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The Role of Literature in Glorifying World War I

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Abstract

The Great War was celebrated on its outbreak. Writers on both sides helped to create and sustain the climate of celebration, although a few deplored the fact and wrote against it. In this paper, I will attempt to show the motivations behind support of the war, citing such factors as the enthusiasm of modernism for the supposed spiritual benefits of war and the inherited values of Victorian England, such as heroism and glory, embodied in popular literature and internalized by the men who went off to fight.

Key-words: Literature of the Great War; Victorian values; Modernism and War.

Resumo

La Unua Granda Milito estis solenita kiam ĝia brulego okazis. Verkistoj ambaŭflanke helpis krei kaj subteni la okazigo humoro dum la komanca monatoj, kvankam iuj lamentis fakton kaj skribita kontraŭ ĝin. En tio artikolo, mi provas montri kialojn malantaŭ tia apogo kaj opozicioj al la milito, citante faktorojn kiel la entuziasmo de modernismo al la supozita spiritaj servoj de la milito kaj hideris valorojn de Viktoriana Anglio, kiel la nocioj de heroeco kaj gloro, enkorpigita en popularaj literaturo kaj interne de la viroj kiuj militis.

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Modernismo kaj milito.

Resumo

A Grande Guerra foi celebrada quando de sua conflagração. Escritores de ambos os lados ajudaram a criar e manter o clima de celebração durante os meses iniciais, embora alguns tenham deplorado o fato e escrito contra isso. Neste artigo, tento demonstrar as motivações por detrás de tais apoio e oposição à guerra, citando fatores como os o entusiasmo do modernismo para os supostos benefícios espirituais da guerra e os valores herdados da Inglaterra Vitoriana, tais como as noções de heroísmo e glória, consubstanciados na literatura popular e internalizados pelos homens que foram lutar.

Palavras-chave: Literatura da Primeira Guerra Mundial; Valores vitorianos; Modernismo e guerra.

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—the war also known as the First World War or World War I, whose centennial was celebrated in August 2014—was the initial 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 of Great Britain 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." (FERGUSON, 1998, p. 176). Large crowds outside Buckingham Palace actually chanted "We want war" (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, 1997, p. 32).

Another reason was that most people, including military leaders, thought that the war, which began in August, 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, 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 **en 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 enthusiasm. 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 opposition (FERGUSON, 1998, p. 181, 185). 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 social pressure from peers and women.

Many intellectuals idealized war, even though it were 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 purification (COOPERMAN, 1967, p. 59). 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 himself flee his native country before the latest expression of the warlike spirit of the Teutonic races. (HAMILTON, 1979, p. 162).

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, which was puffed by the American press as a heroic charge of "Light Brigade" proportions after, it turns out, the real but insufficiently dramatic charge was restaged for the Vitagraph cameramen (SONTAG, 2005, p. 57), declared that war was bracing for the human spirit. Ironically, he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1906. 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" (TUCHMAN, 1994, p. 313). The British poet-laureate Robert Bridges thought the war was "primarily a holy war" (FERGUSON, 1998, p. 209). 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.

Modernist literature contributed to the desire for war by "depicting [it]" as an agency of spiritual renewal, while 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" (FERGUSON, 1998, p. 21). 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, as well as the notable modernist novelists like D.H. Lawrence and Ford Madox Ford, were opposed. As for the celebrated polymath writer Wells, Samuel Hynes argues that he 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, 1991, p. 20, 24). The Bloomsbury group of writers, artists, and social thinkers, including Leonard and Virginia Woolf, was opposed. 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 accounts (TATE, 2009, p. 161-162).

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*." (HYNES, 1991, p. 25). In the poet 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" (HITCHENS, 2000, p. 123-126).

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 1918 (COOPERMAN, 1967, p. 94).

As suggested by the remarks above on the "purifying" aspects of war, such notions of war as masculine, healthy and purifying. 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, the *destructive* gesture of the anarchists, the beautiful ideas which kill, and contempt for women" (PAYNE, 1995, p. 64). 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" (BRADURY, 1994, p. 83).

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 honor (ELLIS, 1989, p. 62). 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. 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 played (YOUNG, 1984, p. xv). 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” (WINN, 2008, p. 122).

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 (WAUGH, 1964, p. 15).

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 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's *apud* Walder (1990, p. 183) statement 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" (WALDER, 1990, p. 183). In traditional 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, Paul 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" (FUSSELL, 1975, p. 21).

The pastoral landscape of England was especially dear to a popular idealization 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" (THOMAS, 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
> That is forever England.

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 memoir, "Undertones of War" (1928), which Fussell characterizes as an "extended pastoral elegy in prose" (FUSSELL, 1975, p. 254). It is noteworthy that the titles of 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 horrors of the war itself. 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 (*apud* GILES & MIDDLETON, 1995, 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" (GILES & MIDDLETON, 1995, p. 320).

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 Ernest 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 V (WEST, 2009, p. 98).

In the serious literature of the war, what was produced by combatants, 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 (BARKER, 1991, p. 107, italics in original).

It was in the poetry and prose of the soldiers, 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" (COOPERMAN, 1967, p. 59).

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