

THE
GREAT WAR
AND
MODERN MEMORY

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I
A Satire of Circumstance

THOMAS HARDY, CLAIRVOYANT

By mid-December, 1914, British troops had been fighting on the Continent for over five months. Casualties had been shocking, positions had settled into self-destructive stalemate, and sensitive people now perceived that the war, far from promising to be “over by Christmas,” was going to extend itself to hitherto unimagined reaches of suffering and irony. On December 19, 1914, Lytton Strachey published a piece in the *New Statesman* focusing on “the tragedies of whole lives and the long fatalities of human relationships.” His language was dark. He spoke of events *remorseless, terrible, gruesome*. He noted that “the desolation is complete” and recalled a phrase of Gibbon’s appropriate to the kind of irony he was contemplating: “the abridgment of hope.” “If there is joy . . . , it is joy that is long since dead; and if there are smiles, they are sardonical.”¹

But actually Strachey was not writing about the war at all. In his 2000 words he doesn’t mention it. Instead, he is reviewing Thomas Hardy’s most recent volume of poems, *Satires of Circumstance*, published in November, 1914, but containing—with the exception of the patriotic and unironic “Men Who March Away,” hastily added as a “Postscript”—only poems written before the war. Many emanate from Hardy’s personal experience as far back as 1870.

As if by uncanny foresight, Hardy’s volume offers a medium for perceiving the events of the war just beginning. It does so by establishing a terrible irony as the appropriate interpretative means. Although in these

poems the killer is tuberculosis rather than the machine gun, their ambience of mortal irony is one with which, in the next four years, the British will become wholly familiar. The materials of the poems are largely funerary: they are full of graves, headstones, "clay cadavers," coffins, skeletons, and rot. The favorite rhetorical situation is the speaking of the dead. Voices from the grave—like that of the speaker in John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields"—sadly or sardonically recall, admonish, and regret. They utter brief shapely ironic memoirs. And irony of situation is the substance of even those poems, like "The Convergence of the Twain" (first published in May, 1912), which involve no voice from the grave. A typical poem in the collection is "Channel Firing," written five months before the war. Here the occupants of a seaside cemetery confuse offshore naval gunnery practice with the thunders of the Day of Judgment, only to be reassured by God that they are mistaken: "The world is as it used to be"—namely, brutal and stupid. The actual Judgment Day, He tells them, will be considerably warmer and more punitive.

A characteristic irony of situation—a wry enactment of Gibbon's "abridgment of hope"—is the one in "Ah, Are You Digging on My Grave?" first published in December, 1913. Aware of a scratching sound above, the voice from the grave asks repeatedly who it is who digs at her grave. Is it her lover? No, a voice answers; he was married yesterday and is busy. Is it one of her kinfolk planting memorial flowers? No, they know that planting flowers does no good. Is it then perhaps her "enemy" (a word which public events will soon weight uniquely) "prodding sly" in an easy revenge? No, her enemy, she is told, thinks her no longer worth hating "And cares not where you lie." Finally "giving up," the speaker learns the identity of the digger from the digger himself: he is her "little dog." This news moves her to utter a stanza rich with "pre-war" complacency:

"Ah, yes! *You* dig upon my grave . . .
Why flashed it not on me
That one true heart was left behind!
What feeling do we ever find
To equal among human kind
A dog's fidelity?"

But the dog deprives his mistress of even this comforting connection with the world she's left behind:

"Mistress, I dug upon your grave
To bury a bone, in case

I should be hungry near this spot
When passing on my daily trot.
I am sorry, but I quite forgot
It was your resting-place."

If that points back to the eighteenth century, a poem like "Your Last Drive" (written in December, 1912) reaches toward Robert Frost. Here the irony of situation arises from a collision between innocence and awareness. The speaker recalls how his friend recently admired the night view of the lighted village from a place on the approaching road:

. . . you told of the charm of that haloed view.

The road from which the friend admired the bright town of the living happened to run past the local cemetery,

Where eight days later you were to lie.

Even the narrator, skilled in irony, could not have foretold how rudely soon the admirer of lights would remove to the dark town of the dead, to be now

. . . past love, praise, indifference, blame.

The contrast between before and after here will remind us of the relation between, say, the golden summer of 1914 and the appalling December of that year, although an even more compelling paradigm of that contrast is a poem Hardy wrote in 1913, "After a Journey." The speaker seeks the idea of his dead beloved by revisiting the dramatic seacoast sites of their affair. He imagines her spirit saying,

Summer gave us sweets, but autumn wrought division.

We know that regardless of literal fact or the special needs of the times, "summer" in poems belongs conventionally to gladness and "autumn" to melancholy. But what will happen a year later will compel this traditional figure toward the joltingly literal. Hardy's very private experience will be appropriated then as a very public one.

A more obvious rendering of the irony of benign ignorance is "In the Cemetery," one of the fifteen brief "Satires of Circumstance" which give the volume its title. Now the speaker is the cemetery caretaker, who explains to a bystander how preposterous is the quarreling of a group of mothers over whose child lies in which grave. Actually, says the caretaker, when a main drain had to be laid across the cemetery,

". . . we moved the lot some nights ago,
And packed them away in the general foss
With hundreds more. But their folks don't know."

Single grave, mass grave, main drain—it's all one:

“. . . as well cry over a new-laid drain
As anything else, to ease your pain!"

The idea of mass graves seems to pertain especially to the twentieth century. There are 2500 British war cemeteries in France and Belgium. The sophisticated observer of the rows of headstones will do well to suspect that very often the bodies below are buried in mass graves, with the headstones disposed in rows to convey the illusion that each soldier has his individual place.² As Hardy prophesies,

“. . . all their children were laid therein
At different times, like sprats in a tin."

The one ultimate Satire of Circumstance, as Hardy knows, is mortality itself, "the wonder and the wormwood of the whole." Death's material attendants and conditions, however noisome, fascinate universally, even as Edmund Blunden recognizes, recalling with gentle irony and sympathy a small satire of circumstance fifteen years after Hardy. He is remembering a wrecked French civilian churchyard close to the front line and considering its odd appeal to the "morbid curiosity" of the troops, who crowded to gape at the open vaults and graves:

Greenish water stood in some of these pits; bones and skulls and decayed ceremonies there attracted frequent soldiers past the "No Loitering" notice-board.

Under the circumstances, an odd attraction indeed.

Why should these mortalities lure those who ought to be trying to forget mortality, ever threatening them? Nearly corpses ourselves, by the mere fact of standing near Richebourg Church, how should we find the strange and the remote in these corpses?³

I am not really arguing that Hardy, the master of situational irony, "wrote" the Great War, although if wars were written the author of *Time's Laughing-Stocks* and *The Dynasts* could certainly have written this one. From his imagination was available more or less ready-made—and, certainly, well *a priori*—a vision, an action, and a tone superbly suitable for rendering an event constituting an immense and unprecedented Satire of Circumstance. A traditional "tragic satire" (like Johnson's "The Vanity of Human Wishes") is an accumulation of numerous small constituent satires. Likewise the great tragic satire which was the war will be seen to consist of its own smaller constituent satires, or ironic actions. Thus the literary Blunden regards a battlefield, thoroughly torn up and

littered with German equipment, as "this satire in iron brown and field grey."⁴

Glancing back thirty-one years later, Siegfried Sassoon recalled that during the war Hardy had been his "main admiration among living writers," and he acknowledged the debt of his satirical poems about the war to the prewar ironies of *Satires of Circumstance*.⁵ Fit to take its place as a sixteenth Satire of Circumstance entirely consonant with Hardy's is a poem by Sassoon enacting this plot: "Brother officer giving white-haired mother fictitious account of her cold-footed son's death at the front."⁶ The poem is "The Hero":

"Jack fell as he'd have wished," the Mother said,
And folded up the letter that she'd read.
"The Colonel writes so nicely." Something broke
In the tired voice that quavered to a choke.
She half looked up. "We mothers are so proud
Of our dead soldiers." Then her face was bowed.

Quietly the Brother Officer went out.
He'd told the poor old dear some gallant lies
That she would nourish all her days, no doubt.
For while he coughed and mumbled, her weak eyes
Had shone with gentle triumph, brimmed with joy,
Because he'd been so brave, her glorious boy.

He thought how "Jack," cold-footed, useless swine,
Had panicked down the trench that night the mine
Went up at Wicked Corner; how he'd tried
To get sent home, and how, at last, he died,
Blown to small bits. And no one seemed to care
Except that lonely woman with white hair.

Two nights before participating in the attack on the Somme—perhaps the most egregious ironic action of the whole war—Sassoon found himself "huddled up in a little dog-kennel of a dug-out, reading *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*."⁷ Clearly, there are some intersections of literature with life that we have taken too little notice of.

THE WAR AS IRONIC ACTION

Every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected. Every war constitutes an irony of situation because its means are so melodramatically disproportionate to its presumed ends. In the Great War eight

million people were destroyed because two persons, the Archduke Francis Ferdinand and his Consort, had been shot. The Second World War offers even more preposterous ironies. Ostensibly begun to guarantee the sovereignty of Poland, that war managed to bring about Poland's bondage and humiliation. Air bombardment, which was supposed to shorten the war, prolonged it by inviting those who were its targets to cast themselves in the role of victim-heroes and thus stiffen their resolve.

But the Great War was more ironic than any before or since. It was a hideous embarrassment to the prevailing Meliorist myth which had dominated the public consciousness for a century. It reversed the Idea of Progress. The day after the British entered the war Henry James wrote a friend:

The plunge of civilization into this abyss of blood and darkness . . . is a thing that so gives away the whole long age during which we have supposed the world to be, with whatever abatement, gradually bettering, that to have to take it all now for what the treacherous years were all the while really making for and *meaning* is too tragic for any words.⁸

James's essential point was rendered in rowdier terms by a much smaller writer, Philip Gibbs, as he remembered the popularity during the war of what today would be called Black Humor. "The more revolting it was," he says, "the more . . . [people] shouted with laughter":

It was . . . the laughter of mortals at the trick which had been played on them by an ironical fate. They had been taught to believe that the whole object of life was to reach out to beauty and love, and that mankind, in its progress to perfection, had killed the beast instinct, cruelty, blood-lust, the primitive, savage law of survival by tooth and claw and club and ax. All poetry, all art, all religion had preached this gospel and this promise.

Now that ideal was broken like a china vase dashed to the ground. The contrast between That and This was devastating. . . . The war-time humor of the soul roared with mirth at the sight of all that dignity and elegance despoiled.⁹

The British fought the war for four years and three months. Its potential of ironic meaning, considered not now in relation to the complacencies of the past but in itself alone, emerges when we consider its events chronologically. The five last months of 1914, starting August 4, when the British declared war on the Central Powers, began with free maneuver in Belgium and Northern France and ended with both sides locked into the infamous trench system. Before this stalemate, the British engaged in one major retreat and fought two large battles, although *battles* is perhaps not the best word, having been visited upon these

events by subsequent historiography in the interest of neatness and the assumption of something like a rational causality. To call these things *battles* is to imply an understandable continuity with earlier British history and to imply that the war makes sense in a traditional way. As Esmé Wingfield-Stratford points out, "A vast literature has been produced in the attempt to bring [the Great War] into line with other wars by highlighting its so-called battles by such impressive names as Loos, Verdun, the Somme, and Passchendaele. . . ." ¹⁰ This is to try to suggest that these events parallel Blenheim and Waterloo not only in glory but in structure and meaning.

The major retreat was the Retreat from Mons on August 24, necessitated when Sir John French's four divisions—the whole of the British force engaged—found themselves outflanked. In early September this retreat merged into the first of the "battles," known as the Marne, where the British and the French gradually stopped the German advance on Paris, although at a cost of half a million casualties on each side. Prevented from going through to Paris, the Germans sought an opening further north, and each side now began trying to turn its enemy's western flank with the object of winning the war rapidly and economically; it was still thought by some that this was a compassable object. The ensuing maneuvers during late October and early November are variously misnamed "The First Battle of Ypres" and "The Race to the Sea"—that is, to the Belgian seaports. The journalistic formula "The Race to the ———" was ready to hand, familiar through its use in 1909 to describe Peary's "Race to the (North) Pole" against Cook. Rehabilitated and applied to these new events, the phrase had the advantage of a familiar sportsmanlike, Explorer Club overtone, suggesting that what was happening was not too far distant from playing games, running races, and competing in a thoroughly decent way.

By the middle of November these exertions had all but wiped out the original British army. At the beginning of the war, a volunteer had to stand five feet eight to get into the army. By October 11 the need for men was such that the standard was lowered to five feet five. And on November 5, after the thirty thousand casualties of October, one had to be only five feet three to get in.¹¹ The permanent trenchline had been dug running from Nieuport, on the Belgian coast, all the way to the Swiss border, with the notorious Ypres Salient built in. The perceptive could already see what the war was going to be like. As early as October, 1914, Captain G. B. Pollard wrote home, using gingerly a novel word whose implications would turn more and more ghastly as time went on: "It's absolutely certainly a war of 'attrition,' as somebody said

here the other day, and we have got to stick it longer than the other side and go on producing men, money, and material until they cry quits, and that's all about it, as far as I can see." ¹² Lord Kitchener was one who agreed with Captain Pollard. Near the end of October he issued his call for 300,000 volunteers. Most of them would be expended on the Somme in 1916. The first Christmas of the war saw an absolute deadlock in the trenches. Both British and German soldiers observed an informal, *ad hoc* Christmas Day truce, meeting in No Man's Land to exchange cigarets and to take snapshots. Outraged, the Staff forbade this ever to happen again.

The new year, 1915, brought the repeated failure of British attempts to break through the German line and to unleash the cavalry in pursuit. They failed, first, because of insufficient artillery preparation—for years no one had any idea how much artillery fire would be needed to destroy the German barbed wire and to reach the solid German deep dugouts; second, because of insufficient reserves for exploiting a suddenly apparent weakness; and third, because the British attacked on excessively narrow frontages, enabling every part of the ground gained to be brought under retaliatory artillery fire.

However, the first failed attack of 1915 was not British but German. The area selected was near Ypres, and the fracas has been named the Second Battle of Ypres, or simply Second Ypres. On April 22, after discharging chlorine gas from cylinders, the Germans attacked and advanced three miles. But then they faltered for lack of reserves. Gas had first been used by the Germans on October 27, 1914, when they fired a prototype of modern tear gas from artillery near Ypres. The German use of gas—soon to be imitated by the British—was thought an atrocity by the ignorant, who did not know that, as Liddell Hart points out, gas is "the least inhumane of modern weapons." Its bad press was the result of its novelty: "It was novel and therefore labelled an atrocity by a world which condones abuses but detests innovations." ¹³ In the late-April attack at Ypres the British were virtually unprotected against gas—the "box respirator" was to come later—and even though the line was substantially held, the cost was 60,000 British casualties.

A few weeks later it was the British turn. On March 10 the first of the aborted British offensives was mounted at Neuve Chapelle. The attack was only 2000 yards wide, and, although it was successful at first, it died for lack of reserves and because the narrow frontage invited too much retributive German artillery. Again the British tried, on May 15 at Festubert, and with similar results: initial success turned to disaster. Going through the line was beginning to look impossible. It was thus essential

to entertain hopes of going around it, even if going around took one as far away as Gallipoli, 2200 miles southeast of the Western Front, where the troops had begun landing on April 25.

Imagining themselves instructed by these occasions of abridged hope at Neuve Chapelle and Festubert, the British mounted a larger attack near Loos on September 15. Six divisions went forward at once, and this time the attack was preceded not only by the customary artillery barrage but by the discharge of what Robert Graves tells us was euphemized as "the accessory"—cylinders of chlorine gas.¹⁴ Most of it blew back into the British trenches, and the attack was another failure which even the *Official History* later stigmatized as a "useless slaughter of infantry." ¹⁵ The proceedings at Loos were called off eleven days after they had started, but not before 60,000 more British casualties had been added to the total.

Now volunteers were no longer sufficient to fill the ranks. In October Lord Derby's "scheme"—a genteel form of conscription—was promulgated, and at the beginning of 1916, with the passing of the Military Service Act, England began to train her first conscript army, an event which could be said to mark the beginning of the modern world. Clearly the conscripts were needed, for things were going badly everywhere. The assault at Gallipoli was proving as unsuccessful as the assaults elsewhere, and at the end of 1915 the forces there were withdrawn with nothing gained.

The need for a stiffening of home-front morale at the beginning of 1916 can be gauged by the Poet Laureate's issuing in January an anthology of uplifting literary passages of a neo-Platonic tendency titled *The Spirit of Man*. Such was the military situation, Robert Bridges implied in his Introduction, that "we can turn to seek comfort only in the quiet confidence of our souls." We will thus "look instinctively to the seers and poets of mankind, whose sayings are the oracles and prophecies of loveliness and lovingkindness." The news from Belgium and France, not to mention Turkey, was making it more and more necessary to insist, as Bridges does, that "man is a spiritual being, and the proper work of his mind is to interpret the world according to his higher nature. . . ." Such an outlook is now indispensable, for we are confronted with "a grief that is intolerable constantly to face, nay impossible to face without that trust in God which makes all things possible." ¹⁶

The comforts purveyed by *The Spirit of Man* were badly needed, for 1915 had been one of the most depressing years in British history. It had been a year not only of ironic mistakes but of a grossly unimaginative underestimation of the enemy and of the profound difficulties of siege

warfare. Poor Sir John French had to be sent home, to be replaced by Sir Douglas Haig as commander of British forces. One doesn't want to be too hard on Haig, who doubtless did all he could and who has been well calumniated already. But it must be said that it now appears that one thing the war was testing was the usefulness of the earnest Scottish character in a situation demanding the military equivalent of wit and invention. Haig had none. He was stubborn, self-righteous, inflexible, intolerant—especially of the French—and quite humorless. And he was provincial: at his French headquarters he insisted on attending a Church of Scotland service every Sunday. Bullheaded as he was, he was the perfect commander for an enterprise committed to endless abortive assaulting. Indeed, one powerful legacy of Haig's performance is the conviction among the imaginative and intelligent today of the unredeemable defectiveness of all civil and military leaders. Haig could be said to have established the paradigm. His want of imagination and innocence of artistic culture have seemed to provide a model for Great Men ever since.

To Haig the lesson of 1915 was clear and plain. A successful attack leading to a breakthrough would have to be infinitely larger and wider and stronger and better planned than had been imagined. With this kind of attack in view, Haig and his staff spent the first six months of 1916 preparing an immense penetration of the German line on the Somme which he was confident would end the war. The number of men destined for the attack, equal to twenty-six World War II infantry divisions, constituted a seven-to-one superiority over the Germans. While the planning was underway, France was engaged at Verdun. Its defense bled her so badly that henceforth the main offensive effort on the Western Front had to be British. There were not enough French left, and those remaining were so broken in spirit that the mutinies of May, 1917, given the stingy French leave and recreation policy, might have been predicted. The ironic structure of events was becoming conventional, even Hardy-esque: if the pattern of things in 1915 had been a number of small optimistic hopes ending in small ironic catastrophes, the pattern in 1916 was that of one vast optimistic hope leading to one vast ironic catastrophe. The Somme affair, destined to be known among the troops as the Great Fuck-Up, was the largest engagement fought since the beginnings of civilization.

By the end of June, 1916, Haig's planning was finished and the attack on the Somme was ready. Sensing that this time the German defensive wire must be cut and the German front-line positions obliterated, Haig bombarded the enemy trenches for a full week, firing a million and a half shells from 1537 guns. At 7:30 on the morning of July 1 the artillery

shifted to more distant targets and the attacking waves of eleven British divisions climbed out of their trenches on a thirteen-mile front and began walking forward. And by 7:31 the mere six German divisions facing them had carried their machine guns upstairs from the deep dugouts where during the bombardment they had harbored safely—and even comfortably—and were hosing the attackers walking toward them in orderly rows or puzzling before the still uncut wire. Out of the 110,000 who attacked, 60,000 were killed or wounded on this one day, the record so far. Over 20,000 lay dead between the lines, and it was days before the wounded in No Man's Land stopped crying out.

The disaster had many causes. Lack of imagination was one: no one imagined that the Germans could have contrived such deep dugouts to hide in while the artillery pulverized the ground overhead, just as no one imagined that the German machine gunners could get up the stairs and mount their guns so fast once the bombardment moved away at precisely 7:30. Another cause was traceable to the class system and the assumptions it sanctioned. The regulars of the British staff entertained an implicit contempt for the rapidly trained new men of "Kitchener's Army," largely recruited among workingmen from the Midlands. The planners assumed that these troops—burdened for the assault with 66 pounds of equipment—were too simple and animal to cross the space between the opposing trenches in any way except in full daylight and aligned in rows or "waves." It was felt that the troops would become confused by more subtle tactics like rushing from cover to cover, or assault-firing, or following close upon a continuous creeping barrage.

A final cause of the disaster was the total lack of surprise. There was a hopeless absence of cleverness about the whole thing, entirely characteristic of its author. The attackers could have feinted: they could have lifted the bombardment for two minutes at dawn—the expected hour for an attack—and then immediately resumed it, which might have caught the seduced German machine gunners unprotected up at their open firing positions. But one suspects that if such a feint was ever considered, it was rejected as unsporting. Whatever the main cause of failure, the attack on the Somme was the end of illusions about breaking the line and sending the cavalry through to end the war. Contemplating the new awareness brought to both sides by the first day of July, 1916, Blunden wrote eighteen years later: "By the end of the day both sides had seen, in a sad scrawl of broken earth and murdered men, the answer to the question. No road. No thoroughfare. Neither race had won, nor could win, the War. The War had won, and would go on winning."¹⁷

Regardless of this perception, the British attempt on the Somme con-

tinued mechanically until stopped in November by freezing mud. A month earlier the British had unveiled an innovation, the tank, on the road between Albert and Bapaume, to the total surprise and demoralization of the enemy. But only thirty-two had been used, and this was not enough for a significant breakthrough. A terrible gloom overcame everyone at the end of 1916. It was the bottom, even worse than the end of 1915. "We are going to lose this war," Lloyd George was heard to say.¹⁸ And the dynamics of hope abridged continued to dominate 1917 with two exceptions, the actions at Messines in June and at Cambrai in November.

On January 1, 1917, Haig was elevated to the rank of Field Marshal, and on March 17, Bapaume—one of the main first-day objectives of the Somme jump-off nine months before—was finally captured. The Germans had proclaimed their intention of practicing unrestricted submarine warfare in the Atlantic on February 1, and by April 6 this had brought a declaration of war from the United States. Henceforth the more subtle Allied strategists knew that winning the war would be only a matter of time, but they also knew that, since the United States was not ready, the time would not be short.

Meanwhile, something had to be done on the line. On April 9 the British again tried the old tactic of head-on assault, this time near Arras in an area embracing the infamous Vimy Ridge, which for years had dominated the southern part of the Ypres Salient. The attack, pressed for five days, gained 7000 yards at a cost of 160,000 killed and wounded. The same old thing. But on June 7 there was something new, something finally exploiting the tactic of surprise. Near Messines, south of Ypres, British miners had been tunneling for a year under the German front lines, and by early June they had dug twenty-one horizontal mineshafts stuffed with a million pounds of high explosive a hundred feet below crucial points in the German defense system. At 3:10 in the morning these mines were set off all at once. Nineteen of them went up, and the shock wave jolted Lloyd George in Downing Street 130 miles away. Two failed to explode. One of these went off in July, 1955, injuring no one but forcibly reminding citizens of the nearby rebuilt town of Ploegsteert of the appalling persistence of the Great War. The other, somewhere deep underground near Ploegsteert Wood, has not gone off yet.

The attack at Messines following these explosions had been brilliantly planned by General Sir Herbert Plumer, who emerges as a sort of intellectual's hero of the British Great War. In sad contrast to Haig, he was unmilitary in appearance, being stout, chinless, white-haired, and pot-



Plumer, the King, Haig. (Imperial War Museum)

bellied. But he had imagination. His mines totally surprised the Germans, ten thousand of whom were permanently entombed immediately. Seven thousand panicked and were taken prisoner. Nine British divisions and seventy-two tanks attacked straightway on a ten-mile front. At the relatively low cost of 16,000 casualties they occupied Vimy Ridge.

If Messines showed what imagination and surprise could do, the attack toward Passchendaele, on the northern side of the Ypres Salient, indicated once more the old folly of reiterated abortive assaulting. Sometimes dignified as the Third Battle of Ypres, this assault, beginning on July 31, was aimed, it was said, at the German submarine bases on the Belgian coast. This time the artillery was relied on to prepare the ground for the attack, and with a vengeance: over ten days four million shells were fired. The result was highly ironic, even in this war where irony was a staple. The bombardment churned up the ground; rain fell and turned the dirt to mud. In the mud the British assaulted until the attack finally attenuated three and a half months later. Price: 370,000 British dead and wounded and sick and frozen to death. Thousands literally drowned in the mud. It was a reprise of the Somme, but worse. Twenty years later Wyndham Lewis looked back on Passchendaele as an all-but-inevitable collision between two "contrasted but as it were complementary types of *idée fixe*": the German fondness for war, on the one hand, and British muddle-headed "doggedness," on the other. These, he says, "found their most perfect expression on the battlefield, or battle-bog, of Passchendaele." Onomatopoeic speculations bring him finally to a point where again we glimpse Hardy as the presiding spirit:

The very name [Passchendaele], with its suggestion of *splashiness* and of *passion* at once, was subtly appropriate. This nonsense could not have come to its full flower at any other place but at *Passchendaele*. It was pre-ordained. The moment I saw the name on the trench-map, intuitively I knew what was going to happen.¹⁹

Ever since the first use of tanks in the autumn of 1916 it had been clear that, given sufficient numbers, here was a way of overcoming the gross superiority provided an entrenched enemy by the machine gun. But not until the attack near Cambrai on November 20 were tanks used in sufficient quantity. Now 381 of them coughed and crawled forward on a six-mile front, and this time with impressive success. But as usual, there were insufficient reserves to exploit the breakthrough.

The next major event was a shocking reversal. During the last half of 1917 the Germans had been quietly shifting their eastern forces to the Western Front. Their armistice with the Bolsheviks gave them the op-

portunity of increasing their western forces by 30 per cent. At 4:30 on the morning of March 21, 1918, they struck in the Somme area, and on a forty-mile front. It was a stunning victory. The British lost 150,000 men almost immediately, 90,000 as prisoners; and total British casualties rose to 300,000 within the next six days. The Germans plunged forty miles into the British rear.

The impact of this crisis on home-front morale can be inferred from London newspaper reaction. The following is typical:

WHAT CAN I DO?

How the Civilian May Help in This Crisis.

Be cheerful.

Write encouragingly to friends at the front.

Don't repeat foolish gossip.

Don't listen to idle rumors.

Don't think you know better than Haig.²⁰

Haig, back-pedaling, felt sufficiently threatened to issue on April 12 his famous "Bucks to the Wall" Order of the Day. This registered the insecurity of the British position in some very rigid and unencouraging terms: "Every position must be held to the last man. There must be no retirement. With our backs to the wall and believing in the justice of our cause, each one must fight on to the end." In its dogged prohibition of maneuver or indeed of any tactics, this can stand as the model for Hitler's later orders for the ultimate defense of positions like El Alamein and Stalingrad. There are conventions and styles in Orders of the Day just as for any literary documents.

Hardy would have been pleased to know that of this famous order one corporal noted: "We never received it. We to whom it was addressed, the infantry of the front line, were too scattered, too busy trying to survive, to be called into any formation to listen to orders of the day."²¹

During May and June the Germans advanced to great effect near the rivers Lys and Marne. But unwittingly they were engaged in demonstrating the most ironic point of all, namely, that successful attack ruins troops. In this way it is just like defeat. This is a way of reiterating Blunden's point that it is the war that wins. The spectacular German advance finally stopped largely for this reason: the attackers, deprived of the sight of "consumer goods" by years of efficient Allied blockade, slowed down

and finally halted to loot, get drunk, sleep it off, and peer about. The champagne cellars of the Marne proved especially tempting. The German Rudolf Binding records what happened when the attack reached Albert:

Today the advance of our infantry suddenly stopped near Albert. Nobody could understand why. Our airmen had reported no enemy between Albert and Amiens. . . . I jumped into a car with orders to find out what was causing the stoppage in front. . . . As soon as I got near [Albert] I began to see curious sights. Strange figures, which looked very little like soldiers, and certainly showed no sign of advancing, were making their way back out of the town. There were men driving cows before them . . . ; others who carried a hen under one arm and a box of notepaper under the other. Men carrying a bottle of wine under their arm and another one open in their hand. Men who had torn a silk drawing-room curtain from off its rods and were dragging it to the rear. . . . More men with writing-paper and colored note-books. . . . Men dressed up in comic disguise. Men with top-hats on their heads. Men staggering. Men who could hardly walk.²²

By midsummer it was apparent that the German army had destroyed itself by attacking successfully. On August 8, designated by Ludendorff "The Black Day of the German Army," the Allies counterattacked and broke through. In the German rear they found that maneuver was now possible for the first time since the autumn of 1914. From here to the end their advance was rapid as the German forces fell apart.

The German collapse was assisted by American attacks in September at the St. Mihiel and between the River Meuse and the Argonne Forest. Simultaneously the British were advancing near St. Quentin-Cambrai and the Belgians near Ghent. Despite exhaustion and depletion on all sides—half the British infantry were now younger than nineteen—the end was inevitable. On November 9, 1918, the Kaiser having fled, Germany declared herself a republic and two days later signed the Armistice in the Forest of Compiègne. The war had cost the Central Powers three and a half million men. It had cost the Allies over five million.

NEVER SUCH INNOCENCE AGAIN

Irony is the attendant of hope, and the fuel of hope is innocence. One reason the Great War was more ironic than any other is that its beginning was more innocent. "Never such innocence again," observes Philip Larkin, who has found himself curiously drawn to regard with a wondering tenderness not the merely victimized creatures of the nearby Sec-

ond World War but the innocents of the remote Great War, those sweet, generous people who pressed forward and all but solicited their own destruction. In "MCMXIV," written in the early sixties, Larkin contemplates a photograph of the patient and sincere lined up in early August outside a recruiting station:

Those long uneven lines
Standing as patiently
As if they were stretched outside
The Oval or Villa Park,
The crowns of hats, the sun
On moustached archaic faces
Grinning as if it were all
An August Bank Holiday lark. . . .

The shops are shut, and astonishingly, the Defense of the Realm Act not yet having been thought of,

. . . the pubs
Wide open all day. . . .

The class system is intact and purring smoothly:

The differently-dressed servants
With tiny rooms in huge houses,
The dust behind limousines. . . .

"Never such innocence," he concludes:

Never before or since,
As changed itself to past
Without a word—the men
Leaving the gardens tidy,
The thousands of marriages
Lasting a little while longer:
Never such innocence again.

Far now from such innocence, instructed in cynicism and draft-dodging by the virtually continuous war since 1936, how can we forbear condescending to the eager lines at the recruiting stations or smiling at news like this, from the *Times* of August 9, 1914:

At an inquest on the body of Arthur Sydney Evelyn Annesley, aged 49, formerly a captain in the Rifle Brigade, who committed suicide by flinging himself under a heavy van at Pimlico, the Coroner stated that worry caused by the feeling that he was not going to be accepted for service led him to take his life.

But our smiles are not appropriate, for that was a different world. The certainties were intact. Britain had not known a major war for a century, and on the Continent, as A. J. P. Taylor points out, "there had been no war between the Great Powers since 1871. No man in the prime of life knew what war was like. All imagined that it would be an affair of great marches and great battles, quickly decided."²³

Furthermore, the Great War was perhaps the last to be conceived as taking place within a seamless, purposeful "history" involving a coherent stream of time running from past through present to future. The shrewd recruiting poster depicting a worried father of the future being asked by his children, "Daddy, what did *you* do in the Great War?" assumes a future whose moral and social pressures are identical with those of the past. Today, when each day's experience seems notably *ad hoc*, no such appeal would shame the most stupid to the recruiting office. But the Great War took place in what was, compared with ours, a static world, where the values appeared stable and where the meanings of abstractions seemed permanent and reliable. Everyone knew what Glory was, and what Honor meant. It was not until eleven years after the war that Hemingway could declare in *A Farewell to Arms* that "abstract words such as glory, honor, 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."²⁴ In the summer of 1914 no one would have understood what on earth he was talking about.

Certainly the author of a personal communication in the *Times* two days before the declaration of war would not have understood:

PAULINE—Alas, it cannot be. But I will dash into the great venture with all that pride and spirit an ancient race has given me. . . .

The language is that which two generations of readers had been accustomed to associate with the quiet action of personal control and Christian self-abnegation ("sacrifice"), as well as with more violent actions of aggression and defense. The tutors in this special diction had been the boys' books of George Alfred Henty; the male-romances of Rider Haggard; the poems of Robert Bridges; and especially the Arthurian poems of Tennyson and the pseudo-medieval romances of William Morris. We can set out this "raised," essentially feudal language in a table of equivalents:

A friend is a
Friendship is

comrade
comradeship, or fellowship



The Central London Recruiting Depot, August 1914. (Culver Pictures)

A horse is a	<i>steed, or charger</i>
The enemy is	<i>the foe, or the host</i>
Danger is	<i>peril</i>
To conquer is to	<i>vanquish</i>
To attack is to	<i>assail</i>
To be earnestly brave is to be	<i>gallant</i>
To be cheerfully brave is to be	<i>plucky</i>
To be stolidly brave is to be	<i>staunch</i>
Bravery considered after the fact is	<i>valor</i>
The dead on the battlefield are	<i>the fallen</i>
To be nobly enthusiastic is to be	<i>ardent</i>
To be unpretentiously enthusiastic is to be	<i>keen</i>
The front is	<i>the field</i>
Obedient soldiers are	<i>the brave</i>
Warfare is	<i>strife</i>
Actions are	<i>deeds</i>
To die is to	<i>perish</i>
To show cowardice is to	<i>swerve</i>
The draft-notice is	<i>the summons</i>
To enlist is to	<i>join the colors</i>
Cowardice results in	<i>dishonor</i>
Not to complain is to be	<i>manly</i>
To move quickly is to be	<i>swift</i>
Nothing is	<i>naught</i>
Nothing but is	<i>naught, save</i>
To win is to	<i>conquer</i>
One's chest is one's	<i>breast</i>
Sleep is	<i>slumber</i>
The objective of an attack is	<i>the goal</i>
A soldier is a	<i>warrior</i>
One's death is one's	<i>fate</i>
The sky is	<i>the heavens</i>
Things that glow or shine are	<i>radiant</i>
The army as a whole is	<i>the legion</i>
What is contemptible is	<i>base</i>
The legs and arms of young men are	<i>limbs</i>
Dead bodies constitute	<i>ashes, or dust</i>
The blood of young men is	<i>"the red/Sweet wine of youth"—R. Brooke.</i>

This system of "high" diction was not the least of the ultimate casualties of the war. But its staying power was astonishing. As late as 1918 it was

still possible for some men who had actually fought to sustain the old rhetoric. Thus Sgt. Reginald Grant writes the Dedication of his book *S.O.S. Stand To* (1918):

In humble, reverent spirit I dedicate these pages to the memory of the lads who served with me in the "Sacrifice Battery," and who gave their lives that those behind might live, and, also, in brotherly affection and esteem to my brothers, Gordon and Billy, who are still fighting the good fight and keeping the faith.

Another index of the prevailing innocence is a curious prophyllaxis of language. One could use with security words which a few years later, after the war, would constitute obvious *double entendres*. One could say *intercourse*, or *erection*, or *ejaculation* without any risk of evoking a smile or a leer. Henry James's innocent employment of the word *tool* is as well known as Browning's artless misapprehensions about the word *twat*. Even the official order transmitted from British headquarters to the armies at 6:50 on the morning of November 11, 1918, warned that "there will be no intercourse of any description with the enemy." Imagine daring to promulgate that at the end of the Second War! In 1901 the girl who was to become Christopher Isherwood's mother and whose fiancé was going to be killed in the war could write in her diary with no self-consciousness: "Was bending over a book when the whole erection [a toque hat she had been trimming] caught fire in the candles and was ruined. So vexed!" She was an extraordinarily shy, genteel, proper girl, and neither she nor her fiancé read anything funny or anything not entirely innocent and chaste into the language of a telegram he once sent her after a long separation: "THINKING OF YOU HARD."²⁵ In this world "he ejaculated breathlessly" was a tag in utterly innocent dialogue rather than a moment in pornographic description.

Indeed, the literary scene is hard to imagine. There was no *Waste Land*, with its rats' alleys, dull canals, and dead men who have lost their bones: it would take four years of trench warfare to bring these to consciousness. There was no *Ulysses*, no *Mauberley*, no *Cantos*, no Kafka, no Proust, no Waugh, no Auden, no Huxley, no Cummings, no *Women in Love* or *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. There was no "Valley of Ashes" in *The Great Gatsby*. One read Hardy and Kipling and Conrad and frequented worlds of traditional moral action delineated in traditional moral language.

Although some memories of the benign last summer before the war can be discounted as standard romantic retrospection turned even rosier by egregious contrast with what followed, all agree that the prewar summer was the most idyllic for many years. It was warm and sunny,

eminently pastoral. One lolled outside on a folding canvas chaise, or swam, or walked in the countryside. One read outdoors, went on picnics, had tea served from a white wicker table under the trees. You could leave your books on the table all night without fear of rain. Siegfried Sassoon was busy fox hunting and playing serious county cricket. Robert Graves went climbing in the Welsh mountains. Edmund Blunden took country walks near Oxford, read Classics and English, and refined his pastoral diction. Wilfred Owen was teaching English to the boys of a French family living near Bordeaux. David Jones was studying illustration at Camberwell Art School. And for those like Strachey who preferred the pleasures of the West End, there were splendid evening parties, as well as a superb season for concerts, theater, and the Russian ballet.

For the modern imagination that last summer has assumed the status of a permanent symbol for anything innocently but irrecoverably lost. Transferred meanings of "our summer of 1914" retain the irony of the original, for the change from felicity to despair, pastoral to anti-pastoral, is melodramatically unexpected. Elegizing the "Old South" in America, which could be said to have disappeared around 1950, David Lowe writes in 1973:

We never thought that any of this would change; we never thought of change at all. But we were the last generation of the Old South; that spring in the early fifties was our summer of 1914. . . . Like those other generations who were given to witness the guillotining of a world, we never expected it. And like that of our counterparts, our world seemed most beautiful just before it disappeared.²⁶

Out of the world of summer, 1914, marched a unique generation. It believed in Progress and Art and in no way doubted the benignity even of technology. The word *machine* was not yet invariably coupled with the word *gun*.

It was not that "war" was entirely unexpected during June and July of 1914. But the irony was that trouble was expected in Ulster rather than in Flanders. It was expected to be domestic and embarrassing rather than savage and incomprehensible. Of the diary his mother kept during 1914, Christopher Isherwood notes that it has "the morbid fascination of a document which records, without the dishonesty of hindsight, the day-by-day approach to a catastrophe by an utterly unsuspecting victim. Meanwhile, as so often happens, this victim expects and fears a different catastrophe—civil war in Ulster—which isn't going to take place." Kathleen Isherwood writes in her diary on July 13: "The papers look fearfully

serious. . . . Sir Edward Carson says 'if it be not peace with honor it must be war with honor.' The rhetoric seems identical with that of the early stages of the war itself. I have omitted only one sentence in the middle: "Ulster is an armed camp."²⁷ Alec Waugh remembers the farewell address of his school headmaster: "There were no clouds on my horizon during those long July evenings, and when the Chief in his farewell speech spoke of the bad news in the morning papers, I thought he was referring to the threat of civil war in Ireland."²⁸ Even in a situation so potent with theatrical possibilities as the actual war was to become, for ironic melodrama it would be hard to improve on the Cabinet meeting of July 24, with the map of Ireland spread out on the big table. "The fate of nations," says John Terraine, "appeared to hang upon parish boundaries in the counties of Fermanagh and Tyrone."²⁹ To them, enter Sir Edward Grey ashen-faced, in his hand the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum to Servia: *coup de théâtre*.

In nothing, however, is the initial British innocence so conspicuous as in the universal commitment to the sporting spirit. Before the war, says Osbert Sitwell,

we were still in the trough of peace that had lasted a hundred years between two great conflicts. In it, such wars as arose were not general, but only a brief armed version of the Olympic Games. You won a round; the enemy won the next. There was no more talk of extermination, or of Fights to a Finish, than would occur in a boxing match.³⁰

It is this conception of war as strenuous but entertaining that permeates Rupert Brooke's letters home during the autumn and winter of 1914–15. "It's all great fun," he finds.³¹ The classic equation between war and sport—cricket, in this case—had been established by Sir Henry Newbolt in his poem "Vitaī Lampada," a public-school favorite since 1898:

There's a breathless hush in the Close tonight—
Ten to make and the match to win—
A bumping pitch and a blinding light,
An hour to play and the last man in.
And it's not for the sake of a ribboned coat,
Or the selfish hope of a season's fame,
But his Captain's hand on his shoulder smote—
"Play up! play up! and play the game!"

In later life, the former cricket brave exhorts his colonial troops beset by natives:

The sand of the desert is sodden red—
Red with the wreck of a square that broke;

The Gatling's jammed and the Colonel dead,
 And the regiment blind with dust and smoke;
 The river of death has brimmed his banks,
 And England's far, and Honor a name;
 But the voice of a schoolboy rallies the ranks:
 "Play up! play up! and play the game!"

The author of these lines was a lifetime friend of Douglas Haig. They had first met when they were students together at Clifton College, whose cricket field provides the scene of Newbolt's first stanza. Much later Newbolt wrote, "When I looked into Douglas Haig I saw what is really great—perfect acceptance, which means perfect faith." This version of Haig brings him close to the absolute ideal of what Patrick Howarth has termed *bomo newboltiens*, or "Newbolt Man": honorable, stoic, brave, loyal, courteous—and unaesthetic, unironic, unintellectual and devoid of wit. To Newbolt, the wartime sufferings of such as Wilfred Owen were tiny—and whiny—compared with Haig's: "Owen and the rest of the broken men," he says, "rail at the Old Men who sent the young to die: they have suffered cruelly, but in the nerves and not the heart—they haven't the experience or the imagination to know the extreme human agony. . . ." ³² Only Newbolt Man, skilled in games, can know that.

Cricket is fine for implanting the right spirit, but football is even better. Indeed, the English young man's fondness for it was held to be a distinct sign of his natural superiority over his German counterpart. That was Lord Northcliffe's conclusion in a quasi-official and very popular work of propaganda, *Lord Northcliffe's War Book*:

Our soldiers are individual. They embark on little individual enterprises. The German . . . is not so clever at these devices. He was never taught them before the war, and his whole training from childhood upwards has been to obey, and to obey in numbers.

The reason is simple:

He has not played individual games. Football, which develops individuality, has only been introduced into Germany in comparatively recent times. ³³

The English tank crews, Lord Northcliffe finds, "are young daredevils who, fully knowing that they will be a special mark for every kind of Prussian weapon, enter upon their task in a sporting spirit with the same cheery enthusiasm as they would show for football." ³⁴ One thing notable about Prussians is that they have an inadequate concept of playing the game. Thus Reginald Grant on the first German use of chlorine gas:

"It was a new device in warfare and thoroughly illustrative of the Prussian idea of playing the game." ³⁵

One way of showing the sporting spirit was to kick a football toward the enemy lines while attacking. This feat was first performed by the 1st Battalion of the 18th London Regiment at Loos in 1915. It soon achieved the status of a conventional act of bravado and was ultimately exported far beyond the Western Front. Arthur ("Bosky") Borton, who took part in an attack on the Turkish lines near Beersheeba in November, 1917, proudly reported home: "One of the men had a football. How it came there goodness knows. Anyway we kicked off and rushed the first [Turkish] guns, dribbling the ball with us." ³⁶ But the most famous football episode was Captain W. P. Nevill's achievement at the Somme attack. Captain Nevill, a company commander in the 8th East Surreys, bought four footballs, one for each platoon, during his last London leave before the attack. He offered a prize to the platoon which, at the jump-off, first kicked its football up to the German front line. Although J. R. Ackerley remembered Nevill as "the battalion buffoon," ³⁷ he may have been shrewder than he looked: his little sporting contest did have the effect of persuading his men that the attack was going to be, as the staff had been insisting, a walkover. A survivor observing from a short distance away recalls zero hour:

As the gun-fire died away I saw an infantryman climb onto the parapet into No Man's Land, beckoning others to follow. [Doubtless Captain Nevill or one of his platoon commanders.] As he did so he kicked off a football. A good kick. The ball rose and travelled well towards the German line. That seemed to be the signal to advance. ³⁸

Captain Nevill was killed instantly. Two of the footballs are preserved today in English museums.

That Captain Nevill's sporting feat was felt to derive from the literary inspiration of Newbolt's poem about the cricket-boy hero seems apparent from the poem by one "Touchstone" written to celebrate it. This appears on the border of an undated field concert program preserved in the Imperial War Museum:

THE GAME

A Company of the East Surrey Regiment is reported to have dribbled four footballs—the gift of their Captain, who fell in the fight—for a mile and a quarter into the enemy trenches.

On through the hail of slaughter,
 Where gallant comrades fall,

Where blood is poured like water,
 They drive the trickling ball.
 The fear of death before them
 Is but an empty name.
 True to the land that bore them—
 The SURREYS play the game.

And so on for two more stanzas. If anyone at the time thought Captain Nevill's act preposterous, no one said so. The nearest thing to such an attitude is a reference in the humorous trench newspaper *The Wipers Times* (Sept. 8, 1917), but even here the target of satire is not so much the act of Captain Nevill as the rhetoric of William Beach Thomas, who served as the *Daily Mail's* notoriously fatuous war correspondent. As the famous correspondent "Teech Bomas," he is made to say of Nevill's attack: "On they came kicking footballs, and so completely puzzled the Potsdammers. With one last kick they were amongst them with the bayonet, and although the Berliners battled bravely for a while, they kamedered with the best."

Modern mass wars require in their early stages a definitive work of popular literature demonstrating how much wholesome fun is to be had at the training camp. The Great War's classic in this genre is *The First Hundred Thousand*, written in 1915—originally in parts for *Blackwood's Magazine*—by "Ian Hay," i.e. Ian Hay Beith. It is really very good, nicely written and thoroughly likable. It gives a cheerful half-fictionalized account of a unit of Kitchener's Army, emphasizing the comedies of training and the brave, resourceful way the boys are playing the game and encountering the absurdities of army life with spirit and humor. ("Are we downhearted? NO!") The appeal of the book is to readers already appreciative of Kipling's fantasy of school high-jinks, *Stalky & Co.* (1899). Hay finally mentions trench casualties, but in such a way as to make them seem no more serious than skinned knees. The Second World War classic in this genre—at least in America—is Marion Hargrove's *See Here, Private Hargrove*, published in May, 1942. It performed the same function as Hay's book: it reassured the folks at home and at the same time persuaded the troops themselves that they were undergoing really quite an amusing experience. Interestingly, Hargrove's book appeared at about the same time after the start of its war as Hay's did after its. Little had happened yet to sour the jokes.

The innocent army depicted by Hay actually did resemble closely the real army being trained in 1914. It was nothing if not sincere, animated by the values of doing one's very best and getting on smartly. C. E. Montague remembers that

real, constitutional lazy fellows would buy little cram-books of drill out of their pay and sweat them up at night so as to get on the faster. Men warned for a guard next day would agree among themselves to get up an hour before the pre-dawn Revéillé to practice among themselves . . . in the hope of approaching the far-off, longed-for ideal of smartness, the passport to France.³⁹

It was an army whose state of preparation for what faced it can be estimated from the amount of attention the officers' *Field Service Pocket Book* (1914) devoted to topics like "Care of Transport Camels" and "Slinging Camels On To a Ship." As Douglas Haig used to say, two machine guns were ample for any battalion. And he thought the power of bullets to stop horses had been greatly exaggerated. People were so innocent that they were embarrassed to pronounce the new stylish foreign word *camouflage*. They had known so little of *debris* that they still put an acute accent over the *e*.

IRONY AND MEMORY

The innocent army fully attained the knowledge of good and evil at the Somme on July 1, 1916. That moment, one of the most interesting in the whole long history of human disillusion, can stand as the type of all the ironic actions of the war. What could remain of confidence in Divine assistance once it was known what Haig wrote his wife just before the attack: "I feel that every step in my plan has been taken with the Divine help"? "The wire has never been so well cut," he confided to his diary, "nor the artillery preparation so thorough."⁴⁰ His hopes were those of every man. Private E. C. Stanley recalls: "I was very pleased when I heard that my battalion would be in the attack. I thought this would be the last battle of the war and I didn't want to miss it. I remember writing to my mother, telling her I would be home for the August Bank Holiday."⁴¹ Even the weather cooperated to intensify the irony, just as during the summer of 1914. "On the first of July," Sassoon says, "the weather, after an early morning mist, was of the kind commonly called heavenly."⁴² Thirteen years after that day Henry Williamson recalled it vividly:

I see men arising and walking forward; and I go forward with them, in a glassy delirium wherein some seem to pause, with bowed heads, and sink carefully to their knees, and roll slowly over, and lie still. Others roll and roll, and scream and grip my legs in uttermost fear, and I have to struggle to break away, while the dust and earth on my tunic changes from grey to red.

And I go on with aching feet, up and down across ground like a huge

ruined honeycomb, and my wave melts away, and the second wave comes up, and also melts away, and then the third wave merges into the ruins of the first and second, and after a while the fourth blunders into the remnants of the others, and we begin to run forward to catch up with the barrage, gasping and sweating, in bunches, anyhow, every bit of the months of drill and rehearsal forgotten, for who could have imagined that the "Big Push" was going to be this? ⁴³

What assists Williamson's recall is precisely the ironic pattern which subsequent vision has laid over the events. In reading memoirs of the war, one notices the same phenomenon over and over. By applying to the past a paradigm of ironic action, a rememberer is enabled to locate, draw forth, and finally shape into significance an event or a moment which otherwise would merge without meaning into the general undifferentiated stream.

This mechanism of irony-assisted recall is well illustrated by the writing of Private Alfred M. Hale. He was a genteel, delicate, monumentally incompetent middle-aged batman, known somewhat patronizingly as "our Mr. Hale" in the Royal Flying Corps installations where he served. Four years after the war, he composed a 658-page memoir of his agonies and humiliations, dwelling on his palpable unfitness for any kind of military life and on the constant ironic gap between what was expected of him and what he could perform. At one camp it was his job to heat water for the officers' ablutions. At the same time, he was strictly forbidden to gather fuel for heating water, since the only source of fuel was the lumber of numerous derelict barracks in the camp. Frustrated almost to madness by this conflict of obligations, by the abuse now from one set of officers for the insufficiently heated water, now from another for his tearing up and incinerating the barracks piece by piece, Hale confesses to an anxiety fully as agonizing as that faced by troops in an assault. "Heating water," he remembers, "was a sort of punishment for every sin I have ever committed, I should say." Writing his aggrieved memoir, he knows that he is dwelling excessively on his water-heating problems, incessantly returning to them again and again. He tries to break away and resume his narrative: "I said I was going to turn to other matters." But it is exactly the irony of his former situation that keeps calling him back: "In truth it is the irony of things, as they were in those days, that has forced me back on my tracks, as it has a habit of doing, whenever writing of what I then went through." ⁴⁴

Another private, Gunner Charles Bricknall, recalling the war many years later, likewise behaves as if his understanding of the irony attending events is what enables him to recall them. He was in an artillery battery being relieved by a new unit fresh from England:

There was a long road leading to the front line which the Germans occasionally shelled, and the shells used to drop plonk in the middle of it. This new unit assembled right by the wood ready to go into action in the night.

What rises to the surface of Bricknall's memory is the hopes and illusions of the newcomers:

They was all spick and span, buttons polished and all the rest of it.

He tries to help:

We spoke to a few of the chaps before going up and told them about the Germans shelling the road, but of course they was not in charge, so up they went and the result was they all got blown up.

Contemplating this ironic issue, Bricknall is moved to an almost Dickensian reiterative rhetoric:

Ho, what a disaster! We had to go shooting lame horses, putting the dead to the side of the road, what a disaster, which could have been avoided if only the officers had gone into action the hard way [i.e., overland, avoiding the road]. That was something I shall never forget. ⁴⁵

It is the *if only* rather than the slaughter that helps Bricknall "never forget" this. A slaughter by itself is too commonplace for notice. When it makes an ironic point it becomes memorable.

Bricknall was a simple man from Walsall, Staffordshire, who died in 1968 at the age of 76. He was, his son tells me, "a man; a real man; a real soldier from Walsall." ⁴⁶ Sir Geoffrey Keynes, on the other hand, John Maynard's brother, was a highly sophisticated scholar, surgeon, author, editor, book collector, and bibliographer, with honorary doctorates from Oxford, Cambridge, Edinburgh, Sheffield, Birmingham, and Reading. ⁴⁷ In 1968 he recalled an incident of January 26, 1916. A German shell landed near a British artillery battery and killed five officers, including the major commanding, who were standing in a group. "I attended as best I could to each of them," he remembers, "but all were terribly mutilated and were dead or dying." He then wonders why he remembers so clearly this relatively minor event: "Far greater tragedies were happening elsewhere all the time. The long, drawn-out horrors of Passchendaele were to take place not far away." It is, he concludes, the small ironic detail of the major's dead dog that enables him to "see these things as clearly today as if they had just happened": "The pattern of war is shaped in the individual mind by small individual experiences, and I can see these things as clearly today as if they had just happened, down to the body of the major's terrier bitch . . . lying near her master." ⁴⁸

In gathering material for his book *The First Day on the Somme* in 1970, Martin Middlebrook took pains to interview as many of the survivors as he could find. They too use the pattern of irony to achieve their "strongest recollections." Thus Private E. T. Radband: "My strongest recollection: all those grand-looking cavalymen, ready mounted to follow the breakthrough. What a hope!" And Corporal J. H. Tansley: "One's revulsion to the ghastly horrors of war was submerged in the belief that this war was to end all wars and Utopia would arise. What an illusion!"⁴⁹

"There are some contrasts war produces," says Hugh Quigley, "which art would esteem hackneyed or inherently false."⁵⁰ And, we can add, which the art of memory organizes into little ironic vignettes, satires of circumstance more shocking, even, than Hardy's. Here is one from Blunden's *Undertones of War*:

A young and cheerful lance-corporal of ours was making some tea [in the trench] as I passed one warm afternoon. Wishing him a good tea, I went along three fire-bays; one shell dropped without warning behind me; I saw its smoke faint out, and I thought all was as lucky as it should be. Soon a cry from that place recalled me; the shell had burst all wrong. Its butting impression was black and stinking in the parados where three minutes ago the lance-corporal's mess-tin was bubbling over a little flame. For him, how could the gobbets of blackening flesh, the earth-wall sotted with blood, with flesh, the eye under the duckboard, the pulpy bone be the only answer?

And irony engenders worse irony:

At this moment, while we looked with dreadful fixity at so isolated a horror, the lance-corporal's brother came round the traverse.⁵¹

Another example, again of an ironic family tragedy. Here the narrator is Max Plowman, author (under the pseudonym "Mark VII") of the memoir *A Subaltern on the Somme* (1928). The commanding officer of the front-line company in which Plowman is serving has received "a piteous appeal," a letter from "two or three influential people in a Northern town, setting forth the case of a mother nearly demented because she has had two of her three sons killed in the trenches since July 1 [1916], and is in mortal fear of what may happen to the sole surviving member of the family, a boy in our company named Stream." The authors of this letter ask if anything can be done. The company commander "is helpless at the moment, but he has shown the letter to the colonel, who promises to see what can be done next time we are out." The reader will be able to construct the rest of the episode himself. A few days later "Sergeant Brown . . . comes to the mouth of the dug-out to report that a big shell dropped right in the trench, killing one man, though who it was he

doesn't yet know: the body was blown to pieces. No one else was hurt."⁵²

The irony which memory associates with the events, little as well as great, of the First World War has become an inseparable element of the general vision of war in our time. Sergeant Croft's ironic patrol in Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) is one emblem of that vision. The unspeakable agonies endured by the patrol in order to win—as it imagines—the whole campaign take place while the battle is being easily won elsewhere. The patrol's contribution ("sacrifice," it would have been called thirty years earlier) has not been needed at all. As Polack puts it: "We broke our ass for nothin'."⁵³

There is continuity too in a favorite ironic scene which the Great War contributes to the Second. A terribly injured man is "comforted" by a friend unaware of the real ghastliness of the friend's wounds. The classic Great War scene of this kind is a real "scene": it is Scene 3, Act III, of R. C. Sherriff's play of 1928, *Journey's End*, which had the amazing run of 594 performances at the Savoy Theater. The dying young Second Lieutenant James Raleigh (played by the twenty-eight-year-old Maurice Evans) is carried down into the orderly-room dugout to be ministered to by his old public-school football idol, Captain Dennis Stanhope:

RALEIGH. Something—hit me in the back—knocked me clean over—sort of—winded me—I'm all right now. (*He tries to rise*)

STANHOPE. Steady, old boy. Just lie there quietly for a bit.

RALEIGH. I'll be better if I get up and walk about. It happened once before—I got kicked in just the same place at Rucker; it—it soon wore off. It—it just numbs you for a bit.

STANHOPE. I'm going to have you taken away.

RALEIGH. Away? Where?

STANHOPE. Down to the dressing-station—then hospital—then home. (*He smiles*) You've got a Blighty one, Jimmy.

(*There is quiet in the dug-out for a time. Stanhope sits with one hand on Raleigh's arm, and Raleigh lies very still. Presently he speaks again—hardly above a whisper*)

Dennis—

STANHOPE. Yes, old boy?

RALEIGH. Could we have a light? It's—it's so frightfully dark and cold.

STANHOPE. (*rising*) Sure! I'll bring a candle and get another blanket.

(*Stanhope goes out R, and Raleigh is alone, very still and quiet. . . . A tiny sound comes from where Raleigh is lying—something between a sob and a moan; his L hand drops to the floor. Stanhope comes back with a blanket. He takes a candle from the table and carries it to Raleigh's bed. He puts it on the box beside Raleigh and speaks cheerfully*)

Is that better, Jimmy? (*Raleigh makes no sign*) Jimmy—⁵⁴

The most conspicuous modern beneficiary of this memorable scene is Joseph Heller. Alfred Kazin has accurately distinguished the heart of *Catch-22* from the distracting vaudeville surrounding it: "The impressive emotion in *Catch-22*," he says, "is not 'black humor,' the 'totally absurd' . . . but horror. Whenever the book veers back to its primal scene, a bombardier's evisceration in a plane being smashed by flak, a scene given us directly and piteously, we recognize what makes *Catch-22* disturbing." What makes it disturbing, Kazin decides, is the book's implying, by its Absurd farce, that in the last third of the twentieth century, after the heaping of violence upon violence, it is no longer possible to "describe war" in traditional literary ways.⁵⁵ But what is notable about Heller's "primal scene" is that it does "describe war" in exactly a traditional literary way. It replays Sherriff's scene and retains all its Great War irony.

Heller's unforgettable scene projects a terrible dynamics of horror, terrified tenderness, and irony. Yossarian has gone to the tail of the plane to help the wounded gunner, the "kid" Snowden: "Snowden was lying on his back on the floor with his legs stretched out, still burdened cumbersome by his flak suit, his flak helmet, his parachute harness and his Mae West. . . . The wound Yossarian saw was in the outside of Snowden's thigh." It was "as large and deep as a football, it seemed." Yossarian masters his panic and revulsion and sets to work with a tourniquet. "He worked with simulated skill and composure, feeling Snowden's lack-luster gaze resting upon him." Cutting away Snowden's trouser-leg, Yossarian is pleased to discover that the wound "was not nearly as large as a football, but as long and wide as his hand. . . . A long sigh of relief escaped slowly through Yossarian's mouth when he saw that Snowden was not in danger of dying. The blood was already coagulating inside the wound, and it was simply a matter of bandaging him up and keeping him calm until the plane landed."

Cheered by these hopes, Yossarian goes to work "with renewed confidence and optimism." He competently sprinkles sulfanilimide into the wound as he has been taught and binds it up, making "the whole thing fast with a tidy square knot. It was a good bandage, he knew, and he sat back on his heels with pride . . . and grinned at Snowden with spontaneous friendliness." It is time for ironic reversal to begin:

"I'm cold," Snowden moaned. "I'm cold."

"You're going to be all right, kid," Yossarian assured him, patting his arm comfortingly. "Everything's under control."

Snowden shook his head feebly. "I'm cold," he repeated, with eyes as dull and blind as stone. "I'm cold."

"There, there," said Yossarian. . . . "There, there. . . ."

And soon everything proves to be not under control at all:

Snowden kept shaking his head and pointed at last, with just the barest movement of his chin, down toward his armpit. . . . Yossarian ripped open the snaps of Snowden's flak suit and heard himself scream wildly as Snowden's insides slithered down to the floor in a soggy pile and just kept dripping out.

Yossarian "wondered how in the world to begin to save him."

"I'm cold," Snowden whimpered. "I'm cold."

"There, there," Yossarian mumbled mechanically in a voice too low to be heard. "There, there."

And the scene ends with Yossarian covering the still whimpering Snowden with the nearest thing he can find to a shroud:

"I'm cold," Snowden said. "I'm cold."

"There, there," said Yossarian. "There, there." He pulled the rip cord of Snowden's parachute and covered his body with the white nylon sheets.

"I'm cold."

"There, there."⁵⁶

This "primal scene" works because it is undeniably horrible, but its irony, its dynamics of hope abridged, is what makes it haunt the memory. It embodies the contemporary equivalent of the experience offered by the first day on the Somme, and like that archetypal original, it can stand as a virtual allegory of political and social cognition in our time. I am saying 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.