

With the passing of the hero,
war can never be the same

The Literature of War

Mark Taylor

The literature of the First World War, to begin with that one, illustrates a tragic paradox: The most destructive of human enterprises can nourish the most creative. Probably no single event in history allowed the transformation of so many intense personal experiences—often presented for outspokenly didactic reasons or as cries of impotent frustration or as necessary therapy—into works of art that transcended the limited circumstances of their birth. No responsible account of this century's imaginative literature could omit Robert Graves's *Good-bye to All That*, Ford Madox Ford's *Parade's End*, William Faulkner's *Soldiers' Pay* and *A Fable*, Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, William March's *Company K*, Henri Barbusse's *Under Fire*, Jaroslav Hašek's *The Good Soldier: Schweik*, Arnold Zweig's *The Case of Sergeant Grisha*, or the lyric poetry of Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, Siegfried Sassoon, and Charles Hamilton Sorley. To this list might be added such seminal works of modernism as T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Ezra Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, and Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*. These are not "war poems" or "war novels," in any narrow sense, but they clearly would not exist had there been no war.

The other major conflicts of this century occasioned less literature of real excellence. In addition, such important works as were produced have not been evenly distributed among nations and cultures. A vast amount of fiction has been produced until now about the Second World War. But almost all that seems certain to survive or that strikes the reader as really new is the work of Germans such as Günter Grass and Heinrich Böll or of Eastern Europeans such as Jerzy Kosinski (*The Painted Bird*) in which interest in the war itself is subsumed under interest

in the capacity for personal cruelty and national barbarism that the war revealed.

America's other wars, Korea and Vietnam, have been just that, *American* wars. Thus the lack of international literary preoccupation with them is not surprising. If there is such a thing as a continuity of Western (European and American) letters, then continuity can have been little affected by Korea and Vietnam, which, unlike both world wars and however unfairly, required the participation of but a small fraction of the Westerners theoretically available to fight them. Korea seems to have had little enduring hold even on the American imagination. It was the source neither of great literature nor of significant attempts.

Vietnam, by contrast, may have had a common meaning for a whole generation of young Americans, but that meaning was more political than military. The war was viewed from home, not from within its theatre of operations; the war was seen as symptom rather than as fundamental condition. There have been, to be sure, many admirable expressions of rage and grief by American poets in, for instance, the anthology *Winning Hearts & Minds*, Michael Casey's *Obscenities*, and the "Against the War" issue of the prestigious *Poetry* magazine, but the permanence of any of this work is doubtful. Vietnam has found lasting memorials so far in only a couple of novels, notably Victor Kolpakoff's *The Prisoners of Quai Dong* (the work of a nonparticipant), and perhaps in Fred Branfinan's unbearably moving little book *Voices From the Plain of Jars*. But the last is, significantly, a work of Laotian literature.

I have spoken of the international literary response to the First World War, but it would be more accurate to speak of the Western response. In fact, the conflict itself (and despite the nominal participation of states such as Panama, Nicaragua, Liberia, and Japan) is more accurately

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seen as the European War rather than as the World War. But if the war of 1914-18 was limited in its geographic scope as that of 1939-45 was not, if the earlier war did not in fact involve the total energies of planet Earth, it did mark the disintegration of a world to a far greater degree than did the Second World War. That world had been constructed by two thousand years of Christian Europe with its shared beliefs, assumptions, and self-confidence, and by a mutual commitment to the order and civilization that it saw itself embodying despite countless lesser wars within the family.

The war irreparably shattered that world. Never again would the nations of Europe share a sense of collective supremacy over, and independence from, the rest of the world. Maurice Genevoix, a participant in the First World War, has written: "Everyone agrees in recognizing that in the whole history of mankind, few dates have had the importance of August 2, 1914." Another commentator, too young to serve in the conflict, writes: "For us, it is difficult not to think of the war as one of the catastrophic turning points in history; like the fall of Constantinople, it seems to mark the end of one cycle of history and the beginning of another."¹

With respect to the literature that this war fed and shaped, what matters is not whether these judgments seem extravagant today (they do not) but that to a whole generation of Europeans and Americans they seemed perfectly reasonable. This consensus explains much about the extraordinary burst of creative energy the war released; it was an end and a beginning. It demanded the sort of commemoration Homer had given to Troy, or Shakespeare to the War of the Roses, which he saw as symbolizing the passage from the medieval to the modern world. Although to a lesser degree, Tolstoy in *War and Peace* and Thomas Hardy in *The Dynasts* offered such a commemoration to the Napoleonic Wars.

We are, of course, still too close to the First World War for its commemoration to have entered the general and yet passive historical consciousness that was manifest in Homer and Shakespeare when they sang of what to them were equivalent upheavals. To say that is to remind ourselves that the first phase of World War I literature is over, the phase of firsthand documentation by participants and observers, a few of whom—such as Robert Graves and David Jones—are still alive but whose statements have been made. Perhaps the most ambitious sign to date of a second phase—cooler, more distant, and in intention more comprehensive—is Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *August 1914*, which begins a projected multivolume chronicle of modern Russia, the author's *chef d'oeuvre*, with the debacle of General Samsonov's army at Tannenberg. Whether this second phase, or yet a third, will produce a *Europiad* on the scale of the *Iliad* or of Shakespeare's *Henriad* is as uncertain as the future of literature and the world. Perhaps some

clues can be discovered in reflecting on the first phase, especially on the English and American literature of the first phase, and in looking at its relationship to the literature that went before it as well as to the shape of modern consciousness.

At the beginning of the war all Englishmen believed that their nation stood for a just cause and that decisive victory would be swift in coming. In *Good-bye to All That* Graves explains his immediate decision to enlist by saying: "I was outraged to read of the Germans' cynical violation of Belgian neutrality." Fifty-odd years later he wrote: "When the newspaper placards on August 4, 1914, read: ENGLAND DECLARES WAR ON GERMANY . . . there was no prouder nation in the world than ours."² Though this pride continued for a couple of years, it did not mean that there were no limits to the risks an intelligent English soldier should run for his nation. There was a certain wisdom in trying to survive any given campaign, since, as Graves says in his autobiography, "At no time in the War did any of us believe that hostilities could possibly continue more than another nine months or a year." The belief in an early end to hostilities Graves shared, it seems, with nearly all his countrymen. In his sonnet "1915," which was published on the first day of that year in the *Times* of London,³ H. D. Rawnsley wrote:

Today how many thousands will not hear
 There in their changeless, timeless world of light
 The sad year's solemn passing in the night,
 The silent coming of a happier year.
 For this new year, though full of woe and fear,
 Shall prove that Right has triumphed over Might,
 Shall see an end of war's accurséd blight
 And Peace among the nations drawing near.
 We cannot hear their voices, clasp their hands,
 The faces that we loved no more we see;
 But they whose names are bright on Honor's roll
 In some far world shall know we reached their
 goal,
 Crowned with the Will that set all Europe free.

It was beyond imagining that the "accurséd blight" had nearly four years still to run.

One consequence of these tandem beliefs in the justice of the Triple Entente's cause and its ability to enforce justice quickly was an outpouring, throughout the English-speaking world, of verse condemning German barbarism and celebrating patriotism, bravery, decency, and even Christian righteousness. Much of it has the same historical interest as Rawnsley's sonnet but, if possible, even less aesthetic merit and is deservedly hidden in dusty library annexes. Some is better known today, such as Rudyard Kipling's "The Holy War" and "For All We Have and Are" ("Who stands if Freedom fall? / Who dies if England live?"). In fairness to Kipling, anyone who knows enough of him to indict his militarism

and jingoism should also read his poem "Stellenbosch" and George Orwell's 1942 essay on him to gain a more complete and complex picture.

However forceful such patriotic and self-congratulatory verse may have appeared in 1914, its sentiments did not hold up, and were perhaps never much shared by men who had been to the front. After the first two years of fighting, World War I took on a very different character; 1916 is generally seen as the year dividing two radically different perceptions of the war. The disaster at Verdun marked the turning point for the French and that of the Somme for the English. It is often asserted that this transformation, this disillusionment, this mounting sense of futility, initiated a way of seeing all wars, not only World War I. Thus, it is said, our chief literary legacy from World War I is the record of this shift in outlook.

W.H. Auden has written: "There have been few more radical changes in the history of Western culture than the change in attitude towards war and the military profession brought about by World War I. . . . We may still believe that in certain circumstances a war is just and necessary, but nobody imagines any longer that it will be fun."⁴ The literary product of this change, "the chief lasting accomplishment of World War I," as Leslie Fiedler had written earlier, "was the invention of the antiwar novel."⁵ And a recent critic, Michael True, has written that "The only good war poems are anti-war poems," a category that he distinguishes from earlier poems of the "heroic tradition." So far as English poets are concerned, Mr. True, who is not the first to make this contrast, finds emblems of the two opposed attitudes in the verse of Rupert Brooke and Wilfred Owen. Though Brooke's sonnet "The Soldier" (If I should die, think only this of me . . .) was "perhaps the last great war poem in the heroic tradition,"⁶ the reality of the war, which Owen understood, was to make such poems and the sentiments they enshrine no longer acceptable, nor even possible. Owen thus stands at the beginning of a tradition of antiwar letters that continues to our day. This conventional account of literary history is impressive in its sweep, in its dramatic reversal, in its clarity of design, but it is much less than the whole story.

Rudyard Kipling may be rightly regarded as an unfortunate holdover from the Boer War and the glorious days of India. Thus Rupert Brooke is seen as the last English celebrant of heroic values. As such he is a favorite whipping boy among critics who believe late-Victorian and Georgian verse to have been an unqualified disaster. But what exactly is wrong with the work of this much maligned figure? To modern readers 1914, his famous sequence of five sonnets on the war, sounds

boyishly insouciant and naive in its inspirational cadences. It is unmistakably, even ludicrously, old-fashioned in postulating death as a kind of joyful transcendence, "a white / Unbroken glory, a gathered radiance," where "Naught [is] broken save this body, lost but breath." It often suffers from self-conscious poetizing and a reliance on archaic idiom, as in the vaguely Keatsian "that unhopd serene, / That men call age." But 1914 is not guilty, as many have alleged, of "easy patriotism" (Michael True). Nor is it guilty of the facile moral judgments that constitute propaganda, nor yet of the resonances of the "heroic tradition," since its heroes are not warriors but men, boys really, hoping to be warriors; thus their grandiloquent utterances are simply uninformed. (I use the term "heroic" in its widest possible sense, not as a synonym for epic, which would limit the discussion to such poems as *The Iliad*, *The Song of Roland*, and *The Nibelungenlied*, but as descriptive of any poem, narrative, or lyric, or of any prose fiction in which soldiering, for one's country's gains or one's own, is uncritically glorified.)

Only Brooke's fifth sonnet, "The Soldier," mentions England by name—the others are geographically unspecific as all five are temporally unspecific. "The Soldier" is a moving tribute to England and, more, to a sense of identity with one's land, to a spirit of belonging that can give purpose to life and death (sentiments, by the way, that should not be assumed dead because of their absence from contemporary urban America). But there is no hint of supercilious nationalism, nor of an unexamined acceptance of dogma, nor of "My country right or wrong." That the England of Brooke's Cambridge bears little resemblance to the England of the Manchester working class, and that elsewhere in 1914 Brooke is rather less sanguine about England's emblematic value, means only that the picture offered in "The Soldier" is incomplete, not that it is false.

On the whole, Brooke's poems are unmixed with political considerations. The reasons for the conflict at hand, and the allies and antagonists in it, are never mentioned, nor do the structure and focus of the poems make us wonder about such lacunae. Brooke's sequence is totally amoral and egoistic; it is as far from blaming Germany for anything as it is from

This resolution (right) issued by the Church Peace Union suggests something of the flavor of the pre-1911 "Establishment World" which Mark Taylor says was shattered by World War I. That people of great influence could entertain the sentiments and expectations voiced in this resolution will strike some readers as idealistic. Others will no doubt condemn it as irresponsibly, even criminally, naive. Whatever our value judgment may be, the resolution vividly highlights the distance we have traveled since a fateful August day in 1911. In 1961 the Church Peace Union, which had been established by Andrew Carnegie in 1914, changed its name to the Council on Religion and International Affairs and is today the publisher of this journal.

Resolutions Passed by The Church Peace Union; Founded by Andrew Carnegie, at its First Meeting, February 10th, 1914



RESOLVED, that we, the members of The Church Peace Union, and of one or other of the following religious bodies: Episcopal, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran, Congregational, Presbyterian, Disciples of Christ, Unitarian, Jewish, Universalist, and Friends, as our first duty appeal to the Rulers, Statesmen and people of all civilized lands to give their immediate, earnest and prayerful attention to the lamentable facts here presented, hoping they will realize it as their first duty to provide the remedy which seems open before them through a union of several powers pledged to co-operate in abolishing savage war and establishing the reign of peace through arbitration of international disputes; that as citizens must appeal to the tribunals of the law to redress their wrongs, so shall nations.

Here, as it appears to us, lie the two outstanding evils of our day, entailing grave responsibilities upon all religious men from Emperor to workman, that the crime of men killing each other may soon be banished from the face of the earth.

FIRST: The combined debt of the world, mostly borrowed and used for war purposes, amounts to nearly \$37,000,000,000. The interest charge of the world on its national bonded debt amounts to \$1,500,000,000. The amount expended yearly on standing armies and battleships is \$3,500,000,000. If the entire property of United States were to be sold, and the returns capitalized and put at interest at four per cent., it would just about keep up the military and naval forces of the world in time of peace. Our own country, the United States, spends on Army and Navy \$800,000 per day.

The so-called civilized world maintains, chiefly in idle parade, usually all their lives, no less than 6,244,600 men, armed and pledged to go forth and kill their fellowmen as ordered should war arise. Most of these, however, never fire a hostile shot, war being the exception, long years of idleness the rule. Even in war, with men firing at battleships twelve miles distant, with troops under cover firing at troops a mile distant—war is no longer conducive to the heroic.

SECOND: The second sad and distressful crime of our day is that in war we are still capturing private property upon the high seas, although it is exempt from confiscation in war upon the land. This is the greater sin, for the seas are the highways of peaceful and necessary exchange of products; no nation has been created to live by its own products alone, but by peaceful, neighborly exchange with other nations, thus creating a brotherhood of man, each benefitting the other. Little do the masses know the extent of this amazing friendly exchange. Last year Britain imported food products to the value of \$1,403,000,000, her total imports being \$3,723,203,000. Germany imported food products to the value of \$375,000,000, the total value of her imports being \$2,530,000,000. France imported food products to the value of \$340,000,000, her total imports being \$1,960,000,000. Even our country, the United States, imported food products to the extent of \$355,000,000, total imports \$1,650,000,000. The world's annual exchange of its products amounts to the almost incredible sum of thirty-three billions, five hundred millions of dollars.

We pause to ask this question of the governors of these armed naval powers: Why should this beneficent exchange of products between nations, so vast as to require eleven figures to express, and drawing men towards a holy brotherhood, be interrupted by them against the seemingly obvious plans of an all-wise Creator? Appalling, indeed, the responsibility of rulers, who have the power to remove this embargo upon peaceful, holy exchange amongst men who should be as brothers, promoting each other's good.

There is another aspect worthy of attention: the three Teutonic nations, Germany, the Fatherland; Britain, the Motherland; and the United States, peopled largely with their sons and daughters, all as we have seen, deeply involved in international exchange of products, naturally possess for its protection the greatest part of the naval power of the world; why, therefore, should they not meet and agree to inform the world in friendly manner that they could not look with favor upon war on the high seas, the sacred pathway of peaceful exchange, promoting the brotherhood of man.

Signatures:

PETER AINSLIE
ARTHUR J. BROWN
FRANCIS E. CLARK
W. H. P. FAUNCE
J. CARD. GIBBONS
DAVID H. GREER
FRANK O. HALL
E. R. HENDRIX
EMIL G. HIRSCH
HAMILTON HOLT

WILLIAM I. HULL
CHARLES E. JEFFERSON
JENKIN LLOYD JONES
WILLIAM LAWRENCE
FREDERICK LYNCH
CHARLES S. MACFARLAND
MARCUS M. MARKS
SHAILER MATHEWS
EDWIN D. MEAD
WILLIAM PIERSON MERRILL

JOHN R. MOTT
GEORGE A. PLIMPTON
JUNIUS B. REMENSNYDER
HENRY WADE ROGERS
ROBERT E. SPEER
FRANCIS LYNDE STETSON
JAMES J. WALSH
L. B. WILSON

RESOLVED: That a copy of the foregoing resolutions be sent to each Sovereign, President, Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Relations, President of Legislature, and other high official of the World Powers, and to the clergy of Germany, Great Britain and the United States.

considering alternatives to the war, or from anxiety about what modern war might really mean.

In 1914 Brooke celebrated the opportunity of being a young man in that particular year. Its theme had been fully anticipated by Wordsworth in *The Prelude* (XI, 108-112).

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very heaven! O times,
In which the meager, stale, forbidding ways
Of custom, law, and statute, took at once
The attraction of a country in romance!

Wordsworth is writing about the French Revolution as it appeared to him, and to many others, in 1789. If that had been his last statement on the matter his moral and political vision might be faulted, but he lived, as Brooke did not, to see things differently. We shall return to the charge that Brooke's poems fail, in their condemnation of "A world grown old and cold and weary," to correspond to the facts and opportunities of his own life, and that there is something inauthentic if not positively disingenuous about his postures. But here I merely stress that what is often taken as an absolute prowar stance in the sonnet sequence is actually an assertion of salvation through action, that in renewing human possibilities the war can effectively renew the world. Like Falstaff, but with a most un-Falstaffian innocence, Brooke protested against "the cankers of a calm world and a long peace." His concern is not with the national enterprise but with individual escape from the "half-men, and their dirty songs and dreary, / And all the little emptiness of love!"

What did Rupert Brooke, this young, privileged aristocrat of "gay and golden qualities," as Geoffrey Keynes described him, know of such sordid things? Probably not much. He was likely distant personally from the background of despair in 1914 as he was blind (like everyone else) to the course the war would follow. On the other hand, whatever Brooke might have experienced himself, his picture of conditions in peacetime England is far from inaccurate. It is, incidentally, a picture that he had enigmatically adumbrated in that most Georgian of Georgian poems, "The Old Vicarage, Grantchester" (1912): "Say, is there Beauty yet to find? / And Certainty? and Quiet kin? / Deep meadows yet, for to forget / The lies, and truths, and pain? . . ."

Modern historians no longer accept the picture of Edwardian England and its Empire as a timeless and fertile paradise that could have lasted forever had it not been for the war. Problems of Irish nationalism, labor, industrialism, and feminism, antedated the war and continued through it. They would inevitably have torn apart England's nineteenth-century inheritance, war or no war. Correlli Barnett has gone so far as to suggest that the English masses were easily sold on the war

and their personal participation in it because they were in reality, as Brooke only pretends to be, eager for release from "the cage of a colorless and shabby, highly disciplined life in the dreary rats' nest of modern industrial cities."⁷ War forces and to some extent shapes social change, but it does not independently cause it; in the same way, I will suggest, World War I stimulated but did not determine the direction of modern literature.

The most penetrating critique of Brooke's verse was made by his younger contemporary, the poet Charles Hamilton Sorley. Killed in France in October, 1915, nine months before the disillusioning battle of the Somme, Sorley has the distinction of being the first of the English antiwar poets. In a letter to his mother he wrote that Brooke "is far too obsessed with his own sacrifice, regarding the going to war of himself (and others) as a highly intense, remarkable and sacrificial exploit, whereas it is merely the conduct demanded of him (and others) by the turn of circumstances, where non-compliance with this demand would have made life intolerable. It was not that 'they' gave up anything of that list he gives in one sonnet [Sonnet IV, "The Dead"]": but that the essence of these things had been endangered by circumstances over which they had no control, and he must fight to recapture them. He has clothed his attitude in fine words; but he has taken the sentimental attitude."⁸ The fundamental distinction Sorley draws here is between the *freedom* that Brooke so exuberantly professes, albeit the freedom to sacrifice oneself, and *necessity*, that impersonal force that levels all humanity before it, the only motive visible to Sorley. Sorley was right, not only about the prominence of necessity in the modern world, but about its prominence in modern literature. Thus it is in his mistaken emphasis on personal freedom that Rupert Brooke's can be regarded as a voice from a vanished world.

The First World War was a strategic and tactical nightmare. Every combatant nation was committed, from beginning to end, to waging an offensive war. After all, Clausewitz had written a century earlier that the real object of warfare, to which everything else is auxiliary, is the enemy, not his containment. The problem was that no one, especially within the Triple Entente, had any notion how an offensive war was to be waged. Railroads made possible the swift dispatch to the front of masses of men, but once there they lacked a practical way of advance; to do so on foot, slowly, after heavy artillery bombardments, was invariably to meet the reinforcements that the enemy had brought up by its railroads. The machine gun, the main tactical weapon of the war (though the English were slower than the Germans or French to catch on to its usefulness), was almost wholly defensive in its application; infantry advance against it, across shell

holes and lines of trenches, was virtually impossible. When tanks were used, as at the battle of the Somme, they were moderately successful, but commanders did not know to follow them immediately with infantry. The archaic (and heroic) ideal of the horse cavalry charge persisted through half the war. One of the recurrent ironies of *Good-bye to All That*, that matchless primary source on the details of army life (though, of course, it is much more), is the brutal emphasis the Royal Welch Fusiliers, Graves's outfit, put on riding school for its junior officers during periods of training and rest. The English finally got their chance and sent three divisions of cavalry against the Germans at the Somme, "through the waving corn with bugles blowing and lances glittering," the historian A.J.P. Taylor writes. "The glorious vision crumbled into slaughter as the German machine guns opened fire."⁹ Poison gas has associations of horror that are all its own, perhaps because it was not used in the Second World War. What is not always remembered is that it could be as perilous to those using it as to those against whom it was used. Graves writes of one incident: "The gas-men rushed about shouting for the loan of an adjustable spanner. They managed to discharge one or two cylinders; the gas went whistling out, formed a thick cloud a few yards off in No Man's Land, and then gradually spread back into our trenches. The Germans, who had been expecting gas, immediately put on their gas-helmets: semi-rigid ones, better than ours."

The unmistakable lesson in all this was that modern technology was not an extension of human purpose, capable of human control and productive of human good. The instrument of progress and increased material well-being was shown to be a sham—not, of course, that the gulf between technological promise and fulfillment was any surprise to the men from England's industrial cities. But it appears to be in the nature of war to make manifest the contradictions of peace, to carve into rock the patterns of a culture that had existed only as light pencil sketches. Yet the wartime technology was not to be rejected or replaced or meaningfully modified; rather, in the war of stalemate and attrition that it caused, it was continuously and impersonally fed with millions of soldiers. Their participation, except at the beginning, was not a matter of choice; except in rare instances their effectiveness as warriors and their physical survival were unrelated to the traditional *and formerly valid* martial virtues of training, strength, courage, obedience, and esprit de corps. Thus had necessity become the dominant force in the world.

Survival often depended upon the mastery of a new set of virtues antithetical to the older ones. Most of the soldiers in *Good-bye to All That*, officers and men alike, are obsessed with the desire to get a "cushy one," a wound, even a severe, permanently disabling wound, that will get

them evacuated from the front and from which they will recover, if at all, only after the war has ended. Graves tells also of men in the Bantam Battalions, units of volunteers deemed too short for the regular army, who nevertheless saw their share of combat. Contrary to all expectations, it developed that the Bantams had a very special advantage in combat, for their small stature reduced—appreciably, says Graves—the likelihood of their being hit by bullets. Survival had replaced victory as the soldier's goal, and littleness had replaced largeness as the most desirable physical attribute. In a war in which victory seemed unattainable and individual achievement either pointless or elusive, in a war in which death seemed to produce nothing except the possibility that your replacement could get killed in turn, survival, the personal thwarting of necessity, became the new ideal. The Bantam, followed later by the malingering and goldbrick, became the new hero, since he was most nearly capable of achieving this ideal.

Traditional heroes do best what the spokesmen for their society agreed was most worth doing. When simply staying alive could be regarded as of greater worth than anything else, the new literary hero became the man least possessed of heroic virtues, least inclined toward, or capable of, demonstrations of physical prowess. He became, in short, the antihero, the man most likely to be overlooked. But it should be possible to distinguish between two different types of antihero. There is, on the one hand, the man whose definition resides in his recognizing that nothing external to himself has any legitimate claim on his attention, the man whose heroism consists in the *perception* that his world is without absolute values. He may, like Hemingway's Jake Barnes, crowd his life with frenzied activities, but in his essence he is passive. Furthermore, his passivity is an implicit criticism of anyone who believes in meaningful action—though, paradoxically, the latter is a necessary context within which the antihero's antiheroism can be viewed as heroic, that is, preferable. Thus Jake Barnes is an implicit criticism of Robert Cohn, the real (and traditional) hero of *The Sun Also Rises*. Like Don Quixote, he is an anachronism in his world.

There is also an active antihero, the man who recognizes that he lives in a world not bereft of values but dominated by false values. Their very falsity implies the existence of an opposed truth. This antihero is represented by Private Sylvester Wendell in *Company K*, who writes, in a letter he does not send, to the mother of a dead comrade that her son "died needlessly in Belleau Wood . . . in agony, slowly." Wounded by shrapnel, "He lived three full hours screaming and cursing by turns. He had nothing to hold on to, you see: He had learned long ago that what he had been taught to believe by you, his mother, who loved him, under the meaningless names of honor, courage, and patriotism, were all lies. . . ." This antihero does best what he alone knows

is worth doing at all; in the process he persuades us that he is right and everyone else is wrong. His triumph will be a small thing—not holding a job maybe, or not saving money, or just staying alive—but in it lies a measure of heroism. As Jake Barnes is a type of passive antihero, so are Hašek's good soldier Schweik and Captain Grimes in Evelyn Waugh's *Decline and Fall* types of active antihero.

The antihero is no more an invention of the First World War, however, than are the reductive forces of technology that give him a special prominence thereafter. In his *Anatomy of Criticism* Northrop Frye describes five kinds of fiction differentiated by the hero's relative power of action. The hero of *myth*, Frye writes, is "superior in kind both to other men and to the environment of other men." The hero of *romance* is superior only "in degree to other men and to his environment." The hero of the *high mimetic mode* is "superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment." The hero of the *low mimetic mode* is "superior neither to other men nor to his environment." And the hero of the *ironic mode* is actually inferior to other men. But since our word irony comes from the Greek *eiron*—the clever underdog in Greek comedy who manages always to outwit the boastful and apparently superior *alazon*—he may only *appear* inferior to other men.¹⁰

These five sorts of fiction represent something like a chronological progression through the centuries. The high mimetic mode is dominant in Elizabethan tragedy, for example, the low mimetic mode in the realistic fiction of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the ironic mode in modern and postmodern fiction. At the same time, no period is the exclusive property of a single mode. Elizabethan middle-class comedies like Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor* belong to the low mimetic mode, and throughout the Renaissance there are fictional characters, like Falstaff, Rabelais's Panurge, and Erasmus's Stultitia, who are so strongly ironic in conception that it is easy to take them for direct lineal ancestors of Schweik. The main (and very important) difference is that there is an external standard by which their limitations become visible and may be measured—Falstaff's by Prince Hal, Panurge's by Pantagruel, Stultitia's by Christianity. There is no such standard, and perhaps cannot be, for Schweik.

The mode of the literary hero, which is determined solely by capacity for action and not by ethical considerations, tends to descend in direct proportion to the representation of classes of society and of absolute numbers of people among the literature's audience and creators. It is no accident that the Elizabethan drama, for all the homage it pays to royalty, contains many more identifiably middle-class elements than do the narrative

poems of the same period (such as Spenser's *Faerie Queene* or Samuel Daniel's *Civil Wars*). The audiences at the playhouses were socially heterogeneous, while the literacy required for reading poems was still largely the property of the aristocracy. It appears that popular literature, whether popular with a select coterie or with the public at large, must contain heroes with whom its readers can identify, either in actuality or in legitimate fantasy. The notion that one is or could be like Achilles may be a legitimate fantasy for a nobleman but quite illegitimate for a peasant. Therefore the history of literature—aided by the expansion of literacy, the invention of printing, the discovery of cheap paper, and the widespread increase in leisure time—is a history of its democratization and therefore of the demythologizing of its heroes.

This perspective on literary history emphasizes the dangers inherent in believing that literary expression corresponds exactly to the contours of general human consciousness, that the books of an age can tell us what people thought in that time. It also challenges the assumption that the First World War produced a new kind of literature because people had changed their minds about war. What in fact happened in the First World War was the transfer of control over literature from those who had most to profit by war to those who had most to lose. It may be that centuries earlier the assumptions of heroic poetry were universally shared, but we have no way of knowing that, since the vast majority of people who lived before the eighteenth century left no records of their beliefs. Even before technology curtailed human freedom it seems doubtful that most people perceived themselves as meaningfully free.

It is unlikely that there has never been a genuinely popular war. No doubt plenty of wars, when fought by professional, volunteer armies and when not perceived as a drain on their nations' economies, have been popular. They were popular not because reasonable men considered them just and necessary, the way in which the Second World War was popular, but because the soldiers stood to gain from them materially and also, perhaps, because they believed in the martial virtues by which they were being tested. Nor do I suggest that the First World War was just another war except that it was more exhaustively reported by its participants. By almost any standard it was worse than any prior conflict in history—in the macabre design of its weaponry, in loss of human life and destruction of property, in the dishonesty it encouraged among military and political leaders, in the social upheavals (still continuing) it precipitated. As noted earlier, what was bad about it was bad not in a vacuum, so to say, but in the context of a generally contrary optimism about the future of Europe, of technology, and of humankind. But the fact remains that the First World War did involve a larger number of articulate

and informed adversaries to official national positions than had any earlier war. It has been interpreted by people who had little personal stake in it. War propaganda aims to create the illusion that war gains will somehow belong equally to the subjects of the victorious nation. In fact, many return from the front to unemployment, inflation, and a sense of having been passed by. Heroic poetry is, in content and purpose, not unlike propaganda. It is the creation of a ruling class or of bards for a ruling class, not because bards are toadies, but because they must take their employers as they come.

No country has a monopoly on books about World War I, but it is probable that English-speaking readers are most familiar with the British poets and novelists: Rupert Brooke and the trench poets Owen, Rosenberg, Sorley, and Sassoon; the authors of straight or fictionalized autobiographies such as Sassoon, Graves, and Guy Chapman; poets writing after the fact such as Herbert Read in *The End of War* and David Jones in *In Parenthesis*; and novelists such as Ford Madox Ford and Frederick Manning. There is a certain irony in this substantial British achievement. Except for Ford, these authors were all soldiers in the war, but in a sense none was meant to be. The war led Britain to violate what had long been its central strategic principles: the maintenance of the Empire with a large navy and a small, highly trained, professional army, and a policy of separation from the internal affairs of the Continent. For the first time in its history Britain practiced conscription, creating an immense army on the Continental model. The decision left one million dead in Europe and would spell, eventually, the end of the Empire. The point is that this army was representative of the population at large as no previous English force had been. If the war's more articulate survivors, and some who did not survive, chronicled the brutalities, stupidities, and deceptions of the war, despite their initial enthusiasm for it, they did so not as committed military men but as specially privileged citizen-witnesses. The rituals of a secret society tend to look rather silly to outsiders.

Shifts in taste and the perspectives of criticism furnish another index to the broadened participation in the experience of literature. Putatively descriptive statements such as "The only good war poems are antiwar poems," or "It is my notion that all poetry is against war and for man,"¹¹ seem so unexceptionable that it is easy to lose sight of their modernity. Such statements reflect a way of reading that probably did not exist a century ago. It should be noted that both emphatically ("only" and "all") embrace the poetry of the distant past as well as that composed since, say, 1918. Even heroic poems like *The Iliad*, which had traditionally been regarded, at least in substantial part, as glorifying the unique opportunity for self-fulfillment offered

by war, are turned inside-out and found to be the reverse of what had been thought. Perhaps the most compelling of all modern critical readings of Homer is Simone Weil's *The Iliad or The Poem of Force*. She focuses on Homer's transcendent pity for those heroes, Achaeans and Trojans alike, whom the war turns into things.

Once written, books don't change, of course; but what we find there does change. The critic E.D. Hirsch, Jr., makes a useful distinction between the *meaning* and the *significance* of a literary text. Meaning is what is immutably represented by a text, what is present in "a particular sign sequence," whereas significance "names a relationship between that meaning and a person, or a conception, or a situation, or indeed anything imaginable."¹² In other words, meaning is absolute, but significance depends upon one's perception of a text, and as perceptions may be sharp or blurred, accurate or inaccurate, so may significances be exact or vague, sophisticated or naive, profound or trivial, even true or false. In any event, it would seem clear that the significance of a text to any particular reader, or group of readers (even to a whole generation of critics), will, in practice if not in theory, always fall short of the full meaning of the work; otherwise the business of criticism would someday be done with.

"Greatness" in a work of literature, the quality from which it derives its permanence, is, at least in part, the product of meaning (still in Professor Hirsch's sense) of such density, complexity, and moral ambiguity that wholly valid and yet wholly incompatible significances may be gleaned from it. Today the significance of a text whose subject is war will almost certainly include the observation that war is brutal, senseless, base, or absurd. The text's meaning may contain genuine prowar and antiwar points of view, but we will find, or trust, only the antiwar.

We may consider *Henry V* Shakespeare's most narrowly nationalistic, even chauvinistic, play, for instance, and thus assign it a low rank in the canon, but we will see other things as well. The Archbishop of Canterbury's tedious disquisition on Salic Law is likely to appear a kind of learned cover-up for a mutually profitable deal between Church and State at the expense of the common man. The hanging of Bardolph for robbing a church will remind the modern reader that in another sense the Church had all along been robbing the class to which Bardolph belongs. Henry's famous speech absolving monarchs of responsibility for the death of men killed in their service now seems to derive much of its force from unsound analogies and a mere semblance of logic. Perhaps most objectionable, and thus most persuasive as evidence that Shakespeare's sympathies are not altogether with the King and his militant policies, is Henry's treatment of the good soldier Williams. He regards with levity, ridicule, and contempt mat-

ters that to Williams are very serious indeed; he unfairly, we now say, pulls rank on Williams; he utterly fails to persuade Williams—and so ourselves?—of the merits of his position.

These elements—democratic, antiheroic, antiestablishment, antiwar—have always been present in *Henry V*, but it is only as the spirit in which the play is received has become more democratic, as the bias of readers has become more egalitarian, that the elements seem to have moved up from the background of the text. This process is so pronounced, indeed, that modern interpretation risks neglecting historical context. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that the relationship of Williams to England matters more to us today than does that of Henry. More generally the dilemma of the ruled is more urgent than that of the ruler. Williams is one of us; he and his kind have been writing poems and novels about war as they saw it for sixty years now, and so it is little wonder that the perspectives of modern literature intrude into the readings of older works.

As one species of public action, war has always been an appropriate subject for literature. It has remained so in the twentieth century, even though we have come to think of literature as concerned more with private states of consciousness than with public action. This modern focus on the inner life, however, merely emphasizes from another direction

what I have tried to argue, namely, that the literature of war has become wholly divorced from the authority in whose name, and presumably for whose gain, war is waged.

The structural counterpart of the loss of political authority over literature is the loss of the writer's authority within literature. Thus a major characteristic of modernism, as in *The Waste Land* or *In Parenthesis* or *Company K*, is the fragmentation of narrative continuity and authorial perspective, and an insistence on the autonomy, and often the loneliness, of the individual. I know of no novel or poem about the First World War that has even a remote concern with the motives and responsibilities of senior professional officers, still less with those of politicians or diplomats.⁹ Because wars now have more truly representative spokesmen than before, war is recognized not as a phenomenon *sui generis* but as a symptom. It is seen as the direct symptom of the historical tendency toward necessity, human impotency, and loss of freedom. The literature of war has become the literature of the triumph of impersonal, technological force.

⁹No novel or poem of the first phase, that is. It may be indicative of a widening of perspective that Solzhenitsyn's *August 1914* is much concerned with generals and that its hero, Vorotyntsev, is a colonel in General Headquarters.

NOTES

1. Walter Allen, "A Literary Aftermath," in *Promise of Greatness: The War of 1914-1918*, edited by George A. Panichas (New York, 1968).

2. Robert Graves, "The Kaiser's War," in *Promise of Greatness*.

3. Reprinted in *Songs and Poems of the Great War*, edited by Donald Tulloch (Worcester, Mass.: February, 1915). The early date at which this large volume appeared is worth noting.

4. *A Certain World: A Commonplace Book* (New York, 1971).

5. Introduction to Jaroslav Hašek's *The Good Soldier: Schweik* (New York, 1963).

6. Michael Truc, "War and Poetry," *Confrontation* (Spring, 1974).

7. Correlli Barnett, "The Illogical Promise," in *Promise of Greatness*.

8. Quoted by John Press in *A Map of Modern English Verse* (London and New York, 1969).

9. A.J.P. Taylor, *A History of the First World War* (New York, 1966).

10. *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957).

11. Eleanor Ross Taylor in *Poetry* (September, 1972). This is by way of explaining why she did not contribute to the "Against the War" issue.

12. E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, 1967).