

The First World War: overview

As the last part has shown, the twentieth century was not the first to endow war with sublime qualities. However, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the notion that war is ennobling and fortifying does not form the core of discourses about war and peace nor was it developed into a fully formed theory. By the end of the nineteenth century, in contrast, the celebration of war no longer occupies the fringes of a discourse on peace, but becomes a historical force in its own right.

The philosopher whose name is most associated with the glorification of war is Friedrich Nietzsche. In *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (On the Genealogy of Morality, 1887), Nietzsche identifies war with a heightened form of life, whereas peace is a symptom of decline (“Symptome des absinkenden Lebens,” v: 403).¹ In *Also sprach Zarathustra* (Thus Spoke Zarathustra, 1883–5), war is not only meaningful in and of itself, it is also capable of endowing the world with meaning: “Ihr sagt, die gute Sache sei es, die sogar den Krieg heilige? Ich sage euch: der gute Krieg ist es, der jede Sache heiligt” (IV: 59) (You say it is the good cause that sanctifies even war? I tell you: it is the good war that sanctifies every cause). Nietzsche proclaims that war is man’s true purpose on earth: “Der Mann soll zum Kriege erzogen werden und das Weib zur Erholung des Kriegers: alles Andere ist Thorheit” (IV: 85) (Man is to be educated for war and woman for the relaxation of the warrior: everything else is foolishness). War teaches manly virtues, encourages sacrifice, develops physical and moral strength, and injects life into an increasingly barren and lifeless society: “dass eine solche hoch cultivirte und daher nothwendig matte Menschheit, wie die der jetzigen Europäer, nicht nur der Kriege, sondern der grössten und furchtbarsten Kriege – also zeitweiliger Rückfälle in die Barbarei – bedarf” (II: 312) (that such a highly cultivated and therefore necessarily lax humanity, as is that of today’s Europeans, is in need not only of war, but of the biggest and most terrible wars – that is, temporary relapses into barbarity).

And yet, although Nietzsche defines war as invigorating and purposeful, he also criticizes every attempt to camouflage aggressive impulses with a moral sheen. Inverting Clausewitz, Nietzsche argues that war is not a vehicle of politics but rather uses politics for its own ends: “Der Fürst, welcher zu dem gefassten Entschlusse, Krieg mit dem Nachbarn zu führen, einen *casus belli* ausfindig macht, gleicht dem Vater, der seinem Kinde eine Mutter unterschiebt, welche fürderhin als solche gelten soll” (II: 340–1) (The ruler who attributes a *casus belli* to his already made decision to make war against the neighbor resembles the father who foists a mother on his child who is supposed to pass for the real one in future). Clearly, Nietzsche’s glorification of war is surpassed only by his determination to unveil the political lies and subterfuges that serve to justify war. In that sense, Nietzsche’s theories informed both the right-wing warriors of steel and the left-wing critique of war. But, of course, although Nietzsche does provide a model of “Ideologiekritik,” he, unlike the pacifist writers of the post-First World War period, does not hold out any promise that there will ever be a time without war.

Nietzsche’s pessimism regarding the possibility of lasting peace was shared by Sigmund Freud. In his essay “Zeitgemässes über Krieg und Tod” (Thoughts for the Time on War and Death, 1915),² written approximately six months after the beginning of the First World War, Freud comments on the surprise felt by many that a war of such cruelty and bloodthirstiness could be possible in civilized Europe. The point of the essay, however, is precisely that there is nothing surprising about it. According to Freud, human behavior is determined by drives, including aggressive and destructive drives. The effects of such drives can be temporarily redirected, repressed, or controlled, but they cannot be eradicated completely: “In Wirklichkeit gibt es keine Ausrottung des Bösen” (41) (In reality, there is no extermination of evil). Thus, culture is a thin veneer – there are “ungleich mehr Kulturheuchler als wirklich kulturelle Menschen” (44) (far more cultural hypocrites than truly cultural humans) – and war represents a return of the repressed that is bound to haunt mankind’s present and future.

That Freud’s early pessimism is not a spontaneous response to the outbreak of war but expressive of a lasting conviction is evident in his response to Albert Einstein’s invitation, extended in 1933, to discuss the possibility of liberating mankind from the yoke of war. Freud’s answer, entitled “Warum Krieg?” (Why War?), does not share Einstein’s faith in the redeeming power of education and knowledge. Although Freud describes forces that counteract war, he also asks: “warum empören wir uns so sehr

gegen den Krieg, Sie und ich und so viele andere, warum nehmen wir ihn nicht hin wie eine andere der vielen peinlichen Notlagen des Lebens” (284) (why do we take such offense at war, you and I and so many others, why do we not accept it as one of the many distressing exigencies of life).

As Freud’s writings indicate, the First World War represents a watershed event that left its contemporaries with deep doubts and even despair about the possibility of human progress. In spite of the far greater carnage of the Second World War, the First World War remains to this day the foundational war of modernity, and our notions of war literature remain shaped by the vast body of texts that sought to come to terms with the experience of the Great War.

In the following chapters, I will offer readings of Ernst Jünger’s (1895–1998) *In Stahlgewittern* (In Storms of Steel, 1920) and Erich Maria Remarque’s (1898–1970) *Im Westen nichts Neues* (All Quiet on the Western Front, 1929) to exemplify some of the challenges and choices with which war writers have to contend. Jünger, a proponent of the political right, has often been reviled for his glorification of war and his affinity to Nazi ideology. Remarque, whose novel featured prominently during the infamous Nazi book burning of 1933, is celebrated as a pacifist icon, and *Im Westen* is included in many school curricula. Clearly, in many ways, Remarque and Jünger are polar opposites. And yet, a simple classification of their texts as belligerent and pacifist respectively does not even begin to address the structural and thematic complexities and paradoxes of texts about war.

Departing from a reading of Jünger’s and Remarque’s works, I argue that a text’s opposition to war can manifest itself in vastly different and mutually contradictory ways. For example, a text may oppose war thematically and *expressis verbis*, but affirm its meaning through its narrative and structure. Conversely, a text may proclaim the glory of war, while its structure and the bleakness of its factual details convey a sense of meaningless slaughter. Consequently, the following readings of Jünger and Remarque seek to challenge one of our most dearly cherished assumptions about war and peace, namely the idea that a text that opposes war in pronounced and powerful terms must necessarily succeed in promoting peace. As I will show, opposition to war tends to highlight victimization, while peace is built on agency. To be sure, agency and victimization are not mutually exclusive categories. But the portrayal of victimization in the *Materialschlacht* of the First World War evinces a tendency to occlude agency that makes it impossible for First World War texts to transcend the representation of war towards a grammar of peace.

To the generation that fought it, the First World War constituted a radical break with the past. New technologies and tactics, including trench warfare, the use of tanks, poison gas, machine guns, flamethrowers, aircraft, and submarines, led to carnage on an unprecedented scale. It has often been pointed out that the escalation of violence on the battlefield shattered nineteenth-century beliefs in progress, ever-lasting peace, and ever-increasing prosperity. In the context of First World War novels, this rupture manifests itself as a rejection of nineteenth-century realism in favor of a modernist aesthetics. Several scholars, including Samuel Hynes and Evelyn Cobley, have drawn attention to the fact that the well-ordered forms of nineteenth-century literary realism are ill suited to represent the chaotic butchery of modern warfare. In different ways, both Hynes and Cobley alert us to the importance of the “content of the form” (Hayden White), that is, to the fact that an anti-war novel is not made by content alone. Rather, narrative devices and stylistic idiosyncrasies are themselves carriers of ideological meaning. For example, if a novel about the First World War relies on nineteenth-century literary traditions, it introduces narrative conventions that impose order, stability, and a teleological trajectory on the subject of war. This, however, runs counter to the defining features of the First World War, which, as Hynes explains, “was not an adventure or a crusade, but a valueless, formless experience that could not be rendered in the language, the images, and the conventions that existed. To represent the war in the traditional ways was necessarily to misrepresent it, to give it meaning, dignity, order, greatness.”³

Hynes is certainly right to claim that the conventions of realism cannot do justice to the messiness and senseless slaughter of the First World War, but he neglects to mention that it is precisely these traditional forms that allowed those afflicted by the war to comprehend and cope. As Jay Winter explains in his excellent study *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, “traditional modes of seeing the war, while at times less challenging intellectually and philosophically, provided a way of remembering which enabled the bereaved to live with their losses, and perhaps to leave them behind.”⁴ Seen in this light, a novel of war is faced with a choice: it can make sense of the war in order to heal and provide closure, or it can unsettle and seek to induce action in the reader by keeping the wounds open. Or it can, as Remarque’s novel does, attempt to do both. As I will show, *Im Westen nichts Neues* is marked by a fundamental tension between content and form that confounds its representation of war. The novel portrays the horror of war through its relentless depiction

of the body in pain, and it provides comfort and coherence through its reliance on nineteenth-century narrative traditions, in particular the genre of the *Bildungsroman*.

Remarque's *Im Westen* goes out of its way to denigrate the ideal of *Bildung*. At the same time, the text's structure evinces a great affinity to the nineteenth-century novel of *Bildung*. Similarly, Jünger's *In Stahlgewittern* is deeply beholden to German Classical literature, to Schiller's idealism, and to the notion of the sublime. But Jünger's determination to conjure these forces in order to contain the trauma of the front is as fierce as his struggle to rid himself of this heritage. Jünger knows that, however much he calls on the German classics, these well-worn traditions will fail to impose meaning on his experience. Again, this is particularly evident in the text's narrative structure. Although Jünger, unlike Remarque, is intent on portraying personal growth, the tradition of the German *Bildungsroman* did not leave its mark on his text. Jünger's representation of war is not shaped as a narrative arc, but as a linear progression of interchangeable battles. There is no climax, no beginning, no midpoint, no end, only an endless succession of the ever same. Even in its revised form, Jünger's account of war remains beholden to the form of the diary and lacks the kind of closure and teleological trajectory that the novel offers.

Aesthetically, Jünger's text is more apt to give expression to the meaningless slaughter of the First World War than Remarque's novel. Moreover, although Jünger is known for his exalted portrait of war, his text does not downplay its horrors. *In Stahlgewittern* is filled with casualty lists and details all the devastating injuries that war inflicts on the human body. Such honesty about injuries and death is crucial because it holds the potential to counteract glorifications of war. In her path-breaking study *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry has drawn attention to the multiple strategies with which texts about war seek to elide the body in pain and eliminate from their surface the facts of wounding and killing.⁵ To Scarry, such strategies are suspicious because they serve to obfuscate the horror of war. Conversely, one might conclude that careful attention to the body and its various discomforts and sufferings may constitute a powerful anti-war message. However, as I will show, attention to the body in pain is not in itself a sufficient guarantee of a text's pacifist potential. Jünger's text, for example, never shies away from the suffering of war, but it is also steadfast in its belief in a cosmic order that endows the slaughter of the First World War with a transcendental meaning. It is this mythical view of the war that absolves the individual soldier from political responsibility.

Paradoxically, Jünger, who insists most forcefully on the possibility of individual agency in the everyday theater of war, conceives of war itself as part of a cosmic cycle of death and rebirth wholly removed from the realm of human influence.

While Jünger embeds suffering and death in a redemptive framework, Remarque insists on their utter lack of meaning. And yet, although Remarque's body politics constitute a powerful denunciation of war, his novel cannot imagine a world beyond war. *Im Westen* fails to formulate a grammar of peace because its potentially productive balance of comforting and warning is destabilized by a pervasive victim discourse. Paradoxically, the very feature that constitutes the most effective critique, namely the portrayal of the effect of war on the body, simultaneously helps to undermine the text's quest for political agency. It would seem that Remarque's pacifist agenda is undone by a problematic dialectic inherent in the representation of the body. If a text subscribes to the Cartesian hierarchy of body and mind while focusing exclusively on the physical side of life, it drastically limits the scope of agency.

To be sure, the representation of the body in pain does not necessarily imply the erasure of agency. Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* (1958), for example, combines the depiction of extreme physical suffering with a fierce determination to carve out niches of agency. However, if a text *reduces* humans to the body, the only subject positions available to them are those of the victim or the beast. Remarque's novel cannot transcend the arena of war because it combines careful attention to the body in pain with an exclusive focus on the soldier as victim of war and politics. In joining war and victim narratives, *Im Westen* reinscribes a paradigm that has shaped German war discourse to this day. Clearly, the representation of soldiers as victims describes an important aspect of life in the trenches, but an overemphasis on victimization produces a non-identity of soldier and citizen that undercuts all attempts to promote peace. For peace, if it is to become political reality, must be subtended by concepts of agency.