

Registering War: Modernism, Realism, and the Can[n]on

Fiction of the Great War has never become canonical in the way that at least some of the poetry has: many University English departments teach twentieth century literature or novel courses which include none of the prose texts of the war. In many ways this is surprising, but it is not often registered as such by either undergraduates or lecturers. The feeling of surprise—or its lack—depends of course on what is being prioritised in twentieth century courses, and this in turn suggests various presumptions about the function of literary study. Until recently there was little question that modernism dominated the university curriculum for the twentieth century novel: Joyce, Lawrence and Woolf were the big British names, with Hemingway as an American variation. This prioritisation suggested that unprecedented literary innovation was the most marked feature and value of the modern novel. Such (generally) formalist assumptions were perhaps then modified during the nineteen seventies and early eighties by a new stress on historicising literature, and then by the associated view of literary study as an aspect of cultural study, rather than an autonomous discipline. From the mid-eighties on (building on these developments) modernism began to be displaced to some extent from its dominance in the curriculum by a new emphasis on contemporary literature and on the concept of post-modernism.

At no stage in this history has fiction of the Great War figured to any extent. Though there have often been options offered on literature of the First World War, it has not been seen as a central literary event in general twentieth century literature or novel courses. In terms of the formalist stage, this is not that surprising: little of the fiction of the war is generally classed as modernist or strikingly radical in its procedures. Like other varieties of twentieth century realism (in as much as this is seen as opposed to modernism), the fiction of the war is neglected. One might think that the omission of any text at all during the historical and cultural phase is more surprising, in that the focus has shifted (usually) to issues of relations between literature, culture and history, and to the relation between the texts studied and the concept of modernity. As a major European historical event, and as the first twentieth century war, the First World War might be thought to be worthy of mention. And in fact, it often is invoked as a factor in some of the most radical departures of modernism (particularly in Woolf, Lawrence and Hemingway). Nevertheless, the texts dealing directly with that war remain marginal.

There are a number of reasons for this: competition between texts, kinds of texts, and periods within the century seems particularly intense in twentieth century courses (perhaps because there is a clearer knowledge among students of subdivisions in their own century). However, the

main reason remains that of the precedence of modernism (and post-modernism), and the accompanying assumption that innovation is the prime literary quality. Great War texts have because of these factors remained cut off from a more general literary and cultural history of the twentieth century (at least for undergraduates, but perhaps also more widely in the academy). In particular, there has been little stress on any connection between the (institutionally accepted) central tradition of modernism and war texts. I propose first to sketch out the way in which such texts are placed in the university canon, precisely because there is in fact a huge area of productive connection between modernism, modernity and prose fiction of the First World War, which needs to be opened up.

Paul Fussell in the very title of *The Great War and Modern Memory*,¹ as well as in its overall project, argues for the centrality of the war in the formation of a modern consciousness. While university English departments have generally not taken that centre as a starting point, the book itself does not make all the connections it might between modernist and modern writing and texts of the First World War. A notable formal feature of a number of prose fictions about the war (and one with wide cultural and historical implications) is also a striking feature of central modernist texts: an intense and explicit interest in register and register shifts (in itself this may suggest the crudity of any categorisation of these texts as necessarily simply realist or unexperimental). The two texts chosen as examples of this here are David Jones's *In Parenthesis* (1937) and Frederic Manning's *The Middle Parts of Fortune* (1929).

There are a number of similarities in these two texts: both are much given to quotation and allusion, particularly of Latin sources and Shakespeare (with *Henry V* as favourite source). Both are centred, though in very different ways, on an educated and articulate private soldier, both are much concerned with the ordinary business of soldiering, with the senselessness of the war, and also with representing a kind of heroism which is not an official one. There are also, of course, many differences between them. The first is that while Frederic Manning's novel is undeniably a novel, David Jones's text is not so clearly a novel, and indeed not even clearly a prose work in the normal sense. It might seem indeed to be a perverse choice of text with which to illustrate the modern and modernist concerns of Great War prose texts, but its challenging of definitions and mixing of discourses and registers is itself one of the central issues under discussion, and its marginalisation in (at least) the 'undergraduate' canon of twentieth century literature despite its highly experimental nature is itself striking. Moreover, the comparison between it and *The Middle Parts of Fortune* serves to confirm the presence of similar stylistic issues in

one text which is markedly modernist, and one which might appear to be more traditionally realist.

Register shifts—and the shifting of normal relation between registers and discourse—are constantly foregrounded in *In Parenthesis*. Every page of the work provides examples, because the shifts are so frequent and rapid. Sometimes shifts take place between one line and the next (often giving the text an aspect of poetry by such explicit concentration on language, as well as by the implication that there are 'lines' rather than continuous prose), sometimes (in a more novelistic way) between paragraphs or larger sections. For example at the beginning there is:

'49 Wyatt, 01549 Wyatt.
Coming sergeant.
Pick 'em up, pick 'em up - I'll stalk within yer
chamber.
Private Leg ... sick.
Private Ball ... absent
'01 Ball, 01 Ball, Ball of No.1.
Ball of your section.
Movement round and about the commanding
officer.²

Here there are two obvious register shifts from a specialised discourse of military questions and answers (itself containing vernacular and more formal varieties of English indicating differences in rank and class), one at the quotation/allusion to Sir Thomas Wyatt's poem, another in the last two lines. However, there is also a less obvious shifting of the apparently realistic recording of the language of a particular experience into a poetic form by the layout's formation of verbal and rhythmic patterns ('01 Ball, 01 Ball, Ball of No. 1,' for instance.) This mixing of realistic and 'aestheticist' representations is characteristic of the work, and maintains its generic ambivalence between poetic novel/novelistic poem. It is also a marked feature of modernist prose in general. In their fiction and (in the latter two cases) their accounts of their art, Joyce, Lawrence and Woolf all assume that the most truthful representation of reality is an imperative, and also that such a representation will, if properly carried out, naturally have an aesthetic beauty and unity.³ Thus each of these writers can (in very different ways) be seen as forming patternings of a notable poetic kind out of material which in other respects might seem to have a realist justification.

The effect of David Jones's use of these kinds of device has been much discussed. Paul Fussell calls *In Parenthesis* as a whole an 'honourable miscarriage'.⁴ The main source of his reservations is a feeling that in the end the poem aestheticises the war at the expense of truth:

Despite Jones's well-intentioned urging, we refuse to see these victims as continuing the tradition of ...

high-powered swordsmen and cavalry heroes of romance, Renaissance epic and sacred history ... What keeps the poem from total success is Jones's excessively formal and doctrinal way of fleeing from the literal: the book and the words of Malory, Frazer and Eliot are too insistently there⁵

For him the literariness of the work, seen particularly as an aspect of its use of allusion and registers to associate modern soldiers with predecessors from heroic literature or history, reduces its ability to see faithfully the uniquely modern horrors of this war. Perhaps this is the case, but the urge to aestheticise the war does not come only from a general immersion in literature at the expense of bearing witness to the experience of the war. There is a strong impulse to represent this war in ways which will make clear its particular texture, but ironically this depends on the use of modernist techniques which may seem to undercut that specificity. Fussell assumes that allusions and register shifts in *In Parenthesis* function mainly to associate the present war with the past. In fact, though, the disrupted form of the text does not necessarily point only back to the past as a superior version of what is happening in the present. On the contrary, the way in which the register shifts and allusions are handled does not imply a clear hierarchy of significance: the heroic is (partly) deflated by the modern just as much as the modern is (partly) glorified by the past.

Almost any section of the text can provide an example of how complicated the relation between past and present is:

This Dai adjusts his slipping shoulder-straps, wraps close his misfit outsize greatcoat—he articulates his English with an alien care.

My fathers were with the Black Prince of Wales at the passion of the blind Bohemian King.
They served in these fields,
it is in the histories that you can read it, Corporal - boys
Gower, they were—it is writ down—yes.

Wot about Methusalem, Taffy?

I was with Abel when his brother found him,
under the green tree.

I built a shit house for Artaxerxes.

I was the spear in Balin's hand

that made waste King Pellam's land

(p.79)

Though there is undoubtedly a sense in which this modern war is being associated with past wars, there is much to say about how the association functions. It is not simply a way of rescuing this war for literature. Firstly, the references to the past are not all to 'glorious' images of war; on the contrary, in each reference the high cultural 'aura' of the past is met in conjunction with something which disturbs

any simple idea of heroism without necessarily destroying that aura completely (Dai's great coat does not fit, the king is blind, he is a sacrifice, soldiers throughout history also build 'shit houses,' the 'I' is both a guilty and a victimised speaker about war.)

Secondly, any simple judgements—any simple hierarchies—are complicated by the lack of clear prioritisation given to the voices which speak in the passage. Thus the cockney interjection (as elsewhere in the text) does not seem to be obviously categorised as that of a modern, disbelieving, impoverished and anti-heroic culture (as cockney voices are in Eliot's *The Waste Land*.) The question may accuse Dai of exaggeration (and even of unwarranted self-glorification,) it may express comradeship through humour, or it may represent another equally valid way of reacting to the war (with a disbelief that nevertheless still allows Dai his own way of seeing himself.) The voice which follows the question is, of course, even more free floating. It could be Dai's continuing, though it does not continue his Welsh-English speech patterns,) or it could be John Ball's thoughts on the matter, or it could be the unidentified or collective narrator.

In a whole range of ways a passage like this does not then make the war into a heroic or romance narrative as Fussell suggests: it is too complicated and too various, each voice may be taken as parodic or (and?) authentic. Similarly, his idea that the text always flees from the literal seems both helpful and not quite accurate. It is true that there is relatively little in the text about (for example) the horrific mutilations of the war, and that realism is not clearly its mode. However, in fact its realism is instead that of the modernist novel, which sees thought/voices as the primary reality. In that sense the multiple unprioritised voices of *In Parenthesis* are (up to a point) claiming to represent the reality of viewpoints of that London Welsh regiment, and of the exceptional mind of the narrator (who may or may not be John Ball.)

Both the realist and aestheticising impulses here are strongly present in much modernist writing, but the latter is not here simply as a decorative gloss applied after the event. The modernist treatment is important in terms of the historical context of the war and the text. A chief aim of *In Parenthesis* does seem to be to give a sense that the war was an heroic venture, but without letting this view be a simple or wholly unironised one. Fussell argues that irony was the characteristic trope of the war, and it is indeed constantly produced by the varied and overlapping voices of Jones's work, but without there ever being a final conquest of one voice by another. This seems a centrally important feature, especially given the context of official heroism which most writers with experience of the war understandably rejected. For in many ways Jones's devices for suggesting the epic nature of the war do bear a relation to official British propaganda. For example the appeal to military tradition, and to English history (especially as seen through

Shakespeare) was, of course, very much part of official propaganda. Equally, ideas of the comic, half cynical, half flippant, but in the end 'cherry' 'Cockney' and the romantically heroic Welsh soldier who is still close to his ancestral traditions pick up on national myths which were to be found in more clearly establishment views of the War.

However, these glorifying notions are constantly (if partially) ironised or placed in alternative contexts by the text's obsession with register mixing and shifting. In this way, *In Parenthesis* refuses any sense of there being a single simple response to the War, without having to reject the actually heroic sufferings or the culturally varied attitudes of the soldiers (even if stereotyped), which it can claim were in fact features of this first thoroughly modern war. In this sense the text both does and does not fulfill the cultural shift suggested by Peter Miles and Malcolm Smith, when they argue that 'the flood of war novels and memoirs which followed the conflict testify to the felt need ... for accounts of the war validated in other ways than by the language of traditional authority'.⁶ *In Parenthesis* does draw on a range of discourses of high cultural authority—including Biblical, Shakespearian, and literary versions of British history—and these do construct a part of its meaning. However, they are clearly presented as partial and perhaps fragmented views with origins in specific points of a British culture which is varied, and which also includes a range of popular discourses, registers and language varieties that are here made of equal value. This equalising of value—or disruption of hierarchy—does itself ironically rely on the acceptance of a modernist notion of literature as of high value. The range of languages is validated by their placing in a literary ideology which values variety, innovation, bohemianism, 'panoramic' inclusiveness, allusiveness and realist reference. The modernist form is not just incidental, but is part of the version of the War which David Jones presents: the tendency of modernism both to celebrate and lament fragmentation and diversity is here used to celebrate and mourn that 'misadventure' (Dedication).

Manning's *The Middle Parts of Fortune* looks like a much more clearly realist text, one that is more obviously novelistic than *In Parenthesis*. However, it too is addicted to quite startling register mixing and shifting. Unlike David Jones's work, this has not been so much noted. In his 1990 introduction to the Penguin edition of the novel, Paul Fussell makes a number of very helpful comments which suggest some of the peculiarities of the text, but none of these quite reveal the bizarre quality of the novel's style, or its deviations from novelistic norms. Fussell writes that:

This is a 'war novel' like no other. While observing actualities on the Western Front ... Frederic Manning perceived that combat, traumatic and interesting as it is, occupies a small part of a soldier's time and attention. Most of the time he is safe, engaged in 'soldiering'—and to dramatise the

full meaning of that term is one of the tasks Manning has set himself. Thus if most novels and memoirs from the Great War focus on fighting and danger and fear and death, this one, whose subject is human nature and its moral dimension, is more concerned with thought and language, rationalism, and the attempt to understand the inexplicable...What would it be like to be an extraordinarily smart, articulate person caught in a catastrophe requiring deep moral analysis but apparently quite resistant to it?⁷

These comments begin to bring out some of the novel's features which resemble some of the peculiarities of David Jones's text. On the one hand, it is a work very much concerned with the ordinary life of soldiers at the front (itself a paradoxical idea, of course), but it is also concerned with the inexplicable. Ordinarity suggests a realist mode, but this particular novel is also said to be *about* 'thought and language [and] rationalisation'. This seems very acute, but by introducing the term modernism, the insights can perhaps be further developed. If *In Parenthesis* can be justly queried for its non-realist representation of war, it is interesting that an apparently more realist text's realism also seems to consist not in the representation of actual horrors, but in the representation of the thoughts of the combatants (a central modernist approach to reality). Though it could be argued that the kinds of thought represented here are more realist (or realistic), in fact, Bourne's thoughts are not by any means ordinary seeming (though where he is allusive, this is more seamlessly grounded in the actual). There seems to be a similarity here between the two texts, which becomes very apparent if register is considered.

One would normally expect a realist novel to downplay the role of language as representative (or rather not to foreground that role), since according to most theorists of realism, its project is to present a shared objective world to the reader by hiding its own devices of representation, by eliding difference, and by presenting an apparently seamless world and text. Up to a point, Manning's novel might be said to do this (and Fussell's account of it certainly suggests a novel of an at least superficially normal kind). However, closer inspection of the novel's language use suggests a much less coherent world, despite a great concern with objective and minute description. At one point Bourne/the narrator describes a bombing raid by German planes:

They marched from Meaulte to Mericourt, and on the way an enemy plane swooped out of the blue and dropped two bombs, which exploding on the hard macadam sent gravel and road metal flying in all directions. In spite of their casualties the men were very steady, and though there was no cover, they moved quietly off the unenclosed road on to soft wet turf, which would stifle to some extent the

effect of any more bombs. Some of our own planes at once attacked the Hun, and drove him off, a running fight ensued, but it was apparently indecisive. Evidently the enemy was challenging our temporary supremacy in the air with a new type of machine, for in the earlier stages of battle he had not been very troublesome. (p.39)

This is a description very like many in the novel, and displays a range of bizarre aspects. Initially, the description might read like a conventional impersonal narrator's neutral account of an event (and indeed, that is a central way in which the paragraph does have to be read), but in fact it is clear here as elsewhere in the novel that these are Bourne's thoughts mediated by a narrator. Bourne is thus supposed to be present at this event. However, the text makes no attempt to create any illusion of presence or experience. We are given no location for Bourne's—and our—observation of the attack at the same time as we are given many clues to his being a witness. We are given no insight into his mind at all, nor into his movements (presumably, he too moves onto the soft turf as the best that can be done in the way of taking cover, presumably—if he were a normally realist character—he too would have reactions to what is happening). Moreover, the registers used for the description cannot be appropriate both to a witness and a 'safe' (fictional) observer/narrator. At some points Bourne is apparently located ('some of our own planes at once attacked'), but at others he seems to be entirely separated from the attack ('the men were very steady'). Perhaps oddest of all is the conclusion of the paragraph, where the language of a distant strategist or newspaper report is invoked ('the enemy', 'our temporary supremacy' and 'not very troublesome' do not seem to suggest the immediate reactions of someone who has just escaped being cut to shreds by flying fragments).

There are a number of possible explanations for this effect in the novel. The realist principle of coherence might suggest simply that this *is* how Bourne perceives the war (deploying the very formal English which he uses throughout)—but this would be unconvincing because the mismatch is not simply one of language appropriacy, but also one of realist devices of implied presence and absence which are manipulated into awkward combinations. Another explanation would be that this is an ironic effect: by placing the language of absent commentators (those frequently satirised or condemned by writers who were at the front—the general staff, the journalism, the propagandists) in the mouth of a private who is at the front, that language's inadequacy is made comically apparent. Or, it could be that Bourne's language is itself a sign of civilised values which, though in the end they cannot make themselves appropriate to such horrors, are a sign of resistance to a normality which should never have been established. Yet one more alternative is that this effect is a

kind of English Hemingway-esque: Bourne's language refuses to accommodate (or cannot accommodate) that which he experiences. It may signify his stubborn ability to maintain his own identity regardless of mere happenings, or it may signify an inability to own his own experience. In place of Hemingway's colloquial American heroes (though not necessarily influenced by them), Manning has a British hero whose formal, educated English is a version of the stiff upper lip and nonchalance of the gentleman at war.

In fact, it may well be a combination of the last three kinds of explanation, which best approaches questions of register in *The Middle Parts of Fortune*. But in any case, it seems clear that this is not in any simple sense a straightforwardly realist novel, and that the kinds of problem it raises (identification of narrators and characters, problems of perception and experience, fragmentation, and disturbing register shifts) can usefully be associated with problems of modernist writing. Both *In Parenthesis* and *The Middle Parts of Fortune* seem to be texts which centre on questions of how this war can be registered in language, and in particular how the varieties of voices which had been literally brought together by the experience of mass mobilisation and war could be combined and distinguished. Both texts while using a range of discourses of traditional

authority also radically decontextualise and recontextualise them.

As well as suggesting something about the unexpected similarity between these two texts in their interest in registers, this article may serve to suggest that quite simple categorisations of texts and kinds of text can have profound impacts on their place in or relation to ideas of 'canonicity'. While *In Parenthesis* does have a certain marginal status as a work heavily influenced by *The Waste Land*, the fact that it deals with an event which is conventionally seen as a partial and valuable origin for Eliot's poem has nevertheless not given it any secure status. *The Middle Parts of Fortune* is probably even less studied on undergraduate courses on twentieth century fiction, and like other fictions about the war, it is perhaps unconsciously categorised as being simply realist, or even as a text somehow preceding the great modernists, because it deals with an event preceding the most of their work. Given the interests of most twentieth century literature courses, many fictions of the First World War could not only provide an opportunity for widening discussion of modernism, but could also problematise a central problem for such courses, the ways in which texts are selected and the way in which texts and varieties of language become valued.

Notes

1. Oxford 1975.
2. Corrected edition of 1978, London. p.1. Subsequent page numbers given in brackets in text.
3. See, for example, Woolf's 'Mr. Bennet and Mrs Brown', Lawrence's letter to Edward Garnett about the 'old stable ego' and rhythmic patter.
4. *The Great War and Modern Memory*, pp.144, section title
5. *The Great War and Modern Memory*, p.153
6. *Cinema, Literature and Society—Elite and Mass Culture in Interwar Britain*, London, 1987, p.132
7. Penguin edition, 1990, IX. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be given in brackets in the text.

Chris Hopkins
Sheffield Hallam University
Sheffield, UK