EDITED BY

NANETTE NORRIS

GREAT WAR MODERNISM

ARTISTIC RESPONSE IN THE CONTEXT OF WAR, 1914–1918

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Edited by Nanette Norris

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Introduction

Great War Modernism

Nanette Norris

In the expansionist stream of the New Modernist Studies, more and more work purports to be modernist amid a babel of voices that distinguish yet confuse aesthetics, genres, an ever-expanding list of artists, and the uncertainty of the modernist movement's inception and decline. The new global turn (transnational?) is as confusing as it is exciting. Is there such a thing as literary modernism, when the modern "period," what has been called "modernity,"[1] extends over several hundred years? Mark Wollaeger relates, "In the American academy, modernism as a field of study and historical period (roughly 1890–1945) was firmly entrenched by 1960."[2] It focused on what is now referred to as a "core" of Anglo-American writers, the "early canon of modernism"[3] : James Joyce, Ezra Pound, W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, and so forth. Wollaeger writes, "The initial critical construction of Anglo-American modernism as a realm of giants—the men of 1914—rendered the relatively new field ripe for criticism of its apparently masculinist, elitist, and authoritarian bearings."[4] New Modernist Studies, while reviving and revitalizing modernist studies through lively, scholarly debate about historicity, aesthetics, politics, and genres, is struggling with important questions concerning the delineation that makes discussion fruitful and possible. This volume aims to explore and clarify the position of the so-called core of literary modernism in its seminal engagement with the Great War.

We have moved so far from the "men of 1914" that, as Wollaeger relates, a 2010 session at the Modern Language Association that was sponsored by the Modernist Studies Association debated "doing without some long-standing points of reference, such as modernism as a crisis of representation, as anti-realist or experimental, and whether there is any value in identifying

particular aesthetic forms or techniques as intrinsically modernist."[5] "Some panelists engaged in a bravado refusal of limits, one professed no longer to care about distinctions between modern and modernist, and the session concluded inconclusively."[6] Whereas Mark Wollaeger and Matt Eatough's book aims to revise "the received maps of modernism,"[7] this volume aims to return to the "men (and women) of 1914"—to reread this time, this period, and these writers.

In studying the years of the Great War, we find ourselves once more studying "the giants," about whom there is so much more to say, as well as adding hitherto marginalized writers—and a few visual artists—to the canon. The contention here is that these war years were seminal to the development of a distinguishable literary practice that is called "modernism," but perhaps could be further delineated as "Great War modernism," a practice whose aesthetic merits can be addressed through formal analysis.[8] All literature, but most certainly all modernist literature, responds to the cultural realities in which it is engendered, with a specific aesthetic response that can be meaningfully compared and contrasted in order to deepen our understanding of that time and place in history.

BEYOND "THE MEN OF 1914"

The expression "the Men of 1914" comes from Wyndham Lewis's *Blasting & Bombardiering*.[9] Written in 1937, Lewis's analysis of the artists and artistic expression during and immediately following the war years has resonated deeply in modernist studies, in a misdirected manner. Lewis writes,

> What I think history will say about the "Men of 1914" is that they represent an attempt to get away from romantic art into classical art, away from political propaganda back into the detachment of true literature. . . . And what has happened—slowly—as a result of the War, is that artistic expression has slipped back again into political propaganda and romance, which go together . . . The attempt at objectivity has failed. The subjectivity of the majority is back again, as a result of that great defeat, the Great War, and all that has ensued upon it.

This paragraph encapsulates the narrow origins of modernist studies: the exclusionary masculinism, the concept of a backward movement into classical art, the idea of "true" literature being detached and supposedly objective, and core modernism being thought of as elitist and detached. In fact, Lewis got it wrong, and the modernists were always already political revolutionaries for whom the war became the crucible in which their artistic responses were fashioned. He is right, however, that the Great War was the central experience of this artistic expression, this modernism, whose complex rela-

tionship with modernity (and changes in technology and dissemination of expression) allows it expression that is widespread, propagandic, political, subjective, transnational, and involved, in every way possible. Although, indeed, we have New Modernist Studies to thank for moving us beyond the narrow confines of the Lewis camp of modernist interpretation, our understanding of these "core" years of modernist artistic expression is far from complete. The distinction needs to be made between this core and what Mark Wollaeger refers to as "inflections" on modernism. Whether one subscribes to a center-periphery model of modernism, or to some other conceptualization, these years, this time, these forms of expression can be profitably delineated and studied.

NEW MODERNIST STUDIES

The value of the New Modernist Studies has been "the fertility of questioning rigid temporal delimitations,"[10] as Mao and Walkowitz point out. The "fruitful rethinking"[11] has undertaken "temporal, spatial, and vertical"[12] expansion of the conception of modernist literatures. However, as Wollaeger says, this is "[i]n part a legacy of postcolonial studies,"[13] the intent of which is to "dismantle levelling Anglo-European frames and norms."[14] As important as this direction of study is, it fails to address—nay, threatens to render abject—the ongoing concerns of Anglo-European or Anglo-American modernism. In fact, it tends toward distortion in that, according to Eric Hayot, "at the so-called origin of European modernism, the foreign has already inserted itself."[15]

It also is having the effect, some say, "of erasing the distinction between modern and modernist."[16] The caveat, as Laura Doyle rightly acknowledges, is the phrase "insofar as modernism is a function of modernity." Modernity and modernism may have commonalities, overlapping junctures, but they are not one and the same. Yes, the broad and belligerent reach of the British Empire enabled the relative calm and the imaginary possibilities of the Edwardian age in England, and the colonial enterprises of France enabled the turn-of-the-century Decadence in France (and then England), and colonialism is indeed a function of modernity, but as I have argued elsewhere,[17] World War I brought an end to the age of imagination in Britain. It brought on a moratorium of so-called pure artistic endeavor: art for art's sake. It shocked the writers and artists of that time (and geo-specificity) into applying the skills they had been honing—of color, of abstraction, of imagism, and so forth—to radical, critical, and sometimes revolutionary ends, specifically in response to their experience of the Great War. To the extent that the Great War was a function of both modernity and colonialism, modernity and colonialism, writ large, should, of course, be part of the discussion. However,

"this world forced modernist art into being."[18] Whether in England or elsewhere, modernist art has a turn-of-the-twentieth-century (and, arguably, World War I) beginning, and it presents as a complex consisting of "challenge" to "the classical empires and their cultures,"[19] "the anxious vision of a fractured 'modernist' world,"[20] stylistic choices, technical innovations, so-called pure and literary aesthetic *brought to bear upon a world of shock and trauma.* Or so I would argue. The Great War altered the direction of turn-of-the-twentieth-century modernist expression, placing Great War modernism in a distinctive category vis-à-vis other modernisms.

Abstract Expressionism is a case in point. In the early, prewar days of budding Anglo-modernism, the use of myth was seen in the light in which Wyndham Lewis glossed it, as "an attempt to get away from romantic art into classical art,"[21] an aesthetic direction that has been seen as removed from the events of the day, conservative and elitist in its thrust. However, by the end of the war, myth was being used for its capacity as the bearer of "imaginative truth."[22] An American art movement of the 1940s and 1950s, European modernists fleeing the political upheaval and war of Europe fed Abstract Expressionism. Painting was seen as a "struggle between self-expression and the chaos of the unconscious,"[23] and myth as a way to objectively express the "post-war mood of anxiety and trauma."[24]

MODERNITÉ/MODERNISM

Virginia Woolf famously wrote, in an essay on aesthetics, "On or about December 1910 human character changed."[25] In fact, the "change" had been recognized many years earlier, by Baudelaire (in the French newspaper *Figaro* of 1863), when he

> used the term "modernité" to articulate a sense of difference from the past and to describe a peculiarly modern identity. The modern, in this context, does not mean merely *of* the present but represents a particular attitude *to* the present. This attitude is related by Baudelaire to a particular *experience* of modernity, which is characteristic of the modern period as distinct from other periods. . . . Baudelaire could define it in this way: "By 'modernity' I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable" (*The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, 13). These two aspects—the transitory or fleeting, on one hand, and the eternal on the other—were two sides of a duality. There was a mutual dependence and a productive tension between them.[26]

Where Baudelaire used the word *modernité* we might profitably translate this word as *modernism*, because, as Marshall Berman so aptly distinguishes, modernity refers to "the maelstrom of modern life,"[27] whereas Baudelaire was articulating what he saw as a *response* to the socioeconomic transforma-

tions[28] —the first glimmerings of the modernism that Ezra Pound expanded upon in his 1914 essay "Vorticism."[29] While the term *vorticism* was given to a short-lived movement in modern British art, of which Pound's wife, Dorothy Shakespear, was a part, as was Wyndham Lewis, Pound saw it as the concept that moved poetry beyond the confines of symbolism:

> THE IMAGE IS NOT an idea. It is a radiant node or cluster; it is what I can, and must perforce, call a VORTEX, from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing.[30]

The standard definition of an image that is usually anthologized, also from Pound ("An 'Image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time"[31]), is reductive in comparison to this more inclusive idea of the constant rush of ideas.

If the modern(ist) movements of expressionism, futurism, vorticism, imagism, and so on were short-lived in and of themselves, it is useful, in the words of Andrew Thacker, "to be reminded both of the energy and excitement that Vorticism exemplified and of how its 'blasting' of the staid aesthetic norms that ruled in London in 1914 spread beyond the borders of an England that was described in the first issue of BLAST as an 'industrial island machine, pyramidal.'"[32] Pound articulated the cohesiveness of all of modernism's many so-called movements when he wrote, "We worked separately, we found an underlying agreement, we decided to stand together."[33] Although they did not call themselves "modernists," the men and women who fashioned the "image as vortex" to express the realities of a world at war were aware of their many commonalities. Virginia Woolf expressed the essence of the change of this conjunction of aesthetic and experience when she wrote:

> I think that Mr. Eliot has written some of the loveliest single lines of modern poetry. But how intolerant he is of the old usages and politenesses of society—respect for the weak, consideration for the dull! As I sun myself upon the intense and ravishing beauty of one of his lines, and reflect that I must make a dizzy and dangerous leap to the next, and so on from line to line, like an acrobat flying precariously from bar to bar, I cry out, and I confess, for the old decorums, and envy the indolence of my ancestors who, instead of spinning madly through mid-air, dreamt quietly in the shade with a book. . . . For these reasons, then, we must reconcile ourselves to a season of failures and fragments. We must reflect that where so much strength is spent on finding a way of telling the truth the truth itself is bound to reach us in rather an exhausted and chaotic condition.[34]

FRAGMENTATION AND TRAUMA

Fragmentation is a marker of modernism that, according to Wollaeger, "is not likely to go away anytime soon."[35] Ruth Jennison provides an excellent overview of the debate that surrounds the aesthetic of fragmentation in New Modernist Studies, and she concludes that the concept of fragmentation has become the touchstone to the "political economy of modernist practice and ideology."[36] As readers and critics, our interpretation of fragmentation becomes a marker of our understanding of modernist practice. If we see fragmentation as "the imprint of a subject supposedly fragmented *by modern life* (emphasis added) upon the text,"[37] then we partake of a Marxist sense of literature as production, and commodification as the active factor in artistic expression. "Fragmentation, it turns out, is less a formal descriptor than it is a narrative about the ways in which a lamenting liberalism invokes an essentially conservative ontology."[38]

However, if Great War modernism was, as I am arguing, to a large extent an aesthetic response to World War I, then fragmentation may serve in the manner in which Virginia Woolf describes it above, as a marker for seminal changes in perspective. As Vincent Sherry writes, "Global in scope, shattering in its impact on national traditions as well as class structures and gender identities, this first world war scored a profound disruption into prevailing standards of value and so opened the space in cultural time in which radical artistic experimentation would be fostered."[39]

Sherry lamented "the dearth of work in a historically informed understanding of the 'modernist war.'"[40] This volume is an important contribution to this neglected area of study (neglected, perhaps, because it is difficult to read World War I in the shadow of World War II). The focus on World War I has borne interesting fruit in this collection. It has highlighted the importance of major research concerns of our time, post–World War II, which impact the study of World War I modernism. One such research concern is Holocaust studies—that large and unwieldy study that specifically raises questions about the genocide of the Jewish people during the German Third Reich (the Shoah), but tangentially has led to intense study of war itself, especially in the face of ongoing conflicts worldwide. Perhaps it is a cart-and-horse argument of the origins of the studies, but there is no doubt that more general trauma studies grew out of Holocaust studies, as have studies in war and remembrance, memory, witnessing, life writing, archival studies, issues of mediating atrocity, memory and popular media, and many more.[41]

Whereas New Modernist Studies have benefitted greatly from postcolonial studies in diaspora, the hegemony of the subaltern, and other studies of the marginalized, Great War modernism studies have confronted war trauma and the importance of art in the expression of, and healing from, trauma.[42] Carl Krockel reminds us that "Lawrence and Eliot suffered profoundly during the

war, and their most mature work developed through it. Both even suffered from neurasthenic symptoms of paralysis, the civilian's equivalent to the soldier's war trauma."[43] Key to the study of literature is the importance of narrative in trauma studies, and the importance accorded the process from speechlessness to narrative.[44] The passage of time has enabled a clearer vision, so that we can pull together the many threads of the complex World War I era, and trauma studies have shown us that the writings of the modernists are touchstones to otherwise incomprehensible experiences of this war and this era.[45]

The term *Great War* modernism allows for expansion beyond "the Men of 1914" to include women as well as other nations and national expressions, and many concerns not as yet articulated. Is this canon Anglo-American-European? There may be expansions to this, but they did not present themselves for inclusion in this volume. This delineation allows the avant-garde, with its Italian and Russian connections, its rightful interaction and influence (D. H. Lawrence traveled extensively through Italy for many years and was close to S. S. Koteliansky, a Russian émigré). It allows for the influence of Russian spiritism (Madame Blavatsky) in conjunction with other occult leanings (Pound and H.D.), and for the influence of Russian literature and language (I'm thinking of John Cournos and S. S. Koteliansky). If indeed the Great War was an important factor, then it should not surprise us that the British-American-European trio is uppermost: although over one hundred countries participated in this war, they did not have equal levels of involvement, and many were drawn into the conflict through their colonial ties. Great War modernism studies, as a critical genre, would necessarily allow for the cascading effect of World War I.

OVERVIEW: MARINETTI TO JONES

Part I: Noncombatant Responses: Nostalgia, Legacies, and Recuperations. This volume has been divided into three sections. The time frame that the volume covers is that of World War I, but in many ways the war was an interruption to—and redirection of—artistic reflections of modernity that were already in process. Michael Walsh's chapter, "Homeric Cheeses and the Breast of a Decrepit Nurse: Ruskin and Marinetti on Art, War, and Peace," is a lively invocation of the time, especially in Europe. Marinetti had a vision of difference, of change, of clarity, and he plied this vision internationally through small magazines and lecture tours. The chapter examines the relationship between art and war. The England to which Marinetti speaks during the prewar years is already a community divided in its sympathies. Marinetti saw violence and war as the way to cultural evolution, with "noble" war and great art going hand in hand. By counterpointing Marinetti with Ruskin,

Walsh gives keen sense of the swirl of ideas from the mid-1900s to the beginning of World War I.

Differences in the way that we view the world—especially in terms of our keen sense of interrelationship with the planet—have enabled us to foreground issues of such awareness during the war years. David A. Davis's "The Irrepressible Conflict: The Southern Agrarians and World War I" looks at the southern United States, and particularly the concern over the changes being wrought by the encroachment of technology, which increased exponentially during the war years. The southern agrarians, seen to be conservatively defending the agrarian lifestyle of the South, are, by our standards, in the vanguard of the realization of the effect of industrialism and technology upon the land. Davis places the contributors to an important collection of essays called *I'll Take My Stand* (1930), all poets who contributed to a little magazine, *The Fugitive*, and some of whom were war veterans, in relation to their sense of this industrial encroachment.

With similar benefit of hindsight, Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy uses ecocritical tools of literary analysis to look at the way in which Ford Madox Ford imaged his responses to World War I through nature. "'A Reconstructionary Tale': Ford Madox Ford's Georgic Response to World War I" shows *No Enemy* (written in 1919, but published in 1929) as making the claim that postwar recovery could take place through nature, through a "pastoral promise" that focuses an interesting issue of "Englishness" at the same time that it looks forward to our present-day engagement with trauma studies.

Post-Holocaust trauma studies have alerted us to the importance of noncombatant responses to war. Taryn Okuma's chapter, "Noncombatancy, Narrative, and Henry Green's *Pack My Bag*," claims that *Pack My Bag*, written on the eve of World War II, addresses the issue of Green's response, as a noncombatant, to World War I, and rightly belongs to the category of works that challenge how the war is memorialized. As Okuma says, *Pack My Bag* is a narrative about war narratives, an exploration of perspectives about the war from the point of view of a noncombatant, which therefore challenges the "uniform" perspective.

Graeme Stout's "Painting Abstraction/Observing Destruction at the Front" looks at the visual legacy of the war, arguing that this legacy has been informed by images of the front in terms of establishing the metaphor of modern industrialized warfare. He argues that Paul Nash's 1918 painting, *We Are Making a New World*, points to a change in the representation and presentation of the war and compares Nash's representation to that of writers such as Erich Maria Remarque and Henri Barbusse, who both return to "the language of the sacred as a means to describe the relationship of the soldier to the front and its elemental forces."

Part II: High Modernists and the Shock of War. In the second section of this volume, the chapters take new approaches to authors whose membership