

The Great War and how to find the language to describe it: voices form Literature and History

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Resumo: Neste artigo nos propomos a mostrar pontos de vista sobre a Primeira Guerra Mundial. São várias perspectivas para se justificar ou condenar uma Guerra, no caso a “Grande Guerra”. Ela foi, por exemplo justificada pelos políticos de todas as nações envolvidas como inevitável e além dos poderes de qualquer um para a impedi-la. No entanto, não existe um acordo unânime sobre as suas causas. Foram dadas várias explicações, que foram resumidas pelo historiador Niall Ferguson: (a) Geopolítica: Os estudiosos alemães argumentam que a Alemanha, devido à sua posição geográfica na Europa Central, tinha medo do cerco. Essa foi pelo menos a justificativa alemã. Mas qual seria a justificativa dos aliados? O que dizem pensadores e historiadores sobre o assunto? Discutimos também a influência da Guerra na linguagem literária. Entre vários autores citaremos T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, W. B. Yeats, Ford Madox Ford que revelam o efeito da guerra na linguagem.

Palavras-chave: Grande Guerra; Progresso; História; Pontos-de vista; Reflexões Literatura.

Abstract: All commentators agree that the Great War had a profound effect on virtually every facet of society and culture. To literary critic Malcolm Bradbury, it “seemed to abstract and empty life itself, creating a landscape of violence and uncertainty in which the human figure was no longer a constant, the individual self no longer connected with the universe, the word no longer attached to the thing” In this article we propose to show points of view on the First World War arguing that are several perspectives to justify or condemn a War. It was, for example, justified by politicians from all nations involved as inevitable and beyond the powers of anyone to prevent it. However, there is no unanimous agreement on its causes. Various explanations have been given, which have been summarized by historian Niall Ferguson: (a) Geopolitics: German scholars argue that Germany, due to its geographical position in Central Europe, was afraid of siege. That was at least the German justification. But what would be the allies’ justification? What do thinkers and historians say about the subject? We also discuss the influence of the War on literary language. Among several authors we will mention are T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, W. B. Yeats, Ford Madox Ford who reveal the effect of war on language. The Great war promoted a new aesthetic notions of “hardness, abstraction, collage, fragmentation, dehumanization—and the key themes of chaotic history.

Keywords: Great War; Progress; History; Viewpoints; Language. Literature.

The war as the end of progress

On November 11, 1918, the Germans officially surrendered to the Allies, bringing an end to what was known simply as “The Great War”—until the even greater war of 1939-1945, when it began to be called the First World War or, for the Americans, World War I—for for its vast geographical expanse and large number of combatant nations. The level of its violence was unprecedented in the annals of human history—an estimated eight and a half million soldiers killed (twenty million wounded), as well as six million civilians killed. Many more people died of war-related diseases: the so-called Spanish Influenza epidemic of 1918, which

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flourished among an unhygienic and undernourished population devastated by the war, claimed another 20 million victims.

From the military viewpoint, one reason for the scale of the deaths was that the general staffs of the belligerent armies did not give sufficient importance to the technological and tactical changes that had been brought about since previous conflicts, clinging to older wars as the model to be followed and failing to take in the lessons of more recent ones, such as the Boer War of 1899-1902, and the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-1905. For their part, the Germans staked all on the theoretical elegance of the Schlieffen Plan, which called for a rapid attack through Belgium into France that would presumably end the war on the western front in six weeks. Their initially rapid advance was checked and a stalemate endured for four years.

Rather than responding with a sensible plan of digging in and resisting the German advance from the advantage of solid defenses, the British and French pursued what sounds like a semi-mystical policy emphasizing “the transcendent virtues of the attack” (ELLIS 1989, P. 87). Both sides gave more importance to the intangible qualities of will and determination than tactical and material factors, especially the development of modern weapons. The result was the initial French failure to penetrate the German line, followed by a long, costly war of attrition, interrupted only by series of futile, disastrous Anglo-French attacks across open ground against machine-guns and entrenched positions. John Ellis explains it in this way:

Because all the armies were organized and equipped in much the same way, it was thought that battles would be a close-run thing in which victory would go to those who showed the greatest resolution, the greatest will to win. [The generals] completely ignored the implications of the weapons with which they had equipped themselves. They failed to see that when an army adopted a different role, when one attacked and one defended, there would be a vast disparity between the effectiveness of the available weaponry (ELLIS, 1989, p. 87).

The weaponry itself was lethal enough to make such strategy ill-fated:

The level of arms technology available in 1914 had made war, as it was conceptualized by the participants, literally impossible to fight. Yet fight they must. And it was the clash between these two imperatives which defined the tragedy. In essence, everybody attacked because nobody had any real alternative (O’CONNELL, 1989, 244).

The Great War was justified by politicians of all the nations involved as inevitable and beyond the powers of any to prevent it, and yet there is still no unanimous agreement on its

causes. A number of explanations have been given, which have been summarized by the historian Niall Ferguson: (a) *Geopolitical*: German scholars argue that Germany, from its geographical position in middle Europe, had a fear of encirclement. This was at least the justification of the German politicians at the time. From the Allied viewpoint, German expansionism is in fact the cause most frequently cited by scholars and writers of those countries) (TUCHMAN, 1994, p. 7). (b) *Diplomatic*: President Woodrow Wilson warned of the dangers of the European system of secret alliances. (c) *Imperialist*: Soviet revolutionary leader V.I. Lenin claimed that economic rivalry among the great capitalist powers was the cause (KIERNAN, 1988, P. 172. (d) *Arms race*: British historian A.J.P. Taylor argued that once in motion the build-up of weapons was impossible to stop. (e) *Political*: American historian Arno Mayer argued that the European elites, fearing democracy and socialism, appealed to an exaggerated nationalism.(FERGUSON, 1998, pp. xxxvii-xv).

Most British historians, and even some important German ones, tend to favor the first theory, blaming the war on the Germans' desire for hegemony; in the eyes of France and Britain, Germany's attempt to dominate Europe had to be prevented. The official reason for Great Britain's entrance into the war was, as politicians like Winston Churchill insisted at the time, the need to defend Belgium's neutrality against German aggression (TUCHMAN, 1994, p. 133). At the same time, it may be argued that Churchill's, and Great Britain's main concern was not the Western Front at all, but its imperial possessions in the Middle East. The British Foreign Office, in this view, decided that sacrifices and concessions would have to be made to secure the Empire against attempts to dismantle it (WARNER, 1995, p. 12).

In a larger social and cultural perspective, the British military historian John Keegan has argued that the war was the result of the militarization of European culture itself. In a discussion of historical methods of raising and maintaining armies, he writes that the uniquely modern solution to this perennial problem was the system of universal conscription, instituted by the First French Republic, the success of whose armies ensured that this would be the "military system of the future" (KEEGAN, 1993, p. 233). After Prussia's victories over France and Austria, other nations rushed to copy the Prussian military model. Conscripts looked upon their military service as a masculine "rite of passage," which became an important cultural issue in European life through the electorate's acceptance of it as a social norm and the resulting militarization of society. The classic work *On War* (1832), by the Prussian general and military strategist, Karl von Clausewitz, whose most famous dictum, still

quoted often, was that “war is a continuation of politics by other means,” had wide currency among military professionals. Keegan points out, however, that Clausewitz’s observation of how factors always operated to bring the purpose and the potential nature of war—war as it should be—versus war as it really is into adjustment “dwindled into invisibility” in the Great War:

The war’s political objects—difficult enough to define in the first place—were forgotten, political restraints were overwhelmed, politicians who appealed to reason were execrated, politics even in the sense of liberal democracies was rapidly reduced to a mere justification of bigger battles, longer casualty lists, costlier budgets, overflowing human misery. Politics played no part in the conduct of the First World War worth mentioning. The First World War was, on the contrary, an extraordinary, a monstrous cultural aberration, the outcome of an unwitting decision by Europeans in the age of Clausewitz to turn Europe into a warrior society (KEEGAN, 1993, p. 21).

British historian Eric Hobsbawm concurs in this view: “The experience itself naturally helped to brutalize both warfare and politics: if one could be conducted without counting the human or other costs, why not the other?” (HOBSBAWM, 1996, p. 26).

The war would eventually and effectively expose the inherent defects and the high cost of such a society:

The loyalty of such armies, headily reinforced by national feeling, was to hold up throughout the first three years of the war’s terrible ordeal. By 1917, the costs, psychological as well as material, of making every man a soldier began to have their inevitable effects. There was a large-scale mutiny in the French army in the spring of that year; in the autumn the Russian army collapsed altogether. In the following year, the German army went the same way; at the November armistice, on its return home, the army demobilized itself and the German empire was thrown into revolution (KEEGAN, 1993, p. 234).

In Keegan’s formulation, Clausewitz’s classic expression should be reversed: it was politics that had become the extension of war.

The war as an historical event so utterly destroyed the legacy of nineteenth century liberal culture and humanitarian gains that it has been said to mark the real beginning of the twentieth. Hobsbawm, who accordingly makes the war the beginning of his history of the “short twentieth century,” writes that: “the great edifice of nineteenth century civilization crumpled in the flames of the world war, as its pillars collapsed” (HOBSBAWM, 1996, p. 22). Paul Fussell, in his seminal book on the culture of the war, claims that the war “reversed the myth of human improvement that had dominated the public consciousness for a century:

the war was an embarrassment to the prevailing the idea of Progress” (FUSSELL, 1975, p. 8). He asserts as well that war itself is ironic, because “its means are so melodramatically disproportionate to its presumed ends,” and, by that criterion, the Great War “was more ironic than any for or since” (FUSSELL, 1975, p. 7-8)). Not only the length and level of violence as opposed to the vagueness of war-aims, but the disillusionment resulting from the contrast between what came before and the reality of the war itself, the gap between expectation and experience, was particularly excessive.

The war was not only a negation of a progressive past but also initiated deeply ominous historical tendencies to come: the growth of state power, the widespread use of mass political propaganda, the establishment of chaotic social and economic conditions that encouraged the rise of fascism and totalitarian types of socialism, the first example of large-scale genocide, a great increase in the nationalism and militarism that partly provoked the war in the first place; and a disastrous attempt to reorder the world along ethnic-linguistic states (PAYNE, 1995, 31). It is not too much to say, as the historian of the Second World War, A.J.P. Taylor, does, that the First World War “explains the Second and, in fact, caused it, in so far as one event caused another” (TAYLOR, 1974, p. 42).

A devalued language?

All commentators agree that the Great War had a profound effect on virtually every facet of society and culture. To literary critic Malcolm Bradbury, it “seemed to abstract and empty life itself, creating a landscape of violence and uncertainty in which the human figure was no longer a constant, the individual self no longer connected with the universe, the word no longer attached to the thing” (BRADBURY, 1994, p. 147). It seems natural to associate one of the most characteristic symbolic images in twentieth century literature, T.S. Eliot’s “Wasteland,” with the landscape of the devastated, shell-pitted area between enemy trenches known as “No-man’s-land.” To Stanley Cooperman, who wrote a study of the American novels about the war, it was “a collective trauma such as the world had never known,” whose effect on writers was so devastating that many of them claimed that it was impossible to describe (COOPERMAN, 1967, p.7-8). Until a decade or so after the war, by which time the modernists who emerged in the Twenties—T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, W. B. Yeats, Ford Madox Ford, and their continental counterparts—had discovered that language invents the world rather than merely describes it, the war could not be adequately written about in any

language but the available one of traditional literature (FUSSELL, 1975, p.174). The experience of modern mass technological war was so much worse than anything that had come before, the words for it had to come later, which is perhaps why so many narrative accounts of the war appeared in the late twenties or even thirties. As Bradbury puts it, in his history of the modern British novel:

The words, of course, would come in time. But the realization that they would have to be new words, that the war had drained most of the old ones of signification, that a different language pared of most of the old romantic and cultural associations, would have to be found, grew as the terrible Great War went on (BRADBURY, 1994, p. 84).

As Bradbury points out, however, the roots of the modernism that flourished in the Twenties had been planted in the pre-war years of 1910-1914. New aesthetic notions of “hardness, abstraction, collage, fragmentation, dehumanization—and the key themes of chaotic history, Dionysian energy, the ‘destructive element,’ [helped] to provide the discourse and forms of the world to come,” while the war itself put an end to Victorian and Romantic notions of sentimental patriotism (BRADBURY, 1994, p. 84). And Samuel Hynes summarizes the debate on how it tended to be represented: “To represent the war in the traditional ways is necessarily to *misrepresent* it, to give it meaning, dignity, order, greatness—an essential and inevitable place in the human soul” But “war,” Hynes goes on, “had created a new reality; and a new reality may require a new language, and devalue an old one” (HYNES, 1991, p. 108, emphasis in original), & p. 109). Henry James, never at a loss for words, wrote in *The New York Times* that the “war has used up words; they have weakened; they have deteriorated” (qtd. in SONTAG, 2005, p. 22).

If finding the right words to write about the war proved difficult for those who wanted to tell its truths, official censorship did what it could to ensure that this would not happen while it was still in progress. The official line on life in the trenches can be glimpsed in this statement from *Lord Northcliffe's War Book*, written by the man in charge of British government propaganda: “The open-air life, the regular and plenteous feeding, the exercise, and the freedom from care and responsibility, keep the soldiers extraordinarily fit and contented” (qtd in FUSSELL, 1975, p. 87). This is so ludicrously far from the reality of the trenches that Northcliffe seems to be talking about a boy-scout summer-camp rather than the circumstances of troops on the front line.

John Ellis gives a more documented version of that reality: Northcliff's "open-air life" consisted of moving back and forth between a front-line and a support line connected by a communication trench, and farther back, support trenches. The Germans early on in the conflict attained the higher ground, which gave them tactical advantage and caused the British to live in foul conditions, with their trenches often filled with water and mud (ELLIS, 1989, p. 10). "Regular exercise" was carrying grossly overweight packs and equipment when advancing into battle, and, while waiting for the next attack, going on "fatigues," the endless labor of repairing wire, rebuilding trenches, etc., which went on day and night with a consequent lack of sleep. The men frequently suffered from the elements: mud, freezing cold, trench foot, and private battles with rats, lice, and nits. Ellis claims that almost fifty-percent of the casualties were attributable to bad conditions in the trenches, but, even so, chances of survival for the sick (only 1% died), were far greater than for those wounded in battle (31% mortality rate) (ELLIS, 1989, p. 58). In contrast to Northcliff's assurances of the men being free "from care and responsibility," they had to endure harrowing night patrols beyond the wire, the constant danger of being shot in the head by enemy snipers, and deafening and lethal artillery barrages that were especially hard on nerves. To experience the latter, it was generally agreed, "was a physical and mental torture" (ELLIS, 1989, p. 61-65).

Writers Pro & Con

Given both the uncertainty of causes and the great suffering and loss of life that resulted, one of the most ironic aspects of the Great War was the initial willingness, even eagerness, of young men to take part in it. Popular euphoria and public expressions of patriotism were equally widespread. Lloyd George, who would become Prime Minister in 1916 and lead a government that waged an aggressive war, recalled the outbreak of the war in August 1914, as "a scene of enthusiasm unprecedented in modern times," and large crowds outside Buckingham Palace actually chanted "We want war" (FERGUSON, 1998, p. 176; WARNER, 1995, p. 17.). One reason for this initial enthusiasm must have been no more than what Samuel Hynes calls the "condition of emotional excitement of a nation at war," a current that especially sweeps up the young, who enlist "for no other high motives but simply because other men are enlisting, because the current is irresistible." (HYNES, 1991, p. 32).

Another reason was that most people, including military leaders, thought that the war, which began in August 1914, would be over by Christmas. This expectation, in turn, may

have been due to the lack of long-lasting conflicts in recent history, the two most recent—the Boer War and Russo-Japanese War being relatively short-lived. Finally, as suggested above, the enthusiasm of the young volunteers owes something to their acceptance of the cultural notion of taking part in war as part of the male rite of passage. German university students, in spite of their academic exemption, volunteered *em masse* for infantry service and within two months, mustered as the Ersatz Corps, went up against outnumbered but seasoned British Army regulars at Ypres in Belgium, where they were slaughtered in what is known as the *Kindermord*, or “death of the children.”

Niall Ferguson argues, however, that the widely accepted notion of mass enthusiasm has to be qualified. Socialist parties and trade unions were against the war although they were unable to stop it, and even the politicians and generals who began it did not feel great enthusiasm². The Bloomsbury intellectuals opposed it with the utilitarian argument that “the war would reduce the sum of human happiness,” and a number of scholars and intellectuals opposed it at the outset, although Ferguson concedes that the war’s opponents were unquestionably a small minority and they were persecuted by their governments for their opposition³. For example, thirty-four British conscientious objectors were sent to France, court-martialed and sentenced to death, although the sentence was commuted to hard labor after public protests.

The strong argument for war enthusiasm is still the great number of men on both sides who volunteered, who had been encouraged to join through effective recruiting techniques as well as other psychological but equally effective means, like pressure from peers and women⁴. Many intellectuals idealized war, even thought it to be some kind of mystical experience that purifies and aggrandizes a nation. The scholar Edmund Gosse declared that war “is the sovereign disinfectant, and its red stream of blood cleans out the stagnant pools and clotted channels of the intellect,” a metaphor that takes seriously the notion of purification⁵. From the German side, a major writer claimed that “Germany is warlike out of morality—not out of vanity or glory-seeking or imperialism...Germany’s whole virtue and beauty...first flower in war.” These words, taken from a piece called “Thoughts in Wartime,” were not written by some proto-Nazi but by novelist Thomas Mann, who less than twenty years later would

² Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, pp. 177-178.

³ Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, pp. 181, 185.

⁴ Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, pp. 205-206.

⁵ Qtd. Cooperman, *World War I and the American Novel*, p. 59.

himself flee his native country before the latest expression of the warlike spirit of the Teutonic races⁶.

The bogus spiritualization of war was not solely a German phenomenon. President Theodore Roosevelt, who had taken part in a minor cavalry action during the Spanish-American War (puffed by the American press as a heroic charge of “Light Brigade” proportions but, it turns out, after the real but insufficiently dramatic charge restaged for the Vitagraph cameramen)⁷, and had won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1906, declared war to be bracing for the human spirit. Artists and liberal intellectuals from all sides jumped on the jingoist bandwagon, many of them seeing war as a means of redemption. The French philosopher Henri Bergson, theorist of the *élan vital*, thought that out of the ultimate success of the Allied victory over the Germans would come “the moral regeneration of Europe...the march forward toward truth and justice.”⁸ The British poet-laureate Robert Bridges thought the war was “primarily a holy war,”⁹ and the popular and patriotic English poet Rupert Brooke, on the outbreak of the war, wrote in a famous sonnet, that that was a moment “to turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping / Glad from a world grown old and cold and weary,” an image that becomes obscene when contrasted with that of the British soldiers who literally drowned in the mud at Passchendaele.

Modernism contributed to the desire for war by “depicting [it] as an agency of spiritual renewal.”¹⁰ For the poets of both France and Germany, there seemed to be, in early August 1914, “an apocalyptic and transcendental dimension to what was impending. It is noteworthy that popular authors like Arthur Conan Doyle, John Buchan, and Rudyard Kipling were pro-war, while both “progressive” writer-thinkers like George Bernard Shaw, Aldous Huxley, and H.G. Wells (who predicted modern total war as early as 1902), as well as notable modernists like D.H. Lawrence and Ford Madox Ford, were opposed¹¹. The Bloomsbury group, including the Woolfs, the Webbs. Lytton Strachey, Duncan Grant, and Clive Bell were opposed.

⁶ Qtd. Hamilton, Nigel, *The Brothers Mann: The Lives of Heinrich and Thomas Mann*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 162.

⁷ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 57.

⁸ Qtd. Tuchman, *The Guns of August*, p. 313.

⁹ Qtd. Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, p. 209.

¹⁰ Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, p. 21.

¹¹ Hynes argues that Wells was in fact a “divided man,” a jingoist journalist who supported the war but also the author of the curious book *Boon*, an attack on Edwardian values, in which, “all that Wells had to say (and show) about art was that they were incompatible; war destroys everything, including poor, foolish, civilized art.” Hynes, *A War Imagined*, pp. 20, 24.

Virginia Woolf's 1917 review of Siegfried Sassoon's poems emphasized his "terrible pictures" of the war in contrast to the lies and propaganda of newspaper accounts¹².

Samuel Hynes claims that most English writers and artists, with the exception of Lawrence, were involved in war work, and were "also quick to support the war *as writers*."¹³ In Kipling's case, at least, the misplaced enthusiasm had an unfortunate end. Noted champion of the British Empire, Kipling urged his only son John to volunteer for war service, and although the young man was turned down because of poor eyesight, his father pulled strings at high places to get him commissioned. Lieutenant John Kipling was killed at the Battle of Loos. Kipling's own couplet on the war dead may serve as a self-critique, while it makes a telling larger point: "If any question why we died, / Tell them, because our fathers lied."¹⁴

The heady language of war had wide currency in the European countries and the United States before the Great War began, and it is hard not to think that such charged language must have made considerable contribution to its acceptability. The contribution of popular literature was here considerable, the rhetoric of which even survived the experience of the war itself. Stanley Cooperman, in his study of the American literature of the war, mentions the widely read patriotic American novelist Arthur Train, who "typified the various concepts of war as proving-ground, religious cause, and racial invigoration (the view of combat as a cure for decadence"), concepts that were not even completely erased after the war—Train's exemplary novel *Earthquake*, for example, was published in 1918¹⁵.

As suggested by the remarks on the "purifying" aspects of war, such notions of war as masculine, healthy, purifying, etc., were not only the work of popular literature but were already being articulated by certain sectors of the pre-war European intelligentsia and would contribute, in the Twenties and Thirties, to the mentality of "vitalism," from which fascism developed. Fascist ideology, in the so-called "Vorticism" of Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis, reflected in their journal *Blast* (published in June 1914, two months before the beginning of the war) was inspired, among other things, by the Italian movement of Futurism. The ninth article of Filippo Marinetti's Futurist manifesto, of 1909, for example, a declaration of principles of the European avant-garde (itself a military term, be it noted), stated the following: "We want to glorify war—the only cure for the world—and militarism, patriotism,

¹² Tate, Trudi, "The First World War: British Writing," in: McLoughlin, Kate (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to War Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 161-162.

¹³ Hynes, *A War Imagined*, p. 25.

¹⁴ Bradbury, Malcolm, *The Modern British Novel* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1994), p. 147.

¹⁵ Cooperman, *World War I and the American Novel*, p. 94.

the destructive gesture of the anarchists, the beautiful ideas which kill, and contempt for women.”¹⁶ One might make allowances for the usual exaggerations of manifestos, but “the bursting mechanical violence, the new kinetic energies” touted by the pre-war avant-garde became real enough once the war started and, worse, “the bombing of the old art cities, the flooding of the museums, that the Futurists had called for turned into fact.”¹⁷

Far less strident, although ultimately more dangerous because of the greater number of its adherents, was the pre-war ideology most citizens took for granted under vague but deeply felt notions of duty and honor¹⁸. The preparation of youth for future wars began in the schools and the playing-fields. Sports and its character-building ethos were easily assimilated into military purposes, sometimes quite literally. A British enlistment poster, for example, shows a decorated young soldier over a background of the Union Jack and smaller figures taking part in various kinds of games. The large caption reads: “Enlist in the Sportsmen’s 1000,” and beneath this caption is a line from Kipling: “Play Up, Play Up, and Play *The Game*,” with the italicized article leaving no guess as to what game is to be played¹⁹. Other posters alluded to enduring values of chivalry and honor, with the intention of appealing to working-class youths who might enlist by imagining themselves as knights in armor. In a poster with an illustration of St. George slaying the dragon, the caption reads: “Britain Needs You at once.”²⁰

The history and mythology of famous battles, which formed part of the curriculum for educating youth in these notions, were still powerful enough to attract into the next world war a mature narrator, Evelyn Waugh’s Guy Crouchback from *Men at Arms*:

Gallipoli, Balaclava, Quebec, Lepanto, Bannockburn, Roncesvalles, and Marathon—these, and the Battle in the West where Arthur fell, and a hundred such names whose trumpet-notes, even now in my sere and lawless state, called to me irresistibly across the intervening years with all the clarity and strength of boyhood.

It is significant that the campaign in Gallipoli, a British military disaster of the First World War, is here mentioned in the same breath as earlier, triumphant historical battles and even legendary ones in which the British could not have taken part. The mythology of glory

¹⁶ Qtd. Payne, *A History of Fascism*, p. 64.

¹⁷ Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel*, p. 83.

¹⁸ Ellis, *Eye-Deep in Hell*, p. 62.

¹⁹ Young, Brigadier Peter (ed.), *Marshall Cavendish’s Illustrated Encyclopedia of World War I* (Freeport, Long Island: Marshall Cavendish Corp, 1984), p. xv.

²⁰ Winn, James Anderson, *The Poetry of War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 122.

exploited by nationalism is transnational; it is not subject to historical time periods but functions as a mythicization of history.

This notion of the importance of past glory is not contradicted by what George Orwell wrote, in his essay “The Lion and the Unicorn” (1941), that the names that “have really engraved themselves on the popular memory are Mons, Gallipoli, and Passchendaele, every time a disaster,” while the names of the final battles that allowed for the military breakthrough and led to victory “are simply unknown to the general public.”²¹ Orwell uses this as an example for his argument that the British people are basically anti-militaristic, but it is more likely the case that in popular cultural productions (ballads and epics, for example) the tragic defeat has always had more emotional appeal, at least in hindsight, and legends tend to take form as history fades into the past.

Given the accumulated cultural legacy of Victorian and Edwardian England, therefore, at least some of the responsibility for these harmful ideas may be assigned to the period’s literature. The association of self-sacrifice and self-control with violence and aggression, Fussell argues, had been prepared for by certain strands of late nineteenth and early twentieth century popular literature, a “Public School” ethos instilled by the boys’ stories of George Alfred Henry, the adventure novels of H. Rider Haggard, the romances of William Morris, and the Arthurian poems of Alfred Lord Tennyson: “the Great War took place in what was, compared with ours, a static world, where the values appeared stable and where the meanings of abstractions seemed permanent and reliable. Everyone knew what Glory was, and what Honor meant.”²²

The pastoral landscape of England was especially dear to a concept of England’s past that was worth defending. Propaganda photographs, postcards of middle-class families, country landscapes in summer, the pastoral poetry of Edward Thomas and his prose hymn to rural England, *The Heart of England* (1906) all served the purpose of giving value to an idyllic and idealized nation—a rural rather than an industrialized England, a local village rather than an imperial power. Rupert Brooke’s celebrated poem, “The Soldier,” juxtaposes these various notions of Edwardian pastoralism, patriotism, and self-sacrifice, as well as an unconscious imperialism:

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there’s some corner of a foreign field

²¹ Waugh, Evelyn, *Men at Arms* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1964). p. 15.

²² Fussell, *The Great War and Cultural Memory*, p. 21.

That is forever England.

Nowadays, one turns with a certain satisfaction from this sort of thing to the vulgar songs of the actual combatants:

I don't want to join the bloody Army,
I don't want to go into the war;
I want no more to roam,
I'd rather stay at home,
Living on the earnings of a whore.

From the point of the view of the men who actually fought, patriotic posturing and earnest abstractions would seem to make little sense after an extended spell in the trenches, and yet Fussell garners sufficient evidence that pastoralism was strong as ever in the literature of the war, for example, in poet Edmund Blunden's war memoir, *Undertones of War* (1928), which Fussell characterizes as an "extended pastoral elegy in prose."²³ It is noteworthy that Siegfried Sassoon's fictionalized memoir passes effortlessly from the first volume, *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*, to the second, titled *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*.

Pastoralism may have a perennial appeal for industrialized societies, but it is disturbing to note that the myth of glorious sacrifice instilled by the pre-war value system was also powerful enough to survive the war. Brooke's upbeat verses, for example, outlasted in popularity the bitter poetry of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon in postwar years. Perhaps the best example of the staying power of the ethos of sacrifice is Ernest Raymond's novel *Tell England: A Study in a Generation*, published in 1922, the story of two public-school boys, Rupert Ray and Edgar Doe, who are both killed in the war. Their deaths are not presented as wasted or futile, as in the Great War novels, but as noble exercises in patriotism and Christianity, just as they were expected to be in the pre-war period. In this passage, Ray contemplates the death of his comrade:

As I copied just now those last words of Monty's sermon I laid down my pencil on the dug-out floor with a little start. As in a flashlight I saw their truth. They created in my mind the picture of that Aegean evening, when Monty turned the moment of Doe's death, which so nearly brought me discouragement and debasement, into an ennobling memory. And I saw him going about healing the sores of this war with the same priestly hand.²⁴

²³ Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, p. 254.

²⁴ Raymond, Ernest, *Tell England: A Study in a Generation*. 1922. Qtd. in Giles, Judy, and Tim Middleton (eds.), *Writing Englishness 1900-1950: An Introductory Sourcebook on National Identity* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 319-320.

These thoughts occur on the night before the offensive in which Ray will himself be killed. The twenty-year-old narrator contemplates this possibility along with other moments of what he thinks of as “surpassing joy,” like winning the swimming cup for his school: “I see a death in No Man’s Land to-morrow as a wonderful thing.”²⁵

While such attitudes are clearly part of the pre-war “Public-School” ethos, what is surprising is that they have survived the disaster of Gallipoli, where the author actually served—unlike Rupert Brooke, who died before actually seeing combat. If Raymond’s continuing faith in God and England may be put down to his having been an ordained minister, the enduring popularity of his novel (which was later made into a film) can only be explained by the public preference of myth to history. Yet, it is also true that the forging of the warrior mentality began well before the pre-war period, or even the Victorian period and its celebration of British imperialism and pluck, as in Tennyson’s famous poem “Ulysses,” in which the Greek hero is turned into an indefatigable conqueror sailing out for one last adventure. The newly founded grammar schools in the sixteenth century taught schoolboys to idolize men of action and words, such as great military commanders who were also great orators: Julius Caesar of the Gallic Wars, Marlowe’s Tamburlaine and Shakespeare’s Henry V²⁶.

Far more typical in the serious literature of the war were the attitudes of men who had to swallow the bitter lessons of experience. In a recent novel about the war, *Regeneration* (1991), a fictionalized historical character, William Rivers, a British psychiatrist who treats shell-shocked officers, muses on the gap between the Public School stories of glory and the reality:

Mobilization. The Great Adventure. They’d been *mobilized* into holes in the ground so constricted they could hardly move. And the Great Adventure—the real life equivalent of all the adventure stories they’d devoured as boys—consisted of crouching in a dugout, waiting to be killed.²⁷

Such men could be forgiven, as George Sherston, Sassoon’s narrator, dryly comments, if “their close contact with the War has diminished their realization of its spiritual aspects.”²⁸ In a striking image, Sherston describes seeing a pair of hands from a dead man of unknown

²⁵ Giles and Middleton, *Writing Englishness*, p. 320.

²⁶ West, Philip, “Early modern war writing and the British Civil Wars,” in: Kate McLoughlin (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to War Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 98.

²⁷ Barker, Pat, *The Eye in the Door* (New York: Plume, 1993), p. 107, emphasis in original.

²⁸ Sassoon, Siegfried, *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston* (London: Faber & Faber, 1937), p. 464.

nationality protruding from the ground, one hand “pointing at the sky with an accusing gesture...Who made the War?” implying that the blame cannot be easily attached to one side or the other, or, more likely, that in the circumstances it hardly matters²⁹.

As the war ground on, the initial enthusiasm born of ignorance and nourished by nationalist and cultural ideologies waned as the corpses began to pile up. Entire age groups of young men in Great Britain, France, and Germany began to disappear; in England, induction had to be instituted to fill up the ranks vacated by the dead. As Sassoon’s Sherston puts it, “What in earlier days had been drafts of volunteers were now droves of victims.”³⁰ It was in the writings of the men who survived the battles to write about their experience, that the contrast between war as an idea, a glorious event in the abstract, and a real event literally experienced in the flesh, can best be appreciated. As Cooperman writes, “the ultimate irony was not that national leaders, and populations, for that matter, ‘wanted’ a war, but rather that they did not want the war they got.”³¹

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²⁹ Sassoon, The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston, p. 435.

³⁰ Sassoon, The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston, p.141.

³¹ Cooperman, World War I and the American Novel, p. 59.

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