THE GREAT WAR AND RECENT WRITING

The first edition of my book on the literature of the Great War, *Heroes' Twilight*, came out in 1965. The work of preparing a new edition, with extensive revisions and additions, has involved me in reading some of the many studies of the subject published since then, during a period in which war literature and particularly war poetry have become established subjects for academic teaching and research. Readers might be interested in my responses to a number of recent books.

Douglas Kerr's *Wilfred Owen's Voices: Language and Community* is an outstanding study, comparable in importance and value to Dominic Hibberd's (*Owen the Poet*), to which it acknowledges a debt. Kerr fruitfully develops Hibberd's presentation of Owen as a complex figure, an aesthete and a homosexual with his artistic roots in the English and French Decadence of the *fin de siècle*. He draws his frame of reference from Bakhtin, who regarded human utterance, spoken as well as written, as comprising many different discourses, which complement or oppose each other in a continual process of clashing and overlapping. In Kerr's reading of Owen, there are four "linguistic communities" in which the poet developed his thought and art. First, there is his family and its characteristic modes of interaction, as revealed in Owen's letters and his brother's biography. Then there is religion, as expressed in his mother's strict Protestantism, and Owen's formative period as an assistant to an evangelical Anglican clergyman. The army, when he joined up, inducted him into a complex of military codes of discourse and command. And finally there was poetry, both English and French, which Owen discovered when he was working as a teacher in France from 1913-15.

Kerr defines his aim: an investigation of the social determinants of a poet's creativity. Admittedly the idea of determination and the idea of creativity consort uneasily together, but although creativity is mysterious, I do not think it is ineffable. And although discourse is certainly socially determined, the utterance is always unique. In thinking about Owen's writing as both a product and an enactment of his experience, the challenge has been to do justice to both the individual poet and the communal institutions, both the creativity and the discourses.

It is an admirable aim, defined with intellectual tact and successfully pursued throughout the book. Kerr discusses Owen's letters as well as his poems, so his study has a biographical dimension. His concern, though, is not Owen's life in general, but the way in which he used and drew on the successive "linguistic communities" of which he was part. Kerr writes a vigorous, elegant, and aphoristic prose that is refreshingly unlike the style of much contemporary criticism, and he brings to his study of Owen wide reading in English and European literature. He makes, almost in passing, a suggestive comparison of Owen with Dante:

> Dante is the most bodily of poets and the fierce body language of the inferno--there is not really anything like it in English--is also spoken in Owen's notations of intense staring, vivid and ghastly faces, stretching out of arms, writhing, rolling, flinching, shrinking, clutching, wounding, and mutilation. Owen could learn from Dante that pain was a subject for poetry.

Owen's principal literary source, though, was English Romanticism, whose imaginative center was, for him, the deathbed of Keats. When Owen wrote *in Apologia pro Poemate Meo*, "these men are worth your tears", he was, Kerr says, giving Romanticism "something to cry about."

Kerr sees Owen's major poetry as arising from the encounter between the discourse of elegiac poetry and that of the army, which gives rise to a "grim, covert, antagonistic dialogue." His study makes it clear that any attempt to reduce Owen to a tormented pacifist in uniform is to over-simplify him radically, since he depended on the army as well as hated it. As Kerr puts it, "Owen seems towards the end of his life to have been developing the idea of the army itself as an adversary to the home culture, an alternative "nation" with its own different and superior sensibility, experience and language." Towards the end of his distinguished study, Kerr raises a consideration that needs to be faced by all readers of Owen (and of the poetry of the Great War in general): "Yet there were large numbers of men who had seen the fighting and who, even so, produced war poetry that endorsed the official view that the war was necessary, and the civilian belief that it could be glorious. And standing behind them were countless other soldiers who, at least, offered no protest. The problem--that there were soldiers for whom the war seemed not to be a problem--was one which, I think, Owen never resolved."

Owen is one of the poets discussed at length in Adrian Caesar's *Taking It Like a Man: Suffering, Sexuality and the War Poets*. The others are Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon, and Robert Graves. Caesar takes a loosely psychoanalytic approach to their lives and work in which he traces a recurrent element of sado-masochism. One point of departure is the fact that Sassoon and Owen were both homosexuals (though Sassoon married in later life), and Brooke and Graves passed through homosexual phases as very young men. Caesar sees them as affected by a number of common factors: Christianity, imperialism, and the public school ethos, which emphasized the value of suffering and sacrifice in games and other activities and Romanticism, particularly its late manifestations as the Romantic Agony. The chapter on Brooke is the weakest part of the book, and is mainly concerned with Brooke's prewar career. The difficulty in fitting Brooke into Caesar's framework is that he saw hardly any action and died of natural causes, so that he has no real claim to be considered

a war poet in the sense that the others were, whatever his place in posthumous mythology.

Caesar is more interesting on Owen, Sassoon and, in particular, Graves. These poets shared the bitter experience of the Western Front and knew and influenced each other. Caesar can be seen as extending Hibberd's approach to Owen to the other two; he argues that because of these poets' strain of sado-masochism they were inclined to be "half in love with easeful death" and to welcome and even revel in suffering. Their psychological dispositions in this direction were, he argues, reinforced by the public school and Christian ideals of sacrifice. Thus, Caesar argues, the so-called anti-war poems of Owen and Sassoon were not really anti-war at all, as the poets saw great value in the suffering and sacrifice and so, by implication, in the war that produced them. He remarks that Sassoon's poems, "for all their supposedly anti-war feeling, in fact, express ideas and emotions which excite young and unwary readers, and covertly support war by providing positive consolations based on the idea that suffering is a good." In discussing Owen, Caesar is indebted to Hibberd but is a good deal less subtle and discriminating. He also invites comparison with Kerr's study in ways that are not to his advantage. Like Kerr, he discusses *Apologia Pro Poemate Meo*, but in much cruder terms, seeing it as "for the most part a sado-masochistic hymn...Owen is suing for peace whilst at the same time finding positive value, even 'love' and 'glory' in the fighting...the poem is an invitation to fight rather than a plea for peace." Whatever he thought he was doing in his poems, Caesar concludes, "Owen could not be a pacifist because he perceived too much value in the suffering that the violence engendered."

Graves, as he acknowledges, never regarded himself as an anti-war poet, and Caesar's account of his attitude to the war is reasonably accommodating to the complexity of his attitudes, during the war and after it. Some of Caesar's claims and arguments are convincing, though a major defect of his book is that poetry is not studied in and for itself but only as evidence of its author's psychological condition. There is a reductiveness in his refusal to accept ambivalence and even contradiction as common elements in human response to crisis. He gives good grounds for accepting that poets were sometimes fascinated by suffering, but that does not mean that they were not sincere in their protest. Indeed, they acknowledged division within themselves, as we see from Owen's letters and Sassoon's diary. It is not easy to detect the ideological stance from which Caesar is writing; he seems to be located beyond absolute pacifism in a perspective where suffering has no place of any kind. Like many works of academic criticism, his book is much longer than necessary; the gist of what he has to say could have been best expressed in one or two provocative essays on Owen, Sassoon, and Graves.

This objection cannot be levelled at Elizabeth A. Marsland's *The Nation's Cause: French, English and German Poetry of the First World War*, a work of considerable substance and learning. Unlike most studies of war poetry, it is not restricted to a few familiar and canonical authors but is based on an extensive trawl of wartime anthologies and poems published in contemporary newspapers and magazines. The author acknowledges that much of the poetry she studies is not poetry at all by traditional evaluative criteria, but says that her approach is that of a social and cultural historian, rather than that of a literary critic: "Because the poetry is viewed as a social as well as a literary phenomenon, value-judgment has been set aside almost totally." One of the many virtues of Marsland's book is that she sets out her approach intelligently and explicitly in the first chapter. She defends her historical-social attitude to war poetry as a collection of documents where themes and topics constantly recur, as opposed to the literary-critical emphasis on the uniqueness and value of the particular poem.

The war opened in 1914 with a mass of patriotic poetry in English, French, and German. Marsland sees this kind of writing as an essentially modern phenomenon, the voice of a new sense of nationhood, reflecting sentiments based on nationalist education and the idea of the nation. She is heavily influenced by Ernest Gellner's studies of the development of nationalism, and she takes from Gellner the belief that the nation was a nineteenth-century invention, so there was little patriotic poetry written before then. Gellner's arguments may be entirely appropriate in their own context, but the conclusion that Marsland draws from them seems to me very dubious. As Linda Colley has shown in *Britons* (1992), eighteenth century Englishmen were marked by an aggressive patriotism, of which `Rule Britannia' is a famous literary expression. And going back to Elizabethan times, there is the patriotism of Shakespeare's history plays, of *The Faerie Queen*, and of such a favorite anthology piece as Michael Drayton's "Ballad of Agincourt". It is truer to say that the notion of a characteristic genre of "war poetry" is a product of the First World War, though it has antecedents in the American Civil War and the Boer War. Fortunately, the conceptual shakiness of parts of Marsland's study does not affect the excellence of her close comparative readings of poetry in three languages. She makes the uncomfortable but precise point that both the patriotic poetry that opened the war and the protest poetry that developed later had propagandist ends. And she remarks that protest poetry was often marked by the poets' uncertainty about their audience.

Despite Marsland's disavowal of value judgments, they creep into her writing, almost inevitably. In one interesting instance she states a preference for Belgian war poetry over French, as more specific and less rhetorical--as she shows by quotations--since it was the work of poets whose country had been entirely occupied. She praises Ernest Piscator's war poems for the precision of their imagery, a quality she finds more typical of English war poetry than of German. Her comments on English poets are often very acute. She says, for instance, of Edward Thomas' "This is no case of petty right or wrong" that though it begins by rejecting automatic and extremist patriotism and refuses to make judgments, the poem ends "with a statement of patriotic commitment, that is largely in

keeping with the principles he has rejected, not least in the use of the 'we' persona characteristic of patriotic verse". She is very good on Charles Sorley's refusal of the consolations of myth

On the question of "protest poetry" Marsland suggests that the protest was not against the horror of war as such, but against the extremes of nationalist "words and word makers." If this is accepted, "One can reconcile the supposedly anti-war attitude of combatant protest poets with their willingness to continue fighting, and one can understand why some of the poets were prepared to countenance another war, presumably destined to be no less bloody and destructive than the last, only twenty years later, when circumstances had changed and an evil of a different kind had to be fought." Although I have difficulties with some of its arguments, *The Nation's Cause* seems to me an excellent book, full of original insights. The French and German comparative dimension enables one to see the familiar English poets in a new and unfamiliar light, and the thorough investigation of the themes and attitudes in minor and now forgotten poetry makes a valuable corrective to much conventional literary history.

Evelyn Cobley's *Representing War: Form and Ideology in First World War Narratives* is a study of selected autobiographies and novels, with a long epilogue on two novels about the Vietnam War. Cobley is clever and well-informed, and a sharp analyst of texts. But her work shows the strengths and weaknesses of the eclectic orthodoxy currently dominant in the North American academy, which tries to bring together poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, Marxism and feminism. In her introduction she acknowledges her indebtedness to Derrida, de Man, Barthes, Foucault, Jameson, Eagleton, Hadyn White, and Bakhtin; the ideas of these *prominenti*, one need hardly point out, are not all consistent with each other. Bakhtin, above all, cannot be subsumed into a dominantly deconstructive mode. Like Adrian Caesar, Cobley claims that writers about the Great War were often complacit with what they seemed to condemn. In her approach this is because of the ideological implications of the narrative forms they employed, which presupposed that language could be transparent to a pre-existing reality, that narrators could give a truthful account of what they had seen and undergone, and that the observing self was a substantial entity. By adopting these assumptions, the war writers, despite themselves, were accepting the repressive ideological order which led to war. Or as she puts it, in a Foucauldian flourish, "Although an immense gulf separates pen from gun, a similar desire for power operates in both domains; whether, presumably, one is constructing a narrative closure or laying down an artillery bombardment."

If one writes with Cobley's fashionable assumptions, then something like her conclusions will seem plausible. At times she is clearly uneasy with what they imply, and she readily lapses into contradiction. Early on in the book she concedes, "it would surely be absurd to contend that the First World War was nothing more than a textual web. What I do want to question, however, is the accessibility of historical events outside of textual traces..." But later on the same page she says, "Both the documentary-autobiographical and the fictionalized narratives were essentially effective in conveying the horrors of war..." How, I wonder, can she tell whether they were effective or not if all we have is a collection of unverifiable textual traces?

Fortunately, there is more to the book than contradiction and incoherence. The author makes a useful analysis of the way in which war narratives tend to oppose the *Bildungsroman* with the picaresque: "Narratives about the First World War are typically characterized by the contradictory impulse of affirming, simultaneously, a modern sense of the subject as a free agent and a picaresque recognition of individual human helplessness. In other words, these texts manifest a continued belief in a protagonist capable of influencing his own fate (*Bildungsroman*) while also demonstrating his deplorable loss of control over events (picaresque tale)". This clearly applies to many of the most celebrated novels and autobiographies by survivors, and Cobley's discussions of specific texts are worth attending to. There is a sharp account of *A Farewell to Arms*, in which the poststructuralist mask slips, and she writes with the severity of an old-fashioned moralistic critic:

> If historical fact lies below the surface of the narrative text, symbolic implication hovers above it. The reader is made to feel, at a level beyond conceptualization, that the transcendent significance of phenomena and events is inscribed by a metaphysical agenda which justifies Frederic's essentially selfish and self-indulgent behavior in highly romantic terms.

As I remarked earlier, traditional literary criticism is liable to slip in unregarded.

The best part of *Representing War* is Cobley's discussion of David Jones' *In Parenthesis*, which she reads as a novel rather than a poem, and reads very perceptively. She sees it as a partial exception to her strictures on other war narratives: "Jones's modernist mode of representation stresses the inadequacy of Enlightenment meta-narratives whose ideological assumptions continue to dominate war accounts in the realistic tradition." *In Parenthesis* provides something of what Cobley wants in a war narrative, but she ultimately finds that its textuality and indeterminacy are diminished by the author's nostalgia for historical and aesthetic order and unity; Jones is, after all, a high modernist, not a postmodernist. She writes, "Where documentary narratives reinforce Enlightenment assumptions through their insistence on referentiality (the transparency of language, the objectivity of narrative stance), *In Parenthesis* does so through its desire for structural order and unity". It is a mark of Cobley's lack of

historical perspective that she sees all modes of rationality as leading no further back than the Enlightenment, whereas "the desire for structural order and unity" that she deplores in Jones should make one think of Aristotle. She regards *In Parenthesis* as an "undecidable" text, which is ideologically desirable, but at the same time as nostalgic for closure, which is undesirable.

It looks as if no war narratives could ultimately be acceptable to Cobley, since whatever mode they employ they, or their authors, are committed to making some kind of sense of experience, and it is the making sense (or more briefly, art) that she regards as so ideologically suspect. *Representing War* is a characteristically modern academic product, intellectually sophisticated but confined by its assumptions, and permeated by the "hermeneutics of suspicion". It is addressed to other academics rather than to general readers of literature, who are likely to be put off by its terminology and its preoccupation with ideology. This would be a pity, as there is quite a lot to be learnt from it; to adapt a title of Paul de Man's, it offers a curious combination of silliness and insight.

The last book I want to discuss is not an academic study, but a bestselling novel, Sebastian Faulks's *Birdsong*. There have been other historical novels set on the Western Front--Susan Hill's *Strange Meeting*, published in 1971, was a distinguished instance--but Faulks's must be one of the most complex and ambitious. Like Hill's, it invokes Wilfred Owen; its epigraph is a phrase from Tagore--"When I go from hence, let this be my parting word, that what I have seen is unsurpassable"--that was quoted by Owen in a letter to his mother in 1918. Much of the action takes place in tunnels constructed by military sappers under the front lines, recalling the archetypal tunnel of *Strange Meeting*.

The central figure is Stephen Wrayford, whom we first meet in 1910, when he is a young executive in the textile trade. He has already lived in France for several years, speaks the language well, and is spending some weeks in Amiens on a business assignment. During that time he has a tempestuous affair with his French employer's young wife and, unknown to him at the time, conceives a child. The greater part of the novel is about Stephen's experiences as a junior officer at the Front during the war, when he returns to Amiens. Although he is in the infantry he works closely with the sappers who are digging tunnels under the enemy lines. Towards the end of the war he almost dies; indeed, on any rational probability he should have died, when the tunnel he is in is blown up. He survives the war but we are told that he did not speak for two years after it, rather like Mark Tietjens in Ford Madox Ford's *Last Post*. There is a further dimension to the story, set well in the future, in the London of 1978, when Stephen's granddaughter, a woman in her late thirties who was born after he died, becomes interested in him and starts to study the coded diaries of his wartime life that she discovers.

Birdsong is an impressive novel and is extraordinarily powerful in places, in its accounts of trench warfare and of the tense, desperate business of tunnelling. And the descriptions of the emotional responses of the ordinary soldiers to loss and tragedy can be deeply moving; at times, the book invites comparison with Frederic Manning's *Her Privates We*. But overall I think it has more power than art and does not properly fulfill its formal ambitions. The relation between the wartime scenes and those set sixty years on is arbitrary and sketchy, despite attempts at symbolic links, as when Elizabeth travels to work through the tunnels of the London Underground, which one of the sappers had helped to construct before the war. It might have been artistically more resonant, for instance, if we learnt that the wartime narrative had been written up from Stephen's diaries. The novel suffers from its slackness in construction and from a remarkable unevenness of style. Faulks is able to write really well, but only, it seems, when he is describing episodes of physical and moral extremity; in the peacetime scenes, whether in France in 1910 or London in 1978, his prose lapses into banality. *Birdsong* is strong but flawed; the fact that it got into the best-seller lists is a sign of the fascination that the war continues to evoke.

Works Reviewed

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