Thomas, ed., *The Collected Poems of Edward Thomas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 67.

The ages made her that made us from dust:
 She is all we know and live by, and we trust
 She is good and must endure, loving her so:
 And as we love ourselves we hate her foe.⁶

Running most of the rhyme words on through enjambment, Thomas mutes the closural effect of the couplet and avoids the ring and resonance of any rhetorical peroration. He moves his poetic appeal away from forum oratory and towards the sort of quiet in which his Private's secret would speak its deeper truth. All the earnest effort Thomas evidences in expressing the inwardness of the Englishness he fights for, however, serves to measure the stronger force of its opponent, the England of tabloid politics. The antithesis in the last line bristles with oppositional thinking, which Thomas brokers in the totalised categories of the emotions invoked. Does hate, moreover, derive rightly from love? The apparently logical proposition Thomas balances across this line suggests the specious reasoning of a preconceived, easy-to-consume, daily-journalism sort of rationale. This disparity – between the absolute purity of a spiritual England, to which Thomas alludes as the establishing condition of his cause, and the contingent, coerced and coercive word of the vulgar tongue – bespeaks at once the reality of the current circumstance and the sadness of a casualty that is more than abstract.

How the language of literature is co-opted by politics is a story that begins in early September 1914, when C. F. G. Masterman, acting as director of an office newly created by the War Government, the Department of Information, convened the major novelists and poets of the moment. In effect, he commissioned them to propagandise the English cause in the war. A surplus of patriotic verse and nationalistic fiction followed the influential lead of authors such as Robert Bridges, John Masefield, G. K. Chesterton.⁷ This 'authorised version' varied in style and sophistication, ranging from placarded caricatures of the barbaric Hun and poster images of English beauty spots to nuanced critiques of Germanic philology, statism or Hegelianism. The unity of view these arguments produced, however, precluded much beyond the wearily predictable certitudes of cultural nationalism that they began with. Nonetheless, the consensus understanding this literature reflects may be remembered as a prevailing standard, one that establishes the substantial challenge writers find in fashioning a language adequate to an individual apprehension.

⁶ In *ibid.*, p. 257.

⁷ See Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (New York: Atheneum, 1991), 'The Arts Enlist', pp. 25–56.

Wilfred Owen testifies to the meaning of his own combat experience in a lyric realism of fiercely detailed immediacy. While this appreciation is featured routinely – and rightly – in literary histories, the achievement of his mature poetry also shows a special, steady intensity of address to the public, political constructions of the war. This imperative accounts for one of the stronger rhetorical personalities in the major work of the last year of the war. Here he assumes the role of reporter, who orients his witnessing force to the standard, presumptive misunderstandings, of which he will disabuse his readership. In ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’, for instance, the narrative account of a gas attack modulates into a direct address to the audience – the ‘you’ Owen accuses in his rhetorically forceful, masterfully contoured, finale:

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
 Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
 And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
 His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin;
 If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
 Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, –
 My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
 To children ardent for some desperate glory,
 The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
 Pro patria mori.⁸

The double periodic construction of subordinate clauses suspends the arrival of the main clause and then intensifies its impact, its dominance in the grammatical structure, when it comes. The speaker thus rather overwhelms the level familiarity Owen assigns his reader, as ‘My friend’. This personage retains some memory of Jessie Pope, whom Owen named in a mock-dedication to an earlier draft of the poem. She had gained her fame from the noisily jingoistic poetry she published so widely.⁹ Its voluble demagoguery has required Owen himself to turn up the poetic volume. Even his courageously angry answer shows the powerful determinants, the really coercive forces, in the verbal culture of mass war.

In these conditions, some of the most important poems are those that get beyond the well-established, all-too-embattled strategies of argument for or against the war. ‘The Poetry is in the pity’, Owen proposed (in his preface to a

⁸ In C. Day Lewis, ed., *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen* (1963; London: Chatto & Windus, 1972), p. 55.

⁹ See *ibid.*

collection of war verse not published in his lifetime). He would penetrate to a dimension of feeling that he understands to be somehow deeper, cleaner, more powerfully and genuinely affective than polemic. He follows this directive in his own exemplary instance in 'Strange Meeting', a dream scenario in which his speaker meets the ghost of the German soldier he has killed. They exchange words of (shared) suffering, and this act of imaginative compassion establishes the basis for the poem's major formulation on the import of (this) war: 'I mean the truth untold, / The pity of war, the pity war distilled.'¹⁰ Whether or not poetry can be lifted away from the fury and mire of an ideologically driven history, it is a true measure of the heavy expense of war fought for ideas no longer believed in that the poets of major record seek to reserve an alternative sphere for verse. The poetry Owen models relocates its centres of imaginative attention to a level of elementary, apparently unprepossessed feeling, where the bleaker truths of the human condition, seen as suffering in the image of war, are newly expressed.

In these circumstances, the poetry of Isaac Rosenberg achieves its special representative status. A painter by profession, Rosenberg *sees* the war through a frame of reference that appears immune or indifferent to nationalist, partisan discourses. As a Jew, he understands his experience through a vision formed strongly in accord with the historical and prophetic books of Hebrew scripture, whose ancient fatalism appears timely indeed in face of the current war's incomprehensible eventuality. 'On Receiving News of the War' establishes this Jewish painter's angle of view on the emergent event:

Snow is a strange white word.
No ice or frost
Has asked of bud or bird
For Winter's cost.

Yet ice and frost and snow
From earth to sky
This Summer land doth know.
No man knows why.¹¹

'Snow is a strange white word': the logical assertion devolves its verbal constituents to colour spots on the artist's palette. In the vacuum left by the absence of rationale Rosenberg catches the impact of the advent of war, again in 'August 1914', where a language of primary emblematic substances – 'Iron,

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 31, 35.

¹¹ In Gordon Bottomley and Denys Harding, eds., *The Collected Poems of Isaac Rosenberg* (1937; New York: Schocken, 1974), p. 124.

honey, gold' – shifts the consideration from any rationalistic grammar to the vivid and impending register of these images:

Iron are our lives
Molten right through our youth.
A burnt space through ripe fields
A fair mouth's broken tooth.¹²

The shock is as solid as the provocation is bare, unaccommodated by a syntax of statement and any of the expected explanations.

Not that Rosenberg's poetry withholds suppositions about the causes or consequences of war. The scheme of the seasons in 'On Receiving News' provides a temporal conception in which the event takes its designated place, but strangely, since the natural pattern seems aberrant: Winter comes in Summer, devastating war in plentiful August. Any cognisance of the sense this system makes seems to be reserved, suspended in a dimension beyond the poet's ken. 'No man knows why', after all,

Some spirit old
Hath turned with malign kiss
Our lives to mould.¹³

'Some spirit old': the reference plays for associations through the Genesis legends of the Hebrew Wisdom books, which mythologise variously that spirit of original malignity. It is not with the force of a moral hortative, however, that Rosenberg invokes such aboriginal calamity. The antique mysteriousness of that spirit appears as its most compelling element, for him and his reader. It is a quality that frames and fables the special incomprehensibility of this particular war.

Rosenberg's importance may be sized in ratio to the immense efforts the mainstream culture of Britain undertook to make its war acceptable. The breach Rosenberg's poetry opens in the scheme of received meanings and reasons locates the creative space of much of the major work of the English war. The circumstances under which those consensus understandings were constructed may be rehearsed, then, with a view to establishing the occasion in which this literature of essential record assumed its resistant shape, its exceptional significance.

By the intellectual values of its partisan tradition, the War Government of the Liberal Party was compelled to provide moral rationales for any military action. This imperative stemmed from its Victorian precedents, most notably

¹² Ibid., p. 70. ¹³ Ibid., p. 124.

from Prime Minister W. E. Gladstone. The code had been broken by the most influential members of the War Cabinet, however. Prime Minister H. H. Asquith and his Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey conceived British needs strategically, primarily, and, since 1906, had moved Britain into a series of continental alliances. Their agreements had to be kept secret, however, due to the ongoing hegemony of Gladstonian standards in the public discussion of policy. These agreements would nonetheless necessitate British involvement in a European war, when it eventuated, but the strategic motives would then need to be replaced, at least in public, with ethical rationales. The lack of valid matter here resulted in case-making efforts of the most strenuous kind. The grandiosity of these hortative formulations – a moral War for Civilisation, for Progress, for Democratic Tolerance, for the Rights of Small Nations, and so on – exposed the holiness of cause as the hollowest of logics.¹⁴ The crisis of those majority values and practices represents a condition in which all the work of substantial and lasting record participates. This connection may be evidenced first in the best-known examples of the English war memoir, which, in the documentary quality the genre features, adds historical memory to personal recollection and, in this expanded awareness, relives the import of the war in political and cultural history as well as individual experience.

Robert Graves's *Good-bye to All That* (1929) frames its war-story (roughly, its middle third) within an autobiography that offers a background narrative and a record of subsequent developments. What Graves takes through the trenches with him is the officer- and governing-class orientation of his generation, which has been formed in the long heyday of British Liberalism. But Graves's personal temperament positions him at the off-angle to standard liberal values: in his youth he avidly – and defiantly – consumes Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, a distopia (making an anagram from the *nowhere* of *u-topos* as its title lead) that belies any belief in progress through scientific rationalism, that particularly liberal faith,¹⁵ the one which the unforeseeable atrocity of mass technological war would discredit so heavily. Accordingly, and especially in memory, Graves orients the younger version of himself towards the war as the defining crisis of Liberalism. The first casualty he names takes on the loaded

¹⁴ Government documents reveal the existence of the secret agreements; see E. D. Morel, *Truth and the War* (London: National Labour Press, 1916), esp. pp. 273–300. The verbal construction of the war by the Liberal Government, in particular the establishment of the ethical case and the elaboration of its rationalistic language, is followed through the partisan journalism by Irene Cooper Willis, *How We Went into the War: A Study of Liberal Idealism* (Manchester: National Labour Press, 1918), esp. 'The Holy War', pp. 86–141.

¹⁵ Robert Graves, *Good-bye to All That* (1929), 2nd edn (1957; New York: Doubleday, 1989), p. 69.

associations of a strong partisan legacy: 'a Liberal M.P., Second-Lieutenant W. G. Gladstone . . . a grandson of old Gladstone, whom he resembled in feature, and Lord-Lieutenant of his county'. The fate Gladstonian Liberalism suffers in the history Graves prefigures with this initial death is detailed further in an adjacent passage, where he pauses over the preserved antiquity of his regiment's name: "'Welch" referred us somehow to the archaic North Wales of Henry Tudor and Owen Glendower and Lord Herbert of Cherbury, the founder of the Regiment; it dissociated us from the modern North Wales of chapels, Liberalism, the dairy and drapery business, slate mines, and the tourist trade'.¹⁶ The commitment to prosperity in the commercial middle class avowed nineteenth-century Liberalism's confidence in material progress, and Graves's report of this social code (including the probity of its Gladstonian, 'chapels' morality) includes a testament of the reverse turn his own experience will take. The zoning of emotional associations in regimental history in particular, in general a shift to the pre-modern past as the centre of affective attention: this frame of reference replaces the forward orientations of rational 'progress'. The undoing of this machinery of received meanings lends Graves's record of his experience its exceptionally representative strength.

'The Illogical Element in English Poetry', the BA paper Graves went on to write after his return in 1919 to Oxford (published subsequently as *Poetic Unreason*), claims the importance of a sub-rational language for literature.¹⁷ This is the mature youth's scholarly riposte to the majority values of English Liberalism, which have authored the moral reasoning for the war in documents whose logic has been disproved. Out of the ruins of that strained and degraded rationalism, Graves is attempting to renew the language of literature. But the trouble in coming up with a speech for unreason can hardly be gainsaid. Graves's own prose seems incapable of being deflected from the impeccable measures of its own neo-Classical *sanitas*. This fact does not discredit his critique, but it raises the issue of the ownership of the literary idiom by established values and, in this way, underscores the real challenge in talking back.

This difficulty finds its most indicative instance perhaps in the work commonly regarded as the exemplary equal of Graves's work in the genre, Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930). This novel-memoir (middle entry in the trilogy *The Memoirs of George Sherston*) rises to the crisis of its author's own great climacteric – the public statement which Sassoon's process of disillusionment with the war, recorded as the main story in this narrative, has led

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 74, 85–6. ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 320.

him to make. Its occasion is arranged through a series of well-placed acquaintances, beginning with the editor of the liberal literary weekly the *Nation*, here the unambiguously renamed *Unconservative Weekly*. Sherston meets this Mr Markington at a club Sassoon labels ‘the Mecca of the Liberal Party’, and he is led thence into the more heavily mentoring presence of Thornton Tyrrell, who is Bertrand Russell, doyen and philosophical powerhouse of Liberal pacifism.¹⁸ Here is the intellectual elite of a dissident wing of political Liberalism, whose long-deliberated case and carefully fashioned language exert an irresistible influence on Sassoon’s personage, who, in turn, takes over the wording of their resistance position. The manifesto is not unfelt, nor inexpressive: the case it makes against the war as an effort lacking strategic reasoning as well as moral rationale conveys the great indignation its author has earned in his service to the causes he disavows here. In the process of its making, however, the statement leaves Sherston feeling as though he were attempting to memorise a foreign language, and its alien bearing to the witness he wishes to give is an insistent, growing, lasting recognition.¹⁹ For it is a language committed to the values and practices of rationalism. And where it misses the inner gestalt of Sherston’s combat reality, it also reveals its pre-emptory command over the external, public circumstance of political discourse. It owns both the policy logic of the partisan war and the record of its most devoted, professional objection.

In this situation Edmund Blunden’s *Undertones of War* (1928) recovers the urgency of an attempt to listen for meanings ‘beneath’ the audible range of those normative discourses. In this effort to represent an inherently – and increasingly – ‘reasonless’ war,²⁰ Blunden develops an idea he draws from classical antiquity: the Roman Mars, before his service as a war god, was originally a fertility spirit. This double function of creation and destruction reflects an understanding that defies the usual attitudes towards war in liberal modernity, which tends to regard organised violence as a regrettable exception to the otherwise benign, perfectible potential of humankind. (The special ‘case’ – *casus*, ‘fall’ – that this lapse from the ideal represents to a liberal sensibility occasions the need to provide some overriding ethical reason for it.) Blunden’s anthropological scholarship gives him an imaginative language in which he can approach an awareness otherwise unspeakable in his day, at least to its reigning Liberal deities.

¹⁸ Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930; London: Faber & Faber, 1965), pp. 193, 195, 199 ff.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 200 ff., esp. pp. 202, 211, 218.

²⁰ Edmund Blunden, *Undertones of War* (1928; New York: Harcourt Brace, 1965), ‘Introduction’ (1965), p. 6.

‘[T]he red god Mars’ is too ‘often worshipped, or at least made obeisance to’,²¹ Blunden protests in his ‘Introduction’, signalling the obvious prominence of bloody war under this god’s patronage. This divinity’s coincidence with the green spirit, however, locates the imagery and substance of the difficult recognition to which Blunden’s speaker must accede. A Georgian Liberal idealist (of sorts), he initially resists the recognition by remarking, for instance, how ‘the lizard ran warless in the warm dust’, or how the ‘green fields and plummy grey-green trees’ of a back area reveal the *matériel* of war as a ‘trifling interruption’ only. But he is compelled soon to conclude that the sanctuary is phantasmal, that ‘the defence of a country must be miles in depth’.²² This recognition adduces one stunning image after another, as scenes of vegetal abundance appear, even – or especially – in their extreme virulence, all too complicit with the deathly energy of war: ‘Over Coldstream Lane, the chief communication trench, deep red poppies, blue and white cornflowers and darnel thronged the way to destruction.’ The ‘pilgrim’ motif Blunden assigns his counterpart moves this character-in-voice through a typical coming-of-age fable, but the development includes a special recognition of green childhood’s convergence on bloody adulthood, of playfield on battle plain: ‘but put back the blanket, a garden gate, opening into a battle field’.²³

Blunden’s rhetorical art conveys the impression that his speaker reaches these illiberal truths in the solitude of pastoral meditation. A number of textual references, however, confirm his place within a broader culture of scepticism about the partisan war. These titles provide a record of the crisis – the really critical condition – into which the dominant logic of the majority attitude has passed.

C. E. Montague’s memoir *Disenchantment* (1922) draws upon the author’s pre-war career as leader-writer for the Liberal *Manchester Guardian*. This background gives his expression of ‘disenchantment’ the condensed, bitter eloquence of a betrayed member of the partisan faithful. ‘There’s reason in everything’, Montague rues with mournful irony in his heckling echo of the formulas of rationalisation that the Liberal leadership applied to the war.²⁴ The ‘reason’ through which its causes were spoken had ceased to mean anything recognisable, as the consequences reached areas of the previously unthinkable, the unimaginably sordid. Montague’s inwardness with the tradition

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8. For the double character of Mars, see W. Warde Fowler, *The Religious Experience of the Roman People: From the Earliest Times to the Age of Augustus* (1911; New York: Cooper Square, 1971), pp. 131–3.

²² Blunden, *Undertones of War*, pp. 28, 39. ²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 48, 77.

²⁴ C. E. Montague, *Disenchantment* (1922; London: Chatto & Windus, 1934), pp. 194, 196, 205. Blunden refers to Montague’s memoir in *Undertones*, p. 179.

being compromised speaks sometimes in partisan code. ‘Our Moderate Satanists’, for instance, title of the chapter in which he addresses those party intellectuals who have turned to support the war, recalls ‘Our Liberal Practitioners’, the summary chapter in Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy*: the ‘reason and justice’ refrain of Victorian Liberalism provides the words of Arnold’s – also an ex-Liberal’s – vindictive mimicry.²⁵ This parody language of Liberal rationality has established itself so extensively, however, that Montague does not confine his views to a cryptic script. He spells them out angrily in his round-up account of war-time writing: oddly straitened logic, daffily rationalised statistics, bizarre novelties of argument and case-making – these are now routine atrocities in the Liberal press.²⁶

Another reference in *Undertones* identifies Blunden as a reader of the *Cambridge Magazine*. University humorists took on the logical folly of the war party with a remorselessly mordant wit. They ‘took off’ the official lingo on a range of policy issues, most notably those of relevance to young men of military age – conscription, for chief instance, where the contradiction inherent in an attempt to make ‘compulsion’ compatible with freely reasoned choice received the rebuking spoof it was due.²⁷

If Blunden’s citations measure the extent of informed dissent in Liberal Britain, these references also acknowledge – in the constant topic of their riposte – the encompassing power of that dominant, majority consciousness. The tenacity with which its fundamental assumptions are maintained over the course of the war may be sensed in the work of the leading literary Liberal, H. G. Wells, most notably in *Mr Britling Sees It Through* (1916). This eponymous hero centres a fictional history of Britain at war that is, also, Wells’s quintessentially Liberal apology for the policy.

Opposed beforehand, like Wells and many other Liberals, who initially rejected the ethical reasons as superficial, Britling is converted, like most British Liberals, and promotes the pro-war case with a passionate rationalism. This residual uncertainty is compensated for in Britling’s formulation of Liberal policy in a fashion equally representative and revealingly extravagant: this is a document indicative of a common party predicament, outrageously (as usually) addressed. An attempt to explain and justify the war thus brings

²⁵ Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. J. Dover Wilson (1932; Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 223–4, 254.

²⁶ Montague, *Disenchantment*, esp. p. 120.

²⁷ See, for example, ‘The Duty of Suicide – Fiat Justitia Ruat Caelum’, *Cambridge Magazine*, 18 November 1916, p. 143. Blunden refers to the journal in *Undertones*, p. 169.

Britling – Wells – to write ‘An Anatomy of Hate’, an exercise in the genre of scientific positivism that is conducted to rigorous standards of linear, propositional logic. The notion this treatise proposes, however, is fetched from possibilities – like the war being argued for – far from the centre of the old Liberal conscience. “‘Is there not’, [Britling] now asked himself plainly, “a creative and corrective impulse behind all hate? Is not this malignity indeed only the ape-like precursor of the great disciplines of a creative state?’”²⁸ This argument represents in substance and method a cartooning parody of the twin liberal standards of creative evolution and progressive reason. Wells’s Britling reinscribes the highest principles of liberal tradition in a manner consistent, nonetheless, with their current animadversion. It is an accurate travesty. Wells’s unwillingness to admit the comic downturn of his intellectual tradition, however, measures the embedded strength of Liberalism, at least on this level of presumptive understandings.

While the logical folly in Wells’s book constitutes a kind of sombre, involuntary comedy of contemporary Liberalism, this consciousness is framed as the aim and target of the Anglo-German Tory, Ford Madox (Hueffer) Ford, in his sequence of war novels, *Parade’s End*. The political drama revolves around Ford’s protagonist and (sometime) counterpart, the *déclassé* English aristocrat Christopher Tietjens. His (precariously) landed values are countered by the designs of a typical arriviste figure, here the cartoon character of a timely and opportunistic Liberalism, Vincent Macmaster, who begins the series in the typical Liberal position of resisting the imminent war. His conversion is swift, complete and much to his benefit. By the end of the first novel he has been knighted, and by the beginning of the third Sir Vincent Macmaster has become ‘Principal Secretary to H. M. Department of Statistics’.²⁹ The triumph *Vincent Macmaster* scores as the unsubtle, doubled significance of his name has been won along the standard Liberal way: his work in the Department of Statistics echoes to the background sound of falsified reports, pseudo-logic and sham rationale that characterised partisan justifications of the war effort.

Add this record of the Liberal hegemony to the chronicles of Montague and the *Cambridge Magazine*, then to the monumental confidence of Wells. The conventional sensibility reveals its summary dimensions. This moment in

²⁸ H. G. Wells, *Mr Britling Sees It Through* (1916; London: Hogarth Press, 1985), pp. 284 ff., 296.

²⁹ Ford Madox Ford, *Parade’s End* (New York: Knopf, 1992), p. 549; this volume contains the texts of the four war novels, *Some Do Not* (1924), *No More Parades* (1925), *A Man Could Stand Up* (1926) and *The Last Post* (1928).

political and cultural time defines a crisis in traditional values as sizable as the opportunity it affords is daunting. It is the substantial challenge that Graves and Sassoon locate in their own underdeveloped projects, which would consolidate some alternative to the established language of Liberal rationalism. A literary idiom in which reason speaks against itself? A new usage, where the standards and practices of rationalism collapse into some expression of unlikely sense? Not in Ford's novel, which, in the main, remains true to a fairly standard syntactic logic. But Ford's double identity in literary history – a sort of half-Modernist, an elder member of the generation whose advance awareness he does not always complement with a correspondingly experimental temper – may be reclaimed usefully and revealingly here. For Ford presents the recognition his younger contemporaries will turn into a verbal art that distinguishes the most representatively 'modernist' work of this moment.

If the suffix in *Modernism* signifies anything, it means being 'modern' in more than a chronological way. It suggests a more intense present, some heightened because self-conscious awareness of this modernity, which hinges on a feeling of *difference* from what has gone before. The interruption the Great War represents in the mainstream traditions of liberal modernity is uttered in the language of London Modernism, in the physical body and semiological tissue of its literary usage, which is conceived to the timeliest of conceits: all in all, a sort of reasonable nonsense. Far from trivial in its iteration, this idiom echoes to the background of a civilisation collapsing, all too rationally.³⁰

This is the novel prosody the major Modernist poetry of the moment develops concurrently, in 1917, in Ezra Pound's *Homage to Sextus Propertius* and T. S. Eliot's quatrain verse. Their work finds its consonance in an all too logical *folie*, a wry *jouissance* of reason gone awry. Eliot's quatrain art concocts a rhetorical fiction of particularly sagacious high-jinks, sententious absurdity. His tautly formed stanzas employ normative syntax and mechanical metre to create a feeling of reasoned meditation that dissolves constantly, however, into imponderable propositions, unpronounceable words. As in 'Mr Eliot's Sunday Morning Service':

Polyphiloprogenitive
The sapient sutlers of the Lord
Drift across the window-panes.
In the beginning was the Word.

³⁰ This argument is developed through the several contexts of literary and political history by Vincent Sherry, *The Great War and the Language of Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

In the beginning was the Word.
Superfetation of τὸ ἔν,
And at the mensural turn of time,
Produced enervate Origen.³¹

Pound's Roman poet responded to the literary politics of his own Augustan day, exhibiting a kind of resisting reciprocity with its commissioned idioms. Pound's creative translation cues his riposte to the wit he signals in the invocation of his particular, timely, muse:

Out-weariers of Apollo will, as we know, continue their Martian generalities,
We have kept our erasers in order.³²

The wording is almost wholly interpolated; the joke is all Pound's: Apollo, the god of logic (as well as poetry and music), has been wearied and worn out in this war, but not by generals, rather by the 'generalities' of Mars. These are the political discourses of Liberal conflict – statements that wear a hole in the language, in the logos, in the very logic of words. Pound's critical perception resonates as poetic usage in this heroic catalogue, for typical instance, where the first (interpolated) word injects a note of reasoned sequence, which the rest of the recitation hardly bears out:

For Orpheus tamed the wild beasts –
and held up the Thracian river;
And Citheron shook up the rocks by Thebes
and danced them into a bulwark at his pleasure,
And you, O Polyphemus? Did harsh Galatea almost
Turn to your dripping horses, because of a tune, under Aetna?
We must look into the matter.³³

Pound is using the idiom of his contemporary persona, the logic of his own parole, to assume some ready and available meaning for those obscure classical allusions that are the basic imaginative language of the poem. This knowingness is as concocted as the rhetorical question in which Pound concentrates this note of meaning- and reason-seemingness. A tone new to his developing range, as it is to Eliot's, it locates the timely element in the major Modernist poetry of the moment.

³¹ T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems, 1909–1962* (1963; London: Faber & Faber, 1974), p. 57; first published in September 1918.

³² Ezra Pound, *Personae: Collected Shorter Poems of Ezra Pound* (1926), rev. edn, ed. Lea Baechler and A. Walton Litz (New York: New Directions, 1990), p. 205; first published serially through 1919.

³³ Pound, *Personae*, p. 206.

The use Virginia Woolf will make of this opportunity may be projected from a reconnaissance she takes in April 1917, in 'The Mark on the Wall'. Musing on the activities of 'novelists in future', she interrupts herself thus:

– but these generalisations are very worthless. The military sound of the word is enough. It recalls leading articles, cabinet ministers – a whole class of things indeed which as a child one thought the thing itself, the standard thing, the real thing, from which one could not depart save at the risk of nameless damnation. Generalisations bring back somehow Sunday in London, Sunday afternoon walks, Sunday luncheons . . .³⁴

Echoing Pound's 'Martian generalities', Woolf's 'generalisations' present the new idiom of total war, a context 'the military sound of the word' specifies. This usage echoes in particular to the language of official rationales; of policy documents and partisan briefs; of 'leading articles' and 'cabinet ministers'. Whereas the Anglo-American poets relate to this linguistic situation strategically, with the opportunism of ex-colonials, a constellation of objects known and rituals remembered revolves for Woolf around the words now ceasing to cohere. For Virginia Stephen Woolf had been born, as Sir Leslie Stephen's daughter, if not to the preferred gender, at least within the clerisy of cultural liberalism. The 'nameless damnation' she fears as punishment for transgressing that former order is indeed the damnation of namelessness, the fate she must face as one raised in the formidable traditions of rationalist language. In advance, she claims the major ambition and dare of the Modernist project she consummates – the nerve and courage of her own emergent attempt to speak reason against itself.

In her major linguistic inventions of the 1920s, Woolf evolves a prosody of the *mock*-logical, a grammar of the *pseudo*-propositional. A typical, prefiguring instance occurs in the opening sentence of her 1922 narrative, her first modernist novel, *Jacob's Room*. "So of course", wrote Betty Flanders, pressing her heels rather further in the sand, "there was nothing for it but to leave."³⁵ 'So of course': the gesture of logical conclusion that opens this novel includes already a sense of its ending, the death in the Great War of Betty Flanders's son Jacob, an immanence projected from the beginning of this family-chronicle novel through a name that goes to one of the most charged, valorised sites of the recent conflict. The one matter of narrative and logical course in this novel is the inevitability of an event otherwise, however, mainly unnamed in

³⁴ In Susan Dick, ed., *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, 2nd edn (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1989), p. 86; first published in July 1917.

³⁵ Virginia Woolf, *Jacob's Room* (1922; San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1990), p. 7.

the story. The War is presented ever at the oblique angle of the extreme trope, or in moments of apparently chance evocation like a family name. 'And then, here is Versailles',³⁶ goes the whole of a one-sentence paragraph in the midst of the continental tour Jacob undertakes in *early* summer 1914, where the forward import of the war, formally concluded in the Versailles Treaty of 1919, can hardly be claimed in narrative time. What the novel traps again and again is the inadequacy of language to the salient fact of the war, specifically of the rationalistic language it puts forward in so conspicuous and exposed a position at its outset, or through a usage like 'Versailles', the monument of a first Age of Reason involved now in the collapse of a second. A parsing of the syntax in the especially expressive passages in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927), her other major novels of the decade, reveals a steady pressure being exerted against the constraints of the rationalistic language her sentences otherwise observe on their surfaces. These narratives enact a verbal ceremony of the ongoing end of that major value of liberal modernity – an end she centres with ostensible and insistent references to the war, not only to its human victims but also to its constructions in the political culture of Liberalism.

Woolf's representations of the war's Liberal character(s) find a summary instance in her depiction of the events of early August 1914, in *Jacob's Room*, which recounts her perception of the gendered dimension of the political enterprise. This Whitehall scene features 'the sixteen gentlemen, lifting their pens or turning perhaps rather wearily in their chairs', who 'decreed that the course of history should shape itself this way or that way, being *manfully* determined, as their faces showed, to impose some coherency upon Rajahs and Kaisers and the mutterings in bazaars'.³⁷ The crisis that an identifiably (or self-assigned) 'male' reason meets in rationalising this war shows most locally and affectively, in Woolf's literary record, in *Mrs Dalloway*, in her representation of the combat experience of her male protagonist. In these martial circumstances, and in response to conventional expectations, Septimus Warren Smith 'developed manliness'; in reacting to the death of his officer and friend, Evans, Smith 'congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably. The War had taught him. It was sublime'.³⁸ The inadequacy of this rationalist attitude is manifest, and its extravagant failure goes as well, and most notably, to an unravelling of its establishing personality of 'manliness'. This incident offers a signal instance of a widely working influence in the social culture of the English war, all in all, a reimagining and recasting of conventional gender identities.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 128. ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

³⁸ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925; rpt San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1990), p. 86.

The intimation elsewhere of a homoerotic quality in the bond between Smith and Evans may be taken as an indication of a new range of expressive revelation, in the literary record of the war, of male sexual affection. The representation of these feelings included homosexual as well as homoerotic elements, that is, manifestations through overt sexual behaviour as well as expressions of sheer physical appeal, bodily fondness, etc. While attraction could be exerted by characters 'manly' by customary signs, the various circumstances of the war, ranging from the 'unmanning' of its rhetorical authority to the 'feminising' of soldiers in the intimate, day-by-day situation of stationary warfare, all contributed to an opening of areas of male feeling previously closed by conventional proscription. Memories of tenderness new to the experience of their recorders appear frequently on the pages of unpublished letters and diaries, variously from the officer class and soldiers of other ranks, in the archives of the Imperial War Museum. Clarified, intensified, eroticised or sexualised to differing degrees, these feelings of male attraction also generate a literature as extensive as the list of major names in the canon of British war writing: Graves, Sassoon, Owen, Brooke, Gurney and David Jones, among others. The purity of the pathos of foregone love between men, the condition establishing the vocal character and expressive value of Gurney's 'To His Love', may contrast manifestly with the register in Owen's poetry, say, where a thwarted, self-censoring force often contorts the erotic impulse into a laborious ceremonial of dead, or deathly, sexuality. 'Red lips are not so red / As the stained stones kissed by the English dead'.³⁹ Even the beauty of epicene youth in Owen's 'Arms and the Boy' presents an attraction that is magnified by the countermanding, reprimanding voice, which punishes or threatens this affection, seemingly, by menacing the body of a love still unable to speak its name: 'Let the boy try along this bayonet-blade / How cold steel is, and keen with hunger of blood'.⁴⁰ But if the resistance indicated here also measures the pressure of the instigation, a fair assessment may be taken of the demand these newly realised feelings were making for more direct expression.

The opportunities the war afforded women in the way of new work eventuated, it is well known, in the acquisition of their long-sought right of suffrage and, in the franchise, the capacity of potentially meaningful social representation. Self-representation in writing is also occurring with a new breadth and exceptional depth of literary activity by women. Whether or not the 'combat status' of a writer authorises his or her record in some exceptional way (it does not), the representation women made of their work in the war effort has drawn

³⁹ Owen, 'Greater Love', *Collected Poems*, p. 41. ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

steadily increasing attention from literary historians. What may be featured here is the critical witness some women were giving to the existing political discourses which, until 1918, and at least so far as the vote was concerned, still officially excluded them. The externality of perspective their outsider status conferred on them (as on the Anglo-American poets, Woolf's fellow Modernists) also provided the advantaging circumstance for this critique.

Founding editor of the *Freewoman* (1911), subsequently the *New Freewoman* (1913) and the *Egoist* (from 1914), Dora Marsden took her perspective on English politics from the vantage of a sometimes radical feminism. Her critique of the Liberal hegemony worked diversely, most searchingly in her analysis of the assumptions of its rationalist language, which, in her perception, exhibited the worst proclivities of Nominalism. The Liberal era was, for her, 'the verbal age', and the possibilities to which it consecrated its monuments of hope and policy were the projections of a wholly linguistic way of thinking. When the old Liberal testament of a sheerly verbalist reason comes undone under the burden of the war, Marsden registers its defeat with the eloquent concision of her own vindication. Thus on 1 September 1914 she hears the expression of the official 'Reasons for this War' as just so much 'cant'. She expands this understanding two weeks later, calculating the extent of the damage done to the language of rationalism by the agents of this latter-day Gladstonianism. Rehearsing the now established moralistic arguments for the war, she repeats the response to the question 'Why We English Fight?' by Lord Rosebery: "'To maintain", he proposed, "the sanctity of international law in Europe"'. She expatiates: "'Mumbo-jumbo, Law and Mesopotamia" can always be relied on to work all the tricks, and cloak all the spooof.'⁴¹ Her parody of this Liberal imperialist is clarifying as well as caricaturing: his is the non-sense logic in which a long-endowed, well-established male rationalism uttered the antic rant of its collapse. It is a critical perception shared and augmented in the account of Irene Cooper Willis. She conducted a searching archaeology of the contemporary record, ranging from daily journalism to diplomatic correspondence, collecting and analysing these materials in *How We Went into the War: A Study of Liberal Idealism* (1918).⁴²

Marsden's *Egoist*, the journal of Anglo-American Modernism in its nascent day, represents a staging area for reactions, at once intellectual and imaginative, to this breakdown in the traditions of public reason in liberal modernity. Even within London Modernism, however, the response was composite, various. Wyndham Lewis, premier representative of the English avant-garde in his

⁴¹ Dora Marsden, 'Views and Comments', *Egoist*, 1 September 1914, p. 324; 'Views and Comments', *Egoist*, 15 September 1914, p. 344.

⁴² See n. 14.

work as Vorticist and editor of *Blast*, drew an energy of self-presentation from the resources of cultural and political nationalism, like many artists in the European avant-garde; like many Futurists, he compounded this persona with the masculinist values being hazarded, Woolf was correct in observing, with the collapse of rationalism: he appears unwilling to exploit the critical condition of 'male' reason in English Liberalism.⁴³ David Jones, whose *In Parenthesis* (1937) models itself on the already accomplished Modernism of Eliot, presents a rich and dense evocation of the author's service on the Western Front; its verse-with-prose experiment hardly seems second-hand, but this neo-Modernist work witnesses no evident attention to Liberal England's disability – as an instigating condition of new writing.⁴⁴ The novel quality in Modernist response to this extraordinary moment in history is fostered by a sense of *difference*, an awareness in particular of the disabled claims of the formerly majority values of Liberal rationalism. The male ownership of that language helps to make female Modernist writing a register equally rare and fine of this timely difference.

Rebecca West's *Return of the Soldier* (1918) takes the story its title announces as the occasion for her male character's experience of personal estrangement from the England he left in 1914. The 'dissociation' or 'memory fugue' from which Captain Chris Baldry is suffering has shifted his centre of remembered value from Baldry Court, the ancestral demesne in which he lived before the war with his wife. He recovers an earlier and humbler love, one whose authenticity lies in its being unscripted to the customs dominating the quasi-public character of life at Baldry Court. That locale shows its emblematic quality in his wife Kitty, whose beauty, which compels men to ever greater exertions in order to please her, is described as a 'civilizing' force,⁴⁵ the same value for which Chris has fought in England's Great Liberal War. His inability to recognise the image of this now forgone authority registers the difference the war actually made in the code of meanings that dominated the mainstream experience of Liberal political culture. The salient value of 'reasonableness' in that convention appears in West's extraordinarily perceptive record as the weird, eerie reasonableness of a former norm now unrecognised, its once presumptive authority a memory unremembered. The lie the Great War for English Civilisation gave to the Liberal standard of reason in all things is the truth to which West gives her own exemplary testament as a female Modernist.

⁴³ Lewis censures the practice of pseudo-logic in 'T. S. Eliot: the Pseudo-Believer', in *Men without Art* (London: Cassell, 1934), pp. 65–100.

⁴⁴ David Jones, *In Parenthesis* (1937; London: Faber & Faber, 1982).

⁴⁵ Rebecca West, *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), 2nd edn (1980; New York: Carroll & Graf, 1990), p. 154.