

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-87222-5 - Modernism and World War II
 Marina MacKay
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Introduction: Modernism beyond the Blitz

What we call the beginning is often the end
 And to make an end is to make a beginning
 The end is where we start from.

T. S. Eliot, *Little Gidding* (1942)¹

‘Either you had no purpose’, Eliot writes in his wartime *Little Gidding*, ‘Or the purpose is beyond the end you figured / And is altered in fulfilment’.² The work of a poet concluding a career of unparalleled significance, Eliot’s *Four Quartets* speculate continually about what it would mean to make a good end, where an end is an objective or a conclusion, an intended destination or just a termination – and perhaps, but not necessarily, both. So if I begin this book by saying that its subject is the end of modernism, I mean ‘end’ in Eliot’s double sense: the end of modernism signifies both its realisation and its dissolution. Vindicated, certainly, but melancholy in its vindication, the mood of late modernism in England resembles the watershed event that it recorded: the Second World War, too, was both a win and a winding up. In the chapters that follow, I suggest that the correlation between late modernism in England and the world-changing circumstances with which it overlapped amounts to more than a historical coincidence.

It would be hard to overstate the continuing centrality of the war in contemporary English culture – this is always just ‘the war’, colloquially, as if there had been no other – ‘remarkably resonant’, as one historian summarises it, ‘appearing in many different sites of memory and permeating just about every level of national, local and personal culture’.³ The reasons why the war should have accrued this tenacious importance for the national imaginary speak directly to late modernism’s characteristic preoccupations. In geopolitical terms, a conflict that had initially been deferred because of the virtual impossibility of protecting an empire sprawling across potential war fronts on the Atlantic, Pacific and

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Mediterranean finally led to national bankruptcy and the termination of Britain's status as a superpower. This was Britain's final moment as the kind of global force that most English modernists, inheritors of late-Victorian liberalism, had heartily loathed, and whatever Britishness or Englishness could be made to mean for the future, imperial grandeur would play no part in it. The nation's newly minor status is the keynote of both the war's literature and its subsequent discursive construction, and so, for instance, the most powerful emotional investments have been made not in military triumphs that recall Britain's former imperial glory but in moments of national vulnerability. Such nostalgia magnets as 'the Blitz' and 'Dunkirk' commemorate nothing more than the pathos of passive defence and a horrifically outnumbered retreat. This is the war as scripted by modernism: post-imperial, anti-heroic and totally unwanted.

'Standing alone', as the 1940 cliché had it, Britain acquired a master narrative for national isolation from the continent that also goes some way towards accounting for the war's enduring cultural significance. Often evoked in the intermittently strained relations between the United Kingdom and the rest of Europe, the repercussions of Britain's wartime singularity, its period of isolation between the fall of France and the entry of the United States into the war, might be seen either as a defence of the small and particular against the undemocratically homogenising or as the bloody-minded insularity of a defunct power. The literature of the Second World War presents a return to the source, when modernists were compelled to scrutinise the political and moral claims of insular nationality at a time when allegiance was demanded as rarely before, the national culture at risk as it had not been in centuries. These cosmopolitan and European-minded intellectuals saw for the first time that their transnational interests could be imperial privilege as well as enlightened internationalism and that national identification could mean anything from pernicious parochialism to the freedom from totalitarian occupation. All of the texts discussed in this book are in their different ways national allegories, and if it is a factor of their modernism that these writers' responses to national feeling turned out to be so conflicted, it was surely a factor of their extraordinary mid-century moment that these metropolitan modernists should think nationality the most pressing issue of all. Among the writers discussed in later chapters, for example, Rebecca West finds herself holding to critical account the Anglocentric underpinnings of modernist internationalism even as she catalogues at extraordinary lengths the devastating effects of imperialist nationalism; conversely, Evelyn Waugh ends up mourning an aborted modernist

cosmopolitanism in *Brideshead Revisited*, a novel that he wrote as a memorial to traditional feudal England.

Waugh's post-war persona as a diehard of pantomime proportions is a blunt reminder of how important the war's domestic as well as global transformations were ultimately to become in the second half of the century. The exigencies of total war permanently changed the role of the state in relation to its citizens as they changed Britain from a class-bound empire into a medium-sized welfare state. As early as ten months into the war even the conservative *Times* was proposing that 'The European house cannot be put in order unless we put our own house in order first', arguing that the only hope for a new international order rested on the realisation of a social arrangement no longer based 'on the preservation of privilege, whether the privilege be that of a country, of a class, or of an individual':

If we speak of democracy we do not mean a democracy which maintains the right to vote but forgets the right to work and the right to live. If we speak of freedom, we do not mean a rugged individualism which excludes social organization and economic planning. If we speak of equality, we do not mean a political equality nullified by social and economic privilege. If we speak of economic reconstruction, we think less of maximum production (though this too will be required) than of equitable distribution.⁴

Dismantling the hollow patriotism of the Great War of 1914–1918 – the fight for Democracy, Freedom and Equality against oppressive Hunnery – by recalling the broken political promises of the decades that had followed it, this radical social formulation was a statement of closing horizons and a newly critical form of nationalism. The post-imperial state that might survive the war had to look to itself.

Both in content and in tone, the *Times* editorial's call for reform captured the political atmosphere of the moment: a total rejection of the political inertia of 1930s government, a torpor so profound that it had not only made the negative policy of appeasement seem a viable option (even to the *Times* itself, it should be said), but had made laissez faire look like lazy complacency about the conditions in which the bulk of the population still subsisted: 'Hunger, to a certain extent', one Member of Parliament had opined in the blighted 1930s, 'is a very good thing'.⁵ 'Do not let me hear of the wisdom of old men', Eliot writes in *East Coker*, and goes on to castigate their 'fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession, / Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God'.⁶ On the face of it, one would no more expect radical denunciations of a timeserving and quietist

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interwar establishment from the Tory Eliot than from the Tory *Times*, and yet in 1940 they came anyway.

Two years later, Sir William Beveridge's much-hyped *Social Insurance and Allied Services* would promise social security from the cradle to the grave; as a direct result, the war hero Churchill would be beaten in the general election landslide of 1945 by Clement Attlee's Labour Party because, although Beveridge's overwhelming reception had forced all parties to commit to massive reforms, their interwar record clearly made the Conservatives the party least likely to realise the greater social justice that had become a war aim long before a British victory was even plausible. Literally totalitarian conditions on the war's home front made possible a long-term shift in the balance of private and public ownership, raised taxes for redistributive purposes and gave the working classes reliable access to health care and education. To say that it revolutionised British society would likely make political historians wince: surely even the most spectacular of watershed events has a longer evolution and less clear-cut outcomes (and the long history and muddled outcomes are central to this book). Nonetheless, the war was experienced in nothing short of revolutionary terms, and the public debate surrounding these domestic transformations are crucial because they forced modernist writers belatedly to scrutinise their own social and political investments. Watching late modernism embark on this process of stocktaking offers a way to avoid the short cuts offered by the individual case – say, by Ezra Pound's fascism on one side and Hugh MacDiarmid's communism on the other. The writers in whom I am interested here occupy the same narrow spectrum as parliamentary politics: Liberals and liberals, socialists and liberal socialists, one-nation Tories and Tory radicals, they compel a more measured and historically responsible approach to the persistent critical debate surrounding the politics of modernism.

This book aligns the renovation of the public sphere in Britain with the aesthetic discourses that had anticipated its necessity and came to record it in the process of taking shape. It emphasises moments that illuminate how the war came to mean what it does to the post-imperial imagination. Some of these landmarks are historical in the textbook sense: the nerve-strung early months of waiting known as the Phoney War; the passing of the Emergency Powers (Defence) Act, which turned Britain into a totalitarian state in the spring of 1940; the Blitz that followed later in the year, when 'British' territory came closer to invasion than it had in a millenium; the publication of the Beveridge Report at the end of 1942; the Labour landslide in the spring of 1945. Utterly implicated in this more

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conventionally historical narrative is the sequence of less bounded imaginative happenings in which the late modernists also participated: the rebranding of stratified imperialist Britain as something that might conceivably be worth going to war over this second time; the creative mapping of the archipelago in pursuit of a part, whether ravaged metropolis or timeless rural backwater, to stand for the newly post-imperial whole; the collapse of interwar polarities into unprecedented political consensus; the dawning crisis of minority culture in the era of the welfare state and the early Cold War. Late modernism gives the critical and affective content to the story of England's cultural remaking.

In historical and political terms, the story that late modernism tells is so compellingly dramatic that it is not immediately obvious why it should have gone untold in the first place. But despite tremendous recuperative work by recent surveys of this long neglected period, little of the war's literature has ever fully registered on the critical field of vision, and even now the final wartime work of canonical writers like Eliot and Woolf is read comparatively little; their late writing is largely the lonely domain of single-author specialists, as if these valedictory masterpieces have nothing important to say about modernism or mid-century culture more generally.⁷ The commonplace that this was 'a war to which literature conscientiously objected'⁸ was already good for a joke by 1941, when Cyril Connolly opened a famous *Horizon* editorial with 'About this time of year articles appear called "Where are our war poets?" The answer (not usually given) is "under your nose"'.⁹ The criteria for what constituted proper war literature had already been established by the Great War, without regard to the sheer secondness of the Second World War and without acknowledgement of what had happened in between. The soldier poets of the Great War set the standard by which the literature of the second war was judged wanting, as if next time around there could have been a reprise of the bitterly disillusioned goodbyes-to-all-that which flooded the literary market of the 1920s. The war literature of 1914–18 was nothing if not an anti-war literature, and its authors had for once and for all trashed the militarist mystique by writing so harrowingly of its betrayals. The literature of the Second World War was always going to be different: that it does not take as its *raison d'être* the position that war is stupid, wasteful and ugly is certainly not because writers mistook state-sanctioned violence on the grand scale for anything other than what it is, but exactly because, after the Great War, they took this as given. The exhaustion of the Great War mode even seeps into later combatant writing, as when Keith Douglas in

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1943 addressed an important Great War precursor with: ‘Rosenberg I only repeat what you were saying’.¹⁰

Killed in action as Isaac Rosenberg had been, Douglas has always for good reason been considered the most significant British poet of 1939–45, but there’s an important sense in which Cyril Connolly was right to locate the war writers ‘under your nose’. What makes the cultural context of the second war so radically different from that of the first was the new primacy of the civilian experience: whereas the ‘home front’ was primarily a propaganda metaphor in 1918, the Second World War was halfway through before the number of dead British combatants exceeded that of dead British civilians.¹¹ And, as Tony Judt points out in his important new history of post-war Europe, only in Britain and Germany did military losses finally outnumber the civilian death toll; in total more than 19 million non-combatants were killed across Europe.¹² That the Second World War continues to be perceived as largely a civilian war gives it some of its enduring and resonant pathos, because even if the Great War poets comprehensively demystified the glories of warfare, admiration for the courage of passive defence – for those who cannot kill, but can be killed – flows readily enough. War’s homecoming, or the new significance of the non-combatant experience, loosens the boundaries of its possible literatures, and Randall Stevenson was surely right to speculate that the absence of a major Second World War literature in Britain ‘may simply be a consequence of looking for it in the wrong place’.¹³ As a conflict in which the civilian experience was paramount, its literature urges a reshaping of what counts as the literature of war in order to include authors who were not combatants and texts that are not ‘about’ war in any straightforwardly mimetic way. It demands, in other words, the modes of reading that the non-combatant modernisms of the Great War made possible.

I say this because modernist writing produced between 1914 and 1918 stretched the concept of ‘aboutness’ almost to its breaking point in its approach to the war that saw its publication. Ford Madox Ford’s *The Good Soldier* (1915) is tauntingly titled: no war story, *The Good Soldier* tells of a deracinated American discovering that the perfect paragon of heroic English masculinity is privately a philandering liar, and trying to reconcile this new knowledge with his own desire to be ‘a good soldier’ of the same kind as his hero. Meanwhile, Ford’s old collaborator Joseph Conrad was also investigating treacherous ideals of male leadership and turned *The Shadow-Line* (1917), an autobiographical account of his disastrous first captaincy, into a war story when he added a prefatory dedication to his

son at the Front. The war appears literally nowhere in the body of these novels, and yet one would have to unlearn the novels' dates in order to evade the timeliness of these dissections of pre-1914 England's destructive fantasies about manly virtue. Like the wartime late modernisms this book describes, such novels as those Ford and Conrad produced during the Great War are preoccupied less by the war as a self-contained event than by its social, epistemological and psychological meanings: the devastating insufficiency of normative English masculinity; the impossibility of discerning the truth about events amid a swamp of public lies; the stigmatised debility of traumatic experience in a culture of the stiff upper lip. Novels such as these speak to the war in which they were published without necessarily speaking about it at all.

Their address to the war is more than a question of modernist literature's famously oblique thematic. Almost exactly a year after the Armistice, Katherine Mansfield wrote in a well-known letter to her husband John Middleton Murry that Virginia Woolf's new novel *Night and Day* (1919) was 'a lie in the soul. The war has never been, that is what its message is':

I don't want G. forbid mobilisation and the violation of Belgium – but the novel cant [*sic*] just leave the war out. It is really fearful to me the 'settling down' of human beings. I feel in the *profoundest* sense that nothing can ever be the same [...] that as artists we are traitors if we feel otherwise: we have to take it into account and find new expressions [...] new moulds for our new thoughts & feelings.¹⁴

Provoked by the refusal of Woolf's second novel to acknowledge the war explicitly (thematically), Mansfield argued that 'leaving the war in' was as much an issue of narrative idiom as of manifest content. Many experimental treatments of the Great War share Mansfield's sense that modernist form was something close to a historical obligation imposed by unprecedented recent violence. The narrator of Rebecca West's shellshock novel *The Return of the Soldier* (1918) even states outright the link between textual crisis and the war in progress when she describes her soldier's insanity as 'a triumph over the limitations of language which prevent the mass of men from making explicit statements about their spiritual relationships'.¹⁵ The soldier of the novel's title has returned from the Front having forgotten his entire adult life, and the political implications of his 'triumph over the limitations of language' could not be starker when his madness represents his wholesale rejection of pre-war male privilege as feudal landowner, commercial imperialist and breadwinning husband. More canonical intersections of linguistic crisis, war damage and social

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protest could obviously be found in the predicament of Woolf's Septimus Smith and Eliot's nerve-racked residents of *The Waste Land*, in post-war texts whose formal modernity arises from the erosions that they undertake of traditional distinctions between public and private spheres, war front and home front, between conventionally historical events and the painfully permeable psychic life. Woolf's experiments at the really subjective end of free indirect discourse in the rendering of the war-ravaged Septimus Smith (*Mrs Dalloway* is the first of her novels written in what became her characteristic style) and Eliot's spasmodic, syncopated verse in the passages of *The Waste Land* that deal with similarly broken homecomings ('What are you thinking of? What thinking? What? / . . . I think we are in rats' alley / Where the dead men lost their bones') make it inviting to connect the Great War's causes and effects to the emergence of new textual forms.¹⁶

After all, it was the First World War that had showed the agonising incommensurability of the old realist historiography of decisive battles, victory and defeat, with the shapeless and essentially unbounded damage that war inflicts. War had ceased to look formal, was no longer believably contained by the sporting discourse, gendered and class-bound, of winners and losers. That uniquely modern lesson about the amorphousness of the war experience surely stands behind the argument made by one seminal feminist essay on war studies, that we have to think 'beyond the exceptional, marked event, which takes place on a specifically militarized front or in public and institutionally defined arenas, to include the private domain and the landscape of the mind'.¹⁷ Shifting beyond the artificially circumscribed public histories of the event is modernism *de rigueur*, or what Woolf in a different context wrote of as the need to 'do away with exact place & time' in her experimental fiction, 'this appalling narrative business of the realist . . . false, unreal, merely conventional'.¹⁸ As a mode of historical representation modernism works indirectly and inwardly: renouncing totalising and documentary ambitions, it tries to expand the categories of what constitutes historical experience. Its abiding pre-occupations with 'the private domain and the landscape of the mind' potentially explain the time-honoured identification of modernism with the Great War: modernist inwardness versus shattering public failure. You could pit the conscientiously objecting modernists ('the private domain and the landscape of the mind') against the tub-thumping jingoes (the 'public and institutionally defined') who defended a war that became synonymous with unprecedented suffering. Modernism thus becomes subversive because its formal waywardness disrupts the hierarchically

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imposed version of the real; by their nature dissident, modernist forms renounce the mindlessly habitual, unthinkingly collective perspectives that make war possible; modernism's fractured and estranging modes simultaneously mimic the damage of war and blow to bits the lazy mental habits of mind that produced and sustained it.

What I would like to suggest in this book is that any such semi-allegorical rendering of war and modernist politics has to be supported, or else qualified, by attention to historical particularity. In his groundbreaking *Institutions of Modernism*, Lawrence Rainey warns against causally vague and politically optimistic conflations of modernist form and progressive politics, made possible only by 'excessive faith in our capacity to specify the essence and social significance of isolated formal devices and to correlate them with complex ideological and social formations'.¹⁹ Primarily, his book shows how the impulse to read modernism's anti-commercial difficulty as an assault on the values of the bourgeois economy is compromised by attention to the publishing and marketing structures within which modernist writers actually wrote; but the wider implication of Rainey's work is that historically more attuned analysis of modernist contexts renders problematic the impulse to rescue modernism from its long and damning association with reactionary politics by radicalising experimental form. The same applies to the link between modernism and the Great War because, although some of the experimental writing produced in and around that period lends real support to the identification of anti-conservative politics and a distinctively new aesthetic, the identification is supported immeasurably better by some texts and writers than by others, and there can be something unhistorical, even anti-historical, about a general conflation of formal and political heroism in this period as in any other. It is as well to keep in mind that some canonical 'Men of 1914' managed to sound even more hysterically militaristic than their parliamentary counterparts (and who would vote for T. E. Hulme over Lloyd George?), even as much of the experimental writing that came after 1918 traces critical connections among public violence, linguistic rupture and a broader context of social dereliction and political failure.

But what the Great War initiated, the Second World War realised. Britain's political culture finally caught up with its interwar avant-garde, and this closing gap means that there's a historical moment at which the polemical conflation of poetry and protest, literary and political dissent, ceases to ring true. Obviously late Romantic when seen in its longer lineage, the conflation also owed something to the characteristic

modalities of the Great War: Paul Fussell's classic *The Great War and Modern Memory* describes how the polarising imaginative habits of 1914 ('"We" are all here on this side; "the enemy" is over there') escaped their jingo origins to land in the work of combatants who were protesting the war: men against women; soldiers against civilians. Finally, fatuous ideas of military heroism get replaced by the imaginative heroism of literary truth-telling.²⁰ The identification of poetry and political protest became familiar interwar tropology, and, like the other Second World War commentators who wondered where the war poets were, Cecil Day Lewis clearly thought that any legitimate war writing was an anti-war writing. He says this directly in his 1943 poem 'Where are the War Poets?'

It is the logic of our times,
 No subject for immortal verse –
 That we who lived by honest dreams
 Defend the bad against the worse.²¹

For Day Lewis, there is no 'immortal verse' in the era of the political consensus; equating literary achievement with political opposition, he could not countenance the possibility of a literature that would take this tension between creative transcendence and political actuality as its starting point.

This is a crucial issue because all major British writers of the mid-century made the guilty compromise, knowing it to be exactly that, of supporting the Second World War, and it produced not only formidable work by established writers like Eliot and Woolf, but also the most significant writing that younger modernists such as Rebecca West, Henry Green and Evelyn Waugh were ever to produce. George Orwell had insisted right up until the end of the 1930s that fascism and capitalist democracy were 'Tweedledum and Tweedledee',²² but in an aphorism that would do service for all these writers, E. M. Forster described Orwell's final change of heart as the belief that 'All nations are odious but some are less odious than others, and by this stony, unlovely path he reaches patriotism. To some of us, this seems the cleanest way to reach it'.²³ In stark contrast to the Great War, writers would not use their much greater liberty of expression to speak out against the Second World War: and if the imperialist causes and catastrophic effects of the Great War became easy retrospectively to denounce, the experimental writing produced in the subsequent war records more complicated conversations between literary experiment and political culture.