

Letters from a Soldier
Letters and States of Intimacy in World War One American
Literature

Mother's Day in America in May 1918 was a special one. The *Stars and Stripes*, the official newspaper of the AEF, had launched the so-called Mother's Letter Plan, designed to maximize the volume and speed of correspondence from American soldiers in France to their mothers at home. On the day, extra stationery was delivered to billets and trenches across France; and by writing "Mother's letter" on the envelope, priority for this mail was assured. As the *Stars and Stripes* boasted, "those two words will have precisely the same effect as though the highest postal official in America had, with his own hand, written 'Rush' across the envelope."¹ No one escaped their tone of bullying sentiment: military censors and mail orderlies were exhorted by the newspaper to work night and day to deal with this surge of mail, and soldiers were encouraged to "plan the best letter you ever wrote in your life . . . write it from the bottom of your heart, and the boat that carries the Mother's Letters to America will be a boat laden with as rich a freight as ever craft bore from shore to shore."² As the *New York Times* reported the next day, "Americans in every quarter of the globe yesterday united in one tender thought – the memory of their mothers."³ (One of those Americans was G.P. Cather, Willa Cather's cousin, who sent a letter to his mother on May 18, just ten days before his death; he became the model for Claude Wheeler in *One of Ours*.) In the final weeks of May, 1.6 million Mother's Day letters crossed the Atlantic.

The Post Office was essential to the American prosecution of the war. Its surveillance of the second-class mail – the rate at which most publications were circulated – was where the Espionage and Sedition Acts' restrictions of permissible speech took greatest effect. The draft was largely administered by mail, and the Post Office delivered a staggering 50 million items to American troops stationed in Europe between June 1917 and July 1918 – all via a transatlantic shipping system already straining to transport the AEF and its necessary supplies.⁴ It inaugurated America's airmail system – designed initially to fly mail between New York and Washington – a

program that, in the decade that followed, largely subsidized the growth of America's civilian air infrastructure.⁵ Yet the Post Office also assumed a cultural prominence in the war for reasons exceeding these vital contributions. In part, this was because before the war the US mail system was the most familiar and quotidian experience of federal power to ordinary Americans, and thus became an important template for Americans to understand the new wartime activities of state power. It served this role particularly well because of the simultaneous experience of systemic vastness and intimacy it provided: it was an infrastructure that combined intimate communication with sublime scale. This duality was exacerbated during the war as the mails registered both newly coercive forces of top-down control in the action of censorship and, conversely, the demotic exchanges of emotional and informational sustenance between ordinary citizens experiencing the anxieties of wartime separation and danger. It was precisely the wartime mail's unique mix of familiarity and intimidating novelty, local dynamics and international scale, institutional coercion and individual self-expression, and depersonalized bureaucracy and intense intimacy that led it to being so often used as a representational vehicle for thinking about the totality of the new relationships between state and individual that the war had unleashed. This chapter explores the literary culture of this phenomenon. In particular, it examines how a range of authors looked to the mail to consider the state's new imbrications in what are commonly considered the experiences and institutions walled off from state intrusion – the private, and intimate, spheres of the family and sexual relationships; and private organizations of charitable benevolence.

Unsurprisingly, some of this writing argued that surveillance of the mails – whether the domestic postal surveillance of publications under the new censorship powers of Congress, or the military censoring of soldiers' mail – infringed liberal freedoms. Yet there was another tradition fascinated by the thoroughgoing transformations in American patterns of sociality and even intimacy that accompanied the changing relationship between state and individual in the war years, and that looked to the mail as both symbol of and conduit for those transformations. If, as postal historians have suggested, the post had essentially produced certain social forms of intimacy and even ideas of the private individual, especially since the advent of cheap postage in the 1840s in the United States had embedded affordable private correspondence as a staple of ordinary life for middle-income Americans, its wartime innovations brought that productive capacity into sharp relief.⁶ The 1918 Mother's Day campaign is one of the most compelling examples of this, one that sought to draw what Fredric Jameson

has called the “uniquely relational system” of the mail into the service of the wartime state.⁷ The campaign sought to shape personal cultures of correspondence in ways that were coercive – Mark Meigs calls it a moment when “the army turned individual soldiers into propaganda agents” – but could never be entirely so.⁸ It sought to parlay a widely shared feeling of trust in the Post Office (a trust essential to its systemic success) into a trust in the American wartime state more generally. It served as a structure of affection that augmented affinities between soldiers and their familiar addressees, but also between citizens and the state apparatus that made this exchange possible. Such dynamics help explain why fictional or poetic letters became such an omnipresent motif in American war literature, a motif found across the spectrum of politics and aesthetic style. For modernists such as Wallace Stevens – whose underregarded poetry sequence “Lettres d’un Soldat” is one of the most sophisticated experimental poetic responses to the political transformations of the war – the letter home was the perfect vehicle to ruminate on new affective and aesthetic dimensions of the state, especially its role in the production of new kinds of intimacy. For Ring Lardner, wartime innovations in postal sociality were ripe occasions for epistolary comedy. For Edith Wharton, the fictional letter home’s status as a shopworn cliché became a mode for considering wartime challenges to types of privatized moral experience she held as central to both her political and her aesthetic life – challenges occurring in both the wartime transfer of private charities to state control and the aesthetics of modernism. Yet many of these writers understood that intimate relationships would not merely be mediated by these letters, but would be indelibly shaped by them and the systemic practices that made them possible. That this wide array of writers chose the wartime letter as a central structural device suggests its nature as the perfect relay between individual and state, the personally intimate and the structurally impersonal – and as the object that demonstrated how deeply interconnected and mutually contingent those categories had become.

The Post Office, Progressivism, and War

That this literary device was so popular in wartime was in part because before the war the US Post Office was the most visible institution of the federal state, and the one most deeply embedded in daily American life. For the historian Christopher Capozzola, pre-1917 America existed as a political culture that “saw little role for the federal government other than delivering the mail.”⁹ In Upton Sinclair’s novel *100%*, as the political ingénue-

protagonist is being educated about socialism from socialists, they tell him “What they wanted was to have the State take over the industries, or to have the labor unions do it, or to have the working people in general do it. They pointed to the post office and the army and the navy, as examples of how the State could run things. Wasn’t that all right?”¹⁰ In 1917, the Post Office was the United States’ largest civilian employer, as it had been since the 1790s.¹¹ Moreover, it had been arguably the central federal institution within Progressive Era reform, principally in how it shaped truly nationalized markets and access to information. From the 1870s onward, the Post Office heavily subsidized second-class postage for publications, a system that represented “what amounted to an informal nationwide educational system based on second-class mail,” in the words of postal historian Winifred Gallagher, and that also facilitated the boom in the magazine industry that helped shape nationalized tastes and habits of consumption.¹² Rural Free Delivery in 1902 and the inception of the parcel post in 1913 were also significant Progressive innovations. The former brought free delivery to rural homes, obviating the need to collect mail from local post offices; the latter saw the US mail accept parcel post of items heavier than four pounds, a business previously only managed by private corporations. The parcel post was an immediate success, with over 300 million parcels mailed in the first six months of operation, and facilitated exponential growth in the catalog mail-order business; Sears handled five times as many orders in 1913 as it did in 1912. Few innovations of the Progressive Era state altered the triangulated material relations between individuals, state, and corporations, or between America’s manufacturing and warehousing centers and their rural customers, as these changes.¹³ Even then, the Post Office was often used as an example by those on the right of everything that was wrong with a large, federally run bureaucracy. For example, in 1915, Henry A. Castle, the former Post Office Auditor, published an article in the *North American Review* assailing what he called the Post Office’s “state socialism” and resistance to reform. Part of the problem was the Post Office’s sublime unintelligibility, and therefore unmanageability; as he bewailed, it “has already grown beyond the power of the human mind to grasp it as a whole, and reform and control it. And still it grows!” Unrepresentable and therefore unaccountable, for Castle, the Post Office bore all the failures of what he called the “policy of public ownership.”¹⁴

Castle would doubtless have been aghast at what happened to the Post Office after America entered World War One in 1917. Wars in American history effected some of the most significant changes in Post Office services

and practices; City Free Delivery and Money Orders were introduced during the Civil War, and V-Mail (microfilming mail to make it easier to transport in bulk) was launched in World War Two. World War One was no different; during the war, the Post Office underwent significant expansion to handle the increased volumes of mail and to transport large quantities of mail across the Atlantic. Even before the huge troop buildup of spring and summer 1918, 450,000 letters per week were going out to troops in France, and by the war's end, 169 Army Post Offices had been established in Europe.¹⁵ In addition, the Post Office was charged with registering enemy aliens, assisting with recruitment, aiding the Red Cross, and helping enforce the Espionage and Trading with the Enemy Acts. Mass letter-writing campaigns were orchestrated around occasions such as Christmas and Mother's Day, and stories documenting delays in the mail between home and front lines featured regularly in the national newspapers – and even sparked a congressional investigation.¹⁶ As well as campaigns to elicit letters from soldiers, the CPI placed numerous pieces in major slick magazines such as the *Woman's Home Companion* and the *Ladies' Home Journal* exhorting wives, mothers, sisters, and sweethearts to write to their men in camp or in France; one such piece by “An American Soldier at the Front” went so far as to claim “I believe this war may be won largely by successful letter writing on the part of the women at home.”¹⁷ Mass-drives were also organized to have women write or send gifts to soldiers from their local communities, and even to servicemen they had never met before.

That the Post Office was simultaneously the most visible arm of the federal state, was the preeminent example of Progressive Era ambitions for what a service state should provide, but was also a lightning rod for conservative attacks on the inefficiencies of state institutions, meant that it both produced and became a central imaginative mechanism for comprehending the new structures and socialities of the American wartime polity. This accounts, at least in part, for why the letter became such a central genre in American war literature. Many collections of letters from American servicemen were published during the war and its immediate aftermath; the fullest bibliography of personal accounts of the war produced by Americans lists forty-eight collections of war letters published from 1919 to the late 1930s, and many more were published during the conflict.¹⁸ Particularly popular (and poignant) were those collections of letters written by young men who had been killed in battle; as well as the letters of Eugène Lemerrier (so important to Wallace Stevens and discussed extensively in the section “Wallace Stevens' Epistolary Politics in ‘Lettres d'un Soldat’” below), such posthumous collections by Quentin Roosevelt and Alan

Seeger also attracted a wide readership. Seeger's appeared in May 1917, less than a year after his death at the Battle of the Somme, and was widely reviewed (and even given a two-page spread in the *New York Times Magazine*, two days after Wilson signed the Selective Service Act into law).¹⁹ This public appetite for letters was also reflected in the prevalence of fictional letters, which appeared embedded in stories or novels, formed the basis for poems, and frequently appeared as standalone pieces. The latter were particularly apparent in American mass-circulation magazines in World War One, and imagined missives from wives to servicemen husbands, soldiers to mothers, and parents to sons on the battlefield. Such letters became staple features of publications like the *Ladies' Home Journal* and the *Saturday Evening Post*: they served simultaneously as conduct literature, propaganda, popular narrative, and a cultural form that mediated anxieties over separation, combat, death, and life outside of the intimate confines of the family home. American humorists such as Ring Lardner, George Pattullo, and Edward Streeter wrote popular serials for these magazines composed of rookie doughboys' unwittingly hilarious letters home, serials often collated into what were essentially epistolary novels. Within more canonical work, Wallace Stevens, Ellen Glasgow, Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, Edna Ferber, and F. Scott Fitzgerald all used the letter home in their war poetry and novels.²⁰

This prominence of the fictional letter in exploring new wartime socialities worked in several ways. It marked that the military assembled after the Selective Service Act of 1917 was a conscripted citizens' army, quite different from the small, professional prewar cadre that often contained men who had served for many years, if not decades. Accordingly, these new men had complex and deep ties to localities, professions, and communities that the original army often did not – ties that relied on the mail for their upkeep. In William March's 1933 war novel *Company K*, for example, the old army company sergeant ruminates that "one thing that puzzles me about these new men is why they are always writing letters home, or getting packages from their mothers or sweethearts. You didn't see much of that in the old days, when I came into the service. Most of the boys then didn't have any people to write to."²¹ Secondly, letters both registered and promised to assuage anxieties about distance, anxieties particularly acute for American combatants fighting thousands of miles from home. They became the material bridge between Europe and America, parents and children, home front and war front. The emotional power of this is registered in the very title of John Allen Wyeth's fine war sonnet "Home Mail," which begins with soldiers jostling to access the "seven sacks of

mail” that have just arrived.²² “Home Mail” presents a neologistic conjunction that, in dispensing with a preposition (i.e., “Home Mail” rather than “mail from home”), represents mail as offering the comfort of an embodiment of home, a literal piece of it, rather than merely emanating from home. Moreover, that such gaps were formed not only by geographical distance but by how the war front had scrambled prewar norms of geographical rationalization and liberal legibility was registered in how often wartime fictional letters dwelt on the state’s paratexts – the codes, stamps, and information included on the letter to ensure its accurate delivery. Few soldiers’ letters appeared in print without the ubiquitous return address of “somewhere in France” for members of the AEF. And in Edna Ferber’s “Long Distance,” a letter arrives to a rehabilitation facility in England “bearing an American postmark and addressed to Sergeant Chester Ball, with a lot of cryptic figures and letters strung out after it, such as A.E.F. and Co. II.”²³ As postal historians have argued, “addressability” was a significant way in which modern postal technology had bequeathed modern identities – fully rationalized house numbering and street naming followed on from cheap postage, not the other way around.²⁴ The prevalence of new kinds of address in the war’s fictional letters therefore both suggests an anxiety about how the war would disrupt prewar identities and also often bespoke a faith that the state would find ways to maintain prewar social ties within novel – albeit bewildering – systems of communication, and even that it could impose order on terrain whose geographical intelligibility had been so challenged by the war.

However, all these tropes did not deliver a consistent politics. As well as being a staple feature of patriotic wartime writing, and often precisely because of that centrality, fictional letters were prevalent in antiwar writing too. This was especially so in British wartime poetry, where, as Susan Schweik has contended, the device of the imaginary letter accentuated “the temporal and spatial distances between soldier/author and civilian/reader,” and was often used in order to place “bitter emphasis on the ignorance of the woman who served synecdochically as a figure for the poet’s audience, and insisted on a disjunction, not a gratifying identification, between poet and reader.”²⁵ In the US tradition, perhaps the foremost example of such an antiwar poem based in the epistolary conventions of the wartime mail is E.E. Cummings’ “my sweet old etcetera” from 1926. Beginning with the line “my sweet old etcetera/aunt lucy,” which playfully mocks the conventions of epistolary salutation, the poem repeats a series of clichéd statements from the speaker’s family during his time at the front – “my/mother hoped that/i would die etcetera/bravely of course.”²⁶ These flights of

formulaic, patriotic rhetoric become obscene when placed alongside the actual conditions of the speaker's time in the war, as

meanwhile my
 self etcetera lay quietly
 in the deep mud et
 cetera (dreaming,
 et
 cetera, of
 Your smile
 eyes knees and of your Etcetera)²⁷

Here, the temporal, spatial, rhetorical, and experiential distance between home front and battle front so characteristic of the antiwar poetry that used the letter as a motif is fully on display. Moreover, the use of "etcetera" changes throughout the poem, and those moves account for much of its fun and satirical sharpness. It begins by marking the sheer *expectedness* of the rhetoric about war used at home, which has become so familiar and limited that once a phrase is initiated, "etcetera" is all that is needed to complete it ("my/mother hoped that/i would die etcetera"). Yet when the speaker refers to "my/self etcetera," with both a line and a stanza break fracturing "myself," he suggests how this rhetoric authorizes the blasting apart of subjectivities at the front. This occurs in both political and potentially physical terms: firstly, the force of this rhetoric's coercive and institutional logic tramples on any possibility of individuated feeling, opinion, or language about the war, thus loosening the possessive and sovereign connection between "my" and "self" – now that self is largely controlled by, and beholden to, others. Moreover, that rhetoric has helped place these young men in positions of extreme danger where their bodies might literally be blasted apart. And the "etcetera," here, has diminished the importance of his life to the extent that its value and complexity can effectively go without saying. Subsequently, the use of the word then shifts to what strictly cannot be said in a military letter; now, the word serves as a place-marker for the unsayable. That unsayable becomes both geographic and sexual: the "etcetera" of his precise return address in the deep mud in France, and the innuendo substitution of a capitalized "Etcetera" for a part of his girl's anatomy at the poem's close.

The poem, therefore, pithily makes two central points about the war's effects on language that would be repeated so often by modernist writers in the 1920s. First, as I discussed in the Introduction, its heavy irony insists that the slew of state-sponsored pro-war rhetoric, originating with Wilson's rhetorical style and disseminated through all levels of the

enormous apparatus of the CPI, was so abstracted, formulaic, and grotesquely detached from the immediacies of war that its vocabulary had been ethically rendered beyond further use. Secondly, the poem suggests that the wartime state's circumscription of what could be written or said had overstepped the realm of protecting military secrecy to police moral and political opinion in ways that represented a gross intrusion into the contents of personal mail – which Cummings understands here as a private sphere of liberal freedom. The Post Office was indeed the crucial institution in the federal policing of speech during the war; as Christopher Capozzola notes, “to state that the wartime Espionage Act authorized the federal government to regulate speech is to say that it handed over those powers to employees of the Post Office department,” and Postmaster General Albert Burleson even boasted that the Federal Mail was the only institution with an adequate infrastructure and personnel to police American speech.²⁸ Cummings had bitter first-hand experience of such policing during his service as a volunteer ambulance driver in the war, having been imprisoned at La Ferté-Macé concentration camp for three months after French censors read letters home from his friend William Slater Brown expressing misgivings about the Allied war effort. When Cummings was questioned about this by French authorities, he refused to incriminate Brown, leading to their detention – which only a frantic calling in of favors by Cummings' father brought to an end, experiences memorably described in his *The Enormous Room* (1922). In both his novel-memoir and this poem, therefore, the liberal state has abrogated what was widely understood as its responsibility to ensure the mails as a sphere of privacy (and therefore individuality), not only by surveilling the mails and punishing elastically understood iterations of “disloyal” speech but by insidiously pushing letter-writers into the self-censorship of empty, patriotic cliché.²⁹

Yet, despite the importance of the antiwar tradition in American writing about the letter home, there was also a quite different, and particularly American, dimension to much of this literature, which took a different approach to the place of the state within private life. This was to see state-structured forms of sociality in war as productive of new forms of private and intimate experience rather than intruding on them, a move that challenged the exteriorization of the state from a letter's “private contents” in the manner of Cummings' poem. Such literary work registered that wartime letters were at once personal and intimate – freighted with the tactile individuality of handwriting, fragrance, or keepsakes – and controlled both physically and linguistically by the state. It acknowledged that

they were handled by the intimate addressees of lovers and family members, and by state employees of postal officials and mail orderlies; that they were read by military censors as well as spouses, siblings, and parents. Many authors contemplating the letter in wartime considered the reciprocal action of these two spheres, the way that both intimate and subjective experience and state institutions were being shaped by this interaction.

Scholarship on war letters, however, tends to stress one or other of these scenes of epistolary production and readership. Paul Fussell, for example, in his classic section on letters home in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, pays particular attention to the British Field Service Postcard, which he finds is the prototype of the modern bureaucratic “form.” This is the paradigmatic “letter home” for Fussell; with its highly limited (and mostly reassuring) range of communicative options (soldiers were asked to strike through any of the preprinted statements not applicable to their situation, and then sign it) and its absolute proscription of individual embellishment – any personal message written on the postcard resulted in its immediate destruction – it is a medium hobbled by the state’s intrusiveness. For Fussell, censorship is the governing feature of war letters. This works both externally, with the handling of soldiers’ mail by military and civil postal authorities, and through servicemen’s self-censorship in the face of a supposed unwillingness or inability of those on the home front to comprehend the horrors of combat. Accordingly, he finds letters a poor medium for communicating what is most real and important about war.³⁰ In contrast, more recent critics – particularly Santanu Das – stress war letters’ potential for meaningful, especially intimate, communication, often as evident in their role as sensory and tactile objects as in their linguistic content. The introduction to Das’s *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* features reproductions of the file of Private George Bennett, including Das’s experience of opening a letter and experiencing the crumbling feeling of dried flowers under his fingertips, flowers picked on the western front and included in Private Bennett’s letter to his wife. For Das, the sensation is “intimate and unsettling,” an intrusion on a realm so private, intimate, and fragile that it literally crumbles under the fingers of an intruder.³¹ Such analysis exalts the personal communication – and tactile exchange – between two people, with the necessary evil of the state – which collected, read, transported, delivered, and archived this intimate missive – placed in the background. Finally, Cary Nelson has recently written about the wartime poem postcard, drawing from his archive of 10,000 items that mingle personal communication with cheaply printed popular poetry. He finds that such poetically engaged correspondence

served state ends by cementing citizens' consent to war through the discourse of sentimental nationalism, but also that it cannot be reduced to that discourse; he observes that "As an ideology crafted to romanticize one's transformation into cannon fodder, [the romanticization of absence in the poem postcard] is largely repellent. As a complicating model of interpersonal politics it cannot be so readily dismissed."³² His essay demonstrates the manifold ways that writers and readers of such correspondence were more than interpellated dupes, and yet the state is an insidious presence for the most part, with his readers and writers gaining their fullest humanity when they resist the state's imperatives most energetically.

Postal Intimacies in World War One Popular Writing

This either/or approach fails to accurately replicate the culture of wartime letters in America during World War One. To consider how the mediation of intimacy by the state became a form of intimacy with the state it is worth turning to the AEF newspaper, the *Stars and Stripes*. Launched in February 1918, at its peak it had a circulation of 526,000 readers. High-spirited and often jocular, the *Stars and Stripes* was an immediate success with rank-and-file soldiers; and, as Mark Meigs observes, it was frequently masterful in finding "a way to move between the impersonal generality of the war and its destructive power and the individual soldiers." Led by prominent journalists (including Harold Ross and Alexander Woollcott, who went on to found the *New Yorker*), this negotiation was frequently achieved by "the special quality of its style: that of the soldier made skeptical by experience but who allows himself to be persuaded by reason, and can surprise himself with heartfelt enthusiasm."³³ Part of the way that style balanced skeptical individualism with enthusiasm for the collective mission was to take soldiers' own writing and language seriously; launched as a magazine for soldiers by soldiers, it took great interest in soldiers' poetry, soldiers' slang, and soldiers' mail. Articles on the latter often addressed censorship, and the dilemma of how a citizens' army could honor the personal and private dimensions of soldiers' sense of individuality – particularly the erotic and sentimental so usually confined to domestic spheres – within a military organization that treated the control of information flow between war front and home front as an imperative. Framed as the war was as a struggle for liberal freedoms – fought by free individuals who had "volunteered in mass," in Wilson's words, to fight autocracy – and also as a war fought to defend the sanctity of intimate domestic spaces, the US Army's surveillance of soldiers' mail put considerable pressure on the

rhetorical strategies of papers such as the *Stars and Stripes* to legitimize the state as a reader of intimate correspondence.³⁴

The paper's agony aunt column, "Free Advice for Lovelorn Lads," showcased those difficulties. In the March 29 issue, for example, all four of the letters to "Miss Info" deal with anxieties from doughboys about letters to their lovers; two dwell on how the state is controlling their correspondence. One worries that he is not receiving letters from his girl at home every day, only to be told that "Nobody gets letters every day in France except the Quartermaster and the Post Office Department." Another dealt with a doughboy's worry about beginning a romantic correspondence with a girl in America because of his concern that his commanding officer would read it in the act of censoring his unit's mail and "kid the pants offa me."³⁵ The reply to that letter was typical in reassuring "Bashful" about the impartiality of the censor. This was also stressed in one of the longest articles on army mail, one that explained the work of the base censor, whose morning mail "was 8,000 letters," 600 of them in languages other than English. It detailed the case of a doughboy carrying on a clandestine affair with a local French woman; the soldier had feared his letters being read by his company officers, and so had used the French mail system, which was prohibited to AEF servicemen. Yet he was caught out, and his mail opened and read. The article reassured doughboys that "he needn't have worried a bit. For the bogey-man isn't a likely rival of anyone. In fact, he isn't a man at all, but a System – just as impersonal as if he wrote his name, 'Base Censor, Inc.'"³⁶ In basing its reassurance on the systemic nature of censorship, the article relied on a commonplace understanding of systems at the time as both automatic and predictable, and as essential to "new visions of order, control and regulation."³⁷ Moreover, its choice of the corporate metaphor to best achieve this reassurance – base censor as "Base Censor, Inc." – was telling; it nods toward what Susan Edmunds has recently labeled the formation in the period of a space she calls the "domestic exterior," a "modern sentimental space developed to coordinate and moralize a triangle of relations emerging among market, home, and state."³⁸ The presence of corporate or state systems in intimate life was no cause for concern, the metaphor of "Base Censor, Inc." suggested; it was both benign and impersonal, and already a fact of life within the "modern sentimental space" of contemporary domestic experience. This reassurance was therefore not so much a guarantee of privacy as its total reformulation, in suggesting that modern, mediated communication was and would never be strictly interpersonal but would feature multiple, benign, and depersonalized readerships within systems. These



"MOTHER'S LETTER"

Figure 2.1 "Mother's Letter," Abien A. Wallgren, *Stars and Stripes*, 1.13 (May 3, 1918),
 1. Image courtesy of Library of Congress, Serial and Government Publications
 Division

readerships would not attend to the intimate content of those communications but smooth the alignment of state and corporate structures with private interests.

This idea was replicated elsewhere in the *Stars and Stripes*' representation of the mail. For example, their exhortations to send letters on Mother's Day in their May 3 issue were accompanied by an image on the front cover by their resident cartoonist, Abien A. Wallgren (see Figure 2.1).

The postman is both inside and outside the domestic space here, inside the gate but not on the porch, a perfect representation of Edmunds' "new sentimental space" in figuring a state that through "domestic infrastructure" had "penetrated and reconfigured the home and the domestic sphere."³⁹ This liminal placing of the letter carrier at the margin of the home also reinforces the particularly conflicted nature of the wartime letter carrier's duties, a duty toward both a nonintrusive political neutrality that preserved the "sanctity" of the private mail and a simultaneous duty toward vigilant surveillance. From the outset of the war, they were advised by their superiors to be "extremely cautious in voicing opinions on the war situation," especially with "citizens of foreign birth or with those having extreme views," but were also ordered to report any "suspicious characters [or] disloyal and treasonable acts and utterances," reports then forwarded to the Justice Department.⁴⁰ Moreover, the letter carrier's gesture is strange and awkward: he is holding the letter out, yet not to the eager mother rushing down the path; nor does he make eye contact with her. In holding his head to the side he half-faces the mother and half-faces the reader of the piece, which would have been the soldier; his very embodiment, therefore, is poised between these two addressees. The embodied impossibility of being at the front and at home simultaneously is caught in this awkward pose, which shows the representational strains of personifying an institution structured around such systemic simultaneity. Respectfully outside the home but shaping (and surveilling) much that happened within it, and handling this personal exchange with a depersonalized aloofness that hints at the impossibility of personifying the vast mail system at all, Wallgren's carrier's strangeness suggests how new and unsettling was the US wartime state's alteration of domestic sentimentality.

Indeed, it was the radical nature of how wartime censorship and the kind of organized sentimentality of the Mother's Day letter campaign had opened familial intimacy out into wider commercial and governmental networks that accounts somewhat for the *Stars and Stripes*' unease in these pieces. There is an uneasy jocularly to the "Base Censor" article, and an uneasy embodiment in the postman, an unease doubtless originating from both pieces' assault on what Lauren Berlant has called the "mirage" of an intimate and often hermetic domestic sphere – a powerful notion that represents the "endlessly cited elsewhere of political public discourse" in its status as a fantasized oasis and "home base of prepolitical humanity."⁴¹ Yet the *Stars and Stripes* would hardly have reached for the corporate metaphor in defining the activity of censorship without the confidence that the "domestic exterior," the nexus between corporation, home, and state, was

a widespread, positive, and quintessentially modern understanding of domestic space and its associated affects of privacy. That space was grounded in the domesticized systematics of both corporations and the postal state, and ultimately it was the sense of depersonalized predictability, constant availability, and trust that were so central to the operations of all those systems that this article sought to engage.

The *Stars and Stripes'* guarded enthusiasm for the new socialities rendered by the wartime letter was amplified in their treatment of the erotic possibilities they generated, which became the subject of humor rather than awkward reassurance. Perhaps the most interesting example was provided by Wallgren (see Figure 2.2).

The cartoon pokes fun at the dilemmas of a doughboy writing back to a woman who had sent him a "comfort kit," as women's voluntary organizations were urged to do. The doughboy is stumped by the fitting register of familiarity to use in responding to a gesture that is both generous and coerced, to a woman simultaneously identified and anonymous, and to say thank you for a gift exchanged between individuals that is organized and mediated by the state. He ranges through forms of address, dismissing them as overfamiliar, patronizing, or too brief. In his search for the appropriate linguistic term he is looking for a register to accommodate new forms of sociality and connection that have elicited both his gratitude and his irritation; and his irritation is more at this situation's perplexing novelty than anything else.

Michael Herzfeld's theories are pertinent here, particularly his work on what he terms "cultural intimacy." For Herzfeld, moments when citizens criticize the nation-state, or work seemingly at odds with its rationalizations and interpellative apparatus, can in fact be moments when the state is most robustly constituted. States are made not just by faceless technocrats but by the rueful familiarity of ordinary people, who in their complaints about state bureaucracy are recognizing the fallibilities of the all-too-human state, complaints that paradoxically cement their allegiance to it. For Herzfeld, "In the intimacy of a nation's secret spaces lie at least some of the original models of official practice"; for if social actors find advantage "in using, reformulating and recasting official idioms in the pursuit of often highly unofficial personal goals," then frequently "these actions – so often in direct contravention of state authority – actually constitute the state."⁴² We can see something of this constitutive dialectic between conformity and frustration, familiarity and the official, in Wallgren's cartoon, which is an artifact that both rues the unintelligibility of the new socialities of the state and helps render them manageable. Intimacy,

“FROM: TO: SUBJECT:” —By WALLGREN



Figure 2.2 “From: To: Subject:” by Abien A. Wallgren, *Stars and Stripes*, 1.13 (May 3, 1918), 4. Image courtesy of Library of Congress, Serial and Government Publications Division

therefore, becomes a crucial mode for the functioning of the liberal state, even as its own nature is reciprocally transformed by putting strangers in unfamiliar situations of intimacy.

This dynamic could also be observed in arguably the most popular writing about the soldier's letter home in the United States at this time: Ring Lardner's so-called “busher” stories. These were one of America's favorite serials: fictional letters from the laughably naïve narrator and Chicago White Sox baseball star Jack Keefe to his friend Al Blanchard in Indiana. Keefe's semiliterate and hilarious stories about life in baseball had

been a star feature of the *Saturday Evening Post* since 1914, with Lardner's stories commanding \$1,500 each from George Horace Lorimer, the formidable editor of the *Saturday Evening Post*.⁴³ Widely regarded as an influential innovator in American vernacular writing, and praised by Virginia Woolf as the most promising American prose stylist of the modern era, as the United States prepared for its first summer with a large number of troops in Europe, Lardner began a series of stories for the *Post* that embroiled Jack Keefe in the war effort.⁴⁴

The Curtis magazines had invested heavily in the wartime letter. Both the *Saturday Evening Post* and the *Ladies' Home Journal* printed numerous fictional letters from war front to home front. The *Ladies' Home Journal* specialized in what were essentially template letters for epistolary conduct – from sons to parents at home, from fathers to sons at the front, from sweethearts at home to their boyfriends overseas.⁴⁵ These guided its readers in the sentimental codes of wartime; they stressed uncomplaining self-sacrifice, cheeriness, and sexual continence, and typified the war as what Stanley Cooperman called a “great crusade” of Christian and civilizational righteousness. In line with the prevalent culture of citizenship that Christopher Capozzola has called “coercive voluntarism,” they often exhorted their readers to adopt the proper tone and content to inspire their men at the front; one fictional letter from a “drafted man” to his sister reprimanded her to “cut out the sob stuff in your letters,” and ended with the caution that “I’ll look forward to that next letter, because I know it’ll be the kind I want.”⁴⁶ A different register was struck with Lardner’s eleven wartime “busher” letter-stories, written between March 1918 and April 1919. Minus two stories, these were later collected as two slim volumes entitled *Treat 'Em Rough: Letters from Jack the Kaiser Killer* and *The Real Dope*.⁴⁷ These dealt with Jack’s being drafted, his training and promotion at Camp Grant, his rocky relationship with his beautiful wife, and his service overseas. They explored his failure to qualify for a marital draft exemption due to his wife’s profitable beauty-parlor business, and his eventual patriotic response to his number being called. But perhaps the biggest joke in *Treat 'Em Rough* – and the one spun out the longest – is a situation similar to Wallgren’s cartoon, the erotic charge of a correspondence with a strange woman who sends him a gift.

The storyline begins as Jack receives a sock from the Red Cross, which has a note tucked into it from “Miss Lucy Chase” in Texas. This immediately connects Jack to the huge (and overwhelmingly female) volunteer network of American knitters in the war; knitters for the Red Cross alone produced a staggering 22 million items for hospitals, 1.5 million refugee

garments, 15 million military garments, and 253 surgical dressings.⁴⁸ As Christopher Capozzola notes, this effort was wracked with tensions; the volunteer network of knitters was an exemplary case of the voluntarism so central to American political sensibility in 1917 in that it simultaneously “denoted an expression of consent . . . referred to organized activity outside state auspices . . . [and] was also an act of unpaid labor.”⁴⁹ Exactly what the place of the volunteer was in the massive war effort was both unclear and contested, and shifted during the course of the war; for example, by 1918 contracts for soldiers’ sweaters had been parceled out to factories, as many volunteers did not possess the necessary skills to make garments to military specifications. (By fall 1918, the *Red Cross Magazine* was urging its readers “Don’t Make Sweaters!”⁵⁰) Yet the letters between Jack and Lucy transform this uncertainty over the relation between the volunteer and the state into an uncertainty over the interpersonal and potentially erotic relationship between volunteer and soldier, especially as it was mediated by the mail. The awkwardness and misunderstanding that characterize their relationship are both the grounds of Lardner’s humor and suggest the perplexing novelty of the new relationships between previously unconnected and unconnectable individuals that the wartime state had conjured into being.

In her initial letter, Lucy flirtatiously asks “Dear Solider Boy, you may never see me but if you can spare time to write me just a few lines it will make me happier than any one in the world for I am oh so lonesome. You won’t disappoint me will you Soldier Boy?”⁵¹ Yet Jack is perplexed by this anonymous amorousness: he speculates on “where she seen me” (with the caustic aside that “it must have been a picture without my feet in it or she would of made the sox bigger”). Troubled by the simultaneous desires to remain faithful to his wife, Florrie, to express the requisite gratitude to a generous volunteer, and to explore what is clearly presented as an intriguing erotic opportunity, Jack’s letters break into a characteristic pattern of anxious dithering and self-justification as he pursues a correspondence with her. All the while he is flummoxed by the question of “where we met,” never comprehending the exchange’s anonymity; both the nature of the gift-giving and the coquettish tone of Lucy’s letters can only accord with his prewar sense of normative heterosexual relations, which stipulate that they must have had a visual encounter.

Unsurprisingly, Jack’s perplexity embroils him ever deeper into this farcical situation, until he arranges a face-to-face meeting with Lucy in a hotel lobby. This results in him discovering that Lucy is in fact “old about 35,” and that his wife and young son have made a surprise visit to the hotel

to see him. Red-faced, he writes to Al that "I couldn't help from feeling sorry for her the way she looked but a woman her age should ought to know more than start writeing [*sic*] letters to a guy she never seen."⁵² That their encounter does not "fit" the expectations of their correspondence echoes the fact that the socks Lucy knitted do not fit; and this ill-fitting mismatch between garment and body, gift-giver and gift-recipient, encodes a whole host of gendered anxieties about the place of volunteerism and its relation to the state in operation at this time that are also embedded in Wallgren's cartoon about the flummoxed soldier. What was the appropriate place of the volunteer, and indeed of women's participation in the war effort: For did not gift-giving place obligations on the receiver disquietingly similar to those in operation in romantic relationships? Was social contact with soldiers initiated by women always shadowed by the overtones of an erotic advance, even when mediated by an "anonymous" letter? Did this assertiveness of the female volunteer, as Jennifer Haytock suggests, give women on the home front an agency in the stakes of the war that actually troubled narratives of separate spheres – an agency that some men found troubling?⁵³ And how could prewar social and linguistic customs structuring heterosexual relationships accommodate these vastly expanded and newly mediated forms of exchange? That none of these questions are resolved only highlights their baffling novelty. What Lardner's fiction and the artifacts from the *Stars and Stripes* demonstrate is that the culture of the wartime letter in the United States cannot be explained simply by seeing the mediating state either as an Orwellian censor that coerced content through its intrusive surveillance or as a necessary evil that left a pristine and intimate interpersonal content largely untouched. Instead, wartime correspondence had greatly expanded the potential readers and writers of intimate content, sometimes in ways that felt like uncomfortable intrusion, and sometimes in ways that felt like exciting and/or erotic expansions of the social.

Wallace Stevens' Epistolary Politics in "Lettres d'un Soldat"

While fictional letters were prominent in wartime popular literature, the unique role of letters in mediating new wartime forms of sociality – and therefore in producing new modes of political subjectivity – also informed arguably the most important American modernist poetry sequence of the war. Indeed, letters provided Wallace Stevens with one answer to a question that preoccupied and transformed modernist poetics – how to write a war poem. As James Longenbach argues, it was the war-as-subject that

shifted modernist poetics from the limits of imagist diminishment into the epic achievements of the long poems of the 1920s.⁵⁴ Yet that move to epic involved its own challenges; for Wallace Stevens, it involved formulating how to replace older rhetorical models while avoiding “the easy aestheticization or internalization” of “the sheer brutality of experience.”⁵⁵ He felt that mission as a historical necessity; Stevens later claimed that the “pressure of the contemporaneous” had begun with World War One, and that “if politics is nearer to us because of [that] pressure . . . poetry, in its way, is no less so and for the same reason.”⁵⁶ Faced with the fact that the war was not merely a military conflict but a conflict of political systems and their allied forms of rhetoric, and, as his noncombatant status placed his personal experience behind manifold and unavoidable filters of mediation, it was unsurprising that Stevens turned to the letter as the medium for crafting his major poetry sequence of World War One. In doing so, he engaged the role that letters home played as a privileged structure of affection facilitating the newly expanding state that I have been discussing so far, as well as their obvious potential for sentimental propaganda.

Stevens’ poetry sequence “Lettres d’un Soldat” first appeared in *Poetry* magazine in May 1918. As Susan Schweik notes, the sequence “has a complex textual history with one general teleology: poems and other apparatus fall away at each stage, each new editing moving the remaining poems further from the politics and topoi of the war and further toward an insulated modernist lyric privacy.”⁵⁷ Yet, in its early incarnations, it presented a remarkable political meditation on the various forms of governance in conflict during the war. Stevens had sent thirteen lyrics to Harriet Monroe at *Poetry* in September 1917, but in March 1918 – on a visit to Chicago – he and Monroe “weeded out the bad ones” in preparation for the eventual publication of nine for the May 1918 issue.⁵⁸ Interestingly, it was the most antiwar poems – such as poems I and XIII – that ended up being “weeded out,” a testament to Monroe’s stated desire to have *Poetry* support the US war effort, and to “print with the utmost promptitude any ‘song for America’ sent to [our] office which may seem worth printing,” as she put it in June 1917.⁵⁹ Formally, the sequence is characterized by having every poem in the sequence prefaced by excerpts from letters from a French soldier to his mother; and, as virtually all commentators on the sequence have observed, the fluctuating ironic distance between a letter and its subsequent poem is the key tonal determinant of the collection. Stevens chose not to include any of these poems in the 1923 version of *Harmonium*, and only included four in the second edition (1931), and all without the prefatory letters. In 1972, the full sequence, including four sections omitted

from the 1918 *Poetry* version, was established by A. Walton Litz; this was republished in Milton Bates' 1989 edited *Opus Posthumous*.⁶⁰ (The numbering I use here refers to this full sequence of thirteen poems.) The letters that prefaced each of Stevens' poems were drawn from a collection published in France in 1916 as *Lettres d'un Soldat: Aout 1914–Avril 1915*. Stevens had read both the original and the American translation, a translation he recommended to Monroe, should she wish to include an English version in the *Poetry* printing (she chose not to).⁶¹ The letters had initially appeared anonymously, because of concerns that the author – who was reported as missing in action in April 1915 – might be a prisoner of war who would be endangered if his name was revealed. But he was never found, and after the war, it was revealed that the soldier in question was a young artist, Eugène Lemerrier.

Stevens' critics have claimed that these prefatory letters function as opportunities for Stevens to explore his noncombatant anxiety, and to register his concern that in writing about war without combat experience he ran substantial risks of ethical and representational failure.⁶² In April 1918, Stevens addressed these concerns to Monroe, observing that the war "absorbs me, but that is no excuse: there are too many people in the world, vitally involved, to whom it is infinitely more than a thing to think of."⁶³ Much has also been made of how Stevens uses Lemerrier's letters and this sequence to consider the limits and the appropriate function of the aesthetic when facing a violent reality. For James Longenbach, the poetry sequence maps out the parameters of Stevens' major collection *Harmonium* of 1923, in presenting a continuum between poems of hubristic idealism at one end and poems stressing the implacability of the real at the other. It has also been seen as a watershed poem in Stevens' career, as well as in the modern aesthetics of death and consolation; for Sandra Gilbert, the poem "The Death of a Soldier" – its most famous individual poem – is a central exhibit in "a crucial turning point in the history of both death and elegy."⁶⁴

Yet few critics have seen this sequence as Stevens' meditation on forms of political authority, and on the various ways in which consent to forms of sovereignty are generated. However, these issues were important to Stevens' consideration of the war. Stevens was a keen reader of the *New Republic* at the time; when he was finished with an issue he would mail it to his wife, often along with the London *Times*' regular monthly summary of the war, and sometimes directing her attention to what he felt were the most interesting articles.⁶⁵ One letter of his from July 1915 records an excursion to Long Beach to spend his day off reading the *New Republic*

on the shore.⁶⁶ At this moment, the magazine was full of concrete examples of exactly the kind of “creative statecraft” Lippmann had called for in 1913, and from a variety of distinguished contributors. In July 1915 alone, H.G. Wells wrote on “Ideals of Organization,” predicting that the future of Western governance would be a middle ground between German “authoritative state socialism” and Allied democratic voluntarism. It reviewed Thorstein Veblen’s new work on the German dynastic state in the Industrial Revolution, which argued that German successes in the war had arisen because of its belated (and thus perfected) adoption of the techniques of British industrial economy, on which it had overlaid feudal traditions of paternal authoritarianism. And it featured a manifesto by Norman Angell proposing that economic sanctions levied against aggressor countries, and administered by a global committee of nations, would be a highly effective way for states to resolve disputes without resorting to military conflict.⁶⁷ In sum, the *New Republic* was engrossed with the relative merits of different political and governmental models, and was certain that the war was their great testing ground. Their articles carried a simultaneous excitement and trepidation about German industrial and political innovation, and an obvious desire to co-opt elements of this system into elements of postwar governance in the United States and Western Europe.

This experimental approach is very like Stevens’ sequence, which maps out a contesting variety of political models – one per poem – as a mode of testing their efficacy through the action of contrast. By putting a variety of political philosophies in the voices of multiple speakers, Stevens replicates the format of the *New Republic*’s pragmatic experimentalism, their evaluation of different political philosophies through the juxtaposition of different voices and arguments. Yet Stevens highlights mediation as a crucial element in political subjectivities; by using a series of dramatic monologues, the political evaluation of Stevens’ sequence often rests on the relationship between his speakers’ situation and the language they have available to negotiate it. In the first and last poems in the sequence, for example, Stevens employs a strategy familiar to scholars of World War One literature, namely an ironic deflation of the nationalist-patriotic language and ideology that were so crucial in ensuring widespread social consent – and even enthusiasm – toward the war. This was the strategy Paul Fussell famously identified as the major tonal legacy of World War One, a war “more ironic than any before or since” because of the unprecedented challenge it presented to a prewar order wherein “values appeared stable and the meanings of abstractions seemed permanent and reliable.”⁶⁸ An

ironic challenge to such "abstractions" endorsing the link between national virtue and martial glory is evident in some of World War One's best-known literature, from Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est" to Erich Maria Remarque's takedown of the bullying schoolmaster Kantorek in *All Quiet on the Western Front*. The first section of "Lettres d'un Soldat," "Common Solider," takes this approach, as the solider announces he will dutifully "accept" the messages of his officers, clergymen, and politicians, in place of what he calls "introspective chaos":

I have been pupil under bishops' rods
And got my learning from the orthodox.
I mark the virtue of the common-place.

I take all things as stated – so and so
Of men and earth: I quote the line and page,
I quote the very phrase my masters used.

If I should fall, as soldier, I know well
The final pulse of blood from this good heart
Would taste, precisely, as they said it would. (CPP 538–539)

Each stanza of this poem suggests the violence and coerciveness inherent in habitual language. The "virtue of the common-place" is simultaneously the quotidian life of the yeoman and the "common-place" of the aphoristic phrase; the fact that the speaker does little to disentangle these two meanings demonstrates the interpellative force that makes the linguistic figurations of ideology seem common and natural. This force is just part of the continual menace surrounding these rote phrases, a menace amplified by the violence through which children are forced to learn these commonplaces (under the bishop's rod), and by the violent death that obeisance to these phrases entails – and that the speaker accepts with a sense of stoic inevitability. Any sense of the solider finding his own language is dismissed as "introspective chaos," but this leaves him with blood rather than his own words in his mouth. Ultimately, the grotesque implication that a moment as anguished, intense, and personal as one's own death can be neatly summarized in an aphorism speaks more to the power of the phrases of jingoist militarism than it does to the heroism of the uncomplaining soldier.

The final poem of the full sequence closes with a return to these "phrases" of the common soldier's political and spiritual masters. Yet unlike poem I, it contains an explicit dual imperative toward "men of the line," a phrase that gestures simultaneously to poets and soldiers. This requirement is that they renovate and replace the forms of language that have served to make death seem either purposeful or heroic, what the poem

calls “symbols of sentiment.” Instead, they should literally unearth a “new phrase/Of the truth of Death”:

26 Mars

*Rien de nouveau sur notre hauteur que l'on
continue d'organiser. . . . De temps à autre
la pioche rencontre un pauvre mort que la
guerre tourmente jusque dans la terre.*

Death was a reaper with sickle and stone,
Or swipling flail, sun-black in the sun,
A laborer.

Or Death was a rider beating his horse,
Gesturing grandiose things in the air,
Seen by a muse. . . .

Symbols of sentiment . . . Take this phrase,
Men of the line, take this new phrase
Of the truth of Death –

Death, that will never be satisfied,
Digs up the earth when want returns . . .
You know the phrase.

(*CPP* 545)

These bookend poems seem to mark a fairly familiar critique of how the nationalist public rhetoric of war, “the phrases,” scandalously legitimated its excessive personal costs. They also signal how “a deep mainstream of established attitudes – call it public reason, call it civic rationality – was convulsing under the effort to legitimize this war,” a convulsion that left an extensive mark on modernist poetry, as Vincent Sherry has ably discussed.⁶⁹ Yet the poems within the sequence map out a more multivalent politics, and present multiple voices and political traditions for readers to respond to. Partly, this is because – as is rarely noted in analyses of the sequence – Stevens deploys a series of dramatic monologues, each ventriloquizing a different political tradition. For example, in poem III, “Anecdotal Revery,” a murderer boastfully strides through a town square full of blind men with the head of the mayor in a sack over his shoulder, perhaps signifying the revolutionary decapitations of the czarist state then taking place in Russia, or at least the anarchist and revolutionist energies of the decade (*CPP* 539–540). Poem IV, “Surprises of the Superhuman,” is a brief, six-line meditation that assumes the voice of a German soldier fantasizing about storming the hilltop French *palais de justice* of chambermaids (a *palais* filled with tempting political and fleshy objectives). He voices the hope that swamping the *palais* in “Übermenschlichkeit” would

make "our wretched state . . . come right." And yet, the "brave dicta" of the "kings" who had built the *palais* are making "more awry our faulty human things"; the lyric voice seems perturbed by the disconnect – enforced by the exacting dualism of the poem's couplet form – between the stern and abstract imperatives of *Übermenschlichkeit* (roughly translated as the condition of the overman) and his experience of wretchedness, human frailty, and sexual desire (*CPP* 541). And Stevens looks forward to his *Harmonium* poem "Anecdote of Canna," often presumed to be referring to Woodrow Wilson, with "Negation," a poem warning about the excesses of political idealism when applied to war policy. In what may well be a dig at Wilson's lofty rhetoric of international progressivism, the lyric voice ruefully observes that "the creator too is blind/Struggling towards his harmonious whole." This blindness of a "too vague idealist" ensures "we endure brief lives" through struggling to be shaped into "The evanescent symmetries/From that meticulous potter's thumb" (*CPP* 543). In short order, then, Stevens mobilizes critiques of the political systems of socialist revolution, German racial imperialism, and the ambitions of Wilsonian internationalist progressivism.

Yet this recurrent skepticism about the exercise of various forms of state power is far from the Wallace Stevens who thrilled in a letter to his wife at the sight of a trainload of African American draftees departing for the training camps in the spring of 1918: "I feel thrilling emotion at these draft movements. I want to cry and yell and jump ten feet in the air; and so far as I have been able to observe, it makes no difference whether the men are black or white. The noise when the train pulled out was intoxicating."⁷⁰ To find this version of Stevens we must look to the heart of the sequence, poem VIII, and to the only moment at which we hear Lemercier's addressee, *Bien chère Mère aimée*, most dearly beloved mother. We have heard the voices of the uncomplaining soldier made docile by the disciplines of nationalized religion; the existential braggadocio of the decapitating socialist; the critique of the Progressive technocrat; and the Prussian soldier doubtful of the order bequeathed by *Übermenschlichkeit*. But this poem deploys a symbol that has not been degraded or rendered obsolete by the events and experience of war, as the lyric speaker mobilizes a series of mothers, each bound to him by bonds of affection and intimacy:

There is another mother whom I love,
 O chère maman, another, who, in turn,
 Is mother to the two of us, and more,
 In whose hard service both of us endure
 Our petty portion in the sacrifice.

Not France! France, also, serves the invincible eye,
 That, from her helmet, terrible and bright,
 Commands the armies; the relentless arm,
 Devising proud, majestic issuance.
 Wait now; have no rememberings of hope,
 Poor penury. There will be voluble hymns
 Come swelling, when, regardless of my end,
 The mightier mother raises up her cry;
 And little will or wish, that day, for tears. (CPP 542)

For Jahan Ramazani, the mother is a frequent and consolatory figure in Stevens' war elegies, a "supreme fiction" of "ultimate consolation, an imaginary being who shields one against pain, suffering, and death by making them a part of her eternal life."⁷¹ Yet here that consolatory figure undertakes a multiple, or a modulated, presence for the lyric speaker: the mother is both his own mother, the motherland of France, and an unnamed mother who nonetheless wields supreme sovereignty over the battling nations. Owing to this instantiation of the mother as a female, helmeted, warrior figure, it is not too outlandish to suggest this is Athena, the goddess of civilization, wisdom, war, and justice – and presiding deity over the prototypical democratic city-state of Athens. His affections move through these different registers, familial, national, and finally the cosmopolitan sphere of universal justice and European civilization embedded in the liberal-democratic state.

The fact that the superior mother is not named aligns her with the sublimity of the liberal state: too vast and numinous to be named, this figure is characterized by the abstracted principles of freedom, and transcendent justice, but also by the focused and local actuality of "relentless" violence. It recalls Woodrow Wilson's deft definition of the global ideal of liberal citizenship to a group of newly nationalized citizens in 1915; Wilson told them they "had vowed loyalty to no one, only to a great ideal, to a great body of principles, to a great hope of the human race."⁷² The mother here is characterized by the capability to subject and annihilate citizens in the name of the welfare of those selfsame citizens, yet still compels the filial loyalty of the speaker, faithful as he is that the political content of her "proud, majestic issuance" is worth his sacrifice. Devoid of the cultural trappings and sentimental machinery of nationality – there is no "will or wish" for tears when this figure speaks – this mother is absolute, "terrible," impersonal, and all-powerful. Yet this figure remains maternal and familial. How to have an intimate relation with an entity that cannot be named; how to register linguistically the simultaneous personal indifference of a social

macrostructure and its penetration into the most intimate aspects of quotidian life; whether it is possible to bring new forms of social relation within the communicative and affective structures and terms of the old, are questions asked by this poem. And these were the same questions implicit in the epistolary cultures going on with the doughboys in the trenches. This is where strangers gave gifts to each other by letter but struggled with how to address one another; and where the state reified the mother–son relationship on Mother's Day – but in the process facilitated a mass mailing that doubtless went well beyond this idealized and sentimentalized vision. The letter to mother sustained not just intimate communications between two people but an intimacy with an entire bureaucratic-state structure that elicited affection as one of its sustaining features, and this dynamic runs through the epistolary culture of doughboys in the trenches just as it does Stevens' poem. While Stevens is far from blind to this new state's coercive and often deadly features, he thrills at the new aesthetic and social forms it seems to promise, just as he thrilled to the trainload of draftees in Tennessee.

Of course, such a reading engages critiques of what Lauren Berlant has called "public intimacy," the use of familial ties and affections to articulate nonfamilial political relationships, and thereby to generate a situation wherein "the intimacy of citizenship is something scarce and sacred, private and proper, and only for members of families."⁷³ Marxist and feminist critics in particular have sought to uncover the conservative and patriarchal ideologies that often underpin such representational strategies, which in the twentieth century were especially prevalent in wartime, and which surfaced in the United States in World War One as what Jennifer Haytock calls a "cult of patriotic motherhood."⁷⁴ It is also true, as Patricia Chu has recently noted, that "women's relationships to the state [whether actual or symbolic], particularly because their status as citizens is not ideologically naturalized in the way male citizenship is, can become flashpoints for thinking about state subjection generally."⁷⁵ Susan Schweik reads this sequence this way; she finds poem VIII quoted above to be the most conservative of the sequence, in its replacement of the suffering and bereavements of real women by this symbolic woman who demands sacrifice in the name of some higher purpose.⁷⁶

Yet I think such propositions run the risk of ignoring the multiple, and even self-contradictory, statements made by the sequence when considered in its entirety about the way an individual death gains significance beyond itself. In contrast to poem VIII, Stevens' most famous lyric from the sequence (entitled "The Death of a Soldier" in *Harmonium*) has been lauded for refusing the elegiac tradition of pathetic fallacy, as it rejects any suggestion

that death gains metaphysical or political significance by some kind of sympathetic concordance with the spiritual or natural world.⁷⁷ Similarly, the mother figure is both a presence inspiring feats of martial heroism in lyric VIII and a moon enfeebled and elderly, barely illuminating a scene of rotting leaves, in “Lunar Paraphrase.” This poem, seventh in the sequence, intones that “the moon is the mother of pathos and pity,” which seems little more than mawkish sententiousness. (This is quite in contrast to the Lemer cier letter prefacing it, which rhapsodizes over a scene during a moonlit march the day before, when the moonlight had cast “shadows of houses which we know to be only heaps of ruins but which the obscurity of the night presents as if peace had built them up again” [CPP 541].⁷⁸) To recognize these kinds of internal contradictions within the sequence is to confirm Patricia Rae’s insight that Stevens’ poetry is often marked by “the method of ‘presenting’ materials side-by-side, without commenting definitively on their relation to one another.”⁷⁹ Perhaps most famously employed in Stevens’ better-known sequence “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” this technique, as Rae goes on to observe, is central to a pragmatic reading of Stevens, for “pragmatic hypotheses may have the effect of transforming the very world against which they are tested: they ‘emerge from facts,’ but also ‘dip forward into facts . . . and *add to them*.”⁸⁰ In the “Lettres d’un Soldat” sequence, Stevens presses on the political potentialities of such pragmatic method by juxtaposing the rhetoric and subjectivities produced by sentimental nationalism, revolutionary fervor, racial entitlement, technocratic idealism, and democratic cosmopolitanism. He does so not to validate one proposition over another but to see what happens when these propositions collide, and to leave his readers to choose which rhetorical/political attitude to imagination, service, and death they prefer.

In doing so, this poem seems to reflect on the very nature of political subjectivity: the multiple ways in which polities are organized across geographical, imaginative, symbolic, violent, and intimate territories, and how individuals struggle to make sense of the geopolitical forces and available discourses that control their destiny. Given this investigative impetus, it is no surprise that he prefaced the individual poems with Lemer cier’s letters, which were of course originally a private exchange but then were published as what Schweik calls “that most populist type of wartime and postwar epistolary publications, the collection of a dead soldier’s letters home.”⁸¹ From a “private” exchange read by his mother and military censors, to published and widely read populist wartime fare in France, England, and the United States, to epigraphs to a wartime modernist poem in *Poetry* magazine, Lemer cier’s *A Soldier of France to His*

Mother demonstrated the manifold ways in which letters both reflected and conditioned the relationship between individual and state during wartime. This connected Stevens' poem to a broader cultural awareness of how wartime letters engaged often disconcerting new circumstances of intimacy, and forged new social relations that frequently defied conventional sentimental or symbolic representation. Stevens was surely aware of this phenomenon, and how letters represented a particularly rich location for thinking about the ongoing and dramatic transformations in the American state. His skill in the "Lettres d'un Soldat" sequence was not just to assemble a series of monologues that test different rhetorical and political models against one another in a form of poetic-pragmatic warfare that mirrored what he saw as the militarized clash of ideologies taking place in Europe but to enfold them all under the umbrella of the letter form whose mediating and habituating force was inseparable from those ideologies. The medium of the letter was the privileged location where "creative statecraft," linguistic coercion, and a simultaneous reification of nationalist gender conventions and their explosion through networks of expanded sociality came together.

Edith Wharton's "Writing a War Letter," Modernism, and Charity

This overdetermination of the letter, seen by Stevens as such a rich source of creative potential, was not universally so regarded. Edith Wharton was much cooler in her enthusiasm for the aesthetics of the wartime letter and the politics it encoded, and continued to see the kinds of intimate dynamics discussed so far as the proper dimension of private and voluntary spheres rather than the province of the state. She was totally committed to France's cause in the war; she lived in Paris for most of the duration and worked intensively for a number of private wartime charities, many of which she had personally organized and funded. Just three weeks after the mobilization of France, Wharton had established a workroom for seamstresses put out of work by the war; later she organized charities for Belgian refugees and sanitarium for tubercular soldiers.⁸² In 1916, she published *The Book of the Homeless*, whose proceeds went to Belgian refugees; it contained a preface bemoaning America's persistent neutrality by her friend Theodore Roosevelt (a view that echoed Wharton's own) and contained writing by John Galsworthy, Henry James, George Santayana, William Dean Howells, Joseph Conrad, and W.B. Yeats. She delivered medical supplies to Verdun, Ypres, and the Vosges, and wrote about these experiences for *Scribner's* magazine, articles later collected in *Fighting France*

(1915); these pieces were essentially designed to mobilize wealthy American philanthropic support for the wide array of war-related medical and refugee charity agencies at work in France.⁸³ For Wharton, who had moved permanently to France in 1913, her adoptive country was a “luminous instance,” a country typified by “intellectual light and . . . moral force” that had been “for centuries the great creative force of civilization,” and was now menaced by a militarism that was “stupid, inartistic, unimaginative and enslaving.”⁸⁴ For her service, Wharton was made a Chevalier of the French Legion of Honor in 1916.

The war demonstrated and deepened Wharton’s commitment to two political ideas. The first was her idealization of a moral-aesthetic unity in France that informed all aspects of its national life, and had produced a civilization and society far superior to both what she called German “state paternalism” and American materialism.⁸⁵ She praised France as the “most homogeneous and uninterrupted culture the world has known,” a “continuity” that deeply informed France’s status as an intellectual and artistic beacon to the world; in her fiction, she called it “a second country” “to thinkers, artists, to all creators,” “a luminous point about which striving visions and purposes could rally.”⁸⁶ And what the French shared with America was a love of liberal democracy rather than a faith in technocracy; for as she explained:

The Frenchman and the American want to have a voice in governing their country, and the German prefers to be governed by professionals, as long as they make him comfortable and give him what he wants.

From the purely practical point of view this is not a bad plan, but it breaks down as soon as a moral issue is involved. They say corporations have no souls; neither have governments that are not answerable to a free people for their actions.⁸⁷

The second idea was the value of charity work as a necessary supplement, and even corrective agency, to the actions of the state. This was especially important during the period of American neutrality; Wharton was infuriated by Wilson’s reluctance to aid France by joining the war, and often referred to it as a cause of national shame. (After Wilson’s reelection in 1916, under the slogan “he kept us out of the war,” she remarked that “it was the saddest moment of my life when I realized that my country wanted him to be what he is.”⁸⁸) Accordingly, she felt it a personal duty to support the French effort however she could. She threw herself into this; within two weeks of the mobilizations, she had joined the committee of the American Ambulance, and soon after returning to Paris in September 1914, she

founded a new charity, the American Hostel for Refugees, which, as Shari Benstock notes, raised funds "on a scale that in our time only corporations could undertake." This was made possible by Wharton tapping her extensive connections in America's social and financial elite for donations.⁸⁹ This followed a well-established model wherein charitable work was one of the few avenues for American women of Wharton's class to participate in public life, a participation steeped in ideologies of *noblesse oblige* and sentimental benevolence. Yet Wharton was careful to separate selfless wartime voluntarism from the kinds of social function charity work customarily played for women in her own elite transatlantic class in peacetime. Indeed, she excoriated American women who took on wartime charity activities as part of a status-building extension of the public social rituals and network-making that her fiction anatomized so well. In wartime Paris, this seemed little more than "dancing and flirting and money-making on the great red mounds of dead" (*ASATF* 176).

Charity work was also where Wharton had her most direct – and bruising – contact with the American state in wartime. As Alan Price has ably discussed, after American intervention in April 1917, the American government designated the American Red Cross as the official US wartime charity and the specified relief agency for the AEF. Over the summer of 1917, it absorbed charities run by private American citizens in France as well as embarking on a \$100 million fundraising drive, the largest of any charity in history. Simultaneously, it dispensed with the prewar leader of the Red Cross, Mabel T. Boardman, a woman in many ways similar to Wharton – born to a prominent Cleveland family and with extensive connections among the American social and financial elite. The reorganized Red Cross was led by an all-male "war committee" made up of dollar-a-year men, headed by Henry P. Davison, a vice president at J.P. Morgan. As Price observes, this shift represented "a dramatic transformation in the nature of American philanthropy. Before April 1917, control of civilian war charities rested primarily with the socially and economically privileged classes. . . . After America's entry into the war, however, philanthropy and civilian war relief increasingly took on the look of a corporate organization dominated by large-scale efficiencies."⁹⁰ Wharton was at the center of this change from "a noblesse oblige model to a corporate model" of charity, and her letters from the time reveal her anger at its effects.⁹¹ She resented the often high-handed and blundering management of "her" charities by the Red Cross, finding that "it did not care about national or personal sensitivities, only about imposing American control and ensuring efficiency."⁹² And she bridled at being shunted out of work she found civically meaningful and

rewarding. As recent critics such as Annette Benert have noted, Wharton's war work with refugees was "the only occasion in which she entered full time into a public cause." Wharton took great pride in it and relished this experience of institutional leadership and management. But the amalgamating actions of the Red Cross effectively made her one of the many women "forced further from the industrial workplace and public responsibility after the war," as she was "thrown back into private life."⁹³

This preamble serves as an important introduction to one of Wharton's most interesting but least-discussed war fictions, "Writing a War Story," which appeared in 1919. Wharton still has a reputation for sinking to the depths of crude propaganda in her war fiction; this charge was leveled most forcefully by Stanley Cooperman, who saw Wharton as spearheading a band of much less talented American "lady authors" who "seriously portrayed God-fearing boys blondly carrying the banners of Christian faith against a simian foe."⁹⁴ Moreover, as Robin Peel has suggested, the war is often seen as contaminating her postwar fiction through its sharpening effect on Wharton's illiberal, reactionary, and nativist political views.⁹⁵ Yet this story – written in the war's aftermath – is a much more humorous take on the war than the often stern moralizing found in *A Son at the Front* or *The Marne*; and the humor stems from a situation that paralleled Wharton's own – how to write war fiction as a noncombatant woman. Yet that the story-within-the-story is entitled "His Letter Home" also connects this piece to Wharton's thinking on how art might engage the new incarnations, and even the new intimacies, of the state.

"Writing a War Story" concerns the pretty and privileged Ivy Spang, a Croton-on-Hudson heiress and poet who had "published a little volume of verse before the war" entitled *Vibrations*. It was praised by her local newspaper but also the "editor of *Zigzag*, the new 'Weekly Journal of Defiance,'" which opined that her poems' "esoteric significance showed that she was a *vers-librist* in thought as well as in technique."⁹⁶ "But then the war came," and we next find Ivy "pouring tea once a week for a whole winter in a big Anglo-American hospital" in Paris. There, she is identified as an author, and tapped by the editor of the new soldiers' magazine *The Man-At-Arms* to contribute a "rattling war story" for their initial number. The editor tells her he wants "the first number to be an 'actuality,' as the French say; all the articles written by people who've done the thing themselves, or seen it done." Nonetheless, he seems unconcerned that she has never visited the front, and urges her to write a trench story, "a tragedy with a happy ending."⁹⁷ He also secures her permission to print a

photograph of her in nurse's uniform alongside the story, and this is where Ivy's troubles begin.

Well aware of the modernist dicta received from the editor of *Zigzag* that one should "not [allow] one's self to be 'influenced,'" and that "people don't bother with plots nowadays," she struggles to make progress with her story. A recent copy of *Fact and Fiction* is promising but turns out to be of little help.⁹⁸ However, inspiration arrives from her governess – formerly a student of the famous philosopher Henri Bergson at the Sorbonne – who has a notebook full of stories related to her by convalescing *poilus* during her year-long stint at a local military hospital. Ivy eagerly works to adapt one of these stories; she adds "a touch of sentiment," and her governess "revised and polished the rustic speech in which she had originally transcribed the tale."⁹⁹ Eventually, her story – "His Letter Home" – is published. Yet all that the young soldiers at the hospital seem interested in is the photo that accompanies her story. She then encounters the renowned soldier-novelist Harold Harbard, who is convalescing in her hospital. The only serviceman to have actually read her work, he tells her that she has "mauled" an "awfully good subject," and schools her that the subject of a story is all-important; "it's only the people without invention who tell you it isn't."¹⁰⁰ The final indignity comes when he asks her for a copy of her photograph.

For such a short piece this story does a considerable amount of work. As Julie Olin-Ammentorp has noted, it ventriloquizes Wharton's own insecurities about her war fiction, particularly her reluctance to describe military combat for fear of misrepresenting a subject her gender prohibited her from experiencing. The fact that Harbard draws his status as an authority figure in the story from his confidence in both war and writing, and that both are staked in a specifically masculinized privilege, is significant; as Jean Gallagher observes, the story is a "satirical cautionary tale of the discursive constraints placed on women writers during wartime."¹⁰¹ But it also voices in nascent form what would become Wharton's extensive postwar critique of modernism. In her 1925 collection of essays *The Writing of Fiction* – which, as Sharon Kim notes, she had been working on for many years and revised extensively following her reading of Joyce's *Ulysses* – Wharton outlined a series of criticisms of modernism that she held to for the rest of her career.¹⁰² Her central contention was that modernism had abandoned core principles of fiction that had been carefully worked out by preceding generations, perhaps most importantly the necessity of embedding subject matter within a broader context of moral experience. This was particularly problematic in stream-of-consciousness narratives, for in

attempting to mimetically capture the patterns of consciousness and psychological experience modernists had dispensed with what she called the “creative imagination,” which in contrast to the “merely sympathetic imagination” was “two-sided, and combines with the power of penetrating into other minds that of standing far enough aloof from them to see beyond, and relate them to the whole stuff of life out of which they but partially emerge.”¹⁰³ Modernists’ passionate attachment to the idea of originality had led them to abandon the formal lessons that provided that perceptive distance; accordingly, “the distrust of technique and the fear of being unoriginal – both symptoms of a certain lack of creative abundance – are in truth leading to pure anarchy in fiction, and one is almost tempted to say that in certain schools formlessness is now regarded as the first condition of form.”¹⁰⁴ She also defended the importance of subject matter in fiction, for “A good subject . . . must contain in itself something that sheds a light on our moral experience. If it is incapable of this expansion, this vital radiation, it remains . . . a more irrelevant happening, a meaningless scrap of fact torn out of its context.”¹⁰⁵ In later critical writing, she traced what she believed to be modernism’s wrong-headed commitment to iconoclasm back to the war, which had been a cataclysm of “moral and intellectual destruction” that was “shattering to traditional culture,” and had caused an entire generation to avoid “the fecundating soil stored for it by its predecessors.”¹⁰⁶

The continuity between these precepts and the satire of modernism evident in “Writing a War Story” is very clear, particularly in Wharton’s scathing opinion of modernism’s supposed readiness to dispense with a “subject,” and its purported overobsession with originality, both of which lead Ivy astray. Combined with Ivy’s dilettantish attitude to volunteering, Wharton also seems to echo the views of many mainstream cultural critics that I explored in Chapter 1, which linked modernist experimentalism with a failure to properly dispatch one’s wartime patriotic responsibilities. Yet there is an element of sympathy here, too, one staked in Wharton’s own anxieties over how noncombatant artists, especially women, could function at all during the war when they were operating under such constrictive parameters for what wartime experiences they could imaginatively engage. Detached from the “actuality” of front-line experience owing to the gendered restrictions of her time – a definition of war experience that has, as many critics have noted, been central to the canonization of male combat veterans as the war’s most important literary voices – Ivy has little to fall back on but the hollow forms of technique in fulfilling an assignment she does not really want. (As Claire Tylee notes, this was a situation

Wharton had personally experienced in the war, when she was pressured by her publisher Scribner's into writing a war story on a topic she had only encountered second-hand.¹⁰⁷) Ivy is relentlessly sexually objectified by men, but also has her writing belittled by them, a belittling in no small part enabled by the very limits they have set on how she should write. The editor of *The Man-At-Arms* sets suffocating limits to the story – asking for an “actuality” and “stirring trench story” with “a dash of sentiment [but] nothing to depress or discourage,” constraints that more or less doom the story to failure from the outset. And, as Tylee observes, at the conversation with Harbard at the story's close, and despite her attempts “to overcome the ladylike limits that convention sets for her,” Ivy is met by “a supercilious determination to keep her in her place.”¹⁰⁸

What appears as a fairly slight story, therefore, has some complex things to say about the relation of gender to war writing, and how modernist aesthetics might preclude the kind of moral engagement necessary to adequately represent the war. Yet what no critics have addressed is the detail of Ivy's failed story, its basis in the fictional letter between war front and home front. What readers are expected to recognize in this choice of title and subject is first and foremost its status as a cliché, the most obvious and well-worn vehicle for combining sentiment, “actuality,” and a connection between the different geographical and gendered spheres of the war.¹⁰⁹ And I use “sentiment” here in the sense neatly formulated by June Howard: that “‘sentiment’ and its derivatives indicate a moment when emotion is recognized as socially constructed,” where “we mark a moment when the discursive processes that construct emotion become visible.”¹¹⁰ By this point, as I hope to have demonstrated in this chapter, the fictional letter home had become a staple of comic writing, propaganda fiction in the nation's bestselling magazines, and war novels of every stripe. Yet it was also perhaps the preeminent form for writers to consider the new forms of sociality of the expanded wartime state, the new ways in which social connection and “cultural intimacy” were being forged and experienced in the new structures (and infrastructures) of Progressive civic life. “Writing a War Story” is withering about the implications of this kind of intimacy, a critique it enacts precisely by mobilizing two of the cornerstones of sentimental, gendered conventionality in the war – the letter from a man at the front to a woman at home, as well as the pretty volunteer nurse – in order to think not just about how women might write about war but about how they might work in it, especially within new state structures of both benevolence and literary production. Which is to say that the story is steeped as much in Wharton's experiences as a woman writing about the

war as it is in her experiences of charity organization in the war, and the way that her gender privileged certain kinds of labor and sidelined her from others.

To engage this issue fully, it is worth registering more fully Wharton's thoughts about the Progressive state, and especially its role in establishing social safety nets of medical care and the amelioration of poverty. At one point in her 1922 war novel *A Son at the Front*, her artist-protagonist John Campton muses over these things:

Nothing hitherto had been less in the line of his interests than the large schemes of general amelioration which were coming to be classed under the transatlantic term of "Social Welfare." If questioned on the subject a few months earlier he would probably have concealed his fundamental indifference under the profession of an extreme individualism, and the assertion of every man's right to suffer and starve in his own way.¹¹¹ (*ASATF* 93)

Despite his musings on "large schemes of general amelioration," which were the forerunners of the mature welfare state then being enacted in Europe and to a lesser degree in the United States – schemes for unemployment insurance, social health care, and universal pensions – Campton's views on charity never really shift from "eas[ing] his own pain by putting his hand in his pocket" in cases of particular "poignancy" (*ASATF* 93). This was the kind of affective and social structure Wharton was most comfortable with for organized beneficence and its attendant social relations, where private charities monetized sympathetic connection outside of the parameters of the state. Indeed, William M. Morgan has characterized Wharton's wartime writing as frequently offering nostalgic evocations of a "classically republican masculinity with its sentimental ideal of public benevolence," a form of masculinity that had been largely superseded by 1917.¹¹² In *A Son at the Front*, Campton is an erratic and impulsive volunteer to war charities, generally only contributing his name or his labor when moved to do so by the appeals (or the tragic deaths) of young men who remind him of his younger self or of his own son. Indeed, this emotional bond becomes one of the few left to him during the war, as "pity was his only remaining link with his kind, the one barrier between himself and the dreadful solitude which awaited him when he returned to his studio" (*ASATF* 94). Of course, poignancy – so characteristic an affect of the sentimental – is an emotional mode eminently capable of privatizing issues of public policy; as Elizabeth Barnes observes, "the conversion of the political into the personal, or the public into the private, is a distinctive trait of sentimentalism . . . [wherein] family stands as the model for social

and political affiliations."¹³ Such is true of *A Son at the Front*, where John Campton's relationship to his only son, George, forms the central emotional and artistic relationship in the book; George is both Campton's central artistic subject (in both life and death) and the only person he loves. His political commitments radiate out from this relationship and inform his understanding of most of the war's broader social and political implications. In these scenarios, charity becomes a way for Campton to organize his politics in a way that both provides the emotional sustenance of "pity" with his "own kind" and remains on the intimate scale of familial fidelity. "Amelioration" in *A Son at the Front*, then, operates not in the "general" terms of state systematics but on the largely privatized and personalized terms of charitable benevolence organized by social elites.

As Hazel Hutchison notes, it is seriously misleading to read the focalizing figure of Campton – marked by petulance, self-centeredness, emotional volatility, and inconsistency in his beliefs and affections – as any kind of reliable guide to Wharton's own feelings. Yet they seem to share the belief that charitable "sentimental benevolence" might be how social amelioration could best be institutionalized, and also that the difference between good and ineffective art is the difference between work that "sheds a light on our moral experience" and work that merely offered to record "scraps of fact." (The book is littered with Campton's scathing reflections on bohemian modernism; he prefers the "sounder goods" of "classic art," *ASATF* 89.) Both Campton and Wharton, therefore, share a set of moral and aesthetic precepts wary of new innovations in both state practice and artistic representation – precepts that are deeply intertwined. Accordingly, if letters function as the paradigmatic state form of facilitating – and even organizing – intimate life, it is telling that *A Son at the Front* pays as much attention to their mediating processes and their unreliability as to their content; an important letter from George to Campton "bore the military frank," and another is not in George's hand but in that of an "unlettered French soldier," George's orderly, who is writing after George has been injured (*ASATF* 160). Letters are prized for their ability to provide substitutes for bodily presence – George's handwriting and turns of phrase give comfort to Campton, and he marks time between letters from his son – but they are also deeply misleading. The second section of the novel, with the relation between George and Campton entirely mediated by letter as George is away from Paris in service, has Campton believing George is safely placed in a staff job, whereas in actuality George has secretly left that posting to fight – a deception he upholds through reassuring (and duplicitous) letters home. At the end of the novel, after George's death ends this

epistolary relationship, Campton wonders whether he knew him at all; for “between himself and George lay the unbridgeable abyss of his son’s experiences,” an abyss that letters only served to widen (*ASATF* 212).

Yet the fullest consideration of the state’s role in intimate life – and its related aesthetics – comes in the depiction of the fictional letter in “Writing a War Story,” for this allowed Wharton to consider on different yet parallel grounds the competing merits of “general schemes” versus personalized “poignancy” in the new institutional paradigms of war. Although the Red Cross is never named directly, and Wharton changes dates and locations to avoid any overt allegorization of its wartime activities, it is easy to see Wharton’s anger at this institution in the story too.¹⁴ The work Ivy does marginalizes women’s authority while drawing on their volunteer labor, and the story Ivy is coerced to write is stripped of the kinds of intimacy and first-hand knowledge Wharton felt was so important to effective charity work. Wharton denigrates the fictional letter in “Writing a War Story” partly by evacuating it of content: we hear nothing of Emile Durand’s life, the *poilu* whose letters form the basis of the story. All we are left with is the title, “His Letter Home,” the hollow shell of the form itself, which becomes a technical device that – devoid of any kind of “moral experience” – becomes not only bad art, but bad politics as well. If the modern state functions through depersonalized infrastructural systems such as the postal service, which, in Bruce Robbins’ words, are “the object of no-one’s desire,” then Wharton sees this less as an exciting expansion of sociality and more as the draining of what makes social connection meaningful.¹⁵ In the hands of Ivy’s governess, sensitively transcribing Emile’s first-hand experiences, there is a “good subject”; as soon as these become reworked into Ivy’s fictional letter home, which hopes to expand that intimacy into the mediating structures of the state, that affective and therefore moral power evaporates. What the cliché is to literature – a form incapable of moral expansion or personal idiosyncrasy, stripped of the possibility of sympathetic connection, where our affective reaction is to the form rather than any kind of individuated experience – in fact comes to resemble the same affective flatness as the modern state’s organization of labor and social connection, a form of bureaucratic depersonalization Wharton saw at work in the newly reorganized and state-sanctioned Red Cross. So, rather than being anathema to the modern state, modernism was in this case seen as its perfect counterpart – an unfeeling and technocratic prioritization of form over moral connection.

Wharton cannot quite let it go at that, however. Most volunteers in *A Son at the Front* seem to achieve benefits – monetary, social, or emotional –

from their work that seem more rewarding than the assistance they purportedly offer to the needy beneficiaries of their labors. And, later in the book, Wharton includes a withering description of how charities can be beset by the same kind of organizational infighting and corruption so often charged to larger governmental structures. This is of a piece with Hutchison's characterization of *A Son at the Front* as an unstable, self-contradicting book, unsure of its politics or its aesthetics. Ultimately, it is interesting to look at the two artworks that conclude the two pieces I have been discussing: "His Letter Home," and the memorial sculpture to his son that Campton begins in the novel's final pages. Neither the morally evacuated forms of modernism and the new Progressive state represented by "His Letter Home" nor the retreat to private grief and a "fix[ation] on the lost childhood of the son from whom he walked away," which represents Campton's final work, seem to offer good alternatives for the place of the artwork in the war's new political, aesthetic, and emotional structures.¹¹⁶ The former is incapable of the moral experience Wharton thought essential for any kind of meaningful intimacy; the latter is a retreat into the solipsistic bath of pity that inevitably becomes self-pity, and so becomes a renunciation of the social altogether.

The first of these views would seem to endorse the views of later critics such as Lionel Trilling, that once the inherently progressive and enfranchising impulses of the "liberal imagination" become programmatic, which is to say institutionalized and rationalized in political institutions, they drift "toward a denial of the emotions and the imagination" that were their very fueling impulse.¹¹⁷ It also limns a quite different Wharton from the flag-waving propagandist cheering on the wartime state that emerges in much of the critical appraisal of her war work. Moreover, Campton's breezy dismissal of "social welfare" on the grounds of needing poignancy to orient his benevolence chimes with one of the most persistent criticisms of the welfare state, both at its inception and in recent neoliberal times: that voluntary benevolence and private charities – often because of the affective richness of personalized and voluntary contribution – were materially and ethically better for the common good than state-organized assistance.¹¹⁸ Yet the representation of voluntarism in *A Son at the Front* is simultaneously unsparing about the problems that social theorists have identified with charitable giving as a foundation for the common weal – its tendencies toward philanthropic particularism and philanthropic paternalism, wherein elites channel money to groups that either remind them of themselves or that serve their own interests.¹¹⁹ Campton's attitude to charity brings into focus his major failure in the novel, which is a failure

to be fully sociable and even social. Tellingly, he refuses to have a telephone installed in his rooms; he is both unable to master the technique of answering and placing calls, and resents it as a “live thing, a kind of Laocoon-serpent that caught one in its coils and dragged one struggling to the receiver” (*ASATF* 35). Like his views on “social welfare,” he is uncomfortable with both the technological form of this new network and the social implications it invokes. He cannot ever broaden his concerns far beyond his son and form meaningful and fulfilling relationships or connections with others, whether in his peer group or within a commons of democratic community. Taken together – and with the letter home as an important mediating device for thinking some of these issues through – “Writing a War Story” and *A Son at the Front* suggest Wharton’s awareness that the very nature of the social was being transformed by the agencies of the modern state; and while she disapproved of some of those transformations, the older models would not suffice either.

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Wharton’s sense that letters could flatten and sentimentalize the intricacies of moral experience was not new to the war – earlier fiction, particularly her 1910 story “The Letters,” had made much of this. Yet what was new was her recognition of the expansion of letters’ purposes, readerships, and audiences in the war – as company commanders, military censors, nurses, volunteer workers, and propaganda magazines read, altered, wrote, imitated, and prompted soldiers’ correspondence. The suspicion of these extensions of intimacy evident in her war fiction in many ways reflected her politics, anchored as they were in principles of naturalized privilege and private affiliation rather than the leveling and impersonal “grand schemes of social amelioration” of state bureaucracy. But other authors saw those extensions of sociality in different terms. Those most directly aligned with the aims of official US war policy saw fictional letters as a key genre in the mass organization of national morale, a vehicle for codifying national sentiment in ways that exalted the private and familial sphere while tacitly reminding the nation that this sphere was deeply enabled by a system of reliable, private, and universal communication that represented a crown jewel of Progressive Era statecraft and institution-building. Others, like Stevens, used the uniquely mediating status of the letter to consider the filters of representation lying between noncombatants and combatants, but also how such mediation was central to a wide variety of modern political experience – including affiliation to the liberal democratic state. For some writers, illuminating the oxymoron of the “private” letter – read by censors

or swapped between strangers, and handled by a state that somehow professed to protect the sanctity of the domestic private sphere by drafting millions of men away from their homes – carried rich potential for comedy and antiwar satire. And a few writers sited the wartime mail as a bracing transformation of national social experience, the full realization of the promise of a federal institution that had already done so much to effect national integration and social modernization, and might even play a key role in Wilson's dream of an international Progressive order. As N.W. Peterson, President of the Illinois State Association of the National Association of Letter Carriers, and writing in the *Postal Record* in 1917, put it, "there is no institution in the world which so tends to draw the nations together as the postal system . . . when the clouds that today darken our storm-tossed world disappear, the Postal System, more than any other single agency, will help to establish the Universal Brotherhood among men."¹²⁰ The culture of the wartime letter, therefore, did not just exist within a polarized terrain of propaganda and censorship on one hand, and familial intimacy on the other; it registered that the war was reconfiguring intimacy and the state's role in producing it. In consequence, fictional and poetic letters, so important to the American understanding of the war's geographical, emotional, and political dimensions, both considered and were conditioned by the state's presence in intimate life, and the simultaneously productive and intrusive place it held there.