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Inventing Literary Modernism at the Outbreak of the Great War

Accounts of English-language literary modernism and the first world war often, and rightly, emphasize the post-war works in which modernist writers established what Samuel Hynes has called “the Myth of the War”: “the notion, partly true and partly imagined, that the war created a vast gap between the pre-war and the post-war world.”¹ Critics have recognized the role of the major modernists in creating this myth in such post-war works as Ezra Pound’s *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920), T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922), Virginia Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room* (1922), *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), and *To the Lighthouse* (1927), as well as less obviously war-related books such as James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) and W. B. Yeats’s *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919) and *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921).² In this essay, I would like to call attention to the more immediate reactions to the outbreak of war and the extent to which these set the pattern for the later developments of the war myth. In particular, the theme of redemptive violence, omnipresent in contemporary reactions to the war, continued to shape modernism for years to come.³

English modernism was invented during the first world war (not, I believe, after it) by writers who had little direct involvement in the war. The work of soldier-poets, such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, made a great difference in changing literary tastes in the period, but the major contribution to the development of a distinctive English “modernism” was made by such non-combatants as Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Joyce, and D. H. Lawrence. Although these men were not directly involved in the war and often proclaimed their indifference to it, the war did influence their perception of their literary tasks. After surveying the immediate responses to the

war of the modernists and their elders, this essay will explore the ways in which the modernists' later poetry refers back to themes raised in the early months of the war and even to the most popular poetry of the first months of the war, that of Rupert Brooke. I shall argue that Brooke, who is often seen as belonging to an entirely pre-modernist, "Georgian" tradition, in fact offered an important model for the modernists' attempts to write about the war, even as Pound, Yeats, and Lawrence grappled with idioms closer to what would eventually become modernism. Many of the major works of the post-war period drew on experiments undertaken by the avant-gardes in the years before the war, but the war re-directed these experiments. The modernists increasingly sought to understand and make their poetry express the transformative power of history. This meant both a new concern with change and a new assessment of literary tradition, which the modernists viewed in an increasingly positive light. At the same time, writers who had aimed before the war at developing an impersonal and almost timeless style, suited—as Pound wrote—for "direct treatment of the 'thing,'" became more concerned during the war with the expression of subjective experience.⁴

Three factors, I believe, account for the shift from "objectivity" to "subjectivity" in modernist literary experiment during the first world war. First, the imagist emphasis on objectivity and direct perception had played itself out in the typical short imagist poems of the pre-war era. The sense that imagism had reached an impasse undoubtedly influenced the splintering of the imagist movement into vorticism on the one hand and Amy Lowell's "Amygism" on the other shortly after the publication of the anthology *Des Imagistes* in March, 1914. In order to achieve something longer and more ambitious, something appropriate to the scale of the wartime experience, the modernists returned to questions of subjectivity. Second, two writers who had not been involved in the pre-war avant-gardes, Eliot and Joyce, came to the

forefront of modernism by the end of the war. While sharing some of Pound's rhetoric concerning the rejection of romanticism, these two writers also showed a greater continuity with the nineteenth-century legacy, including the problems of consciousness that had earlier been explored by such precursors as Gustave Flaubert, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad. Finally, revulsion against the war caused many writers to suspect that artistic abstraction had failed to address human questions vital to the function of art. The attentiveness to subjectivity, history, and tradition allowed the modernists to develop techniques and themes that had resonance beyond the coterie audiences of the avant-gardes.⁵ The greatest force contributing to the development of modernism after the war, however, was the sense of a radical discontinuity between the pre-war and the post-war worlds. The war seemed to have changed everything, and modernist literature found as its subject the nature of these changes. The modernists sensed the beginnings of these changes as early as August, 1914.

The social forces that were to transform English life in the post-war period—feminism, socialism, and anti-imperialism—were already at work before the war.⁶ Yet, in retrospect, the *belle époque* of the pre-war years sometimes appeared as a time of untroubled self-confidence, in which the authority of the crown, the empire, capital, and men was secure. Even the experiments of the avant-garde movements themselves later seemed to have been signs of an optimism that the war destroyed. Those in the older generation of writers often saw the onset of war as opening a radical gap with the past, and they sometimes felt frustrated at their inability to become actively engaged in the war effort. Henry James described the onset of war as “the plunge of civilization into this abyss of blood and darkness” and felt that it undermined his faith in pre-war civilization.⁷ “I go to sleep, as if I were dog-tired with action, yet feel like the chilled vieillards in the old epics, infirm and helpless at home with the women, while the plains are ringing with

battle.”⁸ James became an active volunteer for war causes, such as service to Belgian refugees and wounded British soldiers; he even became Chairman of the American Volunteer Motor Ambulance Corps in France. Joseph Conrad, stranded in Russian-controlled Poland, spent the first two months of the war trying to get back to England. Once he arrived there, he felt a similar sense of futility: “I am painfully aware of being crippled, of being idle, of being useless with a sort of absurd anxiety, as though it could matter to the greatness of the Empire.”⁹ H. G. Wells wrote a series of pro-war articles in the first month of the war collected later that year as *The War That Will End War*, a title later remembered with irony. Wells undertook a campaign to start a national volunteer corps. He concluded one of his propagandistic articles: “nobody wants to be a non-combatant in a war of this sort.”¹⁰ These older men, in many ways inspirations to the modernists, were far more enthusiastic about the war than their literary heirs.

The government was prepared to put these older writers to work. On September 2, C. F. G. Masterman, head of the new Department of Information, invited Arnold Bennett, G. K. Chesterton, Arthur Conan Doyle, John Galsworthy, Thomas Hardy, Wells, and others to Wellington House to undertake a literary propaganda effort.¹¹ One of the first and best products of this initiative, Thomas Hardy’s “Men Who March Away” (written on September 5 and published in *The Times* on September 9), typifies the patriotic intention of the best-known poetry of the first months of the war. Subtitled “Song of the Soldiers,” it describes the emotions of the departing soldiers. In the second stanza, they address a skeptical on-looker, “Friend with the musing eye,” who suspects that the war is nothing but a “purblind prank.” The soldiers believe “In [their] heart of hearts” that “Victory crowns the just.” Hardy’s frequent theme of blind and hostile fate, in his late novels and such poems as “God’s Funeral” (1908-1910), seems here strangely reversed, with the poem’s speakers emphasizing the ways of Providence. Fatalism is

attributed only to the skeptical friend.¹² Yet among the major writers of the period, the confidence that “Victory crowns the just” and even the desire to contribute to the war effort, seem to have been felt more by the older generation than by those of combat age. The younger modernists, Pound, Eliot, and Joyce, and even their older patron Yeats, resembled Hardy’s “Friend with the musing eye” rather than his faithful soldiers.

During the first years of the war, conservative critics could take comfort in the decline of the pre-war avant-garde. Some young pre-war writers, including T. E. Hulme, enlisted, and journals that had published modern writing, such as *Poetry and Drama*, edited by Harold Monro, and Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis’s *BLAST*, closed down. A number of important cultural figures, including D. H. Lawrence, Clive and Vanessa Bell, Leonard and Virginia Woolf, Aldous Huxley, George Bernard Shaw, and the philosopher Bertrand Russell, more or less openly opposed the war. However, their anti-war writings were for the most part not poems, plays, or novels, but essays and pamphlets; Russell eventually went to prison for one of his anti-war pamphlets. Many in this group, too, sensed imminent catastrophe in the initial months of the war. Roger Fry said that “It is over with all our ideas and all the really important things for many years,” and Virginia Woolf reported that Clive Bell and Lady Ottoline Morrell thought the war “was the end of civilisation, and the rest of our lives was worthless.”¹³ Forster wrote to Malcolm Darling on November 6, “The newspapers still talk about glory but the average man, thank God, has got rid of that illusion. It is a damned bore, with a stale mate as the most probable outcome, but one has to see it through, and see it through with the knowledge that whichever side wins, civilization in Europe will be pipped for the next 30 years.”¹⁴ Shaw produced as many protests against the war as his friend Wells did propaganda articles in favor of it.

Yet, important as the anti-war Bloomsbury group was, the major influences on modernism came from a less politically committed set. The non-combatant poets tended at first to avoid direct engagement with the war as a subject matter for their poetry. To some extent, the modernists' hesitance to write of war resulted from their own lack of military experience. In response to Henry James's request for a poem to be published in Edith Wharton's *The Book of the Homeless* in aid of the Belgian refugees, Yeats offered him "On Being Asked for a War Poem" (written February, 1915), in which he wrote, "I think it better that at times like these / We poets keep our mouths shut, for in truth / We have no gift to set a statesman right." Behind the apparent modesty of Yeats's claims about the role of poets lies the implication that the true subjects of poetry are more profound even than war. The six-line poem concludes: "He has had enough of meddling who can please / A young girl in the indolence of her youth, / Or an old man upon a winter's night." These apparently simple functions are those Yeats will later attribute to art in "Sailing to Byzantium." In late 1914, according to Yeats's biographer R. F. Foster, "the war still seemed to him a strange interlude where people endlessly told each other untrue stories."¹⁵ The erotic truths of poetry stand in contrast to the militaristic lies of war. Pound, too, wrote an anti-war-poetry poem, "War Verse," which began: "O two-penny poets, be still!" It remained unpublished during his lifetime.¹⁶

Along similar lines, D. H. Lawrence had refused to enter a war poetry contest sponsored by Harriet Monroe's journal *Poetry*: "I am not in the war zone. I think I am much too valuable a creature to offer myself to a German bullet gratis and for fun. Neither shall I go in for your war poem. The nearest I could get to it would be in the vein of The owl and the pussy cat went to sea / In a beautiful peagreen boat."¹⁷ Lawrence hated the war number of *Poetry* that resulted from the contest, and wrote in response to it his own "war poem," "Passages from Ecce Homo." In

the revised version, published in *The Egoist* in May, 1915, as “Eloi Eloi Lama Sabachthani?,” the poem describes the bloodthirstiness and masochistic tendencies of a soldier before imploring God for expiation: “Why should we hate, then, with this hate incarnate? / Why am I bridegroom of War, war’s paramour? / What is the crime, that my seed is turned to blood, / My kiss to wounds?”¹⁸ As in Yeats’s poems, there seems to be a competition between sexual and destructive instincts. For Yeats, the choice is between writing poems about war or poems presumably about love that will appeal to young girls and old men. For Lawrence, the war is more directly a perversion of the sexual instinct: seed turned to blood.

One of the few early poems on the war by a card-carrying modernist, Ford Madox Hueffer’s “Antwerp” (January, 1915), is in many ways closer to the mood of Hardy than of Yeats or Lawrence. Hueffer, grandson of Ford Madox Brown and son of a German journalist and music critic, anglicized his name to Ford Madox Ford only after the war at the behest of his publisher. He was friendly with the propaganda minister Masterman and, although not among the first group of writers enlisted by him (perhaps because of his German parentage), Ford did eventually write two propaganda novels.¹⁹ Written before either of the novels, the poem “Antwerp” concerns the mystery of why the Belgians resisted the German invasion when it would have been easier to let the Germans pass through on their way to France. Lines like “And you will say of all heroes, ‘They fought like the Belgians!’” do not seem terribly modernist, and yet T. S. Eliot called “Antwerp” “the only good poem I have met with on the subject of the war.” Eliot may have admired the many mythological parallels that Ford draws between his ordinary Belgians and the heroes of Greek or Norse legend. The most Eliotic moment in the poem occurs, however, near its end, with the nightmare vision of Belgian refugees at Charing Cross, mothers “And little children, all in black, / All with dead faces, waiting in all the waiting-

places.” The clearest echo of the poem in later modernist literature occurs in Yeats’s “Easter, 1916,” whose famous lines “All changed, changed utterly / A Terrible beauty is born” may be indebted to Ford’s “But that clutter of sodden corpses / On the sodden Belgian grass— / That is a strange new beauty.” Not only these lines but the general theme of ordinary reality transformed and sanctified by unexpected violence carries over from “Antwerp” to “Easter, 1916.”²⁰

Yeats’s poem, probably the most famous of all the war-time poems, although concerned with the Irish Easter Rising rather than, strictly speaking, the first world war, marked a new direction for modernism. Although Yeats had already written poetry on public topics, notably in the poems on Parnell, Synge, and the Hugh Lane controversy in *Responsibilities* (published in May, 1914), the modernists in general had tended to shy away from poetry that took direct stances on public affairs, especially unambiguously patriotic, religious, or moralistic stances. Sir Henry Newbolt, among the most popular poets of the pre-war years, had written approvingly that the literary public demands from the poet “that he shall chant to them...their own morality, their own religion, their own patriotism.”²¹ The war made such affirmations of conventional beliefs appear hollow. As against Newbolt’s idea of the poet chanting to the public “their own morality,” Pound wrote in a letter, “The public can go to the devil.”²² Despite their rejection of moralistic or explicitly political poetry and their hostility to the “public,” however, both Pound and Yeats soon sought to comment on contemporary events. One of the signs of this engagement with contemporary history was Yeats’s publication of “September, 1913,” among the first of many modernist poems to have a date in the title. The renewed attention to politics, society, and even economics in the poetry of this period helped to define a new “modernist” voice, in contrast with the relative detachment and aestheticism of the same poets’ work before the war.

Between 1913 and 1916, Pound and Yeats shared a stone cottage in Sussex, where they studied occult lore, Chinese poetry, and Japanese Noh drama.²³ Pound served as Yeats's secretary, and Yeats praised the younger man for helping him to "eliminate the abstract" from his poetry, although Pound learned much from Yeats too about how to write modern poetry. The imagist principle of favoring the concrete over the abstract combined, during the war, with a new concern to speak of public events. Such speech differed, however, from the preaching advocated by Newbolt. Yeats wrote that "We make out of our quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of our quarrel with ourselves, poetry." In their representations of contemporary history, the modernists sought to dramatize the quarrels with themselves that public events inspired. As a result, their representation of history is often obscure and indirect. Yeats made many of his political opinions into poetry. He did so, however, not in the manner of Kipling by creating political slogans, but instead by delving into the complexity of his reactions to major historical developments. Though speaking his own opinions, Yeats was thus also creating a persona, a word of considerable importance to both Pound and Yeats, who was interested in the Greek use of masks (*personae*) in theater. Pound had used the term in the title of his second book of poems, *Personae and Exultations of Ezra Pound* (1913).

In Yeats's poems on political subjects, it is often the persona that Yeats has created, rather than the slogan or the content of his opinions, that makes the poem memorable. In "Easter, 1916," Yeats recognized that the Easter Rising, led by radicals of whose politics and violence he did not approve, had transformed not just the political situation of Ireland but the spiritual state of the nation. The poem commemorates the deaths of sixteen Irishmen executed by the English for their roles in the uprising (and one woman imprisoned for her role in the events). The phrase "terrible beauty" expresses Yeats's ambivalence, but the main theme of the poem is Yeats's

dramatization of his own struggle to comprehend the meaning of the event. In the last stanza of the poem, he asks a series of rhetorical questions: “O when may it suffice?,” “What is it but nightfall?,” “Was it needless death after all?” “And what if excess of love / Bewildered them till they died?” Yet, although the questions are rhetorical, “Easter, 1916” is, in Yeats’s terms, poetry and not rhetoric precisely because Yeats cannot answer these questions for himself and he does not assume that there is any easy answer to them. All that he can do is record the names of those who died in this event that he cannot quite comprehend.

“Easter, 1916” was completed in September, 1916. By this time, the longer-term effect of the war on poetry began to make itself felt as a change in poetic taste that accelerated some of the trends already introduced by avant-garde poets like the imagists.²⁴ The war facilitated a transformation of English literary tradition exemplified in the changing status of the corpse in wartime and post-war poetry. The best-known of all war poems was “The Soldier,” the fifth of Rupert Brooke’s “1914” sonnets, published in January, 1915, and made famous by being read aloud as part of Dean Inge’s Easter Sunday sermon at St. Paul’s Cathedral on April 4, 1915, shortly before Brooke’s death of blood-poisoning while on service in the Aegean on April 23. Brooke was commemorated by Winston Churchill in the *Times* as England’s “poet-soldier.”²⁵ In a more private idiom, Henry James had written to Edward Marsh, Brooke’s literary executor and a close friend of Churchill’s, shortly before Brooke’s death: “Splendid Rupert—to be the soldier that could beget [these poems] on the Muse! and lucky Muse, not less, who could have an affair with a soldier and yet feel herself not guilty of the least deviation.”²⁶ The glamorous Rupert Brooke seemed perfectly cast as the lover of the Muse and then as the martyred poet-soldier.

The war began with the great expectations of glory typified by Brooke’s lines, “Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour, / And caught our youth, and wakened us

from sleeping.” Like Hardy, who addresses the “Friend with the musing eye,” Brooke displays a certain scorn for those unprepared for war, suggesting that the soldiers must leave behind “half-men, and their dirty songs and dreary, / And all the little emptiness of love!” Where Lawrence and Yeats would see love as the truth and war as a lie, Brooke reverses the valuation. Typically, Brooke invokes a human, pre-war world of corruption or weakness before associating the soldiers with a timeless and natural world that transcends this corruption. Death emerges as the most natural of phenomena and a safe resting-place: “the worst friend and enemy is but Death.” Death becomes a heritage that the modern soldier receives from those who have in the past “poured out the red / Sweet wine of youth” (blood). In the fourth of the sonnets (one of two titled “The Dead”), Brooke describes the life that the war dead have left behind with the words before a turn in the eighth line: “All this is ended.” The remaining sestet turns toward nature and imagines the world after death in terms of a beautiful deserted landscape, “a gathered radiance, / A width, a shining peace, under the night.” In “The Soldier,” the grave becomes a site of a natural, almost pantheistic rebirth: “If I should die think only this of me: / That there’s some corner of a foreign field / That is forever England.” Here the imagined (and idealized) corpse of the poet returns to nature and sanctifies it in the process. Over three thousand volumes of war poetry were published during and after the first world war, and much of this poetic outpouring consisted of pale imitations of Brooke.²⁷

Although immensely popular at the time, Brooke’s sonnets, written before he had any experience of battle, were later eclipsed by the more graphic representations of corpses in the poetry of writers who had experienced trench warfare. Shortly after the war, for example, Siegfried Sassoon would write:

Do you remember the dark months you held the sector at Mametz—
The nights you watched and wired and dug and piled sandbags on parapets?

Do you remember the rats; and the stench
Of corpses rotting in front of the front-line trench—
And dawn coming, dirty-white, and chill with a hopeless rain?
Do you ever stop and ask, 'Is it all going to happen again?'

Corpses here have none of the dignity afforded them in Brooke's poems; they are merely decaying flesh. The new diction—rats, corpses, stench—reflected a new rhetorical stance. Poets who were themselves combatants, including Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, and Ivor Gurney, tended to be skeptical of the consoling function of poetry. These combatant poets created enduring images of the futility of war, typified in such frequently anthologized works as Owen's "Dulce et decorum est," Rosenberg's "Break of Day in the Trenches," and Gurney's "The Silent One."

The most important literary historians of the war, Paul Fussell and Samuel Hynes, rightly emphasize the extent to which the major poetry about the war and the leading modernists rejected or ironized Brooke's idealism.²⁸ Yet, while Sassoon, Owen, Rosenberg, and Gurney established the lasting images and diction for understanding the war, echoes of the earlier, idealizing poetry of Brooke remain in the major modernist poetry of the interwar period, particularly where the question of redemptive violence is concerned. In Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), these wartime images of death and decay play a notable role, most memorably in the conversation between two veterans who meet near London bridge after the war: "'Stetson! / 'You who were with me in the ships at Mylae! / 'That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / 'Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year? / 'Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?'" The war is the essential background to the poem, but instead of referring to it directly, Eliot alludes to the battle of Mylae in the Punic Wars of the third century B.C.E., suggesting that all wars are in reality one war.

In *The Waste Land*, the fact that the first world war was fought not primarily on ships but in trenches is expressed only indirectly through the idea of the sprouting corpse, which seems a grotesque parody of Brooke's image of the foreign burial plot as "forever England." Similarly, the poem's "rats' alley" owes something to the rats that appear in poetry about trench warfare by such war poets as Sassoon. Later, Eliot casually introduces the minor character Albert, Lil's husband, a demobilized soldier. History enters the poem not as a subject for direct treatment but through snatches of overheard dialogue. Yet, Brooke presides over the poem not only as the object of ironic reversal. The "Lilacs out of the dead land" in the second line of *The Waste Land* recall the first line of Brooke's "The Old Vicarage, Grantchester" (1912): "just now the lilac is in bloom," and figuratively Brooke is one of the martyrs (along with Thomas à Becket, Abraham Lincoln, and the dead of the Great War) who haunt the opening lines of Eliot's poem.

Yeats's use of the Easter myth in "Easter, 1916" also lies in the background of Eliot's *Waste Land*. In "Easter, 1916," in addition to the echoes of Ford already noted, Yeats uses an image popular in the period and also found in Brooke, that of the mother comforting a child. The sixth poem published with Brooke's five "1914" sonnets, "The Treasure," ends with the poet counting memories "as a mother, who / Has watched her children all the rich day through / Sits, quiet-handed, in the fading light, / When children sleep, ere night." Henry James used a similar image in an interview published in the *New York Times* on March 21, 1915, concerning his efforts for the Ambulance Corps: "It is not for the wounded to oblige us by making us showy, but for us to let them count on our open arms and open lap as troubled children count on those of their mother."²⁹ The non-combatant as mother who must protect and comfort the wounded or dying child-soldier seems to have been a powerful metaphor and one belonging to the public imagination of the era. Nonetheless, it seems likely that Yeats had Brooke's lines in mind when

he wrote a poem about martyrdom with a date in the title, "Easter, 1916." That poem ends with Yeats imagining the poet's task in commemorating the dead as akin to a mother's: "our part / To murmur name upon name, / As a mother names her child / When sleep at last has come / On limbs that had run wild." Yeats's version of the image includes a corrective to Brooke's, however: "What is it but nightfall? / No, no, not night but death." Although Yeats knew perfectly well that he was turning the real deaths of the rebels into material for poetry, he called attention to his own idealizing language and corrected it in the course of continuing to idealize the rebellion as martyrdom.

Even the first of Brooke's "1914" sonnets, "Peace," which idealizes war, has its echo in later modernist poetry. Brooke's poem somewhat notoriously compares the soldiers headed off to war to "swimmers into cleanness leaping." This image of the war as (in the futurist Marinetti's phrase) "sole hygiene of the world" helped to form what Samuel Hynes later called the "Myth of the War," the idea that the experience of war created a total break with the pre-war past. Taken up by both militarist and pacifist writers, Brooke's contrast between the pre-war and the post-war worlds finds a distant echo in W. H. Auden's poem, "Spain, 1937," again featuring a date in the title. Auden wrote of the need to turn away from poetry and towards war:

Tomorrow for the young the poets exploding like bombs,

The walks by the lake, the winter of perfect communion;

Tomorrow the bicycle races

Through the suburbs on summer evenings: but to-day the struggle.

In the phrase "the poets exploding like bombs," Auden echoed the militaristic language of the early avant-gardes, as in Pound and Lewis's *BLAST*, but in 1937, he suggested, it was not poetry but real bombs that should concern the young.

Pound himself, while remaining the impresario of imagism, vorticism, and *BLAST*, started to undertake a more far-reaching revision of the English poetic tradition in the first months of the war. In *Cathay* (1915), he published his translations and adaptations of Chinese poetry, based on the notes of the scholar Ernest Fenollosa. The poems, though from various periods of Chinese history, share a tone of nostalgia for a lost past, typified in the “Exile’s Letter”: “And all this comes to an end. / And is not again to be met with.”³⁰ War is a central concern of several of the poems, including the introductory “Song of the Bowmen of Shu” (based on a poem from the 4th century B.C.): “We have no rest, three battles a month. / By heaven, his horses are tired. / The generals are on them, the soldiers are by them / The horses are well trained, the generals have ivory arrows and quivers ornamented with fish-skin” (249). The implicit comparison with the ongoing Great War prefigures Eliot’s tendency in *The Waste Land* to treat all wars as embodying a shared mythical pattern of war. Hints of *The Waste Land* are to be found also in the “Lament of the Frontier Guard”:

A gracious spring, turned to blood-ravenous autumn,
A turmoil of wars-men, spread over the middle kingdom,
Three hundred and sixty thousand,
And sorrow, sorrow like rain.
Sorrow to go, and sorrow, sorrow returning,
Desolate, desolate fields,
And no children of warfare upon them,
No longer the men for offence and defence. (254)

Pound’s *Cathay* reflects the heartsickness of soldiers: “Our mind is full of sorrow, who will know of our grief?” (249). It also tells of the longing of soldier’s wives, a major theme in later war-writing, including notably Rebecca West’s *The Return of the Soldier* (1918). One of the best-known of the *Cathay* poems, “The River-Merchant’s Wife: A Letter,” though not explicitly about war, is spoken by a young woman waiting for her husband’s return: “And you have been gone five months. The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead” (252). Like Henry James

complaining of his status as a *vieillard* or Wells despairing of being a non-combatant, Pound pays special attention to the experiences of those left behind. Although *Cathay* is seldom considered a book about the first world war, it reflects many contemporary concerns and, like some of the later modernist works on the war, views these contemporary events through the filter of ancient myths from another culture.³¹ Pound had greater difficulty in finding his own voice in poetry about the war, but his “1915: February,” again unpublished during his lifetime, does prefigure the condemnation of the war in “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley”: “We are outlaws / This war is not our war, / Neither side is on our side...”³² It is perhaps not surprising that Pound waited to publish such direct condemnation of the war until after it was over.

The other major new influences to be felt in the development of modernism in late 1914 and 1915 were from writers who had not been directly involved in the pre-war avant-garde movements. Pound and Yeats between them made a number of literary “discoveries” of authors living in relative obscurity whom they helped to catapult to leading positions in the modernist movement. Before the war, Yeats had championed the poetry of the Indian nationalist and mystic Rabindrinath Tagore and had assisted him in translating his poems from Bengali to English; Pound published Tagore’s work in *Poetry*. With the help of Yeats and Pound, Tagore rapidly developed a huge European following and won the Nobel Prize in 1913, leading Pound to react against this popularity and include him among the “Blasted” in the 1914 issue of *BLAST*.³³ Pound also took up the cause of Robert Frost, eleven years older than himself, who published his first book of poetry, *A Boy’s Will*, in London in 1913. Pound approved of Frost’s use of the diction of everyday speech, and introduced him to Yeats, whom Frost greatly admired. The setting of Frost’s poems, in rural New England, the apparent unobtrusiveness of his irony, and his attachment to traditional forms militated against his inclusion in any of Pound’s movements,

however. "I'd as soon write free verse," Frost once said, "as play tennis with the net down."

Frost valued his independence and rebuffed Pound's advances. When war came, he returned to America.³⁴

Pound more successfully befriended two writers who later, with his help, would earn reputations as the central figures of English-language modernism, T. S. Eliot and James Joyce. In the second month of the war, Pound met Eliot, a Harvard graduate who was pursuing a Ph.D. in philosophy. Eliot's early poems, including "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," amazed Pound, three years his senior, by their modernity, which Eliot had achieved without any direct contact with avant-garde movements and largely as a result of his own reading of French symbolist poets and of Symons's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899). Pound arranged to have "Prufrock" published in the journal *Poetry* in 1915 and thus launched the career of the most typical poet of "high modernism," who would soon become the leading critical voice of the movement. Eliot's mastery of the rhythms of conversation, to which he gave form in verse, his colloquialisms, witty use of rhyme, and allusions to Dante, Shakespeare and other writers are some of the modern qualities that attracted Pound. Although the poem does not reflect the war experience, having been written in 1910-11, Eliot's early poetry suggests the direction in which modernist poetry would move during and after the war: towards the exploration of the divided consciousness, the theme that Eliot and Pound both associated with Henry James. "Prufrock" is also a precursor of Pound's own *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920), which memorably condemned the entire war in a parody of heroic war poetry: "There died a myriad, / And of the best, among them, / For an old bitch gone in the teeth, / For a botched civilization."

Joyce's relationship to Yeats and Pound was somewhat more distant than Eliot's. Yeats had met Joyce in 1902, when Joyce was twenty and Yeats thirty-seven. Yeats recorded that at

that first meeting Joyce told him, with a sigh: “I have met you too late. You are too old.”³⁵ The older man remained friendly towards the younger and in late 1913 encouraged Pound to write to Joyce, who was barely making a living as an English teacher in Trieste. Pound published one of Joyce’s poems in the imagist anthology and, more importantly, arranged for the publication of Joyce’s novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in installments in *The Egoist*, starting on February 2, 1914 (Joyce’s thirty-second birthday). Joyce had begun the novel ten years earlier, and apparently did not complete it until forced to do so by a deadline in 1915. Joyce moved to Zürich in 1915 after Italian intervention put Trieste (at that time in Austria, but claimed by Italy) near the front line. Pound and Yeats convinced the Royal Literary Fund and the Civil List to grant Joyce the amounts of 75 and 100 pounds respectively, and also arranged some lesser grants, which permitted Joyce to spend the war years working on *Ulysses*, serialized (again due to Pound’s intervention) in the *Little Review* from 1918 onwards, and published in book form on Joyce’s fortieth birthday, February 2, 1922.³⁶ Thus, Pound and Yeats were largely responsible for the rise from obscurity of both the leading poet and the most important novelist of modernism.

The first works that Pound helped Eliot and Joyce to publish, although written largely before the war, were harbingers of the “high” modernism of the 1920s and prefigured some of the typical concerns of later modernism. First among these, perhaps, was the search, never quite fulfilled, for a moment of total insight, what Joyce called an “epiphany,” which would give the answer to the “overwhelming question” that is mentioned but never articulated in Eliot’s “Prufrock.” This sense that life must have an ultimate meaning, but one that can never be made fully explicit, pervades modernism. Conrad had Marlow express it in *Lord Jim* (1900): “Are not our lives too short for that full utterance which through all our stammerings is of course our only

and abiding intention?”³⁷ Both the quest for full knowledge and the recognition of its impossibility are crucial to the modernists. The sheer magnitude of the war-time experience, and the inadequacy of existing literary means to represent it, seems to have helped make this question, first articulated before the war, central to post-war modernism. Another quotation from *Lord Jim* became one emblem of the possible modernist response to the difficulty of achieving such a full utterance: “the way is to the destructive element submit yourself.” Here, the German butterfly collector Stein tells Marlow that that being born is like falling into the sea. To struggle against the waves is futile; rather one must allow the sea to keep one’s body afloat. For the modernists, this signified the impossibility of arriving at a fully commanding view of the culture that surrounded them and that they perceived as being in crisis. It also meant that their literary forms, rather than attempting to arrive at formal perfection, reflected the partial and fragmentary nature of their understanding of their culture. Modernism sought to incorporate the destructive element into the work of art. Although this literary problem preceded the war, it was surely the experience of destruction on such a massive scale that made the destructive element so crucial to the greatest works of literary modernism.³⁸

¹ Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (New York: Atheneum, 1991), p. xi. I am grateful to my research assistant, Sam Alexander, for collecting and sifting materials on the first months of the war, and for his advice on this essay.

² Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined*; Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975); Vincent B. Sherry, *The Great War and the Language of Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). I draw in what follows on these important works, none of which, however, pays extensive attention to the works of the first months of the war that are my primary concern in this essay.

³ On the prevalence of this theme throughout Europe, see Roland N. Stromberg, *Redemption by War: The Intellectuals and 1914* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1982).

⁴ Ezra Pound, "A Retrospect," in *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents*, ed. Vassiliki Kolocotroni, Jane Goldman, and Olga Taxidou (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p. 374

⁵ On the modernists' responses to the war, see James Longenbach, "Modern Poetry" in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, ed. Michael Levenson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1999), pp. 109-118.

⁶ George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (1935; reprint Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

⁷ Quoted in Hynes, *A War Imagined*, 3.

⁸ James to Edith Wharton, August 19, 1914, quoted in Leon Edel, *Henry James* (New York: Avon, 1975), vol. 5, p. 513.

⁹ Conrad to Sir Ralph Wedgewood, November 15, 1914, in G. Jean-Aubry, *Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page, 1927), vol. 2, p. 162.

¹⁰ H.G. Wells, Letter to *The Times*, August 8, 1914, *The Correspondence of H.G. Wells*, ed. David C. Smith. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1998), vol. 1, p. 372.

¹¹ Hynes, *A War Imagined*, pp. 20, 26.

¹² Paul Fussell has noted that Hardy's collection *Satires of Circumstance*, published in November, 1914 and containing many ironic and morbid poems written in the years before the war, set the tone for literary writing about the war. Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 3-7.

¹³ Hynes, *A War Imagined*, p. 10; Woolf to Katherine Cox, August 12, 1914, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), vol. 2, p. 51.

¹⁴ Forster to Malcolm Darling, November 6, 1914, *Selected Letters of E.M. Forster*, ed. Mary Lago and P. N. Furbank (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1983), vol. 1, p. 214.

¹⁵ R. F. Foster, *W. B. Yeats: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997-2003), vol. 1, p. 523.

¹⁶ James Longenbach, *Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats, and Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 115.

¹⁷ Lawrence to Harriet Monroe, October 1, 1914, *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence*, ed. James T. Boulton and George J. Zytaruk (New York: Cambridge UP, 1981), vol. 2, p. 219.

¹⁸ Ernest W. Tedlock, Jr. "A Forgotten War Poem by D. H. Lawrence," *Modern Language Notes* 67 (1952): 410-413.

¹⁹ For a discussion of these novels and the influence of propaganda on Ford's impressionism, see Mark Wollaeger, *Modernism, Media, and Propaganda: British Narrative From 1900 to 1940* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

²⁰ Max Saunders, *Ford Madox Ford : A Dual Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 473.

²¹ Quoted in C. K. Stead, *The New Poetic* (London: Hutchinson, 1964), p. 70.

²² Ezra Pound, *Selected Letters*, ed. D. D. Paige (New York: New Directions, 1971), p. 13.

²³ Their collaboration is studied in detail in James Longenbach, *Stone Cottage*.

²⁴ Hynes notes in particular the new tone of Siegfried Sassoon's poem of November 1916, "The Hero." *A War Imagined*, 154-5.

²⁵ Robert Means and Stuart Lee, "Rupert Brooke,"

<http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ltg/projects/jtap/tutorials/intro/brooke/>.

²⁶ James to Edward Marsh, March 28, 1914, quoted in Edel, *Henry James*, vol. 5, p. 520.

²⁷ Hynes, *A War Imagined*, p. 189.

²⁸ Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, pp. 60, 301-305, and *passim*; Hynes, *A War Imagined*, pp. 112-113, 299-300, and *passim*.

²⁹ Interview with James, *New York Times*, March 21, 1915, quoted in Edel, *Henry James*, vol. 5, p. 527.

³⁰ Ezra Pound, *Cathay*, in *Poems and Translations*, ed. Richard Sieburth (New York: Library of America, 2003), p. 256.

³¹ Longenbach briefly discusses *Cathay* in relation to the war in *Stone Cottage*, pp. 116-117.

³² Longenbach, *Stone Cottage*, p. 120.

³³ Foster, *W. B. Yeats*, vol. 1, pp. 469-73.

³⁴ Jay Parini, *Robert Frost: A Life* (London: Heinemann, 1999), pp. 125-131.

³⁵ Foster, *W. B. Yeats*, vol. 1, p. 276.

³⁶ Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983) pp. 349-53, 390-92, 405-06.

³⁷ The passage is cited by Peter Brooks as the epigraph to his *Reading for the Plot* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

³⁸ See, for example, Stephen Spender, *The Destructive Element: A Study of Modern Writers and Beliefs* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1936).