

MACMILLAN STUDIES IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY LITERATURE

· ANNE WRIGHT ·
**LITERATURE OF
CRISIS, 1910-22**

*Howards End, Heartbreak House,
Women in Love and The Waste Land*



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*Howards End, Heartbreak House, Women
in Love and The Waste Land*

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I Towards a Literature of Crisis

'while it hangs imminent and doesn't fall'

This book has arisen, in the first instance, from a felt need to draw a circle round a small number of texts which, according to received formulations, might not be susceptible to juxtaposition. It has seemed to me that the extraordinary similarities displayed by these texts – *Howards End*, *Heartbreak House*, *Women in Love* and *The Waste Land* – demand that they be read in conjunction as parallel articulations of a specific moment in history. This book seeks to establish a critical language which may recognise and express their affinities with each other; in so doing, it propounds a fresh configuration, and perhaps an alternative perspective. In an admittedly restricted focus, it reproblematises literature as it has been constructed in critical accounts of the period.

The texts – two novels, one play and one long poem – belong to different genres, and they have been variously placed and evaluated in relation both to each writer's work and to other authors. Written or published between 1910 and 1922, they are of the period surrounding the First World War: *Heartbreak House* and *Women in Love* have a common chronology, both largely written, and completed, in 1916–17. *Women in Love* was published in 1921, the year in which Eliot put together *The Waste Land* (which contains some material written much earlier). None of the texts is centrally or explicitly concerned with events at the Front; but each registers a response to the war, or to events leading up to or away from it. The period of their composition also spans the emergence and ascendancy of modernism in the arts: at one end, the Post-Impressionist exhibition, and Virginia Woolf's notorious remark that in or around December 1910 human nature changed;

and, at the other, the *annus mirabilis* of modernism, 1922, which saw the publication of *The Waste Land* as well as of Joyce's *Ulysses*.¹ Taking the four texts as a group, their chronology spans the crises of imperialism and liberalism, the First World War and its immediate aftermath, and the crucial years of the rise of modernism. Yet none of the four is usually considered primarily, or even substantially, as literature of the war; although it should be added that literary-critical constitution of 'war writing' has recently expanded to the point where one or more might be placed with reasonable ease in this category.² And, of the four, only *The Waste Land* is more or less indisputably labelled modernist. However, increasingly we find that two or more of the texts are compared, by critics seeking perhaps to characterise afresh literary production before and after the Great War. The grouping of all four together is still, nevertheless, an implicit challenge to the boundaries and delimitations of both literature of war and of modernist writing.

The texts have been, and are, subject to strongly argued debates as to their artistic value, as well as their place in literary history. In this respect, too, they are as it were *puzzling* texts. Moreover, adverse criticism of them shows a curious commonality of focus. *Howards End*, for example, has been condemned for an arbitrary or inadequate motivation of plot and psychology, or for awkward transitions from narrative realism to utopian vision, and embarrassingly obtrusive symbolism. *Heartbreak House* typically draws fire from those who expect of Shaw a realistic drawing-room comedy concerned with social problems, and who demur at its obliquity, obscurity and use of non-naturalistic characterisation and dramatic action. Even more than Forster or Shaw, Lawrence is charged with overt and excessive didacticism; and *Women in Love* is denounced either because of the prominence of Rupert Birkin as Lawrence's spokesman, or because of an imbalance which renders Birkin less sympathetic and attractive than Gerald Crich. In all these texts, characters and plot have been seen to be contrived in the worst sense, the endings as unconvinced and unconvincing, the mode of writing – realistic or symbolic – as wavering or uncertain. Even *The Waste Land*, paradigm of modernism, may be negatively described as discontinuous, fragmented, or nihilistic; or, alternatively, as exhibiting a naïve proto-Christian redemptive vision.

What my grouping of these texts proposes is, in effect, that such

difficulties are misrepresented as individual and unconnected artistic failure: that they are, rather, defining features of a specific literary phenomenon within the period. These are, for example, texts or narratives which find it necessary to shift from realism into a non-naturalistic mode in order to achieve resolution; with *The Waste Land*, the shift becomes total. They also, as we shall see later in this chapter and in separate, detailed consideration, constitute a peculiar species of fiction. And, certainly, they do have 'difficult' endings: not merely open (indeed, not really open at all, in the sense that all legitimate dispute is permitted by the text); but problematic, ambiguous, fraught with tensions. I propose to attach to this group of texts the designation of a literature of crisis.

This said, in what sense do the texts I have chosen constitute a 'literature of crisis'? More specifically, for the moment, what precisely *is* their concept of crisis? Crisis is not merely the perception of change: each of the four texts is permeated by a sense of crisis, and disturbed by what is registered as an accelerating deterioration in the quality of life. Crisis is expressed as the fracturing or dismantling of personal relations, of social institutions, of civilisation. The dimensions of crisis are in fact questioned by each text, and actually vary: the site and the scope of the breakdown may be individual, national, cultural or cosmic, extending from sexual intercourse to the extinction of the species. Crisis is the distant or imminent threat of cataclysmic disruption of the familiar: total devastation, even if, as in *Howards End*, dimly perceived. In tendency, at least, all four texts are apocalyptic.

At this juncture, while apocalypse 'hangs imminent and doesn't fall',³ modern life is perceived as both fevered and futile. Standing back a little from the texts, we may discern features which characterise their common rendering of the contemporary experience: madness, heartbreak and violence are endemic. The 'confounded madness' of a society in crisis may be located in personal behaviour – 'We all are [madder than usual]', observes Hesione Hushabye in Act I of *Heartbreak House* – or projected into the historical event of international conflict – war as a group madness – or internalised, again, in *The Waste Land* as neurasthenia: 'My nerves are bad to-night'. Heartbreak, too, is registered in both *Heartbreak House* and *Women in Love*: and the 'broken' world of emotional transactions passes into *The Waste Land*, where the 'heart of light' is negative, a silence. Alongside madness and

heartbreak goes violence, latent or direct. All the texts display a marked violence of action and feeling: it is as if the fracturing of social stability generates a violence expressed in the killing of a Leonard Bast, a Boss Mangan or a Gerald Crich. In *The Waste Land* violence passes into the total environment, in a nightmare vision of destruction. Violence and violation, then – emotional cruelty, intellectual assault, physical attack, strangulation and suicide – are pervasive in these fictions: a barometer, perhaps, of anger or despair; certainly, indicative of a climate of tension and conflict. It is the act of placing the texts together which alerts us to the repetition from one to another of apparently casual or unrelated remarks, incidents and motifs. The grouping thus foregrounds images such as those of madness and violence; and we may then more easily, perhaps, make connections with other literature, and indeed other discourses. Scott Sanders has noted the level of rhetorical violence at home in the war years;⁴ and ‘war madness’ is amply evidenced in essays, pamphlets and letters of the time.

On this broader scale we may also note the emphasis placed by the texts on sex, as locus of crisis in the sphere of interpersonal relationships, and as symptomatic, in its failures, of the larger, social crisis. This is not simply to be attributed to a greater frankness in writing about sex, or even, in the wake of a developing psychology of sex, to an increased awareness of the centrality of sexual drives to human motivation and behaviour. The point is that sexuality here is of a particular kind: the relationships are, on the whole, frustrated, inadequate, destructive and (literally) barren. Sex, we may conclude, is one of the problem areas in contemporary experience; yet the specific problem of the position of women and the struggle towards emancipation is exceptionally, and peripherally, an overt issue, except perhaps for Ellie Dunn in *Heartbreak House*. Certainly the female figures energetically initiate sexual relationships; and they reject conventional marriage, or motherhood, or both. But, with the exception of the typist in *The Waste Land*, and Ellie Dunn, we do not hear about them at work: they worry little about economic independence, trusting to unearned incomes or to male support. The ‘feminist recriminations’ which tired Captain Shotover are only intermittently registered.⁵ They push at the edges of the narratives, but are deflected, as it were, into male anxieties and insecurities.

Returning a little closer to the texts, we find that each explicitly articulates the crisis as an acute split in society, as radical division, something that cannot hold together, to the extent that the epigraph of *Howards End* urges 'Only connect . . .', while *The Waste Land* 'can connect/Nothing with nothing', ll. 301-2. The split is expressed in the individual texts by a variety of dualisms or binary oppositions – materialism as against an enlightened humanitarianism, power versus wisdom, industrialisation as against nature – focused in representative characters or groups of characters, and in sharply contrasted environments. In each text there is the commercial or industrial magnate: Henry Wilcox, Boss Mangan, Gerald Crich (and, obliquely, the Bradford millionaire of *The Waste Land*). And there is the 'cultured' opposition, of the Schlegel sisters or Hector Hushabye, who register the problematic split with moral distress, and occupy a position closer to the authorial viewpoint.

The fracturing or split of society in these texts is a twentieth-century version of Disraeli's 'two nations', but concentrated within the middle classes. To Ellie Dunn, poverty is not being able to afford a new pair of gloves. But, to Leonard Bast, hunger and even starvation are real threats: the split between extreme wealth and dire poverty resonates in *Howards End*, in the 'abyss' familiar from Gissing's *The Nether World*, and from late Victorian and Edwardian sociological investigation. Leonard's horrified vision, from the edge of the abyss, of a torrid and destructive social mobility, may be glimpsed, if faintly, in Hector Hushabye's observation that survival is a miracle in the lion's den of a competitive capitalist society. The vertical fissure, the pit that opens in the smooth surface to reveal the stratifications beneath, is also registered in *Women in Love*, in the underworld of the colliers. This nether world, to which belong also Gerald, Gudrun and Loerke, is psychological as well as social; and here we seem closer, perhaps, to Freud or Jung than to the 'social explorers'. However, the division between the daylight world and the underworld is a potent motif, which may operate in many ways: as the descent into the underworld, it is one of the major informing myths of *The Waste Land*. Whether we perceive the underworld as a Freudian subconscious, a collective unconscious, or a social chasm, the very prevalence of the image in disparate areas of writing is remarkable. The various connotations of this slicing across experience suggestively coalesce in a text which predates by more than a

decade those considered in this book. This is Wells's *The Time Machine*, where the two species of Eloi and Morlocks have an ambivalent symbiotic relationship. Here the motif is dynamic and emotive: the threat of falling into the pit, and dread of the night-creatures which emerge from it, are strongly felt. Here we reach an important point: in these texts it is a matter not only of their diagnosis of a split in society, but also of the accompanying sense of anxiety and threat. And it is not only the underworld that is to be feared: as we move forward to 1916-17, the thing from the air becomes increasingly the focus of dread, and takes shape as the Zeppelin or, later, as the Thunder of *The Waste Land*.

The split in society is also represented in terms of a temporal dualism, past and present. If the present is in flux and decline, the past is framed and perfected. There is an element of nostalgia in all the texts: each expresses regret at the loss of an integrated way of life, and rejects materialism, industrialism and philistinism in favour of this lost organicism. The nymphs have vanished, as in *The Waste Land*: pastoral and romanticism, the myth of the golden age, lurk behind the exposition of contemporary social problems. And, to an extent, these *are* elegies, recording with regret the passing of an era, as the sun sets on the perfected past.

Temporal pastoral is translated to spatial, in the familiar dichotomy of country and city.⁶ In *Howards End* the rural ideal persists, if under threat. The normative country house adjoins a working farm, and is firmly rooted in native soil. Both *Howards End* and *Women in Love* discriminate *between* country houses; in both, however, the city is summed up, and abhorred, in London. *Heartbreak House* is less comprehensive than these, focusing on just one, 'cultured', country house, although it envisages others, such as the colonial household of Lady Utterword, or the Horseback Hall of the Preface. It is from this perspective that the city is viewed; and here the City, as in *The Waste Land*, is represented by the activities of the financier. Moreover, Mangan does not stand alone. We feel that his 'mutual admiration gang' provides a strong economic and political back-up, from the citadel. In *The Waste Land* the respective positions of city and country are reversed: the city becomes the main focus, while both temporal and topographical contrasts serve to heighten the sense of urban and cultural decay.

These texts reach back, then, to the line of country-house fictions, as well as to, say, *The City of Dreadful Night*. But to say this

is not at all to reduce their status and significance as vitally *contemporary* writing: indeed, all firmly 'place' themselves, as it were, in their world, addressing contemporary events and issues. In this sense each – and I do not exclude *The Waste Land* – records the moment of crisis. In some sense, of course, all literary discourse may be seen as integral to the contemporary process; but the engagement of these texts with the world beyond the fiction is more than simply a matter of belonging to the historical moment. In *Heartbreak House* and *Women in Love*, for example, the war is more central and meaningful than might be inferred from the obliquity of treatment. There is more than a common chronology of composition here: the war is at the heart of both texts; and similarities of theme and stance are striking throughout, and in some passages extraordinarily close. Both *Heartbreak House* and *Women in Love* try to make sense of the crisis of which they see the war as symptom. Both attempt to give the war a shape and significance, and, finally, to affirm its necessity in the scheme of things. Their respective attempts to affirm the 'necessity' of crisis will be discussed more fully in the chapters which follow.

A similar worrying at the meaning and significance of crisis characterises the texts which precede and follow the war: *Howards End* and *The Waste Land*. Not only does each speak for and about the world which the writer engages in, but that world presents a problem which must yield a meaning. These are all fictions which are concerned both to provide a descriptive model of society, and to project an outcome: they predict, exhort and warn. What they offer is, in effect, a 'cultural statement': 'cultural' in the sense of a shaped and shaping view (which is in the broadest sense a moral view) of society and civilisation; and 'statement' in the sense both of descriptive analysis and of polemic. Their cultural statements shape the crisis: they also seek its 'solution' – mending the split, or replacing a false dualism by a true one. Their fictive worlds, then, are neither wholly fictional nor wholly descriptive: these are purposive narratives, whose prescriptive aspect obtains most obviously in the projected, normative solutions.

This is, of course, to admit a didactic, or rather an ethical drive: at the very least, to see a moral imperative at work. Returning to *Heartbreak House* and *Women in Love* as literature of the war, we might say that the war broke in on Lawrence (as it did for Shaw), adding a further dimension to what was already to be a 'Condition of England' novel, of the twentieth century. It was Graham

Hough who said of Lawrence that 'perhaps the best way of looking at some of his works is to regard them as works of mixed purpose like *Sartor Resartus*'.⁷ Lawrence, and indeed all these writers, offer us in fictive mode what is essentially a cultural statement of 'mixed purpose'; in the case of Lawrence, with a base in the discourse of historical and political philosophy. And the reference to Carlyle is particularly apt: one can look back, to compare Carlyle's vehement denunciation of a materialist society, his prophetic strain, and his moral fervour; and further forward, to cyclical systems of history such as that of Spengler.

This book is not centrally concerned with tracing lines of intellectual influence or development; but one name, or rather one theory, stands out pre-eminently in the statements which these texts make, in their attribution of a meaning to crisis. The impact of Darwin, and the theory of the evolution of species, constantly confronts us: the ubiquitous abyss, for example, may be a manifestation of the complex phenomenon of social Darwinism (and, incidentally, Carlyle was himself a proto-evolutionist). But the more one looks the more one finds Darwin, or, more precisely, post-Darwinian (and, largely, anti-Darwinian and non-deterministic) evolutionism, underpinning all the images and articulations of crisis. As we shall see in separate discussion of the texts, what emerges in the confrontation with a crisis such as that represented by the war, and following the theories of Bergson, is a willed and purposive evolutionism, which can still postulate a force making for good in the universe. As it happens, both *Heartbreak House* and *Women in Love* strive for meaning in a conflation of a post-Darwinian progressive evolutionary ethic, and a consoling salvationism. In this way the writers may gain a precarious optimism which can entertain any dimension of crisis – even the cosmic – as tending ultimately for good, or as a necessary stage in the evolutionary process (and so, ironically, themselves constitute a Darwinian adaptation to the social, political or ideological environment).

Even so broad (but intricate) a 'statement' as social Darwinism is, however, less a programme explicitly formulated within the text than a way, for us, of grasping and characterising what it is that the text has to say. The point to take here is that, despite shared diagnoses of crisis – such as that of sexuality as the site of the breakdown, or the warping effect of the modern industrial machine – each text constitutes in itself a cultural statement, as

well as making or containing one. That is to say, each can speak to us of a moment of crisis in more than the ideas voiced by the characters, or by 'authorial' commentary. As we shall see, the cultural statement is carried more importantly by the plot or narrative sequence, the concatenation of events in the novel, play or poem. But narrative, although plotted by the author, is in a sense autonomous, and we may perceive its processes as other than a conscious, intentional construct. It is in this area, in particular, that the text may operate as a statement; and, possibly, one that articulates a crisis beyond, or other than, what the 'authorial' stance admits to. Here we are dealing with what a materialist criticism might call the 'silences' of the text, the '*not-said*' by which the work is separated from itself, and by which it puts ideology to work.⁸ The discrepancy or disjunction between the dimensions of crisis as gauged by the author, and by the text, will be immediately pertinent in the next chapter, in discussing the peculiar tensions of *Howards End* and, in particular, the way in which the novel is 'plotted'.

The shaping of the plot, in the sense of narrative sequence, is of paramount significance. And the texts with which we are concerned are notable for their 'shared' plot-elements: the parallels between representative characters, groupings of characters, and situations are numerous. Moreover, each plot – including, by an extension of the term, *The Waste Land* – shapes itself in a particular relation to the genres of tragedy and comedy, using and exploring the narrative structures and plot-expectations conventional to each genre. Plot-expectations are geared to the conventionally comic or tragic endings of, respectively, marriage or death. As both marriages and deaths constitute, conventionally, plot-resolutions, both are also envisaged as potential 'solutions' to the problems thrown up in the preceding narrative. Death, we might say, is the negative solution, eliminating the undesirable; and each text covertly or overtly refers itself to the genre of tragedy by embracing death in its narrative. Weddings and births signify the positive solution, and provide for an affirmative resolution: these denote the possibility of harmony and regeneration, investing hope in one or more bearers of the vision of a redeemed future.

Each text opts, then, in its plot-decisions, for a generic attachment; but a simple choice or division between comedy and tragedy does not apply here. *Howards End* aims at comedy, but

narrowly escapes tragedy. *Women in Love* may be a 'barren tragedy', as Gudrun describes Gerald's death. Each narrative strives to connect, to mend that radical split, by a marriage: the comedic solution. Each also embraces a death. The text seeks, still arguably in the comic tradition, to expel one or more characters in order to consolidate and ratify the selected social group. The sudden, violent or premature death of a central figure is the climax of each text, and we may discern a particular congruence in these plot-decisions. There is, too, a remarkable similarity between the figures who are killed off by the plot, or who are left physically maimed, or without power. But there is more to it than this: death is an ambivalent signifier in these texts, and occupies a shifting position in the articulation of the plot. I say this partly in that death is the prelude to and precondition of regeneration – either literally, as in *Howards End*, by property and inheritance, or symbolically, as in *The Waste Land*, by a process of metamorphosis and salvation – and, accordingly, constitutes a positive solution. But in part, too, death operates as an inclusive experience for each text, and so complicates the plot-resolution. The 'expelled' figures refuse, as it were, to be dismissed; their death or elimination threatens to decentre the narrative and disturb both its closure and the total signification. These deaths tip the narratives towards a symbolic statement of an entire society in decay.

The ambivalence does not apply only to deaths. As was noted earlier, sexuality in these texts is problematic: marriages also operate equivocally as tokens of a positive solution. In each case a marriage, or a sexual connection, is central to the direction of the plot; but each proves difficult, and usually unfruitful. Women are virgin or childless, and perversely so: the only child brought forth in these texts is conceived and born outside marriage. Yet, despite the overall infertility, the motif of the child is strong. Predominantly, however, it is the adult who is seen as a large child, and the image is not regenerative, but one of immaturity and inadequacy. The men of *Heartbreak House* are infantilised; and Gerald Crich, the Don Juan of *Women in Love*, is an infant crying in the night. As in Yeats's 'The Second Coming', some creature in these texts is labouring to be born; but the actual delivery, and indeed the nature of the creature to be born, are uncertain.

There is a further point. Each text centralises a marriage or an act of sexual intercourse, and each kills off or eliminates one or more characters. These features – birth, copulation and death –

are the linchpins of the narrative, as it strives to connect and regenerate. But in each case there was for the writer some doubt as to which character should be killed, and which characters should marry. The difficulty which Forster, Lawrence and Shaw experienced in deciding which should die and which survive is demonstrated, outside the texts, by the evidence of working-notes, draft manuscripts and letters; and, internally, by stages of revision. Forster and Lawrence both juggled, in drafts and notes, with various alternatives, only to change their minds in the final versions of their books. Shaw apparently arrived very late at the decision to kill off Mangan, and 'marry' Ellie Dunn to Captain Shotover. (Even in *The Waste Land*, 'Death by Water' was extensively revised by Eliot in collaboration with Ezra Pound: only the translation of an earlier poem survives in the final version, and the connection of Phlebas the Phoenician with other figures and 'events' in the poem is subject to dispute.)

It is not, I think, reductionist to take account of discarded drafts: in the complex process of composition one can unravel something of the text working itself through, and sometimes against the author's initial instincts of its direction. As for the final text, the ingredients of a disturbed closure may be detected in the alternatives envisaged before the text was finalised, as well as in the tensions within it. And it is, as it happens, a fascinating if vexing coincidence that Forster, Lawrence and Shaw all worried over whom their end-directed plots should eliminate: what, in other words, was the desired and necessary final configuration, the blueprint for survival. We have here a curious and important area of uncertainty: curious, again, in the common ground of these texts, here with respect to making plot-decisions, working themselves through; and important, in that the uncertainty is located in that area, crucial to this special kind of fiction, of the resolution of the plot, its final, normative configuration.

Each text reaches towards what I have called, in dealing with them separately, a normative configuration: it is this concluding tableau towards which all characterisation and plotting are directed. But the final configuration has itself a multiple aspect and purpose, which may produce a sense of unease. The denouement, to use a more traditional term, encodes, in the interrelatedness of the characters, and in what the plot has done to them, what are perceived to have been all along the dynamics of the representative picture of society, the tensions and stresses