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Beyond Pacifism: Teaching World War I Literature from Left to Right

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Beyond Pacifism: Teaching World War I Literature from Left to Right

Reading the current canon of texts about World War I, one would think it really had been the war to end war. Wilfred Owen, perhaps the best-known poet of the war, denounced the Horatian motto “Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori” as the “old Lie.” Erich Maria Remarque, author of the best-selling *All Quiet on the Western Front*, also disavowed Horace’s patriotic ideal. When the novel was published in 1929, it was hailed as “the greatest of all war books” (Eksteins 1980: 354), and the film version made the following year won two Academy Awards. In the film, Paul Baumer (Remarque’s narrator) alludes to Horace when he confronts the teacher who urged him to enlist: “I heard you in here, reciting that same old stuff. Making more iron men, more young heroes. You still think it’s beautiful and sweet to die for your country, don’t you?” (Anderson 1930). The novel’s unprecedented sales—more than 2.5 million books worldwide in the first eighteen months (Eksteins: 353)—suggest that Remarque spoke for soldiers on both sides when he debunked the rhetoric of heroism.

Recent work by historians, however, indicates that our conception of World War I gives undue weight to literary denunciations of military ideals and practices.¹ The texts that have become canonical do not reflect public opinion during the war, nor have they diminished the glamour of war since then. The military historian Yuval Harari proposes an explanation of the enduring allure of combat in *The Ultimate Experience: Battlefield Revelations and the Making of Modern War Culture, 1450-2000*. He argues that since the middle of the eighteenth century, the West has adhered to the ideology that combat is a crucible for self-knowledge. The belief that war transforms soldiers is often attributed to militarists, but Harari shows that it is also held by pacifists. Demonstrating that this ideology is pervasive, his research facilitates discussion of war literature among students whose political views vary widely. To test his argument, I invited

ROTC officers to speak to the class about their military experience. Christopher J. Clay, Lieutenant Colonel, US Army, Professor of Military Science, Loyola University Chicago, and Major Frank Flowers, served in Iraq and other combat zones. Their reflections not only corroborated Harari's evidence, but also gave it a face and a voice.

Before the officers' visit, the class discussed some war poems and *All Quiet on the Western Front*. These texts seem to support the standard view that World War I began in idealism and ended in disillusionment. Samuel Hynes calls this narrative the "myth of the war":

a generation of innocent young men, their heads full of high abstractions like Honour, Glory, and England, went off to war to make the world safe for democracy. They were slaughtered in stupid battles planned by stupid generals. Those who survived were shocked, disillusioned and embittered by their war experiences, and saw that their real enemies were not the Germans, but the old men at home who had lied to them. They rejected the values of the society that had sent them to war, and in doing so separated their own generation from the past and from their cultural inheritance. (Hynes 1990: xii)

By 1929 this myth was ubiquitous. Ernest Hemingway etched it into American consciousness in *A Farewell to Arms*. Although the narrator volunteers to serve as an ambulance driver for the Italian army even before the United States enters the war, his retrospective account records only his postwar disillusionment: "I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain" (Hemingway 2012: 161). Other anti-heroic war novels such as William March's *Company K* (1933) and Humphrey Cobb's *Paths of Glory* (1935) reinforce the assumption that realistic accounts of war support anti-war political positions.

Harari challenges this interpretation of war literature in his essay “Scholars, Eyewitnesses, and Flesh-Witnesses of War: A Tense Relationship.” He argues that even pacifist texts idealize war and military heroes by portraying soldiers as initiates who have attained superior knowledge and insight. As he demonstrates in his survey of military memoirs in *The Ultimate Experience*, from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, soldiers usually recounted their feats of valor. Around 1750, however, they began to write about their feelings rather than their deeds. Harari correlates this change with the erosion of communal beliefs. The Enlightenment’s trust in the validity of observations that could be replicated was replaced by the eighteenth-century’s belief in the truth of inner experience. The new philosophy of Sensationism shifted the foundation of knowledge from empirical observation to personal response. As a result, the comprehensive but synoptic perspective of a general behind the lines became less authoritative than the individual reactions of a soldier at the front.

Harari introduces the term “flesh-witnessing” to distinguish inner experience from eye-witness testimony. He takes the term from a French World War I veteran who said that a man “who has not understood *with his flesh* cannot talk to you about it” (Harari 2009: 215). Whereas eye-witness reports provide information that can be communicated to others, the knowledge of the flesh-witness can never be known by anyone else. Harari explains:

Henceforth, a central tenet of the new stories of war was that those who did not undergo the key experiences of war cannot understand these experiences and cannot understand war in general. Two stock expressions repeat themselves in Romantic memoirs: “It is impossible to describe it” and “You had to undergo the experience yourself in order to understand it.” (Harari 2008: 231-32)

Such phrases have become a refrain in accounts of twentieth-century warfare. Although soldiers have tried to write about how they felt in combat, they continually say that they cannot convey their experience: only those who were there can know what they know. The soldier's knowledge is incommunicable yet incontrovertible. It marks him as an initiate.

The two officers who visited our class embodied Harari's paradigm of flesh-witnessing; they had been in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. Since neither was familiar with Harari's ideas or our readings, I wanted to establish a common basis for discussion. I was able to do this by showing the short clip from the 1929 film of *All Quiet on the Western Front* in which Paul confronts the teacher who urged him to enlist. After watching this scene, the officers started the discussion by telling us why *they* enlisted. Like Paul, they spoke of the differences between what they had expected and what they experienced. One enlisted for patriotic reasons, the other for educational opportunities. They achieved their goals, yet the daily reality of military life was filled with long spells of routine interrupted by spurts of danger. Like Paul, the officers missed their families when they were with their units and missed their comrades when they were home. They admitted that coming home was difficult. On duty, their mission was the only thing they had to think about. At home, however, they had conflicting obligations. Several anecdotes suggested that the officers were embarrassed when civilians treated them as heroes. Strangers thanked them for their service, and children flocked around them. But the officers did not feel exceptional or heroic; they considered themselves part of a unit doing its job. In all these ways, the officers resembled Paul, but they also illustrated Harari's crucial point. When one student asked what they told their families about combat, the officers said that they never spoke about combat because civilians could not understand.

After the visit, students wrote short responses comparing the officers' statements to our readings. Some students had relatives in the military, but for those who did not, meeting these officers dispelled the stereotype of the gung-ho warrior. One woman's reflections suggest how much the students learned from the officers. Kasia Plessy wrote:

I found our discussion on Thursday very interesting because I have never interacted with anyone in the military. While I believe many of the questions my classmates and I asked deviated slightly from our topics in literature, I believe that it is important to understand the mindset behind the man in uniform to fully understand violent poetry. . . . I was truly surprised about how much I enjoyed hearing the perspective of men who constantly put themselves in danger; it was almost as if I was startled by their normalcy. (pers. com., 3 October 2013)

Reading Harari prepared the class for the officers' positive feelings about combat and their eagerness to return to their units. These feelings had less to do with fighting than protecting one another:

What I remember most was their emphasis on guilt and brotherhood. I do not know much about military service, but I do usually attribute their voluntary service to come from patriotism. However, I was very surprised to hear that they value their friendships more than their political affiliations, and was even more surprised when they said that they voluntarily go back into duty because they feel a responsibility to the other officers. I remember them saying that they would feel more guilt not being there, and hearing that someone in their ranks died, than if they were there with them. (pers. com., 13 December 2013)

She was able to understand why the officers were unable to describe battle to non-combatants:

I also remember them shying away from emotionally charged questions. . . .They seemed to feel better talking about matter-of-fact situations rather than the ACTUAL personal experience of war. However, I did not really mind this because we have learned that battle can be very personal, and I am not sure I would feel okay talking to a group of strangers about it. (pers. com., 13 December 2013)

Without making Harari the definitive authority on war writing, we were able to recognize how the officers' comments expressed the ideology he detects in memoirs. The officers were able to discuss almost every aspect of their experience except how they felt during combat. Like Paul, they trusted and protected others in their unit, but they could not tell outsiders how they felt.

By uncovering the ideology that combat is a transformative yet indescribable experience, Harari gives us a framework for teaching literature about war. He brackets political debates about the causes and consequences of war to focus on how it is represented. Although we are accustomed to contrasting pro-war and anti-war views, Harari opens our eyes to the ubiquitous appeal of war stories. Exposing an ideology that causes patriots and pacifists alike to idealize soldiers, Harari challenges both groups. Although patriots may feel stirred by the rhetoric of sacrifice for the nation, Harari argues that for most soldiers the meaning of war is personal. Whatever their initial motive for fighting, combat transforms them. They may find the experience exalting or degrading, but in either case the individual's judgment is absolute.

Similarly, although pacifists may believe that recounting the horrors of combat will prevent future wars, Harari dismisses this view as "materialist pacifism" and flatly rejects it:

“Twentieth-century pacifist memoirists are simply wrong in their belief that war was never reported realistically in the past, and that a realistic report of war is enough to destroy its heroic allure” (Harari 2008: 75). Harari acknowledges that many artists condemn war: “Poets, writers, painters, and film-makers have relied on their personal experience in war in order to challenge traditional authorities on war, and to attack the ‘old Lie’ of Western war culture. . .” (Harari 2009: 214). Nevertheless, he argues, since this viewpoint is itself the result of combat experience, the underlying meaning of war for the individual subverts the overt political position the text affirms.

Harari regards *All Quiet* as an example of this unintended effect. The anti-war statements and realistic accounts of battle in the novel are like the testimony of a flesh-witness rather than an effective pacifist polemic (Harari 2009: 222). As another critic observes, Remarque’s vivid account of the horrors of the battlefield only enhances the heroism of the soldiers who endured these conditions; there were “soldiers on both sides who seemed to have adjusted to war as being a crucial, and positively meaningful, part of their lives” (Pois 2000: 11-12). Paul Baumer is one of these soldiers. His beliefs progress from patriotism to skepticism, and he eventually becomes a pacifist. He resolves that if he survives he will devote himself to the international effort to prevent war. His disillusionment with one set of beliefs leads to other convictions. Despite Remarque’s opposition to war, Paul’s new purpose is the result of his combat experience. It is not his pacifism but his transformation that makes him heroic.

Buttressed by the ROTC officers’ experience, Harari’s work changed class discussions. We were able to see that anti-war texts nevertheless stir profound respect for combatants. The promise of revelation, of “ultimate” experience, sustained widespread support for World War I, even after the initial war aims were discredited, and Harari demonstrates that this ideology is not

only present in militarist exhortations but also underlies the anti-war rhetoric of pacifist texts such as *All Quiet on the Western Front*. If combat is the “ultimate experience,” it should be the province of literature, but Harari shows that since the eighteenth century, war has seemed impossible to represent to non-combatants. Only the “flesh-witness” knows the truth. It is seared into his consciousness, and others are incapable of understanding it. This ideology is deeper than the differences between pacifists and militarists, or between socialists and fascists. Whether war is perceived as painful or exhilarating, degrading or ennobling, it is widely idealized as a crucible for the development of the self. It transforms everyone who lives through it, and it makes war stories irresistible, whatever political views we hold.

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¹ For example, Daniel Todman argues that nations had good reasons for fighting, that participants accepted the heavy cost, and that the Allies achieved their objective of stopping German militarism, at least temporarily. He notes that when the war ended, "Across the country, local war memorials interpreted the war in traditional terms of national identity, loyalty, bravery and personal sacrifice in the service of justice, liberty and dignity. They ascribed a positive meaning to the war" (131).