

English Fiction and Drama of the Great War, 1918–39

John Onions

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Preface

This book is a study of English fiction and drama about the First World War. In particular, it examines how this literature explored the image of the soldier as hero. The prose writings of the Great War are extensive, varied and still not fully documented. Any selection of it for critical purposes will inevitably be to some degree arbitrary; indeed, in the later 1920s, much prose literature was reviewed under the umbrella category of 'war books', a term incorporating fiction, drama and autobiography (and sometimes even history). The differences between the genres constitute a not-unimportant academic issue, but this book is unconcerned with autobiography, even though at least two – *Undertones of War* and *Goodbye to All That* – are constructed with obvious literary skill by well-known literary figures. It might be objected that many novels are thinly-disguised autobiography. This is certainly true. What matters, however, is not their factual origin, but their self-proclaimed status as fiction and their consequent commitment to fictional truth. The autobiographical author, for all his literary care, describes the personal experiences of someone who just happens to be a writer.

The books considered here were all written in the interwar period, although two of them – Gilbert Frankau's *Peter Jackson – Cigar Merchant* and A. P. Herbert's *The Secret Battle* – were begun in 1918 when their authors had been invalided out of the army, and Ernest Raymond also wrote parts of *Tell England* (1922) during the war itself. The vast majority of this work appeared by 1930, much of it in the last four years of the twenties. Few war books appeared after 1930, partly because they had saturated the market, and partly because they had achieved their effect. Furthermore, they had coincided with a peak of political idealism, whereas by 1933 the debate had switched to the likelihood of another war. The chief exceptions to this trend were Maugham's *For Services Rendered* (late 1932) and the final volume of Sassoon's trilogy (1936).

The extent of war literature is another problem. *Jacob's Room* (1922) by Virginia Woolf, Christopher Isherwood's *The Memorial* (1932) and Charles Morgan's *The Fountain* (1932), all have obvious links with the war, but there are other works whose link, while significant, remains implicit. One might go further. *The Waste Land*

in a sense is a war poem and *Women in Love* a war novel; both authors, in their own ways, were responding to the conflict. However, this study is of works which deal squarely with the war. More specifically, it is about works which concentrate on the Western Front, since this was the area at the centre of the British experience of war, in both a military and literary sense. The one exception is *For Services Rendered*, with its postwar setting. Works which treat the war obliquely or symbolically, such as Shaw's *Heartbreak House* (1919) or – less significantly – H. F. Rubinstein's *Britannia Calling* (1930) are also ignored. To contemplate First World War fiction is to turn imaginatively to the Western Front and to its archetypal images. It was Mons and Loos, 'Wipers' and the Somme, which shaped the British experience of war and to them that its fiction returned.

I must express my debt to a number of people. Professor Andrew Rutherford has produced important work on this subject, commented on my own writing and answered queries. Dr Hugh Cecil, Mr Colin Hardwick, Mr Rupert Hart-Davis, Mr Brian Kesterton, Mr Reginald Pound and Brigadier B. B. Rackham have all answered my troublesome inquiries. John Murray provided me with photocopies of letters from Frederic Manning. Mr Gerald Gliddon and Mr and Mrs Jeremy Powell unearthed obscure war novels for me; Jeremy and Anne also kindly lent me a near-impossible-to-obtain copy of James Hanley's *The German Prisoner*. Librarians in various institutions have been unfailingly helpful; I would especially like to thank those at Birmingham Reference Library, the British Library, the British Newspaper Library, the Imperial War Museum, and the University Library, Keele. Karen and her wordprocessor have rescued my text from bundles of handwritten notes. Elaine and Sue have preserved my eyesight and patience with their proof-reading. Finally, Dr Dominic Hibberd and Ms Anthea Trodd have guided my learning; the faults and weaknesses of this work I have managed on my own.

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Introduction

The concluding question of that highly amusing parody, *1066 and All That*, asks half-seriously, 'What price Glory?' The phrase alone might be sufficient to date the book as a twenties publication, since it was a popular one deriving from a well-known war film of 1926.¹ The title of Sellar's and Yeatman's book also alludes to Robert Graves's best-selling autobiography of 1929. Yet the phrase itself might have been attributed to any of a vast number of war novels and memoirs which had appeared in the last four years of the decade. The literature of war published in the interwar years, but chiefly between 1927 and 1930, fundamentally affected the modern conception of war and of humanity engaged in it. This literature set out to destroy what romantic illusions remained of battle, and was especially savage towards conventional notions of heroic behaviour, of how and why men faced up to death in war. Just how effective this destruction was can be judged by comments from two writers, both holders of the Military Cross, who had done much to sustain the conventional notions. Writing in 1930, 'Sapper' remarked, 'It is the fashion now, I know, to speak of the horrors of war; to form societies for the abolition of soldiers.' And in 1931 Ian Hay, author of *The First Hundred Thousand*, wrote that 'in certain eyes, the soldier is no longer a hero, or for that matter, a man'.² First World War writing has become a paradigm, perhaps even a cliché, of anti-heroism. Leslie Fiedler has accurately summed up this aspect of its literary significance:

the chief lasting accomplishment of World War One was the invention of the antiwar novel. . . . It is certainly true that before the 1920s that genre did not exist, though it had been prophesied in the first two-thirds of Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, and that since the 1920s, it has become a standard form.

The writers of Europe and America who were young enough to fight in World War One were, in this light, unique, endowed with a peculiar freedom their successors have vainly tried to emulate by imitating the forms in which it was expressed. Only the former, however, actually lived in the interval between two conventional ways of understanding war, serving as the gravediggers to one and the midwives to the other.

Thus, post-1920s writers, in Fiedler's words, have had to affirm 'the death of the myth of the heroic, even as their predecessors were called on solemnly to create to celebrate its life'.³

Consequently the First World War has itself become something of a myth, an archetype existing beyond literature or history which continues to attract modern writers and critics. On the other hand, a stricter historian such as John Terraine is contemptuous of how literary figures, including Paul Fussell, evacuate the war from history. Nevertheless, the present age's continued fascination with the Great War arises from the change in understanding effected by writers between 1914 and 1939.

The reasons for this change have usually been ascribed to the battlefields of France and Flanders; exhaustive attacks, artillery bombardments and season-length battles were seen to deprive soldiers of the individual responsibility necessary for heroic action. Indeed, when in 1918 the American Lowell Thomas came in search of heroic tales from France, he was in effect diverted to Palestine, whence he developed the legend of Lawrence. Unfortunately, such an understanding of the war is only partly true and almost does succeed in taking the 1914–18 conflict out of history. It implicitly sentimentalises earlier wars and obscures the fact that the Great War, even after Passchendaele, remained a personal flesh and blood affair. In fact, complaints against how technology eroded heroic conduct are centuries old. Bayard, epitome of late medieval chivalry, saw the end of his era in the rise of the arquebus, from which he finally died. His complaint was still echoing 150 years later in a passage by the satirical Samuel Butler: 'And therefor since the Invention of Guns came up, there can be no true Hero in great Fights, for all mens Abilitys are so levelld by Gun-shot.'⁴ The essentials of battle for soldiers have not changed so enormously as the myth would permit. What has profoundly altered is the moral understanding of action – of men killing and suffering. The facts about the frontline soldier have not changed nearly as much as his moral status. As Bernard Bergonzi puts it: the war 'meant that the traditional mythology of heroism and the hero, the Hotspurian mode of self-assertion, had ceased to be viable; even though heroic deeds could be, and were, performed in abundance'.⁵

And yet First World War literature, as Andrew Rutherford points out, refuses to be simply anti-heroic.⁶ Much of it – whether fictional, autobiographical or journalistic – veers between heroic approbation and moral denunciation, between praise of the soldier

and rejection of war. Consequently, the difficulty lay in creating a comprehensible heroic vision. For instance, Philip Gibbs, probably the most famous of the war journalists, wrote:

The heroes of mythology were but paltry figures compared with those who in the Great War went forward to the roaring devils of modern gunfire, dwelt amidst high explosives more dreadful than dragons, breathed in the fumes of poison gas more foul than the breath of Medusa, watched and slept above mine-craters which upheaved the hell-fire of Pluto, and defied thunderbolts more certain in death-dealing blows than those of Jove.⁷

Gibbs's language here verifies his desire to commemorate the heroism he witnessed, but fails to do justice to it. The rhetorical devices will not work for a post-1918 generation; the classical, mythical allusions obscure rather than clarify the meaning of heroic action in the Great War. Gibbs's attempted eulogy exemplifies the general validity of Bergonzi's comment. Nevertheless, Gibbs's determination to pay adequate tribute to the soldiers is typical of much First World War writing, though it is usually demythologised, less verbose and anti-abstract. When H. M. Tomlinson (a better writer than his fellow journalist, Gibbs) asks, 'What is Troy, when we remember Delville Wood?',⁸ the allusion is succinct to the point of ambivalence; it uses the heroic past and yet points away from it. Moreover, Gibbs's classical references assume a common store of knowledge; Tomlinson's comment hints at Hemingway's famous sentence in *A Farewell to Arms*: 'Abstract words such as glory, honour, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates'.⁹ Like Hemingway, Tomlinson looks to another and exclusive understanding of heroic action. It is simplistic to suggest that First World War literature destroyed notions of heroic behaviour, for it both destroyed and modestly rebuilt them. The problem was partly one of terminology.

'Hero', of course, has several meanings. It most commonly and simply refers to the central character of a work. More specifically it divides into two other distinct meanings: the military hero (or the hero as man of action) and the hero who, whatever his role, represents what a chosen group has authorised as admirable. First World War literature represents a watershed because, in its own

confused way, it struggled with the relationship between these two conceptions. A tentative definition of the hero suggests someone who undertakes a not-immoral end in the fully conscious risk of losing all that is most valuable (most usually, of course, life itself). The praiseworthiness of an action, from an objective point of view, might appear morally unsound; yet even when it allows for this, the definition is inadequate. It clearly lacks gradation. It makes the boy on the burning deck equal with Odysseus. To comprehend why some are regarded as greater heroes than others, to examine more accurately what is meant by 'the traditional mythology of heroism and the hero', requires some form of differentiation. This book proposes three contexts: cultural heroism, social heroism, existential heroism.

A clearer understanding of each of these should emerge in Chapter 1. Briefly, cultural heroism accords primacy to heroic action and posits rewards for successful heroes. Each man finds his personal fulfilment – *qua* man – in heroic action. An obvious literary example is the *Iliad*. In Homer's epic a man fights for the rewards that fighting brings. The greater the enemy, then the greater the danger, the more renowned the success, and the more commensurate the rewards. A man's cause is thus his own rather than his state's. Such a way of life also constitutes man's attempt to create enough meaning out of action to combat the fact of inevitable death. It may be noted, too, that although the hero achieves self-conscious and acclaimed success, his belief in his lasting fame arises from the power of the writer, the poet, the singer of legend; these make the hero immortal. This kind of hero is scarcely a subject for First World War fiction. Douglas Jerrold, who wrote a powerful polemic against this fiction and who insisted on the ordinary soldier's heroism, nevertheless denied this hero's role in the war: 'The hero is not a man who rises above fear but a man who welcomes danger as a bride. The hero is fundamentally uncivilised, neither hating life nor loving it. We ... were just ordinary civilised people'.¹⁰

With social heroism the stimulus to action resides outside the hero. The social hero risks death because his cause or his belief requires it, and his action in turn reflects back on these. It is this reflective aspect which transforms social heroism into possible propaganda. In Victorian and Edwardian Britain, for example, heroic action in literature was debased by its subordination to a nationalist and Imperialist ethos, the temporary nature of which

was imperfectly perceived. (Thus, late nineteenth-century heroic literature is regularly spoken of as a sub-genre.) Again, some people are greater social heroes than others. An individual may contribute more than others to the success of an enterprise, or he may risk greater dangers when others are less willing or less able.

Central to both these formulations of heroism, and yet independent of them, is existential heroic action, the term 'existential' being used here without its philosophical implications.¹¹ That is to say, underwriting both concepts of heroic action is the assumption that men will, at certain times, risk their very existence and this risk cannot be measured solely by culture or cause. It is tempting to call it psychological heroism and it was aptly summarised by George Orwell:

If you look into your own mind, which are you, Don Quixote or Sancho Panza? Almost certainly you are both. There is one part of you that wishes to be a hero or a saint, but another part of you is a little fat man who sees very clearly the advantages of staying alive with a whole skin. . . . When it comes to the pinch, human beings are heroic.¹²

In effect, this book takes Orwell's psychological insight as a truism, though Orwell, writing in 1941, was departing from the intellectual convention of the previous decade. The 1930s added its own denigrations of heroic behaviour. The impact of Freudian psychoanalysis in particular transformed the hero into a dangerous neurotic, a likely fascist, or a pathetic mommy's boy.¹³ This is one reason why psychological heroism is an inadequate term. Moreover, although it may convey its own relevance to the other two concepts, it does not distinguish itself sufficiently from them. Existential heroism implies that the heroic act functions out of a recognition of time and existence; it remains an act of positive value, though – in the absence of culture or cause – the reward must be internal: the knowledge of what has been risked, suffered and overcome. This contrasts with both social and cultural heroism, and posits only the essentials of existence: life, death, and time's irreversibility. Within the notion of existential heroism there lies an important philosophical assumption: free will. Without such an assumption the heroic act is reduced to a conditioned response.¹⁴

Another implication ensues from this third concept of heroic

action. Free will in heroic action demands the moral equality of man. As Elizabeth Barrett Browning put it:

All actual heroes are essential men
And all men possible heroes.¹⁵

This distinction between three kinds of heroic behaviour should also make it possible to comprehend the paradox of First World War literature: it destroyed the hero even while it asserted his existence and attraction. In effect, it dismantled the social hero and left intact the existential one.

Heroic action by 1914 should be understood, for the most part, as social heroism. Insofar as people absorbed heroic values from literature, it was from popular rather than serious writing. Heroic action in the nineteenth century is largely absent from the major novelists after Scott (excepting Conrad), and occupies instead a world of Imperialist fiction, juvenile adventure stories, and parlour poetry. It was a world which adopted pseudo-medieval trappings and high diction in order to accommodate its values of honour, duty, loyalty and patriotism. And it was against this world that many war novelists of the late 1920s reacted. In rejecting these socially-defined values, they exploded a public debate culminating in 1930 in a spate of letters to *The Times* and a *Times* leader itself.

However, if literature, in Malcolm Bradbury's words, 'coheres, structures and illuminates many of its [society's] most profound meanings',¹⁶ it becomes possible to see the weakness of much First World War literature: namely, its preoccupation with the temporary in history, with social values unfitted to bear the onslaught against them. Much Great War literature is itself propagandist. It does not illuminate. Its comprehension of action and value is on a level with the hackneyed caricatures it purports to despise. It is tempting to suggest of a number of First World War novelists what Yeats said of Owen: 'There is every excuse for him but none for those who like him.'¹⁷ For these novelists were self-conscious survivors of an embittered generation. They spoke for their dead comrades to a world which had failed to redeem its wartime promise to make the world a better place. Moreover, the war (given the upper case initial in the 1920s) remained a powerfully close memory, testified to by emotional Armistice Day services. Consequently, the fury of the debate reflected the nature rather than the quality of the literature. Indeed, the 'genre war novel' includes

work by a serious theorist of the novel (Ford), war poets (Aldington, Sassoon), journalists and essayists (Tomlinson, Montague), serious novelists (Mottram, Williamson), popular novelists (Frankau, Deeping), humorists (Herbert, 'Beachcomber'), and assorted amateurs. Nor was the debate improved by a readiness to confuse autobiography with fiction.

However, the best First World War fiction stretches beyond the domain of social historians and evaluates experience in the manner suggested by Bradbury. It examines heroic action, its relationship to other values and the role of the writer. Its evaluation proves, unsurprisingly, far from simple. War writers were especially troubled by the moral context in which they portrayed heroic action, for the hero who risks death raises awkward humanist issues. The twentieth century, insisting on the horrors and futility of war, has made the heroic act less and less morally viable. James Ntopoulos speaks of 'the anachronism of the heroic act in our times',¹⁸ for our moral awareness covers too many fields of empathic understanding to appreciate exclusively the narrow conception of a tragic sense of life or the even narrower values of patriotism. Even David Jones's remythologising of heroism is entitled, significantly, *In Parenthesis*.

This specific moral conflict flared into words during the war itself in an argument between Bertrand Russell and T. E. Hulme. The latter, rejecting what he considered to be the over-optimistic assumptions of liberal humanism, asserted a 'heroic or tragic system of ethical values'.¹⁹ He served at the front, neither idealising nor enjoying it, but convinced that the defeat of Germany required sacrifice. He was to be killed in 1917. Russell's response to Hulme points to the dominant anti-heroic trend of post-1918 society:

An ethic is rendered heroic, not by the values which it recognises, but by the intensity of its recognition and the sacrifices it is willing to make to realise them. In that sense my ethic is as 'heroic' as his ... the things which I value are very *seldom* promoted by war. I value the kind of life which seems to me 'heroic' ...²⁰

Russell's argument is slightly semantic; he objects to the monopolising of the word 'heroic' by the man who risks his life. More significantly, he affirms the right to subjective values; the hero in

1914 is a social hero, but Russell pronounces in favour of a purely personal kind. Eventually this was to culminate in the anti-hero with 'his own personal, supra-social codes'.²¹

Thus, heroic action, in its military or quasi-military sense, has come to be an island away from the mainland of moral life, a resort to which men must occasionally flee, but not a permanent moral haven. For the twentieth century has lost faith in the moral self-sufficiency of action. Two wars and a host of social changes have not produced a hero with the stature of Livingstone, Rhodes or even Captain Scott. The modern age is aware instead of the tortuous psychological motives at work in the so-called hero, as well as the cost in human suffering borne by others in order to elevate him. Again, a precursor of this attitude can be found during the war itself with the appearance in 1918 of Lytton Strachey's debunking *Eminent Victorians*.

To some extent, it has already been suggested, prewar literature had seen the isolation of the hero. Even the two writers who most demanded his presence, Conrad and Kipling, had distant settings for their field of action. Neither, of course, was simply an Imperialist adventure writer. The isolation of Conrad's sailors in the South Seas or Kipling's subalterns in India is not intended to reflect the irrelevance of heroism to contemporary life; rather, these circumstances make for an acute experience of heroic action, action of the kind which moves interestingly between the social and the existential. Nevertheless, prewar writing does reflect an important historical fact: Britain was largely ignorant of warfare, despite extensive press coverage of the Boer War. Britain's Imperial wars were fought by a small professional army, numbering no more than 250 000 in 1914. The country had not been involved in a major European war for nearly a hundred years. It might be added that the class which produced most of the lasting literature of the Great War had not seen military action at all. Correlli Barnett goes even further, describing the war writers as 'the repositories of the liberalism and romanticism of Victorian England. They all lived at Howard's End'.²²

However, Great War fiction does develop a new kind of social hero; a hero, that is, who embodies vicarious attitudes. This is the soldier-writer. He is fortuitously placed to act as the gravedigger to one tradition and the midwife to another. He has the authority to deny society because, as a soldier, he is a hero on its own terms, but as a writer he is the articulate voice of suffering who reveals the

immorality of war. Therein lies the mythical significance of the Great War. The war itself was not uniquely horrific, but it occurred within unique sociological circumstances: a militarily innocent, literary middle class suddenly discovered itself to be the potential voice of a whole generation. It was also a journey of self-discovery. Looking back, Robert Nichols was to say: 'Our world was a pre-Hemingway world. Not only was there no tough war literature, there was no immediately contemporary tough literature at all.'²³ The soldier-writer becomes an important figure in First World War fiction. Sometimes he is simply the implied author of the novel (Wayne Booth's term); sometimes he is part of the fiction. His predecessor is the real-life war-poet: Owen, Sassoon, Read, Blunden. He is a hero not only because he wins the MC (as all four did), but also because, as a social hero, he elucidates moral understanding on behalf of others. As a decorated military hero he possesses all the stature of Hotspur speaking to the King's 'popinjay', but he speaks with the guilty responsibility of someone who must redefine the morality of action. The soldier-writer is thus the new social hero. Owen, indeed, has come to be regarded as the archetypal war-poet.

However, although this points to the new direction that war literature was to take, it also helps to explain why so much First World War fiction is written with old-fashioned techniques. The war novels of the 1920s are contemporary in the Edwardian sense; they speak directly, even didactically, to the reading public. Only *Parade's End* can be considered as a modernist work, and even that trilogy shows Ford at his more conservative. Aldington's *Death of a Hero* is cynical, flaunting and bitter, but it is also an even more formless example of the Wellsian 'baggy monster'.

The emergence of the soldier-writer as hero created a further problem of how to judge the heroic action of ordinary soldiers. It was a predicament which sometimes resolved itself in complexities (as it does in Owen's later poetry), but sometimes remained unresolved in confusion, as narrative and denunciation bypassed deeper implication. On occasion the ordinary soldier appears as a debased kind of hero in that his ignorance prevents both his guilt and his own complete understanding of action.

The portrayal of heroism is therefore complex. It is inevitably so because writers differed in views, underwent different experiences, and varied enormously in talent. Their collective effect was certainly to destroy the 'myth of the heroic', but the best literature

is very far from being simply anti-heroic for the obvious reason that writers saw an abundance of courage, loyalty and suffering. It becomes more complex as it seeks to discover the moral basis of such action for, having destroyed the myth of conventional and social heroism, it continues to affirm some sort of belief in heroic action.