

Writings of Persuasion and Dissonance in the Great War

That Better Whiles May Follow Worse

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Introduction

As A.J.P. Taylor claims, the Great War ‘cut deep into the consciousness of modern man’ (1966: 11). The guns fell silent on the Western Front in November 1918, but the memories have neither died nor faded away. As the worldwide commemorations for the centenary of the First World War unfold, the massive outpouring of print, television and film responses seems to be increasingly on the rise. The centenary has in fact provided an opportunity to continue reflecting on the magnitude of a conflict that profoundly moulded the course of the twentieth century and, in all probability, of the decades to come. However, while the effects of the war on society and politics are more noticeable; its presence in literature and culture is much more intangible and complex to analyse. Far from being eclipsed in memory by succeeding wars, the *war to end all wars* maintains a tenacious hold on popular imagination, being repeatedly thought over and transformed in the minds of those born long after the 1918 Armistice.

Indeed, this war has become many things to many people: the end of the *long* nineteenth century; the painful birth pangs of a new world order; the nightmarish consolidation of Modernism; a full dress rehearsal for the killing fields of the twentieth century. Among the manifold aspects of the conflict was the demise of a relationship that had been vitally necessary to most warlike undertakings up to that time (mercenaries apart), which is that shared between the combatants themselves and their *mother* country or culture. For many soldiers in the Great War, this relationship went desperately awry, to the extent that—for them—the true enemy was not the one sniping at them from the opposing trenches but instead the society that sent them there in the first place, and from which they had become cut off, alienated and estranged.

The need to explain and articulate the meaning of this experience has opened up a territory of dispute and negotiation, encouraging the study of war as a multifaceted phenomenon whose complexity resists easy classification. Writing about it is not only a way to retain rational human control over one of the greatest calamities to befall Western civilization, but also the means through which destruction can be turned into constructive channels by verbalising, organising and transforming the resources of meaning available to men.

Philip Larkin famously refers to a halcyon period of calm that preceded the war and that was irretrievably lost when conflict broke out; *never such innocence again* was his melancholic summing up of the world that vanished into

chaos and destruction. Our collection of essays¹ borrows from Larkin's idea of lost social innocence and applies it to the disenchantment of the soldiers, whose innocent faith and loyalty to *Home* is shattered by the cataclysmic events of war. Through the prism of the literature produced or otherwise *pressed into service* at the time (by which we also mean those periods that are immediately previous and subsequent to the war), we trace—on the one hand—what is effectively the gradual disassociation of these soldiers from their society and from its values, demands and aspirations, and—on the other—the means by which the home culture attempted to (re)claim its sons and consolidate their loyalty and belief in the cause for which they were fighting. However, whilst this dichotomy is central to our analysis, we also incorporate into our discussion recent critical challenges to the assumption that the *truth* about the war stems from the testimony of the canonical soldier poets and thus gives space to other voices such as women—traditionally excluded in such accounts—and the Home Front.

Although closer readings of these sources result in conclusions that defy easy categorisation and that often transcend the conventional framework of understanding that forwards a *conformity* or *dissonance* interpretation, this collection nevertheless points to what is, in effect, a discourse of two very distinct narratives. One of these is largely of inducement and compliance, reflecting not only the toils to sustain and promote the celebration of war as adventure and noble sacrifice, but also employing a *manly* rhetoric of character and heroic transcendence, with its values and eloquence, as a way of *encouraging* the continued allegiance both of soldiers and civilians. Although tracing any significant path leading directly from Homer to Great War narratives would be much too ambitious for the scope of this work, there is evidence to show that the epic and romance traditions do form the basis upon which the language of persuasion was built. Such heroic and romantic representations offered a patriotic interpretation of the war that was passed on to Victorian society and kept on rising in popularity as the nineteenth century progressed, even withstanding the impact of modern warfare. This militarist mystique had lingered in the minds of those who felt that, in Hibberd's words, they 'had to speak for the nation and steel its heart for battle' (1987: 12). The survival of the exciting images of war, and of patriotic sentiment that the language of conformity aroused, suggests that perhaps idealism did not perish at the Somme, or that maybe some of the responses to the Great War simply failed to capture the reality of the trenches and the disappointment and isolation that many soldiers felt.

1 As our title indicates, we have restricted ourselves for reasons of scope and length primarily to a consideration of British writing. Nevertheless, see Chapters 3, 8, 10, 11 and 15 for discussion of non-British perspectives.

This need to set the record straight takes us to the narrative of dissonance and autonomy, which not only attempts to portray life in the trenches without any trace of patriotic sentiment, casting aside ‘the generals and the plumes, the high abstractions, the images of heroism and glory that made war itself a value-term’ (Hynes 1992: 166), but emphasising the shattering of identity with place, with culture, with family that the combatants came to feel. Cynicism and anger inexorably replace the patriotic fervour of conformity. This dissonant, realistic approach to war revolves around the ethos of Owen’s *Dulce Et Decorum Est* and ‘the pity of War’ (Owen 1921: IX) and around the idea of a split between ‘first of all a naïve enthusiasm for war and then, after the shock of battle experience, an overwhelming sense of disillusion, anger and pity, culminating in pacifism and protest’ (Rutherford 1978: 65). Although its roots lie in the events and opinions surrounding the war, the narrative grew with time, incorporating throughout these years what is meaningful and functional to its beliefs and becoming ‘a sacred national text’ (Motion 2004: XI), ‘the story of war that has evolved, and has come to be accepted as true’ (Hynes: 1992 IX). The clear gap between past and present, between combatant and civilian, between the older generations and the youth that fought the war, has reopened the debate around the representation of war. In this context, the literature of disillusionment has destabilised the dominant heroic discourse and has operated as a counter-text, in this way becoming a centrifugal force. Though clearly separated from one another, however, these two dominant narratives cannot be described as entirely oppositional as they tend to transgress their representational borders to converge and evoke similar, or even overlapping, responses to war.

Charged with the task of making sense of the experience, literary representations of the Great War acknowledge considerable ambivalence towards the possibility, if not the actual appropriateness, of reproducing the reality of the trenches and the view taken from the Home Front in its entirety, not only because of its elusiveness but also because of the influence of prevailing cultural discourses on personal interpretations. Despite the difficulties encountered, however, the main urge, both for writers and literary scholars, has been to tell the truth, to set the record straight. Yet the endorsement of truth has not excluded imagination as the mediator between the seen and the unseen, shaping and moulding the reality of war into something new, examined from a spatial and temporal distance and from different angles. And so the re-writing of war has revealed the difficulty of representing war but, at the same time, has also confirmed the power of men to ascribe meaning and pattern to this experience, even when that experience has continuously resisted patterning.

Much has been written on the connection between war and its literary representations. During the 1960s and 1970s, the literature of disillusionment became most relevant to the academy, which primarily focused on the lyric

poetry of British soldiers; autobiography was relegated to the role of secondary genre, while fiction occupied third place, again with the predominance of the war poets' voices. The language of dissonance was a key constituent for the opening text of this wave of literary criticism. In Bergonzi's *Heroes' Twilight* (1965) the disillusion of the combatants and their social dismemberment is given a privileged position. Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975) not only reinforces Bergonzi's view but moves forward, setting the agenda for most of the criticism that followed it. Fussell claims 'that there seems to be one dominating form of modern understanding; that it is essentially ironic; and that it originates largely in the application of mind and memory to the events of the Great War' (1981: 35). Although Fussell's work has become a signpost in Great War criticism (from *The Great War and Modern Memory* onwards, literary studies of war would revolve around gender issues and the complex relationship between war and modernism), later research has refuted the idea that those modern modes of expression that did not seem to fit within previous categories resulted from the Great War.

The resurgence of interest in the Great War by more current scholarship demonstrates that the process of interpretation has continued uninterrupted over the past years. As Hibberd suggests, 'no sooner has one critical approach to it become established than revisions, refutations and new information start to appear and another cycle begins' (1996: n.p.). In one fashion or another, Rutherford, Bracco, Dawson, Winter, Bond and McLoughlin, among other scholars, have challenged Bergonzi and Fussell's interpretations in an attempt to come to terms with the multi-layered impact of the Great War.

Rutherford adopts a suitable middle ground between the literature of persuasion and more realistic accounts, focusing on those authors 'who at their best take full account of the complicated, contradictory nature of adult experience—who eschew ethical and psychological simplicities—but who none the less choose to treat heroic themes and reinvestigate heroic values' (Rutherford 1978: 10). Bracco's *Merchants of Hope* (1993) points to the continuity with the pre-war world as reflected in middlebrow fiction in the commemoration of heroism and of England as a great nation and in the reverence for the sacrifice and suffering undergone by their men. Similarly, Dawson explores the endurance of war celebratory traditions and perceives the First World War as clear evidence of 'an ongoing tension between adventurous and "anti-adventurous" modes of narrative' (Dawson 1994: 171). Far from underestimating the classical, romantic and religious themes of the past, Winter's *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* (1995) argues that in their search for consolation, bereaved mourners prompted a revival of traditional modes of aesthetic expression that had been prematurely buried by the war: "seeing" the war meant more a return to older patterns and

themes than the creation of new ones' (7). His work, *Remembering War: The Great War between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (2006), on the other hand, focuses more specifically on memory, on the ways the Great War has been remembered, and argues that the memory boom of the Second World War and the Holocaust draws its inspiration from the trauma of the Great War.

Particular attention is given to the battle between the way the past is interpreted by historians and by those who were at the front and felt the need to testify. From a historian's standpoint, Brian Bond's 'British "Anti-War" Writers and their Critics' (1996), *The Unquiet Western Front: Britain's Role in Literature and History* (2002) and *Survivors of a Kind: Memoirs of the Western Front* (2008) are concerned with overturning dissonant narratives by filling the gaps, correcting errors and overcoming prejudices and historical misinterpretations. Bond illustrates a dilemma that is presented to most historians: to what extent can literary representation enter the realm of history if most responses to the Great War prove to be more a product of the time in which they were written than an accurate reflection of the times they claim to record. Bond's position seems clear. He is not only interested in rectifying discrepancies, but in eradicating disillusioned interpretations of war.

Concerned with the idea of authoring war memories, McLoughlin suggests that war 'resists depiction, and does so in multifarious ways' (2011: 6–7). Moreover, she argues 'that accounts of war are always authored' and that 'the gap between the experience and the representation of conflict can be narrowed but never completely eliminated' (2011: 20).

The work of these scholars has shown that there is still ample research material available for examining the questions raised by the conflict. And this current volume is obviously not remotely intended as any sort of final word or judgement on Great War narratives; nevertheless, it is meant to counter some of the final words that have been offered.

This collection works towards focussing on the *myriad faces of war* with the aim of achieving a better understanding of the essential continuities, transformations and mutual dependence between persuasive and dissonant narratives, partly by proposing new frameworks of interpretation, and partly by exploring the broader implications of the critical work outlined above. Our study is an engagingly new approach to First World War literary studies in that, beyond a thorough evaluation of the discrepant discourses that we have already discussed, it uses this evaluation; first, to suggest that the state-soldier dichotomy is not as absolute or solid as is often suggested and that the reality is far less conveniently *categorisable*; second, that there is, in fact, a simultaneous and predictive validity to these alternative discourses, and that both of them in their own ways and for their own purposes conceal and reveal truths.

Our study therefore dramatizes a leap in war representations that should be addressed by further critical research and new textual evidence, rather than compelling a hasty selection of or serious dependence upon either the dissonant or the persuasive approaches. Ultimately, this collection expands on the work carried out on war literature to date, by proposing that there is no explicit literary language that can be regarded as *the* language of the Great War or can ever hope to represent it in its entirety, and that the complexity of responses to such a disturbingly multiple experience points to the need to acknowledge the relevance of individual testimonies over dominant perceptions.

Through emphasis on the variety and complexity of Great War narratives and on the idea that an understanding of the Great War requires the fuller appreciation of its literary representations, this collection brings together the contributions of literary scholars working in the area of war representations, their production and reception, their circulation and, in the case of canonical texts, the causes and effects of their wide legitimization. But, as Professor Christopher Clark—one of Britain's foremost specialists in the study of the Great War—has said of such revisionism, '[t]his doesn't mean embracing a vulgar presentism that remakes the past to meet the needs of the present. Rather, it means acknowledging those features of the past where our changed vantage point can afford us a clearer view' (2013: 3).

The chapters in the collection revolve around a core framework of concerns designated by their section headings. Part 1, 'Reasserting Tradition: The Solace of the Familiar' focuses on the ways in which British soldiers and civilians coped emotionally with the terrible losses caused by the war. The two chapters contained in this section suggest that the traditional and the familiar were still ideally powerful during the war, functioning as positive images to set against the fragmenting and undermining effects of Great War anxieties. In Chapter 1, Bill Phillips adds significantly to the collection's consideration of the uncertainty resulting from the vanishing of the signposts and the blurring of the boundaries of dominant war discourses. Explicitly focusing on how the death of his son at the front affected Kipling's response to the Great War, Phillips suggests that the writer seeks refuge in the ideal of brotherhood that freemasonry provided in an attempt to preserve the continuity of his conformity to imperial and romantic notions but inevitably deflects it in a new direction. In Phillips' view, an overt misogynistic approach to female characters, also shared by some of the most consistent anti-war writers, brings Kipling's war trauma to the domestic space and to the perverse fantasies that took hold of popular imagination after the war ended.

In his reading of Austen's novels as part of the recuperative therapy that shell-shocked soldiers were given at the Home Front, David Owen (Chapter 2) assesses

not only the ways in which Austen's tranquil world might have appealed to traumatised combatants, bringing them a much-needed reminder of calm, order and decency, but the underlying ideas that may have led hospital specialists to recommend this non-canonical writer to mentally wounded soldiers. Moreover, Owen further explores the ways in which the military authorities and government at home used the sentiments and ideals of pre-war England portrayed in Austen's novels as propaganda to reinforce the legitimacy of their war aims and 'strengthen' the soldiers' commitment to the war effort.

Part 2, 'Quiet Desperation: Returning Home to Another War' focuses on the immediate aftermath of the Great War as a crucial period in the redefinition of gender roles and as an endless source of anxieties for both returning soldiers and nurses. In Chapter 3, Donna Coates explores the aftermaths of war through a detailed reading of the novel *Tell* (2014), by Canadian writer Frances Itani. Coates engages with the return of a physically and mentally traumatised soldier and with the situations of anxiety regarding the soldier's adjustment to his old life and to the relationship with his wife at home. The chapter looks at the powerful ways in which the *conspiracy* of silence that surrounded the experience of war after 1918 made it difficult not only for people on the Home Front to discuss the war but also for survivors to integrate this with the rest of their lives. Coates argues that male bonding among veterans and the reconnection with the land and with the community at home play a significant role in survivors' attempts to break the silence, to mourn their losses and to prevent the annexation of war memories from recollection.

This section is also intended to discuss how women's writings during and after the conflict portray the traumatic effects and transformative potential of the return to the *domestic harmony* that had been destabilised during the war by the masculinisation of the home front and the feminisation of the battlefield. Such gender-related effects and transformations are the subject of Laurie Kaplan's chapter (Chapter 4), which examines the ways in which British and American women writers dramatise the contrast between the excitement of hospital war work abroad and the idleness of enforced demobilisation for nurses, VADs, and ambulance drivers after the war ended. Having proved their capabilities and intelligence, and having faced danger and loss as they fulfilled their duties, women return from war service to find that their skills count less than the ability to be 'womanly'. Kaplan analyses some of tropes in the selected texts as vehicles for the exploration of new ideas about female gender roles, which are often removed from the conventional marriage-children-home triad that dominated society's recommendations for women at the end of the war.

Part 3, 'The Great War in Words: Telling the Untellable', confronts the representational crisis that resulted from the experience of modern warfare. The

three writers examined here, Lewis Grassie Gibbon, Patrick MacGill and Ford Madox Ford, point to the difficulty of representing what seems to be unrepresentable by traditional literary means but, at the same time, the writers feel the need to be truthful in their depiction of the war and to reflect what was seen as a radical sense of discontinuity with the literary past. The consideration of narrative strategies, as crucial means for examining war representations, is evident in Andrew Monnickendam's chapter (Chapter 5). He reads Gibbon's *Sunset Song* (1932) as a remarkable hybrid: a combination of the historical novel and stream of consciousness. Unlike the scholarship that has focused almost exclusively on the writer's ambivalent attitude towards nationalism and gender, added to his espousal to socialism, Monnickendam discusses Gibbon's handling of the Great War both as a catalyst of or metaphor for class war or gender war but also as a defining factor of Scottish life and literature. His framework of analysis revolves around the final section of the novel, in which war is not simply a trope but the field of action both in presence, in the fate of its characters, and in absence, in the scenario of the wealthier than-ever home front, made prosperous by the war that simultaneously threatens the lives of its inhabitants.

Brian Dillon (Chapter 6) addresses Patrick MacGill's war trilogy as an exponent of the anti-dissent narratives published while the Great War was unfolding and illustrates how fundamentally unstable and contingent narratives can become when making sense of the war. Dillon argues that despite the fascinating details and vivid set pieces MacGill incorporates in his war texts, there are also frustrating omissions for readers whose comprehension of the war is filtered through the canonical war writers published after 1918. Weak closures to episodes, religious references and peculiar responses to death might reveal MacGill's unwillingness to engage in meaningful reflection on the role religion may play in the irrational violence he records or to envision a post-war existence. Based precisely on these insights, Dillon's chapter focuses on the ways these interpretative gaps can be bridged and overcome.

The need to understand the connection between war memories and their representation is also highlighted by Cristina Pividori (Chapter 7). Drawing on trauma-based literary readings, she focuses on Ford Madox Ford's quasi-autobiographical tetralogy *Parade's End* (1924–1928) to examine what writing as remembering might entail in terms of the choice of literary forms. Pividori claims that, as a first-person witness, Ford makes efforts to reflect adequately what the war meant to him; yet he acknowledges the existence of a gap in his experience that cannot be readily accessible through language or conscious thought. The chapter then builds around Ford's failure to encounter the reality of the Great War in all its traumatic complexity and around his reliance on

literary impressionism as the means through which a number of conflicting voices representing his experience in the trenches strive to find expression against the mandates of the dominant dissenting and persuasive forms.

Part 4, 'Between Happy Warrior and Bitter Pacifist', discusses texts both fictional and poetic that are not completely or clearly dissonant or persuasive in their responses to the war. They adopt ambiguous attitudes, combining messages that condemn the alienation and waste of war but that also voice a reassertion of heroic ideals in the face of the destruction not only of life, but of values and beliefs. The assumption that some elements of dissonance and persuasion can be traced in Canadian works has inspired Monique Dumontet's chapter (Chapter 8). Based on the notion of the cultural continuity of the myth of sacrifice in Vance's *Death so Noble* (1998), Dumontet examines Philip Child's novel *God's Sparrows* (1937) as a representative example of Canadian combatant narratives of the Great War located in the middle ground between *tales of the happy battalion* and *the Old Lie*. She claims that *God's Sparrows* achieves a more balanced and more inclusive portrait of the war not only by valorising multiple perspectives, including those from the home front as well as the battlefield, and various attitudes towards the war, including pacifism, jingoism, spiritualism, and existentialism, but also by evoking and affirming historical and social continuity.

In a similar vein, Andrew Palmer's chapter (Chapter 9) explores the forcefulness—or avoidance—of rhetorical strategies employed by war poets in their attempt to capture the experience of war either through persuasive or dissonant arguments. The discussion develops around the idea that the strongest poetry of the war problematises the terms of that debate, offering ambiguity, nuance and contradiction in a mode that is specifically poetic. Palmer firstly explores the ways in which some poems, apparently written in support of the war, can be read as performances in which the speaker attempts to persuade himself of the rightness of the war while simultaneously undermining the argument. Secondly, he focuses on poems that are rarely anthologised, drawing attention to the ways in which they resist the discourses of persuasion and dissonance.

Adding to this collection's interest in studying war representations is the fact that the Great War has also shaped, and in its constantly evolving representations continues to shape, the identities of other nations and communities. The chapters in Part 5, 'The Subaltern Speaks', share the emphasis on voices from former colonies and different racial and ethnic groups that made themselves heard against the dominant European narratives, bringing attention not only to the *world* character of the war but to the shaping of their *national* identities. Aspects of subalternity are focused on in Esther Pujolràs'

chapter (Chapter 10), particularly those connected with the involvement of East Africa in the Great War and with the shaping of its national narratives in their explicit and/or implicit deconstruction of colonial affiliations. Pujolràs discusses Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise* (1994) and Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* (1989) and *The Book of Secrets* (1994) as deflected narratives of war in which the *colonial home* is contained in forms of bullying imperial practice and of a desire to refashion space into a *home* liberated from British and German allegiances. The chapter contends that, in the same way that the *Scramble for Africa* foreshadowed the First World War, the state of irretrievable homelessness that the war created among East African people prefigured the upcoming struggles for independence.

Drawing on the Jamaican experience, Richard Smith (Chapter 11) illustrates how different interpretations of the Great War became intertwined with the collective memory of the nation itself. On the one hand, the chapter addresses pro-imperial feeling, particularly among the lighter-skinned middle class, who comprised the core readership of the two most popular newspapers (the weekly *Jamaica Times* and *The Daily Gleaner*) and who sensed loyalty would produce enhanced status post war. On the other, it analyses the discordant voices of writers influenced by millenarian traditions, who voiced opposition to the war for the impact it had on the Jamaican population or who believed the war marked the end times of the British Empire. However, Smith argues that these divergent attitudes were ultimately connected through the anticipation of post-war redemption; whether a more equitable imperial relationship, a millennial heaven on earth or Jamaican national independence.

Part 6, 'The Soldier and the Other' turns to male relational patterns as a key element in the representation of masculinities at war. By examining the soldiers' attitudes towards the figure of the friend and the father, these chapters outline the development of male bonding as a complex phenomenon, tracing the ways in which hegemonic masculinity governed and restricted male relationships at the war front. Although literary representations of the experiences of combatants and non-combatants have, in recent years, received a great deal of critical attention, Silvia Mergenthal's chapter (Chapter 12) reassesses a highly complex as well as controversial issue: the notion that *the generation of 1914* was a generation of young men who, both during the war and in its aftermath, had been deceived, betrayed, and abandoned by their elders. Mergenthal discusses H. G. Wells's novel *Mr Britling Sees It Through* (1916) as an early fictional engagement with the discourse of negative paternity, a discourse that will subsequently become a prominent feature of First World War literature. The chapter not only explores the impact of the First World War on the British Home Front as refracted in the changing attitudes to the war of

Wells' middle-aged, middle-class protagonist, but also suggests that the boundaries between *home front* and *war front* are anything but impermeable.

Sara Martín (Chapter 13) further explores the representation of male bonding—in this case, male friendship—in two interesting examples of the middlebrow First World War novel, Wilfrid Ewart's *The Way of Revelation* (1921) and Ernest Raymond's *Tell England: A Study in a Generation* (1922). Based on the notion, developed by Gay and Queer Studies, of the homoeroticism at the core of heterosexual friendships, Martín claims that, despite the efforts of scholars in these fields, homophobia has actually increased in recent years, now that it is progressively harder to represent men's friendship in fiction (particularly in extreme situations like war) as other than concealed homosexual desire. In that sense, the two novels under study are presented as strangely refreshing in the 21st century, as they are both openly aware of the homoerotic overtones of men's friendship.

Among the avenues of literary production that remained opened to writers during the Great War, children's literature merits special attention. The chapters in Part 7, 'The Children's War' focus on how children's literature was used not only to educate children about the realities of the Great War but also to mould the thought of a whole generation based on the dominant cultural interpretations of the conflict. Dorothea Flothow's chapter (Chapter 14) examines the ways by which children's writers attempted to come to terms with the war and its developments, both by reacting to new developments in warfare, such as the trenches, poison gas or mass mobilisation, as well as by drawing on stereotypes and narrative strategies that had already been used to glorify previous, imperial conflicts. Flothow's contention is that children's writers, producing a form of unofficial war propaganda, in fact went to great lengths to downplay the special nature of the Great War, thus making it conceivable for a young audience. By comparing novels from the pre-war decade with those of the early war years, Flothow highlights both the changes and, particularly, the continuities in the presentation of war and of the German enemy.

With a focus on British and Canadian fiction and non-fiction published from 1914–1919, including poetry, short stories, novels, periodicals and textbooks, Elizabeth Galway's essay (Chapter 15) explores some of the paradoxical representations of the war found in wartime children's literature; ones which reflect differing attitudes towards the war on the part of adult authors, as well as inconsistent notions of children and childhood. Her chapter considers examples of both militaristic and pacifist sentiment, examines competing views of national and imperial identities, explores shifting representations of gender roles, and investigates the ways in which this literature reveals complex notions of childhood, including the concern that the war posed a threat not only to the lives of individual children, but to the existence of childhood itself.

Added to the sense of urgency in studying the contrasting meanings of the Great War, these seven sections investigate subject choices (what is deliberately revealed and concealed), the question of experience and agency, and the aesthetic and ideological issues that arise so many decades later when engaging with the complex and ever-controversial idea of setting the record straight. In the attempt to frame not only the uniqueness of the literature emerging in response to the Great War but also its significance as a site of contest between the languages of persuasion and dissonance, this book assesses the extent to which the different attitudes towards the war experience redefine crucial aspects of traditional war narratives and combine them with the seemingly ironic perceptions characteristic of the literature of disillusionment. As the centennial commemorations of the Great War begin to take place across Europe and further afield, we want to stress the idea that memory is constantly developing and triggering different and even divergent responses from those involved in the process of remembering. Above all, we hope that the essays in this collection—by promoting a balanced and thought-through response to the horrors of conflict, and of its aftermaths, will play their own small part in giving the lie to Hardy's bleak premonition that the end of enlightenment and understanding is almost upon us, and will help show that, precisely through calibrated and sensitive response to such a dramatic breakdown in all that is decent and humane, *'better whiles may follow worse'*.

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