The Combatant Experience Revisited: Two Comparatist Studies of First World War Literature.¹

ELIZABETH A. MARSLAND

Franz Karl Stanzel asks in *Intimate Enemies* why First World War literature has been generally ignored by comparatists: a valid question, since this large but circumscribed body of texts, international in scope yet surprisingly homogeneous within and across national borders, certainly invites an international perspective. The scarcity of scholarly studies probably owes less to a desire to avoid controversial topics (Stanzel’s suggestion) than to the nature of the academic literary establishment, which in Comparative Literature as elsewhere is subject to canons, fashions, and "correctness" old or new; and war literature happens not to have found favour. That relatively little of the material has been reprinted or translated is no doubt a further limiting factor. Nevertheless, this corpus offers a wealth of possible subjects for comparative study, ranging from the social and the psychological to the theoretical. Because the field is largely unexplored, Evelyn Cobléy’s *Representing War* and Franz Karl Stanzel and Martin Löschning’s *Intimate Enemies* not only make a welcome contribution to research, they also offer valuable examples of paths to be followed. Cobléy has taken an entirely theoretical approach, selecting some sixteen First World War narratives (English, French, and German) and analyzing them from a mainly post-structuralist perspective, while *Intimate Enemies* is a compilation of conference-papers by an international group of scholars, addressing many comparative aspects of the war literature through a range of critical methods. Both works also demonstrate very clearly that, as a subject for international study, First World War literature is likely to carry the researcher, and ultimately his or her readers, far beyond the bounds of the specific literary corpus. Cobléy’s argument is an important contribution to the wider discussion of the representation of reality as well as to the on-going debate about fact and fiction in First World War narratives; and the essays in *Intimate Enemies* collectively enlarge the body of knowledge not only of First World War literature but also of other facets of early twentieth-century cultural history. The two works, then, are a valuable addition to scholarship both within and beyond their immediate field.

The papers that comprise *Intimate Enemies* were presented at a 1991 symposium organized by Stanzel expressly to encourage a comparative approach to English and German literature of the Great War, and most of the contributions comply with this comparatist aim. The majority are concerned with works that focus on the combatant experience, and they are grouped loosely by genre: two sections deal with poetry, one with drama, and one with retrospective prose narratives. Some prose writings by women are covered in "A Gendered Perspective of 1914-18," which also offers an essay on wartime sexual mores (Alan Bance, "Sexuality, Gender and the First World War"), while the effect of the mechanization of warfare on the literary response is the topic of the section "Old and New Paradigms of War." "The Professors’ War" consists of a paper by Marjorie Perloff on the differing reactions to war of the philosophers Russell and Wittgenstein ("The Limits of Language"), and one by Peter Firchow on the struggle between national and professional identity in wartime literary scholarship — a struggle that was to assume major proportions in Germany in the 1930s ("Shakespeare, Goethe and the War of the Professors, 1914-1918"). Finally, "Painters at War" offers a "preliminary survey" by Patrick Bridgewater of German painting and graphic art, and an analysis by Maria Tippett of the work of official British and Canadian "war artists." The book is illustrated with twelve plates representing the work of some of the artists whom the two authors discuss.

Almost half of the thirty papers in *Intimate Enemies* are concerned with poetry. Criticism of English First World War poetry has been highly influential in establishing as "true" a particular account of the war poetry, and of the war itself, that is actually supported by relatively little evidence. Based on the premise of a major shift in attitude following the Somme offensive in July 1916, this model sets out a parallel series of (roughly) "before" and "after" oppositions — innocence versus experience, war enthusiasm versus rejection of war, idealism versus realism, women (civilians) as pro-war versus men (combatants) as anti-war, traditional versus modern war literature (heroic glorification of war versus anti-heroism and protest), and so on. Broading the scope of research beyond the few English poems upon which the model was based has revealed its many inadequacies. For instance, in Catherine Reilly’s anthology *Scars upon my Heart* (1981) demonstrates the variety in women’s poetic responses to the war; Dominic Hibberd and John Onions in their anthology *Poetry of the Great War* (1986) draw attention to chronological "misrepresentation" in most earlier anthologies, where publication dates are simply ignored to promote the "after the Somme" model; various recent monographs on individual poets (Desmond Graham, Hibberd, Douglas Kerr) have shown that even the well-known writers deviated

which might then be tested against the English writing. Bridgwater is not the sole representative here of the traditional school of thought about English war poetry, but his view is definitely in the minority. It is interesting to note in passing that those critics most concerned with value-judgment and "good" poets appear also to be more interested than others in identifying and trying to explain national characteristics.

The grouping of papers in Intimate Enemies presumably reflects a convenient symposium format, but such an arrangement is not necessarily appropriate in the printed version. Certainly it would have been helpful for readers to view as a single group the six essays that deal with prose narratives. The main section on narrative consists of three papers: Bruno Schultz, concerned with the effect of the "prevailing ideological climate" (Stanzel's term, 15) on literary production, maintains that the proliferation of English war novels around 1929 resulted from a change in political attitudes rather than from psychological causes; Hans-Harald Müller wonders why Ernst Jüngcr's In Stahlgezwistern, translated into English in 1929, was much more widely read in Britain than it had been in Germany to that time; and Ulrich Brixen argues that the hybrid semi-autobiographical, semi-ficitonal form developed by writers like Robert Graves and Ludwig Ren was indeed an appropriate medium for retrospective writing about the war. In the section "A Gendered Perspective," Hanna Behrendt addresses the subject of ambivalence in the wartime diaries of Vera Brittain and Käthe Kollwitz, while Walter Hölbling examines wartime novels by American and German (or Austrian) women — some of them, he suggests, revealing a surprising awareness of the reality of war. Finally, Günther A. Höfner's paper in the "Old and New Paragigms" section offers thought-provoking observations about the effect on narrative style of the essentially cinematic nature of mechanized warfare. There is also a brief drama section, where Heinz Kosok provides a typology and a useful list of English and Irish plays about the war, and Douglas Gill and Ulrich Schneider discuss the theme of wartime mutinies in German and English plays. Not only do these two papers represent an important first step in a virtually untouched area, but the second in particular, in discussing popular response to a BBC TV documentary drama about the 1917 Etaples mutiny, also serves as a reminder that the debate between the conflicting claims of "historical authenticity" and "literariness" — a debate that Stanzel attempts to promote, but where most of the contributors have simply decided in favour of the latter — remains important for the public at large.

"Historical authenticity" is a central concern for Evelyn Cobley, who undertakes in Representing War to examine from a perspective of critical theory the relationship between world and text in several well-known First World War combatant narratives. Unlike Intimate Enemies, however, which might appeal to any "educated reader," Cobley's book is clearly intended only for the initiated. Anyone unfamiliar with the terminology of modern critical theory — such
phrases as "Contingency and lexical ostentation" (38), "the text as a contradictory site of inscription" (3), "to problematize the formal choices" (x) — is likely to find the reading difficult at first. But persistence will be rewarded, for the book offers valuable insights into the narratives and the argument is both cogent and stimulating — if not, in the end, wholly convincing.

Cobley starts from the premise that the writers of the narratives, witnesses to an event that caused "a serious loss of confidence" in "the Enlightenment project" of continuing social progress, offer their personal narratives and novels as an alternative to the official history, a challenge to the establishment's attempt to rationalize the war and conceal what really happened. She maintains that although the writers claim merely to record realistically 'the truth' of what they observed as combatants, most readers, including critics, have viewed their work as a protest against war. At the same time, however, the "formal strategies" in these works reveal the writers' complicity with the Enlightenment ideology they appear to reject. Cobley's formal analysis takes up and develops ideas from structuralist and poststructuralist narratology, most notably from Genette, Hamon, and de Laurentis, while her discussion of the ideological implications owes much to her reading of Derrida, Lyotard, Foucault, Jameson, and Hutcheon.

The argument is organized around aspects of form, and the texts are grouped variously according to their use of the different formal devices. Chapter 2 deals with description, the single most striking characteristic. Here Cobley argues that, contrary to the writers' assertion that their objective realistic description offers "unmediated access" to the reality of the Front, descriptive detail in realist discourse is far from innocent, in large measure because selection is arbitrary. Furthermore, the writers' techniques for "naming the unnamable" echo the procedures of classification and cataloguing central to the ideology that produced the exploitation and suffering, and although their descriptions may have led to new awareness of the combatant experience, their accounts also rationalize the barbarism. Focalization and narrative voice, the topics of Chapter 3, are similarly problematic. Cobley points out that although many writers choose an "I" voice whether as a guarantee of authenticity or to provide a personal counterpoise to the official history, their narratives are astonishingly impersonal and detached, reproducing the conventions of the very histories they set out to challenge. Further, because of the writers' desire to represent what they witnessed, the narratives privilege the "experiencing self" over the "narrating self," with the result that there is little explicit evaluation of the war experience, critical or otherwise.

The next three chapters deal with different kinds of narrative structure. The documentary or "episodic" texts, Cobley suggests, are "disposed to emplot the war experience as a Bildungsroman" (123), the text per excellence of the nineteenth-century "bourgeois social order" (119) though she finds that they actually have more in common with the pre-Enlightenment picaresque tale. Ultimately, however, neither of these paradigms provides a model for bringing about change. Nor, it seems, do the "plotted" or obviously fictional accounts of the war offer a medium for protest, since in their quest for closure the four writers (Hemingway, Aldington, Dos Passos, and Mottram) "displace their frustration ... onto female scapegoat figures" (180), a form of "oedipal logic" complicitous with the patriarchal order of "the bourgeois-capitalist industrial complex" (181). Although the "high modernism" of Jones's In Parenthesis seems to offer a possible escape from inadvertent complicity, Jones's work remains committed to war in both its "ideologically suspect" subject matter (the tradition of male heroism) and its formal "desire for continuity and unity" (207). The study ends with an epilogue on two novels about the Vietnam War, largely to show that postmodern narratives of war, although consciously ambivalent, remain as complicitous as their forebears.

There is no doubt that Cobley's book opens up a valuable new approach to the criticism of the war narratives, and it is sure to inspire further formal studies. Nor can one doubt that the author proves her point that the narratives do not protest against war. The only question is whether that particular point was worth proving. The assumption that their war experience turned combatant writers into pacifists has already been widely challenged in criticism of First World War literature, and the realistic representation of war is no longer automatically equated with protest. Further, although Cobley makes it clear that the error of perceiving the narratives as works of protest was perpetrated by readers, her argument is directed, not against the critics she cites (who brought to their reading the anti-militaristic preconceptions of the academic literary establishment of the 1960s and '70s), but against the writers, to whom, with some sleight-of-hand, she imputes an anti-war intention. By locating her discussion within this spurious "protest" context, Cobley commits herself to proving that the narratives are failures. Possibly such a negative view is inherent in the deconstructive critical approach, and certainly it is necessary for Cobley's particular ideological conclusions, but the persistent and distracting negative judgment implies a degree of naïveté on the part of the authors that is quite belied by these and their other writings. Since in actuality they succeeded beyond all expectation in replacing the official history of the war with their own story, one cannot help regretting that Cobley did not apply her intensive formal methodology and her ideological insights to explain how the works achieve their undeniable effect, rather than to show how they fail to reach a goal to which the writers did not necessarily aspire. Despite these reservations, however, Representing War makes a significant contribution to First World War literary scholarship, and it serves well to complement the less stringently theoretical but no less valuable collection of papers in Intimate Enemies.

University of Alberta
Advances in Malraux Studies

BRIAN THOMPSON

These three finely produced volumes reproduce special issues of La Revue André Malraux Review, a bilingual journal of Malraux studies which has made its mark on Malraux scholarship ever since it succeeded the less elegantly presented but pioneering Mélanges Malraux Miscellany founded and edited by Walter G. Langlois. They bring together first-rate articles by many of the world’s leading Malraux specialists, unpublished source materials of various kinds, and previously published primary and secondary materials not widely available elsewhere. Like the journal itself, they are indispensable to anyone working seriously on this multi-faceted novelist/essayist/memorialist/art theorist/political activist whose work, one might argue, is itself indispensable to anyone seriously interested in the literature and culture of our century and of particular interest to comparatists.

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