

# I

VINCENT SHERRY

## First World War Poetry: A Cultural Landscape

The year 1914 was iconic already by 1915, when it provided the main title for a small volume of poems by (the now posthumous) Rupert Brooke. Inscribing the first year of the First World War in headline-like style, this title caught the sense of tremendous eventfulness in the moment. It also marked wartime against pre-war and, subsequently, post-war, drawing a line across time and defining a watershed in literary history that has grown more vivid in critical and poetic retrospect. Nearly a half-century later, in 1960, Philip Larkin revisited the year and reinscribed the date in his title as 'MCMXIV'. The Roman numerals lend the sense of a time immemorial to the last moments of existence in history before this war, when, in anticipation of the British declaration of hostilities at eleven o'clock on the evening of 4 August 1914, a photograph from a newspaper of that day shows:

These long uneven lines  
Standing as patiently  
As if they were stretched outside  
The Oval or Villa Park,  
The crowns of hats, the sun  
On moustached archaic faces  
Grinning as if it were all  
An August bank holiday lark.

These 'archaic faces' depict the last pre-war moment as a kind of prehistory. This is the place in imaginative time which Larkin stakes later in the poem with a reference to 'Domesday lines', the first land survey of Britain, drawn up in 1085–6, which provides an image of a residual but ancient and now obviously foregone form of social order for the landscape of the last day of peace. 'Never such innocence', goes the poetic editorial, attributing a value he reiterates thus in the final line: 'Never such innocence again'.<sup>1</sup>

The magnitude of this Great War may account for some of the intensity with which Larkin registers the change it made in British history. But how

does this war qualify as the watershed event in Larkin's archetypal story of lost 'innocence'? Allowing for the fact that the horrors of war draw a poetic imagination toward the explanatory and consolatory powers of primary myths, the fact remains that Larkin had not even been born at the time his poem is recording. His is a presumptive understanding of the history he is registering. He has received this story of a fall from the innocence of peace to the experience of war as a legend of history, and he has recycled it with a degree of imaginative confidence that bespeaks the cultural sanction it owns: the eloquence of his finale is as assured as it is terse. This is a story formed under the conditions that governed much of the poetic production early in the war. Revisiting these cultural circumstances in an analytical history may provide an explanation of the genesis of this myth, a story that exerted an extraordinary appeal in the understanding of the subsequent century.

### Georgianism: A Politics, A Poetics

The primary factor in the generation of that legend was the contemporary convention of 'Georgian' poetics. Named after the reigning King George V, drawing on an incidental but relevant connection with the Georgic mode of classical literatures, Georgian poetry inhabited a pastoral circumstance primarily. In this venue, its poets found one of their rhetorical and affective mainstays in the imaginative value of natural innocence. Given the nationalistic character 'Georgian' invokes, this innocence will be politicized as well as militarized when it goes to war, and these aspects of its poetic identity reveal their complexity in the context of the literary and political history of the pre-war period.

A detailed account of the circumstances of political history in pre-war Britain will indicate that those years resist assimilation to that myth of the 'Golden Summer of 1914', which Larkin recycles in 'MCMXIV'. In *The Strange Death of Liberal England: 1910–1914* (1935), for instance, George Dangerfield proposes that the war, far from shaking the foundations of English society, actually helped to preserve the status quo by diverting the energies of social revolution, which was being threatened contemporaneously by the workers' and women's movements, not to speak of the steadily escalating menace in Ireland.<sup>2</sup> This is the era in cultural history that is normally understood as the forcing ground of those disruptive energies that would crest into the productions of English modernism. Therefore, in the interests of dramatic literary history, and in the simplifying binaries of retrospect, Georgianism is often presented as a reactionary opposition to the convention-dismaying temperament of modernism. A more searching interrogation suggests that its poetic sensibility was seen by contemporaries to

be in synergy with the sense of invention and experiment which, if rhyming distantly with the social turmoil of these years, participated nonetheless fundamentally with the artistic revisionism of modernism. The cleansing of the poetic dialect of a fustian, now-deceased Victorianism was a firm motive in the cleaner and sparer line and newly idiomatic accent. *Georgian Poetry 1911–1912* was thus praised in a *Times Literary Supplement* (TLS) review for its divergence from still current tradition, specifically, as a ‘reaction from a mood which was characteristic in its latest Victorian years’, although, as this anonymous reviewer is careful to point out, this poetic sensibility is ‘not a revolt’.<sup>3</sup> ‘There is no sense of revolt’, A.C. Benson emphasizes again in his review of the same volume in *The Cambridge Magazine*, and went on to laud a poetic spirit that seemed ‘adventurous without being disordered’.<sup>4</sup> A renovation that was well-behaved on the surface of the verse nonetheless suggested a challenge to existing norms sufficiently strong to prompt the negation of danger that both pieces of critical praise seemed to require.

The TLS review goes on to characterize the more extreme poetic temperament of those troublous times as a bravado of fragmentation, complaining of a sensibility which would feel ‘that it is braver and more sensible to leave the broken fragments where they lie than fondly to set about piecing them together again’. This poetic temperament, the reviewer goes on to aver, may be ‘justly called decadent’,<sup>5</sup> and it is in relation to this judgmental category of ‘decadence’ that Georgianism develops its political poetics in the war years. ‘Decadence’ was indeed a fraught and charged term: it included associations of decay in the reign of empire, now falling to senescence in a bio-historical model of history, and a range of behaviors as scandalously bad as the representatives of the now fabled English Nineties. If this proclivity was sensed in the imaginative memory of the early Georgian years as a residual susceptibility, the war presented a challenge and an opportunity of renewal, that is, a cleansing and purgation of this ‘decadence’. It is within these cultural circumstances that Georgianism may be read in its development during the war as a return to the cultural center of an English national imaginary, where decadence was disclaimed and innocence reclaimed.

‘As swimmers into cleanness leaping’: thus Brooke images the ceremony of cleansing through which, in a poetic music as exquisite as its notion is counterintuitive, he portrays the young men of the nation going to war. The phrase appears in the octave of a sonnet that presents a history in miniature of those cultural circumstances in which Georgian poetry will forge its special identity in the war:

Now God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour,  
 And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping,  
 With hand made sure, clear eye, and sharpened power,

To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping,  
 Glad from a world grown old and cold and weary,  
 Leave the sick hearts, that honour could not move,  
 And half-men, and their dirty songs and dreary,  
 And all the little emptiness of love.<sup>6</sup>

The condition of England is presented as an inventory of the symptoms of decadence. Entropy, a scientific idea newly formed and anxiously elaborated in the later nineteenth century, shows a 'world grown old and cold and weary'. Equally run-down is the custom and manner of romantic love, whose 'little emptiness' can be sung only in 'dirty songs and dreary' by 'half-men', where the quantitative adverb, which recurs in the poetic lexicon of decadence always as a measure of loss (a half of a whole is always less), also encodes the homosexual identity so menacingly associated with the more notorious characters of the English Nineties. But the 'problem' adduced in this octave – the condition of decadent England from which the speaker seeks reprieve – has already found the solution which, in the conventional economy of sonnet form, it usually takes the concluding sestet to produce. War is the deliverance from a fallen and disorderly experience into an existence which, in being finer and cleaner, is capable of sustaining the resolving value of innocence. The otherwise unlikely title for a poem about going to war, 'Peace', suggests an obviously paradoxical quality to this imaginative reasoning, which, far from discrediting it, actually strengthens its effective power. The Georgian response to the war exhibits a quasi-religious significance. The innocence it reclaims will undergo a sort of baptism by fire, which, in turn, will authenticate and indeed consecrate the condition of innocence that this poetic temperament takes as its mainstay.

The importance of this condition of innocence in the imaginative episteme of Georgianism may be demonstrated in the lengths to which it is occasionally taken. 'Into Battle', a piece by Brooke's fellow traveler Julian Grenfell, pushes this poetic temperament into a dimension of actual combat which, if it is not realistically described, is at least intensely registered:

And when the burning moment breaks  
 And all things else are out of mind,  
 And only joy of battle takes  
 Him by the throat and makes him blind ...

At this extremity, the usually pacific character of Georgian nature organizes support for the martial enterprise:

The woodland trees that stand together,  
 They stand to him each one a friend;  
 They gently speak in the windy weather;

They guide to valley and ridge's end.  
 The kestrel hovering by day,  
 And the little owls that call by night;  
 Bid him be swift and keen as they,  
 As keen of ear, as swift of sight.<sup>7</sup>

The voice of Georgian innocence, recovering nursery-rhyme cadences and offering the fabulous companions of childhood's natural friends as fellows in arms, provides a striking, perhaps even ridiculous, dissonance to the actuality of war that Grenfell has already recorded. Involuntary comedy of this kind bespeaks the power of the forces suborning a poetic intelligence that is capable otherwise of very promising work (like Brooke, Grenfell would die in 1915). If the ceremonies of innocence would be drowned in the blood of actual combat, even as the sweet concords of sonnet form provided the music to perpetuate its value in sacrifice, the Georgian sensibility owes much of its enduring appeal to the forces of cultural nationalism into which it was also tapping.

This is a nationalism for which Brooke becomes the most representative spokesperson in his best-known poem, 'The Soldier', where the words 'England' or 'English' occur half-a-dozen times in the short span of fourteen lines. Specifically, in the place reserved for the tonic note in the musical score of the sonnet, the first line of the concluding sestet presents the national landscape as another scene of innocence recovered: 'And think, this heart, all evil shed away'.<sup>8</sup> Whether or not this Georgian ideal exists subsequently just as a gorgeously fossilized record of fated attitudes, the innocence it valorizes remains in the memory and poetic legacy as a touchstone that is also a milestone: it measures the distance traveled to the war as it actually happened, as it will be recorded more accurately by the poets experiencing it in later years.

One example stands out as a particularly vivid instance of the ongoing importance of the Georgian imaginary even – or especially – as it is ultimately foregone. Ivor Gurney's 'To His Love' may be read as a sort of Georgianism manqué. It is, more particularly, a riposte to the idealization of death for Brooke's 'Soldier' in 'a foreign field that is forever England'. Here a strategic use of rhetorical negatives indicates all in English pastoral that does *not* accommodate the untoward event of the subject's death in alien lands:

He's gone, and all our plans  
 Are useless indeed.  
 We'll walk no more on Cotswald  
 Where the sheep feed  
 Quietly and take no heed.  
 His body that was so quick

Is not as you  
 Knew it, on Severn river  
 Under the blue  
 Driving our small boat through.

You would not know him now ...<sup>9</sup>

While Gurney inserts his 'not's and 'no's into the Georgian idiom, its unavailable topographies still control the representation of poetic feeling. The voice of this once dominant convention holds its greatest potential for expression, then, when its tongue is tied. The military internment service of the final stanza begins thus with nervous words, exclamatory stammering:

Cover him, cover him soon!  
 And with thick-set  
 Masses of memoried flowers—  
 Hide that red wet  
 Thing I must somehow forget.<sup>10</sup>

The enjambment across the final two lines brings the heavy stress of a building rhythm down hard on 'Thing', a word that offers its ultimate subject, the loved body of the fallen soldier, in its generic non-specificity. It is remarkably, shockingly, movingly inadequate. It powerfully expresses the pathos of the loss of those poetic conventions of Georgianism, its innocence most particularly. This is the literary history Larkin has recycled into his picture of the difference the war made in the national story.

### Reportage: The Space of History

'There are strange hells within the minds war made':<sup>11</sup> Gurney's words (in the poem that takes its title from this first line) strike the note of a register sharply distinct to the idealizing diction of the early Georgian poetic report. Protest against the actual horror of war is most often cited in literary histories as the defining task and accomplishment of this verse. This standard critical narrative tells the story through its now canonized poetic legacy: it follows a general development from a poetics of national idealism, as featured in the poetry of Brooke and Grenfell, to the lyric realism and imaginative disenchantment with the national cause that we find in the last years of the war in the verse of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, whose 'views' are read again in an intensified version in the great surge of prose works – memoirs as well as novels – in the later 1920s and early 1930s. This poetry of protest is doubtless an essential dimension in the literary record of war, and it will be recognized in any critical work of fitting record. The very power of this poetry, however, gives it a place greater than the

proportionate space it actually takes in the poetic record. There is a problem in such accounts which might be characterized as reading history backward; it simplifies the story by editing out of the account anything that does not conform to a preconception of its destined end, which is usually formulated in terms of a history of political opinion which is not often the most urgent concern of the poets writing *in* and *ex medias res*. Opening the frame of reference to a broader modality of report helps to recover a range of verse of exceptionally high quality. What begins to become clear in this enlarged compass is the meaning and value of experiential immediacy in the poetry of war, which may comprise but exceed the 'pro-war' and 'anti-war' binary that simplifies the account and misses the textured dimensionality of the represented experience. The aims and motives of this poetic witness direct us to centers of imaginative attention that make sense of the English experience of the war in the context of its deeper backgrounds in European history.

The extraordinary performance of national expansiveness in the capital cities on the continent as well as in London in the early days of August 1914 is a phenomenon that tends to be read, in historical retrospect, with the sense of irony that now attends much of the understanding of the war. Looking at these events from the perspective of antecedent history offers another view on those massive sensations of liberation and deliverance, which were shared across several national cultures in the early moments of the war. The special intensity and exceptional breadth of war-feeling go to motive interests and cultural sources stronger than the appeals of individual national mythologies, let alone national demagogueries. For these energies stem from cultural traditions that can genuinely be assessed as pan-European; they can be understood as a system of comprehensive value for the major national protagonists. This value is, in a word, liberalism.<sup>12</sup> This term, which refers not to a partisan interest but an attitudinal frame of mind, locates the point of defining reference in the cultural history of post-Enlightenment Europe. Its root meanings have to do with ideas and feelings of liberation, and this radical semantic shows in the experiences of deliverance into that zone of emancipated possibilities that is chronicled – ironically or not, and the irony is an important part of the longer story of this salient value of liberalism – across the major literatures of the opening moments of the war. Allowing for the fact that no one feeling is uniform in any one country, let alone in several, the dominance of this sensation of liberation in British and French as well as German (and Austrian) writers of the early war is not to be gainsaid.

Its intensity can be explained through an extended frame of historical reference and with an analytical understanding of liberal ideology, which may be considered both as a motive psychology and an evolved, political economy. For this understanding, the frame of historical reference needs to

pull back further and take into account the revolutions in France in 1789 (and again in 1830 and 1848) and in proto-national Germany in 1848; in England, there was the residual but persistent and increasing pressure of an ever-deferred revolution, which the centralized war effort of 1914 helped again to deflect. The promise of emancipation through these revolutions (or near revolutions) gave the content and depth of intimately known expectation to the namesake value of liberation to the liberalism of post-Enlightenment Europe. By 1914, however, this imaginative value has engendered a system of mercantile capitalism whose failure to satisfy the expanded masses of a European population was more than manifest. Unrealized, the dream of freedom in those European revolutions (or near revolutions) led to the more profound ‘restlessness’ in the populations it purported to serve. The extraordinary release of war-feeling in summer 1914 expresses a climactic, at once the failure and the apotheosis, of mainstream European liberalism.

The motive idea of liberation finds its proof by refutation in the experience of imprisonment in the trench system, where the dream of a freedom of movement finds its awful inversion in stalemate, stasis, and paralytic terror. Again and again, the physical prepossession and emotional intensity of being closed in may be read as the representation of the negative space of the positive concept and mythology of the liberal freedom that initially brought them there. It is in terms of this absconded promise of liberalism that the event discovers its import and consequence in the history, memory and consciousness of post-Enlightenment Europe. The experience is represented in English poetry of the war with a variety and particularity that provide one index of its major imaginative importance.

This expansive feeling of release into the nationalist cause was probably most pronounced in its German version, where crowds supported the cause in proportions whose enormity would be recalled throughout the war as ‘the spirit of 1914’.<sup>13</sup> Thus, it is no surprise that the representation of the German psyche by the English poet Herbert Read, in his ‘Meditation of a Dying German Officer’, reveals this as the compelling motive in his opponent, who is recalling the first days of his war, when

I crossed the Fatherland, to take my place  
in the swift-wing’d swoop that all but ended  
the assay in one swift and agile venture.

But the words of this German officer also bring the representation of the whole European war under the aegis of the force that has compelled him:

I have seen  
The heart of Europe send its beating blood

like a blush over the world's pallid sphere  
calling it to one life, one order and one living.<sup>14</sup>

'When first this fury caught us, then / I vowed devotion to the rights of men', goes the explanation for the English version of the spirit of 1914 in the second part of this diptych, 'Meditation of a Waking English Officer', where the assignably liberal idealization of the political motives being claimed is the burden of the case for Read's English speaker. In his words, he

would fight for peace once it came again  
from this unwilled war pass gallantly  
to wars of will and justice.<sup>15</sup>

The apologias Read's speaker offers here echo the idiolect of the English political war, but the political idealism is not without compulsion. The release experienced in the deliverance into war could be expressed through the available analogy of the spatial extension of empire. A civilian on the British side presents this feeling of fanciful expansion, authorizing the impulse Read's German speaker has expressed but in the familiar images of imperial duty: 'you and I / Dreamed greatly of an Empire in those days', May Wedderburn Cannan writes, 'Setting our feet upon laborious ways'. 'We planned a great Empire together, you and I', she indicates more expansively, 'Bound only by the sea'.<sup>16</sup> Although the fate of death for her lover provides one measure of the cost of this expansion, this is not a subject of direct reproach in the poem.

Other contributors to this record move between pro- and anti-war sentiments, but are more meaningfully examined for the report they leave of those experiences of deliverance and imprisonment in an extraordinary mixture of eloquence and bitterness. A soaring sense of liberation turns down into a paralytic terror of confinement, which presents the record of the war as an experience in the deeper cultural memory of Europe. This is a history that finds its site of primary revelation in the trench, which, as the locus of stalled action, presents itself as the place of the arrested dream of liberalism. The representations of this signal image in the cultural landscape of war may be read with a commensurate depth of resonance.

The enclosed space of the trench restricts but intensifies the sensory prospect in ways Siegfried Sassoon typifies in the poem he titles with the epithetical image of 'The Death Bed': 'He drowsed and was aware of silence heaped / Round him, unshaken as the steadfast walls'.<sup>17</sup> Where Sassoon has shifted the spatial imaginary of the trench into that of a field hospital ward, the experience of time is altered and stalled in ways that Edmund Blunden captures in the depiction of the daily ennui in his sardonically titled 'Preparations for Victory': 'Days or eternities like swelling waves / Surge on,

and still we drudge in this dark maze', where 'The bombs and coils and cans by strings of slaves / Are borne to serve the coming day of days'; the limitation of variation in this rhyme scheme, with a single syllable repeating over four lines, provides a subtler image of the mechanical inanity of containment within the small world of the trench.<sup>18</sup> Change appears to be the possibility foregone with the contraction of time to the constraint of space, where the rituals of the day reiterate in ways Sassoon captures in the narrative of 'A Working Party'. 'Three hours ago he blundered up the trench, / Sliding and poising, groping with his boots', this story begins, taking the personage who 'tripped and lurched against the walls / With hands that pawed the sodden bags of chalk' into the completion of the three-hour cycle with the tersely worded notice of the body's return: 'Three hours ago he stumbled up the trench; / Now he will never walk that road again', now that 'He must be carried back, a jolting lump / Beyond all need of tenderness and care'. This circular pattern in the verse narrative conveys the impression of temporal enclosure, reinforcing the impressionistic connection between the experience of arrested motion in the trench and the closing down of temporal possibilities: within these earthly 'mounds of glimmering sand-bags, bleached with rain', Sassoon records in the most startling image of this poem, 'the slow silver moment died in dark'.<sup>19</sup> As the experience of temporality is distorted or distended from one's customary understanding of movement, the possibility of change is also foreclosed. This loss of the potential for alternate eventualities reads as the bleakest consequence among the casualties of liberalism in this war.

The to-and-fro scheme in Sassoon's narrative reads as a synecdoche as well for the larger tactical (if that is the word) pattern of back-and-forth motions across the small portions of contested terrain in the western front. Here the frustration of being closed in within the battle trench expands into the greater dimensionality of the open air and a proportionately stronger presentiment of despair. The return to sites formerly won, subsequently lost, then contested again: this is the paradigmatic memory Blunden revisits in 'Third Ypres', where, in recalling one of the primary sites in that pattern of murderous return, he depicts the longing for some transformative change. 'The War would end', goes the record of hope in this simulation of the soldier's speech:

the Line was on the move,  
And at a bound the impassable was passed.  
We lay and waited with extravagant joy.

Now dulls the day and chills; comes there no word  
From those who swept through our new lines to flood  
The lines beyond? but little comes ...<sup>20</sup>

The vertical space on the page opens to allow a hope for ‘the impossible’ (turning as the unspoken but irresistible sound-alike of ‘the impassable’) to resonate with all the pathos of the question afterward unanswered. ‘But nothing happens’, Wilfred Owen reiterates in a four-times repeated refrain in ‘Exposure’,<sup>21</sup> where the poet appropriately known as the most eloquent voice of poetic protest shows the preponderance of this common feeling – this sense of motion arrested within the quotidian stasis of the trench experience.

‘An ecstasy of fumbling’:<sup>22</sup> this stunning image, which Owen provided to depict the confusion an infantryman undergoes in trying to fit his gasmask in the face of an attack, brings its etymological memory – literally, ‘out of this place’ – into the spatial imaginary of the war experience. The experience of falling forward – all in all, a strangely exalted sense of losing control – recalls that now long-ago instigation of release into the expansive space of war. It is what remains of the exultation Herbert Read remembers for his dying German officer’s experience of the spirit during the early days of this war: ‘I have lived in the ecstasy of battle’.<sup>23</sup> The dream of freedom in that ‘ecstasy’ has diminished into the vertigo of ‘fumbling’. The promise of liberation in the longer story of the history of liberalism has contracted accordingly.

### The Modernist Turn

A consensus understanding represents the Great War of 1914–1918 as the signal episode of artistic modernism. In this account, the war stands as a watershed event in cultural as well as political history. Dividing the nineteenth from the twentieth centuries, it provides the shaping occasion for artists who take novelty, invention and revolutionary energy as their establishing aim and motive. The experimental verve of literary modernism was of course well launched before 1914, and so a more refined understanding of the meaning of ‘modernism’ needs to be established if we are to understand the special connection between the cultural experience of war and the poetic work we bring under this special heading.

*Modernism*: the suffix provides the sense of an intensified version of the root meaning of the Latin ‘modo’ – ‘today’, ‘now’ or, most accurately, ‘just now’. Accordingly, ‘modernism’ suggests an awareness of a more than usually acute temporal present, all in all, a consciousness of living in a Now distinctly and even overwhelmingly different from a Then. It is the recognition of this difference in history that is the establishing awareness of a modernist representation of wartime. If the imaginative values of cultural liberalism have been stressed in ways that the poetry of experiential report has revealed, the political traditions of the English Liberal Party also undergo

a crisis in wartime. The poets of English modernism take this crisis as a moment of critical historical difference; that is, as their own defining moment as modernists.

The crisis in English liberalism in wartime turned on the tension between longstanding principles of intellectual liberalism and recent exigencies of international politics. The longer tradition, which lived still in the memory of the great Victorian Prime Minister W.E. Gladstone, preserved the ethic and method of rationalism at moral liberty: the decision to go to war turned essentially on the freely reasoned choice of ethical principle. On the other side, a new spirit of realpolitik understood the need to operate in alliance with other European states: these alliances might require involvement in hostilities, but such engagements could hardly be appealed openly to Gladstonian codes. Since 1906, the most powerful positions within the Liberal government were held by representatives of the newer sensibility – Prime Minister H.H. Asquith and his Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey – but the logic of foreign policy was still controlled in its public discussions by Gladstonian protocols. In this situation, Asquith and Grey needed to keep private their alliance-building with France and Russia. Officially, they continued to deny the existence of these ‘secret agreements’ (so dubbed by an already suspicious public), at least until early August 1914, when the network of European connections was activated.<sup>24</sup> This war must suddenly be understood as an urgent moral necessity and, indeed, as the conclusion of an ethically informed process of free reasoning. The doubtfulness of this account opened as a watershed in the cultural history of political England and, in this particular and local manifestation, in post-Reformation Europe, whose values of public reason were enshrined in Gladstone’s protocols. The editorials and reports on Parliament in Liberal journalism became the space of the most extraordinary exertions in political rhetoric and case making. The forced and contorted logic left a record of somber preposterousness, while the actual consequences of this reason-seemingness gives the performance an air of darkening farce.<sup>25</sup> It is to this particular tone of the times that the poetry of modernism responds with a sense of defining timeliness.

‘Out-wearers of Apollo will, as we know, continue their Martian generalities’.<sup>26</sup> Thus, in *Homage to Sextus Propertius* (1919), a creative translation of the Roman poet that Ezra Pound worked on through the last two years of the war, the classical deity of logic as well as of music is invoked as the muse of these days, where the interlingual play orchestrates Pound’s own report of current political culture. Military *generals* and political ‘generalities’ are not related etymologically, but contextually, circumstantially, in a Liberal government whose reasoning for war wears Apollo out by a logic as compromised as the gamey word play of this translation.



poems and the forced logic of the Liberal war comes in the earliest poem in this measure, which takes Liberal war journalism as its target and point of mimicry.

‘Airs of Palestine, No. 2’ addresses the figure of John Spender, editor of *Westminster Gazette*, which had helped to promulgate Liberal war reasoning:

God from a Cloud to Spender spoke  
And breathed command: ‘Take thou this Rod,  
And smite therewith the living Rock’;  
And Spender hearkened unto God ...

They are redeemed from heresies  
And all their frowardness forget;  
And scales are fallen from their eyes  
Thanks to the Westminster Gazette.<sup>29</sup>

The hurdy-gurdy rhymes and rigmarole rhythms speak a sort of doggerel logic, a prosody that caricatures the quality of thought in much of the political war journalism. This is a register charged with the historical content and depth of its particular moment in local political culture, and it provides a tuning fork for the whole range of quatrain verse that Eliot would author in wartime and post-war London.

The poem Eliot was writing at the official end of the war, when the Versailles Treaty was being signed, presents its own conclusive summary of the import of the story which the modernist poetry of this event has recorded. ‘Gerontion’: the ‘little old man’ of the title speaks an extended monologue, which presents a character-in-voice of contemporary liberalism in its senescence. This is a generation that has authored in words a war its old men have not fought in body, generating the opposition between old and young men that was written into the literature as an enduring memory of this event. Eliot’s title personage speaks for that older generation in the opening lines, admitting his inactivity in the recent war and offering an apologia in the attitudes of a verbal ritual, at once well-rehearsed and ill-performed:

I was neither at the hot gates  
Nor fought in the warm rain  
Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass,  
Bitten by flies, fought.<sup>30</sup>

The strenuous extremity of war reasoning in partisan Liberal discourse is the performance Eliot encores in this overture in the extraordinary pressure he places on the sense-making gestures of this sentence. Its clausal construction projects the progressive discriminations of verbal reason – ‘neither /

Nor / Nor' – as its stipulating spirit, its motivating action. The ambitious program and plan of a thrice-suspended period turns into the wreckage its phrasal sequence actually makes of it in the end, however. The rhetorical fiction which an older Liberal ideologue had denominated as 'the grand syllogism of history' has devolved into the unlovely muddle of the final line. This is the same 'History' which, in the well-known meditation in the central section of this poem, presents a maze of 'cunning passages' as a trope not only of the confusions of experience in historical time, nor as an image alone of the map of trenches that had been etched into the spatial imaginary of every European.<sup>31</sup> This is also and most of all a figure for the many 'cunning passages' in which the political warrant of this Liberal war was writ, and which the modernist poetry of the war represents at once in a heckling echo and creative counter rhythm.

While these modernist poets obviously composed in circumstances radically different to those of the combatant poets, we must challenge the long-standing notion that first-hand military experience is the test and requirement of genuineness in the poetic record. From the political capital of London no less than from the closed space of the trenches, the crises of liberalism – pan-European in background and scale and English in its local inflections – provide a language of varied but shared imaginative understandings. Heard together, these poets provide a record of this experience in its larger coherence and broader import.

## NOTES

- 1 Philip Larkin, 'MCMXIV', in Anthony Thwaite ed. *Collected Poems* (1988; rev. London: Faber, 1990), 127–8.
- 2 George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England: 1910–1914* (1935; rpt. New York: Putnam, 1980).
- 3 'Georgian Poetry', *Times Literary Supplement* [Hereafter *TLS*], 27 February 1913, 81.
- 4 A.C. Benson, 'Georgian Poetry', *Cambridge Magazine*, 18 January 1913, 209–10.
- 5 'Georgian Poetry', *TLS*, 81.
- 6 Rupert Brooke, 'Peace', in *1914 and Other Poems* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1915), 11.
- 7 Julian Grenfell, 'Into Battle', in Jon Silkin ed. *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* (1979; 2nd ed., rev. London: Penguin, 1996), 83–4. Most of the war poems cited in this essay, except otherwise stated, appear in this anthology, which will be referenced subsequently as *PBFWWP*.
- 8 Brooke, 'The Soldier', *PBFWWP*, 81–2.
- 9 Ivor Gurney, 'To His Love', in P.J. Kavanagh ed. *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2004), 21.
- 10 *Ibid.*

- 11 Gurney, 'Strange Hells', *Collected Poems*, 141.
- 12 In using a lower case designation for 'liberalism', I am referring to a broadly cultural attitude or frame of mind; an upper case designation will refer subsequently to the Liberal Party in England.
- 13 A good account of the German circumstance comes from Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), 54–89.
- 14 Herbert Read, 'Meditation of a Dying German Officer' in his sequence 'The End of a War', *PBFWWP*, 163.
- 15 Read, 'Meditations of a Waking English Officer' in 'The End of a War', *PBFWWP*, 175.
- 16 May Wedderburn Cannan, 'Lamplight', *PBFWWP*, 151.
- 17 Siegfried Sassoon, 'The Death-Bed', in *The War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon* [Hereafter *War Poems*], introduced and arranged by Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Faber, 1983), 52.
- 18 Edmund Blunden, 'Preparations for Victory', *PBFWWP*, 103.
- 19 Sassoon, 'A Working Party', in *War Poems*, 26.
- 20 Blunden, 'Third Ypres', *PBFWWP*, 123. Emphasis added to the title in the text. The Ypres battles formed a recurring contest along a variegated front which, during the war, was called Passchendaele. 'Third Ypres' was the name given to a particular set of engagements later in 1921, when the British Battles Nomenclature Committee published its report, the year before Blunden's poem was published. I am grateful to Jonathan Sawday for the background information.
- 21 Owen, 'Exposure', in Jon Stallworthy ed. *The Poems of Wilfred Owen* [Hereafter *Poems*] (London: Chatto, 1983), 162–3.
- 22 Owen, 'Dulce et Decorum Est', in *Poems*, 117.
- 23 Read, 'Meditations of a Dying German Officer', *PBFWWP*, 163.
- 24 The existence of these 'secret agreements' and the influence they exert on British policy constitute the subject of the major exposé by the director of the Union of Democratic Control (of foreign policy), E.D. Morel, *Truth and the War* (London: National Labour Press, 1916), esp. 35–41, 273–300.
- 25 I have reconstructed this crisis in the political and intellectual history of English liberalism in *The Great War and the Language of Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), esp. 23–47.
- 26 Ezra Pound, *Homage to Sextus Propertius*, in Lea Baechler and A. Walton Litz eds. *Personae: The Collected Shorter Poems of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1990), 205.
- 27 *Personae*, 206.
- 28 The relevant texts of Propertius's Latin and a standard prose translation are provided by K.K. Ruthven, *A Guide to Ezra Pound's 'Personae' 1926* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).
- 29 T.S. Eliot, 'Airs of Palestine, No. 2', in Christopher Ricks ed. *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909–1917* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1996), 84–5.
- 30 Eliot, 'Gerontion', in *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1968), 29.
- 31 Eliot, 'Gerontion', 30.