Modernism and First World War Poetry: Alternative Lines

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Both the ideology and the category of modernism are presently subject to renewed scrutiny and many of the more rigid classifications and exclusions of the past are under reconsideration. Modernism*s* are the new order of the day.[1] Yet, even within these considered blurrings of lines, there remains an orthodoxy of modernism, and for the purposes of this chapter we shall highlight two of its central features. Firstly, canonical British modernism still forms around a small cluster of high modernist writers – (later) W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf – whose works first provided the characteristic examples for its definition, and the features of whose works, in both form and content, act as an index of what it is to be modernist. Secondly, the First World War is still seen as creating a social, cultural, and artistic rupture which marks the emergence, post-war, of a full-blown modernism. This orthodoxy effortlessly absorbs the existence of elements of modernism pre-war. Thomas Laqueur summarises the relationship thus: 'If the Great War did not actually give birth to Modernism it powerfully mobilised elements of a prewar cultural crisis and gave it new, self-conscious definition predicated on rupture.'[2]

We want to emphasise that the rupture which is frequently invoked as either a metaphor within modernism, or a historical marker of a point of change, was an actual cataclysmic event for the poets engaged with the war, and for some of them this had a radical effect on their poetry which brought it into the line of modernism. Key to our argument is the experiential dimension of war poetry; rupture is not just a metaphor for these poets, it is an experience, and one which informs the changes within their poetry. We shall argue that

two distinct strands of (British) modernist poetry emerged in the early twentieth century. Each drew on different poetic antecedents, but were related to rather than divided from each other, in much the same way that the various pre-war proto-modernist movements were interrelated. These two strands we characterise as high and low modernism, but in accepting the standard modernist descriptor 'high' and counterbalancing it with the apparently opposing 'low', we hope to unsettle the terms themselves.[3]

High modernism in poetry is what everyone is familiar with as modernism: that strand in poetry which came to maturity during the period of the First World War, beginning with the later Yeats, proselytised and brought to fruition by Ezra Pound, exemplified in its early stages in the Imagism of H. D., Richard Aldington, and others, and reaching its apotheosis post-war in Eliot's iconic master-piece *The Waste Land*.[4] It is characterised by a pared down, direct language, drawing on the rhythms of ordinary speech rather than a laid-down metre, and a concomitant abandonment of restrictive verse and rhyme forms and a move towards free verse, providing a voice sufficiently freed from traditional forms to properly express the modern predicament. Along with this went a desire to inhabit the instant, the newness of an experience, since this was to catch fully the modern moment, as well as to reflect the frailty of any fixed reality. From a fragmented modern world arose the fragmented subject or self, to which this poetry would give a voice, but any reality perceived would therein be partial, incomplete, as would the self who uttered it. The unified and unitary poetic voice, it followed, would be inauthentic to this fragmented world and consciousness; the poet would disappear behind a ranged and disarranged collage of perceptions.

This is necessarily a retrospective characterisation; if we go back to the historical moment of 1914 and examine the state of poetry as it was then, we are struck not so much by the distinctions but by the crossover between poets and their various ideas. Certainly, this was a period of manifestos and declarations, and of powerful 'little' magazines positioning themselves in certain ways. But there were constant shifts and interactions within and between these. The

Imagists contested the nature and representation of Imagism in their own publications.[5] At the same time the *English Review* and the *Poetry Review* pre-war, as well as Harriet Monroe's American *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, published Imagist poets alongside poets the Imagists were reacting against.[6] This transatlantic cultural commerce was aided by Pound, who had his finger in almost all poetic pies. The Georgian anthologies lay at the other end of the spectrum from these modernist periodicals, but here too there was crossover and complexity of character. Harold Monro was the publisher of both Pound's *Des Imagistes* and the Georgian anthologies. Poets who passed through the doors of Monro's Poetry Bookshop included Lascelles Abercrombie, Rupert Brooke, Robert Frost, Wilfrid Gibson, Amy Lowell, Charlotte Mew, Wilfred Owen, Pound, Siegfried Sassoon, and Yeats. Meanwhile Isaac Rosenberg, for example, corresponded from the Front with both Laurence Binyon and Monroe. Poetry, then, was not highly demarcated as the war entered its first year: this was still a small and in certain ways a remarkably open creative world.

A particularly interesting example of this fluidity is that of D. H. Lawrence. He was taken up early by the *English Review*, first under Ford Madox Hueffer's editorship (the November 1909 issue marked the first publication of Lawrence as a poet), then under the editorship of Austin Harrison from 1910 onwards. Marsh saw his 'Snapdragon' in the June 1912 issue and included it in *Georgian Poetry 1913–15* – a volume which posthumously published some of Brooke's poems including 'The Soldier'.[7] Gibson and Monro were also included, as was the Irish poet Francis Ledwidge. Meanwhile Pound had taken up Lawrence's cause, sending eight of his poems to Monroe, seven of which she accepted for the January 1914 edition of *Poetry*. Then, in 1915, we find him popping up in *Some Imagist Poets* and thus placing himself amongst those making a breakaway from Pound. Post-war he figures in *Georgian Poetry 1918–19* ('Seven Seals'), alongside surviving war poets Robert Graves, Robert Nichols, and Sassoon, and in *Georgian Poetry 1920–22*, with the subsequently much-anthologised 'Snake'.[8] At the same time he publishes a body of poems under the title *War Films*, in *Poetry*, July 1919,

which, while they purport to be new work, are in fact revamped versions of 1910 translations.[9] Lawrence's pre-war and wartime poems thus could be made to fit Pound's or Monroe's agendas, while still finding favour with Marsh as representative of Georgian poetry; the variety of outlets also reflects his own need for publication at a time when he was unpopular because of his deeply held conviction against the war. Yet his real poetic work during the First World War, which issued in the collection *Look! We Have Come Through!*, was in pursuit of his own highly individual (and certainly sometimes modernist) poetic, exploring a personal male/female conflict which was in his eyes as dramatic, and as worthy of poetry, as the greater conflict. Lawrence's First World War poetry doesn't fit easily into any category but his own.

Notwithstanding the fluidity of the poetic world pre-war, there is no doubt that high modernism in this formative stage, and as it developed throughout the First World War and beyond, inhered in particular poets: Yeats, Pound, H.D., Eliot. While this strand is predominantly American in origin, the émigré or outsider nature of these writers signalled their commitment to a European rather than an American tradition. Eliot, in his introduction to Pound's *Selected Poems* (1928), wrote that his own brand of *vers libre* was 'directly drawn from the study of Laforgue'. For him, Jules Laforgue and Charles Baudelaire were the nineteenth-century poets of choice, rather than his own countryman Walt Whitman. He added: 'I did not read Whitman until much later in life, and had to conquer an aversion to his form, as well as to much of his matter, in order to do so.'[10] Pound, however, both loved and hated Whitman, and he struggled to deal with his difficult poetic inheritance.[11] What Pound shared with Whitman was the impulse to freedom, from constraint of verse, from stricture of subject matter, from extraneous pressures to conform. What he sought that was utterly opposed to the spirit of Whitman was an impersonality of voice, and the suppression of the poetic 'I'. This impersonality became a definitive marker of high modernism in poetry, laid down by Eliot in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919) as the essential for a modern poetic: 'The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction

of personality.' Eliot likened the mind of the poet to 'the shred of platinum' which does not itself change when placed in a test tube containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide, but acts as the catalyst to the two gases to produce a third entity, sulphuric acid. The platinum – and the mind of the poet in the process of creation – 'has remained inert, neutral and unchanged'.[12]

We can see the poetic move towards this impersonality (predating the theory) in Eliot's early works – 'Preludes', 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night', 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', 'Portrait of a Lady'. This body of poems was being written and revised from 1910 onwards and 'Prufrock', eventually published in 1915, can be taken as an index of Eliot's development; the onset of war seems to have made little difference to its progress. So familiar are we with 'Prufrock' that it is difficult to stand back and see how utterly new it was at the time: the intercutting of voices against the narrative voice; the temerity of asking the reader to be interested in someone called J. Alfred Prufrock; the temerity of Prufrock to utter a love song (though of course ironised by Eliot's method); the extraordinariness of the imagery ('the evening . . . spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherised upon a table'). Then there is the final improbable movement from the bathos of 'Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?' to the lyrical 'combing the white hair of the waves blown back' to the incipient tragedy of 'Till human voices wake us and we drown'.[13] Eliot seems oblivious of the risk of bringing in 'combing' straight after 'Shall I part my hair behind', but that is the great strength of his method here – bathos buffets the serious, and the intercutting of registers means that none is privileged over others. Meanwhile, the poet is nowhere to be found, and it is for the reader to determine the reading of the poem.

In *The Waste Land*, Eliot makes use of different voices, and notably of the common voice, that of demotic speech; but he takes away its individual power rather than revealing it. The intercutting robs the common language of its own identity, since it is always ironised by being placed against another voice or vocabulary. We can see the *reductio* of this in the pub scene, at the end of 'A Game of Chess'. Eliot is said to have called this passage 'pure Ellen Kellond', a

reference to his housemaid from whom he says he got the story.[14] No one would deny that Eliot brilliantly captures the cadences of certain sorts of reportage, with its repeated 'I said', 'she said', 'he said' linking a litany of the ordinary. And the final movement from the individual 'Goonight Lou. Goonight May. Goonight. / Ta ta. Goonight. Goonight.' into the allusive 'Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies' is potentially as moving as its source.[15] But the difficulty lies with the placing of the passage in the framework of the poem, and in the choice of language within it. Within this section, it counterbalances the Antony and Cleopatra section at the start; it is of a similar length and it recounts in reportage (as in Enobarbus's original) a relationship between a man and a woman. Juxtapositions of this sort are the poem's currency, and they can work powerfully as in the two river passages in 'The Fire Sermon', where very different registers and experiences and histories are balanced without detriment to either. But Eliot's usual method is more fragmented than that in 'A Game of Chess'; images, voices, vocabularies slip and slide against each other in briefer sections, and the contrast is less weighted. Here the passages seem to be placed in apposition, but the vocabularies in opposition whereby the speech of the pub woman, and the recounted phrases of Lil and Albert, are bound into bathos by comparison with the verbal affluence of Enobarbus. Albert and Lil become figures of fun because they are figures too limited in their ordinariness to be imagined by the reader to carry the same feelings as an Antony and Cleopatra. The impersonality of method in the poem, which depends on treating the different registers and experiences on a par, slips fatally here. We can see Eliot's smirk, just as we can feel his distaste for the typist with her tins, her divan, and her drying combinations.

It is no accident that Eliot's verse, through its French forebears, was *libre*, whereas Whitman's was free. Whitman's freedom of form springs from the democratic impulse so brilliantly expressed in his Preface to *Leaves of Grass*: 'A great poem is for ages and ages in common and for all degrees and complexions and all departments and sects and for a woman as much as a man and a man as much as a woman.'[16] Whitman espoused the common voice, but in a poetry

which made that voice not special – because if so it would cease to be common – but recognised as a voice that could at the same time be poetic. Thom Gunn has noted that he finds the most moving part of *Leaves of Grass* the passage where Whitman 'speaks for the inarticulate and the unheard, for the "deform'd, trivial, flat, foolish, despised, / Fog in the air, beetles rolling balls of dung" – that is, for those who lack even self-definition and for the lowest of the low'.[17] This was emphatically not the voice of Eliot and Pound in the first decades of the 1900s, for all their insistence on a direct vocabulary. Their commitment to *vers libre* was a technical rather than an ethical one, a deliberate freeing of themselves from the restrictions of earlier outmoded forms, rather than the finding of a common language and speech rhythm to express a common humanity. We shall argue that the strand of low modernism formed by certain First World War poets is characterised by this Whitmanesque embrace of common language and speech, which, under the pressure of the experience of the particular conditions of warfare, issued in a style characterised by multivocality and heteroglossia. This undermined any overarching authorial voice and was able, just as much as high modernism, to express existential and perceptual uncertainty. And, like high modernist poetry, it was a poetry of the moment, but in this case of the particular historical moment, and pressured by that particularity into linguistic and formal experiment. We attach the term 'low' to this modernism both to counter the value-laden elements of the descriptor 'high', and also with the intention of restoring value to those common elements – ordinary language, the speech of the common man and woman, the physically brutal and psychologically bruising elements of the everyday experience of real life and death in the First World War – which are central to this poetry. Low in the sense that the experience of the trenches was the lowest common denominator and brought all those who suffered it to the same level of experience; low in the sense that those participants were brought low; low in the sense of the commonest form of speech, counteracting any deceptive rhetoric; and low in the sense of open to all readers, where high might mean exclusive and thus excluding.

If Whitman brought that common language and humanity directly to the First World War poets, they also found in him a poet who had known war at first hand and would give an account of it in a modern voice. This must have spoken powerfully to poets first encountering the brutalities of war which Whitman speaks of in 'Drum Taps'. *Leaves of Grass* had always had currency in England, but the 'Drum Taps' sequence was notably republished as a book by Chatto and Windus in 1915 with an introduction reprinted from the *Times Literary Supplement* (1 April 1915) connecting the work with the current war. Rosenberg carried Whitman with him in France, writing that ' "Drum Taps" stands unique as War Poetry in my mind'[18]; indeed, he offers 'Beat! Beat! Drums' (which he misquotes as 'Beat, drums, beat') as a corrective to Rupert Brooke's 'begloried sonnets'.[19] Ivor Gurney too saw Whitman as his artistic compatriot, and in typical Gurney manner felt that the book carried Whitman as an actual companion as well as a poetic influence, recounting in 'To Long Island First'

> how on a Gloucester book-stall one morning
> I saw, brown 'Leaves of Grass'. . .
>   – a book that brings the clear
> Spirit of him that wrote[20]

Monro, Sassoon, and Edward Thomas were also admirers.[21] Quite aside from the relevance of the war-related 'Drum Taps', Whitman had set in place a line of poetry which was avowedly inclusive, democratic, demotic, free in form and in language: the 'barbaric yawp'.[22] This too was a poetic which answered to modernity, which addressed the nature of the self within the modern world, and which was loose and large enough to accommodate the multiple alongside the individual voice.

There is another possible antecedent to these war poets' low modernism, this time an English one. Hardy's *The Dynasts* was, like Whitman's 'Drum Taps', a poem responding to war. Isobel Armstrong gives an account of the way *The Dynasts* prefigures modernism:

> [*The Dynasts*] is a strangely contradictory genre, an epic-drama, a heroic poem about the great *and* a drama, the democratic form of radical

writing. It moves through many styles and languages – reportage, epic description, metaphysical chorus, rhetorical blank-verse, military-textbook explication, formal prose, demotic speech, dumb show, marching song, satirical jingle, lyric, folk song and music-hall verse. . . . But perhaps the most brilliant technical innovation of the poem, the feature which makes it a fundamentally experimental text, is the constant change of visual perspective. . . . The reordering of perception fragments and reconstructs, asking for that active, participatory interpretative process which is the hallmark of democratic poetry from the beginning of this period onwards.

Armstrong draws here on her concept of the 'double poem', which arises from her readings of Victorian poetry, but which she applies also to *The Dynasts*.[23] What she identifies as constitutive of the 'doubleness' of *The Dynasts* – its multivocality, its linguistic pluralism, its abnegation of authorial imprimatur, its involvement of the reader in the making of its meanings – would all come to be markers of modernism. All figure in both Eliot's iconoclastic *The Waste Land* and in the poems of the First World War poets. What distinguishes the war poets' multivocality from that of Eliot is that for them it remains rooted in the common language used in circumstances where the 'doubleness' of things was underlined every day. A man's blood flows in his veins one instant, he is alive and active, the next 'the darking flood percolates and he dies in your arms'; where once there was a pastoral scene, the blue sky itself 'is flapping down in frantic shreds'; and when the soldier returns home on leave, the longed-for peacefulness is interrupted so strongly by memory that it becomes 'slow death in the loved street and bookish room'.[24] In seeking to characterise the war poets' strand of low modernism, we shall draw, respectively, on the poetry of Gurney, David Jones, and Mary Borden; but our argument can be extended to the more obviously canonical body of work, especially that of Sassoon, Rosenberg, and Wilfred Owen.

For Gurney, Hardy and Whitman were equal models, each seen by him as part of his poetic inheritance and indeed current influence. Like Rosenberg turning to Whitman as a counter-example to Brooke, Gurney turned to *The Dynasts* to set against Brooke's sonnets: 'Rupert

Brooke soaked it in quickly and gave it out with as great ease. For all that we have very much to be grateful for; but what of 1920? What of the counterpart to *The Dynasts* which may still lie within another Hardy's brain a hundred years today?'[25]

Particularly striking here is the way that he is looking forward to the poetic inheritance he and others, in a line from Whitman and Hardy, might provide for other poets a hundred years hence. In that respect, Brooke is an empty vessel, unable to provide sustenance for the poets to come. Gurney himself, however, took hold of that line of influence from Whitman on the one hand and Hardy on the other, having imbibed equally from both the American and the English lines.

The poetry Gurney produced during the war displays some of the traits of Georgian verse but, as Stefan Hawlin argues, 'Whitman became a progressively more important influence, helping him to reach beyond the forms and modes of Georgianism.'[26] The attractions of Whitman for Gurney were various, and came into full play post-war, in Gurney's richest period. Firstly, Whitman's war poetry was experiential: Jeff Sychterz shows how his encounters with wounded and dead soldiers transformed the poetry he wrote about the American Civil War.[27] Gurney, in his encomium 'Walt Whitman', recognises this when he proclaims that Whitman's 'page is coloured with earth's and his heart's blood'. Secondly, Whitman provided a model for the popularly acclaimed war poet which Gurney wished to be – in the same poem, Gurney claims that Whitman was:

> Praised by Gloucesters in trench or marching mood
> For his courage, colour or master-in-action mood.

This acclaim comes from representing the common soldier in a way that is experiential, unsentimental, and therefore democratic. Gurney achieves this through the inclusion of soldiers' demotic voices in a manner that is comradely rather than condescending, entwining them with his own poetic voice to create a low modernist multi-vocality which, while resisting a univocal vision, also resists both authorial 'impersonality' and the high modernist othering of the demotic voice. So, in 'Half Dead', the poet, suffering with dysentery pains, is cured by the cold night air and the sight of the constellations:

Yet still clear flames of stars over the crest bare,
Mysterious glowing on the cloths of heaven.
Sirius or Mars or Argo's stars, and high the Sisters – the Pleiads – those seven.

Best turn in, fatigue party out at seven . . .

The voice is initially poetic – and the borrowing from Yeats's romantic lyric 'He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven' makes it self-consciously so – then gives way to the authentically demotic. The two ways of speaking are connected by the repeated word, 'seven', which movingly emphasises that the poet himself is a common soldier, that one consciousness can experience both these thoughts – one aesthetic, the other practical – and can call on two registers. There are no inverted commas to separate the registers or imprison the demotic, but rather a placing of the poet (isolated as he is in this night-time epiphany) 'among dim sleepers', his comrades.[28]

In 'The Silent One', Gurney sets the demotic voice against the accent of the ruling classes. The soldier whose corpse hangs on the barbed wire in no-man's-land had, when alive, 'chattered through / Infinite lovely chatter of Bucks accent'. The poet is then urged towards the same fate by an officer speaking in 'the politest voice – a finicking accent': 'Do you think you might crawl through, there: there's a hole?' The representation of the officer's way of speaking is exact: he deploys the *politesse* of the drawing room to disguise an order as a question. The assertion that there is a hole in the barbed wire through which the poet 'might' crawl is, similarly, made interrogative. The poet cunningly responds using the same register, taking the officer's questions at face value:

                                                  In the afraid
        Darkness, shot at; I smiled, as politely replied –
        'I'm afraid not, Sir.'

The polite English phrase, in which one pretends uncertainty so as not to appear rudely assertive, masks his actual assessment: 'There was no hole no way to be seen.' The slipperiness of this diction is emphasised by the repetition of 'afraid': the first use is literal, he is afraid, the second a politic imitation of the officer's register. The poet

mimics in order to 'pass' as a member of the officer's class and so strengthen his refusal to sacrifice himself. Significantly, only the officer's register is voiced in the poem – there is no representation of the 'chatter of Bucks accent'.[29] The battlefield is a place where the demotic speaker is sacrificed, while the 'polite' speaker urges yet another common soldier, the narrating poet, to sacrifice himself.[30]

Where the soldier's demotic was silenced by power in 'The Silent One', it fills the entirety of 'Regrets After Death'. Tellingly, however, this poem is a dramatic monologue spoken by a soldier who is dead (perhaps it is the man hanging on the wire in 'The Silent One'). This poem recalls Thomas Hardy's 'The Man He Killed', in which a Boer War soldier ruminates over his act of killing, trying, in a halting dialogue with himself, to understand how he could kill someone just like himself. Gurney portrays a similar process of reasoning, but here, taking a step inwards, the soldier tries to work out how to feel about what has happened to him and what he has done:

> True on the Plain I might have seen Salisbury Close,
> But how that would have repaid there is no one knows,
> True at Epping I might have thanked kindness more,
> But we were for France then – scarce a week to be here.
> At Chelmsford, true I might have kept my first lodging
> Despite of cooking, 'cause she did my washing.

His regrets, relating to the various places he was stationed before being sent to France, are a strange mixture: the first concerns what has been done to him – his life cut short, he will now never see Salisbury's beautiful Cathedral Close – the second is a regret at his own behaviour, while the third is comically practical. Like Hardy, Gurney uses line-breaks and metre to trace the pauses, the turns of thought, the process of arriving at a conclusion. The dead man finally dismisses his regrets, reminding himself of blunt realities:

> Regrets and hopes and accusations are all vain.
> Chelmsford was bad, Hell-upon-Army the Plain,
> Epping had compensations, Northampton kindness, invitations.
> They buried me in Artois, with no time to complain.[31]

The final line, a discrete sentence, expresses that wry, stoic, unsentimental demotic voice – the antithesis of the mealy-mouthed finicking politeness of the ruling classes. And, with the meaninglessness death accords to life, it undercuts all that goes before.

Isobel Armstrong has argued that the dramatic monologue is 'perhaps the type of the double poem, that mid-nineteenth-century form which offers two simultaneous readings by allowing the expressive utterance of a limited subjectivity to become the material for analysis'.[32] While Armstrong is discussing *The Dynasts*, 'The Man He Killed' is a skilful precursor in which we both hear the soldier's voice while also being aware that this is an act of ventriloquism through which we infer the voice of the poet. Such poems exemplify what Mikhail Bakhtin calls 'double-voiced discourse': 'Such speech ... serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author.'[33] The reader encounters the voice of a character while also being aware that the voice is produced by an authorial speaker. This creates a dialogic effect whereby the character-voice and the author-voice interact. As Armstrong points out, although Bakhtin argued that such dialogism was the preserve of the novel, Victorian poetry demonstrates extensive doubleness (particularly in its dramatic monologues) which anticipates the multivocality of modernism. In Gurney's poem, this effect is intensified by the fact that his speaker is dead, and his act of prosopopoeia arises directly from his traumatic experience of the sudden deaths of comrades, alive by one's side one moment, and destroyed the next.[34] The vision is at once consoling and troubling: the dead man speaks but we are simultaneously aware that he does not speak, that the poet is ventriloquising a corpse. We therefore do not simply hear the killed man expressing a reassuring stoicism, but also hear simultaneously the poet's heartbreaking attempt to *present* stoicism where he would dearly wish to find it. This doubleness denies the univocal – we have a sense both of consolation and of trauma – but in a way which retains the strong presence of the poet as a suffering individual. The poem remains personal, the poet in the midst of the experience.

Gurney's *experience* leads him to give a voice to all those dead men he has seen that is very different from the 'begloried' voice attributed to the dead in Brooke's 'The Soldier', where a dead man's life is imagined continuing, by some sleight of hand and mind, in an undying pastoral present. Brooke's dead man is held improbably in a moment of eternal freshness, still 'breathing English air'; Gurney's dead man, with the often trivial specifics of his lived experience identifying him as an individual, is given a voice that, in its ordinariness, contains the opposite of that myth, the non-entity of death.[35]

In the first of these poems, Gurney, in his own voice, intercuts the romantically poetic with the laconic; in the second, he dramatises a dialogue between the officer's and the soldier's voice, played out against the silence of the man hanging on the wire; finally he gives the dead man himself a voice, reflecting on his own life and death. It is no surprise that Gurney explores the essential contradictoriness and multiplicity of experience in the thick of war through the interplay of human voices, to which he responded so sensitively. David Jones, in *In Parenthesis*, takes the interplay of voices further still. This book-length poem combines an extraordinary amalgam of voices, registers, and discourses, and the ways in which they clash and combine strongly recall Isobel Armstrong's description of *The Dynasts*, quoted above. Soldiers' voices are joined by music hall songs, children's rhymes, advertising slogans, and works of literature. Armstrong suggests that 'by superimposing a number of limited and everchanging perspectives on one another', Hardy extended the double poem into 'the multiple poem with its contradictory and self-modifying juxtapositions'.[36] This description fits *In Parenthesis* too. The difference is that, for all its shifts in voice and perspective, *The Dynasts* remains a tightly structured drama in which the identities of speakers are clearly indicated. Jones offers a series of dizzying fragments in which voices merge and part, languages intermingle, and thus the democratic element which Armstrong identifies in Hardy is intensified.

In Parenthesis was championed by Eliot and seems to share many features with *The Waste Land*: it is multivocal, it is fragmentary, the

poetic form is protean, and the poet draws on mythology to provide a kind of framework for contemporary events. However, Jones brings a very different sensibility to each of these elements. The heteroglossia in *The Waste Land* represents a fragmented civilisation (Eliot's characters are divided from each other; Cleopatra and the typist will never exchange words), but, in the trenches, those fragments were forced together. Jones notes how the conditions of war brought a heteroglot community into being as men from various parts of Britain converged in the army (his regiment was made up of a mixture of Cockneys and Welshmen); he writes that soldiers arriving in the front line find 'a folk-life here, a people, a culture already developed, already venerable and rooted'.[37]

In representing their voices, Jones eschews inverted commas, blurring the distinctions between different speakers, and so representing 'that hotch-potch which is ourselves'. Here, some soldiers discuss imminent battle orders in an estaminet behind the lines:

> There's time for another one – wont you. We shall be in it alright – it's in conjunction with the Frogs. The Farrier's bloke reckons we move south after this turn on the roundabouts – he got it from Mobile Veterinary, and there's talk of us going up tonight – no – this 'ere night of all – not tomorrow night my ducky – they've tampered with the natural law – same bit of line, but Supports – how they pile it on –

The lack of inverted commas also blurs the distinction between these soldiers and the voice of the poet-narrator who delivers sensory detail on their behalf, as in this description of soldiers boarding a ship for France: 'Each separate man found his own feet stepping in the darkness on an inclined plane, the smell and taste of salt and machinery, the texture of rope, and the glimmer of shielded light about him.' This voice is both a disembodied consciousness and one of the men. Rather than impersonality, Jones creates a sense of shared experience, frequently shifting into free indirect discourse, to depict either the thought processes of an individual soldier or of the collective, as in this account of soldiers preparing to attack:

> no one seemed to know anything much as to anything and you got the same served up again garnished with a different twist and emphasis

> maybe and some would say such and such and others would say the
> matter stood quite otherwise and there would be a division among them
> and lily-livered blokes looked awfully unhappy

Jones often couples this use of the second person with the present
tense, drawing the reader into imaginary membership of the com-
pany: 'Cloying drift-damp ... It hurts you in the bloody eyes, it
grips chill and harmfully and rasps the sensed membrane of the
throat; it's raw cold, it makes you sneeze – christ how cold it is.'
As in Gurney's 'The Silent One', Jones represents the tensions
between the demotic of common soldiers and the voices of their
officers, but also has the space to develop nuance. Sometimes the
muttered voice of the common soldier comically undercuts the
officer voice: as the company marches to the docks, Lieutenant
Jenkins gives the order, 'The men may march easy and smoke,
Sergeant Snell'; at a sudden and unexpected halt, a wry comment
comes from the ranks: 'The bastard's lost his way already.'
However, Jones's soldiers are not stereotypes and there are shifts
in the relationship. When Lieutenant Jenkins asks Private John Ball,
'Have you a match Ball', there is no question mark – it is a *de facto*
command – but then Ball nervously scatters the contents of his
pocket and, among the debris, is the latch-key to his home, the
sight of which momentarily dissolves the distinctions between them:
'The two young men together glanced where it lay incongruous,
bright between the sets. ... Keys of Stonden Park in French farm-
yard.' The poignancy of the moment affects their final exchange, in
which they speak to each other as equals:

> Will you have these sir.
> Thanks – go and get some sleep. . . .
> Keep them – won't you?
> Thanks.[38]

Throughout *In Parenthesis*, this medley of voices is radically inter-
laced with the language of myth. When, in his Preface, Jones gives a
long list of the elements that make up soldiers' voices (representing
centuries of linguistic accretion), the last item is 'the Celtic cycle that
lies, a subterranean influence as a deep water troubling, under every

tump in this Island'.[39] By deploying the language of this legendary substratum, Jones goes further than Hardy and while this element of the text may seem congruent with the use of myth in high modernist texts, it operates very differently here, in a way that connects *In Parenthesis* with a specifically British folk-culture.

Eliot famously argued that the 'continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity' was 'a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history'.[40] Thus, in *The Waste Land*, he redeems a barren present by suggesting a parallel with the necessary barrenness of regeneration myths, enabling him to express a cautious hope for the future at the end, with 'a flash of lightning. Then a damp gust / Bringing rain'.[41] In *Ulysses* (the book which occasioned Eliot's remarks), the mythical parallel tends to *challenge* the values of the myth. By setting Leopold Bloom alongside Odysseus, Joyce questions ancient notions of heroism, elevating Bloom's humble humanism and quiet forbearance to suggest that this may be a truer *kind* of heroism.[42] While Eliot and Joyce take opposite views about which side of the parallel should be privileged (the ancient myth for Eliot, the modern everyman for Joyce), both regard Europe's body of myth in the same way: it is a 'myth kitty' (in Larkin's memorable phrase) to be plundered.[43] It is the applicability of the myth that matters.

David Jones's motives are different. He chooses his myths not because they suggest some analogy or contrast that will support a thesis, but because they are the 'matter of Britain'. As he writes in the Preface to his later work, *The Anathemata*: 'one is trying to make a shape out of the very things of which one is oneself made'.[44] The result is not a programmatic parallel designed to express a position vis-à-vis contemporary history, but an ongoing series of connections and *failed* connections between the war as soldiers experienced it and the myths which underlie their cultural identities. We are shown not a parallel but a *process*, a series of attempts, in which the meaning comes from an intimate connection with the myth, rather than the light it may shed on the present.

Jones calls on a wide range of sources, but his central mythic material is Arthurian. In his Preface, he quotes Christopher Dawson's statement: 'if Professor Collingwood is right and it is the conservatism and loyalty to lost causes of Western Britain that has given our national tradition its distinctive character, then perhaps the middle ages were not far wrong in choosing Arthur, rather than Alfred or Edmund or Harold, as the central figure of the national heroic legend.' It is this view of the cultural centrality of the figure of Arthur which leads Jones to lace the text with allusions to various Arthurian sources. For example, Part 4 begins with this description of dawn on the front line:

> So thus he sorrowed till it was day and heard the foules sing, then somewhat he was comforted.
>
> Stand-to.
> Stand-to-arms.

In a note, Jones tells us that the first sentence is a quotation from Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*. A second note explains the procedure for 'stand-to'.[45] This juxtaposition is ambiguous. The quotation refers to Lancelot who grieves because his sinfulness will deny him the Holy Grail. The sounds of the farmyard herald the morning and he is briefly comforted. As Paul Robichaud argues: 'John Ball's sorrow is the misery of the infantryman, unrelated to the mystical and chivalric circumstances of Launcelot's grief. On the one hand, Jones represents Ball's sorrow as being as heroic as Launcelot's; on the other, Launcelot's grief is common to all soldiers, at all times.'[46] In one reading, Ball's relationship to Lancelot is like Bloom's to Odysseus – here is true heroism in the real world; in another, their shared experience of anguish *connects* the two characters despite the great distance between them. For Eliot, the cry of 'Stand-to' might work as bathos, lamenting the distance between noble myth and dismal present. It is all of these things, and none. While the Arthurian reference might not seem conducive to modernism, Jones reaches for Malory because this is the language beneath our languages; it is who we are and so we remember it (or, Jones remembers it on our behalf).

As if to underline this, at times in the text the language of Arthurian myth becomes intermingled with the register of the common soldier, as here, when Private Saunders shares news he has overheard about the coming battle:

> He said that there was a hell of a stink at Division – so he had heard from the Liaison Officer's groom – as to the ruling of this battle – and G.S.O.2 who used to be with the 180th that long bloke and a man of great worship was in an awful pee – this groom's brother Charlie . . . reckoned he heard this torf he forgot his name came out of ther Gen'ral's and say as how it was going to be a first clarst bollocks and murthering of Christen men and reckoned how he'd throw in his mit an' be no party to this so-called frontal-attack never for no threat nor entreaty, for now, he says, blubbin' they reckon, is this noble fellowship wholly mischiefed.[47]

Saunders' own way of speaking is interwoven with Arthurian diction;[48] the language of Malory takes its place among the heteroglossia of war, offering ambiguous glimpses of meaning and comfort.

Such attempts to find a language and form to express the existential contradictoriness of living up close to death are in a continuum with the fragmentariness and dislocation we find in Pound and Eliot. But where theirs is a willed response to modernity, the war poets are responding directly to a constitutively incoherent set of experiences. Eliot's commitment to the impersonal voice and to the use of allusiveness and symbolism in its service, lead to its being expressive of the fracture and dissolution associated with the event of the war, but without directly referring to it, except in a way so generalised as not to be meaningful. The war poets, on the other hand, are always engaged with experience at the level of the human. Their use of fragmented form, intercutting of voices (sometimes to the point of cacophony), their pushing of language sometimes to its limits, are all in the service of showing both the humanity of man to man, and at the same time therefore what is lost of the human when both mind and body are stretched to their limits or, in the end, and regularly, 'to shatters blown'.[49]

What we have seen in Gurney's and Jones's poetry is a modernism which still preserves, and indeed is driven by, a sort of

lovingness to their subject. Their formal and linguistic counterparts to rupture, fragmentation, and dissolution are expressive both of the specific experiences of the First World War and of modernity. But in both they preserve their concern for those like them – the human speaking to and of the human, rather than impersonally distancing the human. This is a tender modernism. We see the same deep concern to attend to and honour the human at the very point when it is disappearing in the poetry of Mary Borden. Unlike Eliot and Pound, this American poet did have some direct experience of the effects of the war since she was a nurse first in Belgium and then in the Somme region. She was, like Whitman, a 'wound-dresser' and indeed, in her poem 'Unidentified' her cadences are pure Whitman, as is her stance in relation to 'this man' whom she determinedly and repeatedly calls on us as readers to 'look at'. The poem's title signals its doubleness, since she seeks to identify and make us take note of what will by the end of the poem become 'unidentified', just another and an unknown body. Noting that 'Some of you scorned this man', she exhorts,

> But look! – look at the stillness of that face
> Made up of little fragile bones and flesh,
> Tissued of quivering muscles, fine as silk,

Rather than making the dead man speak, she makes us regard him intently; we are not allowed to look away. We see him in all his brutality as well as his nobleness (a nobleness granted purely by his being placed in the predicament of a soldier), and we see not just the about-to-be-shattered flesh but also his consciousness of the death to come:

> He hears it coming –
> He can feel it underneath his feet –
> Death bearing down on him from every side,
> Violent death, death that tears the sky to shrieking pieces,
> Death that suddenly explodes out of the dreadful bowels of the earth.

Borden transposes the anticipated shattering of the body on to earth and sky – sky torn to 'shrieking pieces' and earth's 'bowels' exploding, so that even the permanencies of nature are disrupted:

The sky long since has fallen from its dome.
Terror let loose like a gigantic wind has torn it from the ceiling of
  the world
And it is flapping down in frantic shreds.
The earth, ages long ago, leaped screaming up; out of the fastness of its
  ancient laws,
There is no centre now to hold it down;

In a reversal of the norm only the man is 'solid', but it is a temporary state, as 'One blow – one moment more – and that man's face will be a mass of matter, horrid slime – and little brittle bits – '.[50]

'Unidentified' investigates unremittingly the effect on a man's consciousness of constantly pre-figuring his own death, and then shows his consciousness annihilated by that death. The normal order is reversed as nature disintegrates in the same way as the man's fragile flesh; finally, all that is left is the void when the man gives way to death, where only 'those remnants of men beneath his feet welcome him mutely when he falls beside them in the mud'. A recurring note in these poems is the desire of the surviving soldier to be alongside those who have died. When Gurney says, 'You dead ones – I lay with you under the unbroken wires once' ('Farewell'), there is almost a nostalgia, a desire to lie alongside, a recognition that it is mere chance that makes him live on while those 'dead ones' lie silent.[51] It is the recognition of the pure contingency of life, dramatically heightened by the conditions experienced by First World War soldiers, that informs these poems and drives both their modernism and their tenderness.

Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*, his masterly study of the relationship between photography and the passage of time, notes the way that the photograph captures both that '*This will be* and *this has been*'. The subject of the photograph is caught both impossibly alive and impossibly dead (even if not yet dead, the death is implied). Barthes tells us: 'In front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself: she is going to die: I shudder . . . *over a catastrophe which has already occurred*.'[52] In front of those First World War poems which seek to bring the alive and the dead together in a moment of understanding, we as readers shudder, as Barthes shuddered. For

Barthes, the catastrophe is universal; for the First World War poets it was particular. For ourselves, reading Borden's 'Unidentified', or Gurney's 'The Silent One', or Jones's *In Parenthesis*, we know both that '*This will be* and *this has been*'. In understanding these specific historical deaths, we also see the catastrophes of our own deaths, as we do in an entirely different way in Eliot's *The Waste Land*. As the poet's voice in 'Unidentified' bids us relentlessly to 'look', we see our own disintegration and meaninglessness, expressed in a language intensely modern. Poetic form itself almost disappears at times, while the elliptical dashes, like wounds in the flesh of the poem, remind us of what is missing – the blanks underlying the words. Modernism is always concerned with those blanks in language – allowing that they exist whilst always trying to fill them up. In the poetry of the First World War the blanks stand for the missing; that poetry, modernist or not, speaks to and for them.

Notes

1. Jane Dowson, from a feminist perspective, proposes that we talk of 'modernism*s*' rather than of a singular 'modernism': see her *Women, Modernism and British Poetry, 1910–1939: Resisting Femininity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 1. Allyson Booth likewise appeals for 'an expansive concept of modernism' in *Postcards From the Trenches: Negotiating the Space Between Modernism and the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 7.
2. Thomas Laqueur, 'The Past's Past', *London Review of Books*, 18.18 (19 Sept. 1996), 3–7.
3. Our terminology is distinct from the use of 'low moderns' in Maria DiBattista and Lucy McDiarmid, eds, *High and Low Moderns: Literature and Culture 1889–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), where the term is used to characterise popular writers of the period (e.g. Kipling, Wells).
4. It is no coincidence that this is the triumvirate of poets crowned by C. K. Stead in his influential *The New Poetic* (London: Hutchinson, 1964), entitled in subsequent editions *The New Poetic: Yeats to Eliot*, a grouping further reinforced in Stead's *Pound, Yeats, Eliot and the Modernist Movement* (London: Macmillan, 1986).
5. Ezra Pound, ed., *Des Imagistes* (London: The Poetry Bookshop, 1914); Richard Aldington et al., eds, *Some Imagist Poets: an Anthology* (Boston

and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company; Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1915).

6. Ford Madox Hueffer founded the *English Review* with its first issue in December 1908, and published both older generation and newer poets: issue 2.7, for example, contained poems by both John Galsworthy and Ezra Pound; 2.8 featured poems by both Laurence Binyon and F. S. Flint (who was later a contributor to *Some Imagist Poets*); Rupert Brooke was also an early contributor. Harriet Monroe's *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* (founding issue, Oct. 1912) set out to publish 'some of the best work now being done in English verse'.

7. Edward Marsh, ed., *Georgian Poetry 1913–15* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons; London: The Poetry Bookshop, 1916).

8. Edward Marsh, ed., *Georgian Poetry 1918–19*, (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons; London: The Poetry Bookshop, 1920); Edward Marsh, ed., *Georgian Poetry 1920–22* (London: The Poetry Bookshop, 1922).

9. For a full account of the complicated textual history of these poems, see D. H. Lawrence, *The Poems*, 2 vols, ed. Christopher Pollnitz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), ii, 675–700.

10. Extracted in appendix to T. S. Eliot, *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909–1917*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 387. Writing eighteen years later, in *Poetry* (Sept. 1946), he further recalled that 'At that stage … Whitman had to be seen through French eyes': extracted in appendix to Eliot, *Inventions of the March Hare*, 388.

11. See Ezra Pound, 'What I Feel About Walt Whitman' (Feb. 1909), in Herbert Bergman, 'Ezra Pound and Walt Whitman', *American Literature*, 27 (1955–56), 56–61; repr. in Ezra Pound, *Selected Prose, 1909–1965*, ed. William Cookson (New York: New Directions, 1973), 145–6; and Pound's poem 'A Pact', *Poetry*, 2.1 (Apr. 1913), 11–12, which in that issue immediately precedes his iconic 'In a Station of the Metro'. Both texts reveal deep contradictions in Pound's attitude to Whitman.

12. T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (3rd edn, London: Faber and Faber, 1951), 17, 18; Eliot's essay was originally published in two parts in *The Egoist*, 6.4 and 5 (Sept. and Dec. 1919), and repr. in T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1920).

13. *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 13, 16, 17.

14. See Valerie Eliot's note 5 to page 13, in T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*, ed. Valerie Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), 127.

15. Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays*, 66.

16. Walt Whitman, 'Preface' (1855), in *Leaves of Grass: Comprehensive Reader's Edition*, ed. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York: New York University Press, 1965), 727.
17. Thom Gunn, *Shelf Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), 17; Whitman, 'Song of Myself', *Leaves of Grass*, 52.
18. Isaac Rosenberg, letter to Joseph Leftwich, 8 Dec. [1917], in *Isaac Rosenberg*, ed. Vivien Noakes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 355.
19. Rosenberg, letter to Mrs Herbert Cohen, [? summer] 1916, ibid., 304.
20. Ivor Gurney, *Collected Poems*, ed. P. J. Kavanagh (rev. edn, Manchester, Carcanet: 2004), 232.
21. See Martin Taylor, ed., *Lads: Love Poetry of the Trenches* (London: Duckworth, 2002), 46.
22. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 89.
23. Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996), 487–8, 13.
24. Respectively: David Jones, *In Parenthesis* (London: Faber and Faber, 1937), 174; Mary Borden, 'Unidentified', in Tim Kendall, ed., *Poetry of the First World War: An Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 81; Ivor Gurney, 'Swift and Slow', *Collected Poems*, 147.
25. Ivor Gurney, letter to Marion Scott, Aug. 1915, in *Collected Letters*, ed. R. K. R. Thornton (Manchester: Mid Northumberland Arts Group and Carcanet, 1991), 29.
26. Stefan Hawlin, 'Ivor Gurney's Creative Reading of Walt Whitman: Thinking of Paumanok', *English Literature in Transition 1880–1920*, 49.1 (2006), 31.
27. Jeff Sychterz, ' "Silently Watch(ing) the Dead": The Modern Disillusioned War Poet and the Crisis of Representation in Whitman's *Drum-Taps*', *Discourse*, 25.3 (2003), 9–29. Sychterz traces that transformation through the 'Drum Taps' group of poems as presented in the 1871 edition of *Leaves of Grass*.
28. Gurney, *Collected Poems*, 233, 112. See also the last two lines of 'Serenade' which similarly combines these two registers: 'True, the size of the rum ration was still a shocker / But at last over Aubers the majesty of the dawn's veil swept': ibid., 240.
29. Ibid., 250.
30. Hawlin demonstrates that as 'Gurney's engagement with Whitman begins significantly to grow, so his attack on the "polite" comes to the fore'; he traces Gurney's pejorative use of the word in a series of poems and argues, 'Whitman is clearly the main influence on these attitudes': Hawlin, 'Ivor Gurney's Creative Reading of Walt Whitman', 44, 45.
31. Gurney, *Collected Poems*, 239.

32. Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, 488.
33. Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 324.
34. In that, it is distinct from Hardy's 'Channel Firing', in which the corpses in a graveyard speak to each other, awakened by the sound of naval exercises. Hardy's effect is ironic, his dead people are representative types of village life; Gurney's speaker is someone he has known.
35. *The Collected Poems of Rupert Brooke: With a Memoir* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1918), 316.
36. Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, 488.
37. Jones, *In Parenthesis*, 49.
38. Ibid., xiii, 103–4, 8, 144, 61, 5, 23.
39. Ibid., xi.
40. '*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth', in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 177; Eliot's review essay was originally published in *The Dial*, 75.5 (Nov. 1923).
41. Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays*, 74.
42. As Declan Kiberd has put it: 'Soldiers were dying in defence of the outmoded epic codes which permeate *The Odyssey*. . . . [T]he very ordinariness of the modern Ulysses, Mr Leopold Bloom, becomes a standing reproach to the myth of ancient military heroism': Declan Kiberd, 'Introduction', in James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), x.
43. Philip Larkin, *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Prose Pieces 1955–1982* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), 79.
44. David Jones, *The Anathemata* (London: Faber and Faber, 1952), 10.
45. Jones, *In Parenthesis*, xiii, 59, 202.
46. Paul Robichaud, 'The undoing of all things: Malorian Language and Allusion in David Jones' *In Parenthesis*', *Renascence*, 53.2 (2001), 158.
47. Jones, *In Parenthesis*, 138.
48. Jones's note tells us, 'various passages of Malory have influence here': ibid., 219.
49. From Gurney's poem, 'On Somme', *Collected Poems*, 206.
50. 'Unidentified' first appeared, under the name Mary Borden Turner, in the *English Review*, 25.6 (Dec. 1917), 482–6. For more on Borden's indebtedness to Whitman, see Jan Montefiore, ' "Blind Mouths": Oral Metaphor, Literary Tradition and the Fantasy of the Mother in Some Women's Elegies of the Great War', *Paragraph: A Journal of Literary Theory*, 21.3 (1998), 376–90.
51. Gurney, *Collected Poems*, 266.
52. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, tr. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 96.