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Introduction

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Introduction

In the novel *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932), Louis-Ferdinand Céline has his narrator Bardamu – despatched to the front in 1914 – declare rather grandly:

The biggest defeat in every department of life is to forget, especially the things that have done you in, and to die without realizing how far people can go in the way of nastiness. When the grave lies open before us, let's not try to be witty, but on the other hand, let's not forget, but make it our business to record the worst of human viciousness we've seen without changing one word. When that's done, we can curl up our toes and sink into the pit. That's work enough for a lifetime.¹

Bardamu talks as though this kind of unvarnished remembrance was actually *possible*. Worse still, even before he has gotten into his stride as supposed chronicler of human nastiness, his creator has started to undermine him. Céline, already part of the French cavalry by 1912, could easily have confined himself to laborious descriptions of the day-to-day sadism of barracks life with a view to carrying out the mission of his protagonist. Instead, he has chosen the *novel*, of all things, to immortalise his war experience; he deploys humour at its most acidic, empathy at its most disarming; we are bombarded with *impressions*. No attempt is made at historical accuracy; nothing that unfolds in regard to human beings is easy or straightforward.

In an equally ambivalent vein, consider this, from Céline's contemporary Blaise Cendrars, in the early pages of his dubious memoir *La main coupée* (1946):

The Jerries' flares were dying out. [...] With consternation, I contemplated this livid dawn, slowly disrobing in the mud. Nothing in this whole miserable, dripping, ravaged and tattered landscape was solid, and I myself stood there like a beggar at the threshold of the world, soaked to the skin, slimy, plastered with shit from head to toe, and cynically delighted to be there, and to see all this with my own eyes...

I hasten to add that there is nothing beautiful about war...²

Again, one senses some vague sleight-of-hand at work here. But, as the author says, when it came to the war, "Nothing [...] was solid..." Small wonder, then, that the painting of the day

¹ Céline, *Journey to the End of the Night*, translated by Ralph Manheim (London: Calder, 2004), p.28.

² Blaise Cendrars, *Lice*, translator uncredited (London: New English Library, 1974) p.47.

is often described as “impressionistic” or “surreal”; the landscapes ever-melting, slipping from our grasp like the pocket-watches of Dalí. Perhaps *La main coupée* itself is best viewed with a sense of stepping back from a vast canvas: very quickly, the anti-war hand-wringing seems perfunctory. What dominates the foreground (and let us not forget that his book was written a good thirty years after Cendrars lost his arm at Champagne) is the author’s reverence for an emphatically *male* camaraderie and an unabashed joy in raw experience.

Nothing beautiful about war? Cendrars was not the only one that didn’t entirely believe it, as Terry Phillips emphasises in the case of William Orpen, who both wrote and painted the Great War and found an “eerie beauty” in the ravaged landscape. Phillips’ paper goes on to show how the likes of Orpen along with the writers Lord Dunsany, Patrick MacGill and Sean O’Casey set about the colossal task of describing the battlefields to those who had stayed behind and were therefore utterly without reference-points. To this end, these craftsmen had recourse to the schools of impressionism and surrealism, gothic literature, fairy and folk tales, and the fantasy genre. It is the stage design for O’Casey’s *The Silver Tassie*, more than the play itself, which is of particular interest here. Unlike the other three, O’Casey had not seen combat at close quarters and instead allowed first-hand verbal accounts to inform his work, thus exposing himself to predictable howls of protest, for, the argument ran, given his level of remove from the actual fighting, how could his vision *not* be skewed by the wishful thinking of a civilian-dramatist?

As it turns out, reading through some of the papers presented here, one is left with the strange impression that in the act of remembering, of bearing witness through art, human beings are not nearly as corruptible as they imagine. Both Phillips and John McDonagh note the striking similarities in the language of those writers in favour of the war and those opposed to it. McDonagh’s paper, for example, contrasts the often minor divergences in the poetry of two men killed in action: Francis Ledwidge, who believed to the very end in the Great War as part of the Irish struggle for home rule, and Wilfred Owen who would go on to compose devastating and excoriating anti-war verses. However, if the untrustworthiness of memory has been somewhat overstated, the theme of remove, of detachment, is arguably more contentious.

In “Dissonant, dissident and detached”, Mary Pierse argues that any interpretation of the period from 1914 to 1918 which ignores the voices of writers absent from the combat is necessarily an impoverished one. She focusses specifically on Irish figures who, as outlined in McDonagh’s paper, typically found themselves detached from events on several levels at

the same time: politically, culturally, geographically, and simply *as artists*. Pierson adds a further dimension: the rarely-heeded feminist perspective. It is noteworthy, for example, that for Countess Markievicz and Winifred Letts, just as for Céline and Cendrars, what the Great War served to highlight more than anything was class division and appalling social injustice. George Bernard Shaw, similarly, publically deplored patriotism, opining that the war was little more than a scandalous duping of the working class: suggesting that, in time, the men on both sides might “shoot their officers and go home”. While Céline and Cendrars’ real-life reasons for going to the front in the First War - and offering to do so again in the Second - are complex and contradictory, in their writings, they return repeatedly to the idea that the phenomenon of war in general has far less to do with nationality than with class.

With the likes of Shaw and Letts, their anger and sense of frustration is palpable. More poignant is the testimony of those *temporally* detached from the action. Both Albert Camus and Jean Sullivan were infants when their fathers were killed in the Great War. In comparing their work, Eamon Maher highlights the painful legacy foisted upon the often forgotten victims of the conflict: the parents, siblings, wives and children of the men who died at the front. For Camus and Sullivan, the war is unquestionably part of their make-up and yet they are shut out from it: “At times you’d like to have the perspective of those who died”, Sullivan admits ruefully. At the same time, in dealing with both of these writers, Maher evokes yet another level of estrangement – a major theme of Grace Neville’s paper on Annie Ernaux, along with my own on Cendrars – between the remote citadels of political power and the quiet persistence of the village community.

In a section of *Les Années*, Ernaux brings the reader into the rambling table talk of adults on lazy afternoons in the French provinces in the decades immediately following the Occupation. These were people who had enjoyed a strangely vicarious war; a time of hardship, no doubt, but with an undeniable *frisson* in the air. As they absorb these tales from the fringes of the war, the youngsters of Ernaux’s generation have thrust upon them a kind of flipside to the sense of inadequacy experienced by Sullivan and Camus; a feeling of having fallen asleep at the wheel and missed out on something marvellous. Here, Neville touches upon an ethical question which will – and should - always make us queasy: what is it that enchants us so sado-masochistically about war? What, for instance, do we really hope to accomplish by taking coach tours to the battlefields of Ypres or the death-factories of Auschwitz? In the future, will people sign up for package holidays to Iraq and Syria with the same giddy fascination?

It is a vein of inquiry which brings us into the murky territory of Brian Murphy's paper on "Dark Tourism". Iraq, Syria, Gaza, Libya, Yemen whether we like it or not, are "our" wars. We contemplate them daily through the trembling lens of the camera-phone and in the editorials of the weekend papers. Unlike the Great War, to us, they are unequivocally ugly conflicts. They do not enjoy the luxury of being "interesting". They are a problem - or rather a hopeless tangle of inter-related problems - that needs to be solved. It only took Ernaux's *petit peuple* a few years to hijack and sentimentalise the Second World War, but even *that* war seemed to them a grubby affair in comparison with the glory days of 1914-18. Here we bump against two issues fundamental in the contemplation of any war: issues of *medium* and of *time*.

Murphy analyses Michelin's First World War Battlefield Guides for tourists, arguing that such a medium can have a sanitising effect on popular perceptions of war. And yet, as Phillips has it, a similar case could be made against MacGill's imaginative prose for "ennobling" the same ghastly event. Poetry, painting, film, tourist guides: shouldn't we regard all these media with equal suspicion? Perhaps, sometimes, we would even be better served by the crude efforts of a glorified tyre salesman than the dramatic flourishes of the professional word-pedlar.

On the time question, as Murphy remarks, it may at first be jarring to note the publication date of the first of Michelin's war guides: 1919. On the other hand, we could ask ourselves if the commercialisation of the Great War is any less disrespectful now than it was then. In their defence, the tourists and the guide-writers of 1919 had not even begun to process what had just happened. A century later, we, at least, should know better.

In writing the war, we will, of course, never "have the perspective of those who died". However, it is easy to see why it is a phenomenon we cannot leave alone, for, in the very act of trying to address it, we instantly come crashing against every conflicted emotion, every fear and preoccupation, every political and artistic bugbear; everything, in short, that makes us want to engage with the *whole* of life: its glory and its squalor in the light of our empathy, our pain, our striving; our outrage and desolation; our viciousness and delusions.

Accordingly, the papers presented here have far less to do with the question of how to depict war than the nature of that eternal process in which we find ourselves compelled to carry on arranging and rearranging the disparate fragments of meaning scattered about us by life.

Gerard Connolly, September 2015.