

E Z E K I E L B L A C K

Troubling Glory: The Uncertain Language Shift of World War I

Several legends accompany World War I. For example, the British remember the summer before the war as the Edwardian Summer, a season of “exceptionally beautiful” weather, but almost any summer would seem idyllic after muddy trench warfare (Vandiver 33). Also, British soldiers reported that angels in the sky “safeguarded” their retreat from Mons in August 1914, but this myth is just an adaptation of Arthur Machen’s short story “The Bowmen,” where English ghosts from the 1415 Battle of Agincourt assist their compatriots by shooting phantom arrows that kill German soldiers but cause no physical trauma (Fussell 115-6). Many educators mention these legends in the classroom because they are evocative, helping their students understand the British mentality at the start of the war. These same educators mention the language shift in the middle of the war to demonstrate the erosion of that mentality. Given the war’s atrocity, the British lost their innocence, lost their sunny days and angels, and thus could not discuss the war with abstractions such as *glory* and *honor*. In the past, war had been glorious and honorable, but with its machine guns, heavy artillery, Zeppelins, airplanes, submarines, flamethrowers, poison gas, etc., World War I was a modern war, and the British needed a modern language to describe it (Stout 3). Citing a variety of wartime literature, educators can substantiate this shift in language; however, they tend to exaggerate its adoption, expanding it from certain infantry poets to most of the British population. Like the Angels of Mons, who helped British soldiers

comprehend the battle's historical significance (The British won both the Battles of Agincourt and Mons despite the enemy's superior numbers), the language shift helps educators comprehend the war's impact on the British people. If educators overestimate its prevalence, though, the language shift will become legend too.

Before one can understand the trouble with the language shift, one must first understand the source of the British antebellum mentality, which stems from their school system. To compete for acceptance of their students at Oxford and Cambridge, both public schools and grammar schools focused on a "rigorous classical education" (Vandiver 85-6). At first, only public schools, which catered to upper-class and upper middle-class students, taught the classics. For example, a graduate of Marlborough College would have read "Aristophanes, Caesar, Demosthenes, Euripides, Herodotus, Homer, Livy, Lucian, Lucretius, Ovid, Sallust, Theocritus, Thucydides, Virgil, and Xenophon" (Vandiver 55). On the other hand, grammar schools, which provided a free "practical" education that would be useful to tradesmen and artisans," did not offer a classical education until the Taunton Commission allowed grammar schools to charge the more affluent students tuition (Vandiver 86). Essentially, grammar schools mirrored public schools to accommodate these new students and their desire to matriculate at Oxford or Cambridge. When these public-school and grammar-school students read about ancient heroes and historical figures, they began to assimilate the language and history. According to Paul Fussell, author of *The Great War and Modern Memory*, "the Great War was perhaps the last to be conceived as taking place within a seamless, purposeful 'history' involving a coherent stream of time running from past through present to future" (21). Not only did British citizens believe that Great War belonged on the same timeline as Thermopylae or Marathon, but they also believed in the language that commemorated those battles: "the Great War took place in what was, compared with ours, a static world, where the values appeared stable and where the meaning of abstractions seemed permanent and reliable. Everyone knew what Glory was, and what Honor meant" (Fussell 21). Before World War I, the British would define *glory* or *honor* with a simple reference to Achilles or Alexander the Great. Therefore, thinking that their superior education and morals would carry them to victory, the British would enlist without hesitation, hence the naiveté of the time.

If one blames the classics for the antebellum naiveté, one might assume that the more erudite the student, the more eager to enlist; however, the British school system boosted enlistment numbers another way, its emphasis on sports. Not all students could read the classics well in their original language, so many devoted

themselves to rugby, soccer, cricket, and other games. While this extracurricular activity might seem like mere amusement, it was considered more important than schoolwork. According to Elizabeth Vandiver, “It has become a commonplace of writing about the public schools to say that athleticism was valued far more than scholastic ability” (36). Although some athletes could not excel at their schoolwork, they could practice the classical lessons on the pitch, and this led to their association with abstractions: “a wholly spurious alliance was forged between physical and moral courage which led to an even less tenable proposition that moral courage was a concomitant of athletic prowess” (Parker 80-1). Also, once these athletes graduated, they would readily volunteer for the military, eager to prove their sportsmanlike conduct; indeed, when an American journalist interviewed George Lloyd, the Secretary of State of War, about the British attitude toward war, he said, “The British soldier is a good sportsman. He enlisted in this war in a sporting spirit—in the best sense of that term. He went in to see fair play to a small nation trampled upon by a bully. He is fighting for fair play. He has fought as a good sportsman. By the thousands he has died a good sportsman. He has never asked for anything more than a sporting chance ” (qtd. in Hynes 117). This is not just an isolated response from a politician; it is a common theme among civilians and soldiers.

Probably the two most famous iterations of the soldier qua athlete come from a Sir Henry Newbolt poem and Captain W. P. Nevill’s exploits. First, Sir Henry Newbolt’s poem “*Vitai Lampada*” contains a refrain that connects an athlete’s virtue to military prowess:

The Gatling’s jammed and the Colonel dead,
 And the regiment blind with dust and smoke;
The river of death has brimmed his banks,
 And England’s far, and Honor a name;
But the voice of a schoolboy rallies the ranks:
 “Play up! play up! and play the game!” (qtd. in Fussell 26)

Newbolt published this poem in 1897, and although it does not describe a battle of World War I, it does describe the same soldier-athlete association: the virtues that the cricket player learned on the pitch will help him on the battlefield (Vandiver 47). In fact, the two pursuits are so intertwined that the soldier morphs into his schoolboy self at his hour of need. Also, Newbolt shows his respect for abstractions by capitalizing *honor*, not to mention connecting it with a name, something stable

and definite. Next, some soldiers, especially Captain Nevill, interpreted the soldier-athlete association literally. While on leave before the Battle of the Somme, Nevill bought a soccer ball for each of his four platoons and offered a reward to the platoon that dribbled its ball into the German trenches first (Fussell 27). Here is a firsthand account of the mile and a quarter charge: “As the gun-fire died away, I saw an infantryman climb onto the parapet into No Man’s Land, beckoning others to follow. As he did so he kicked off a football. A good kick. The ball rose and travelled well towards the German line. That seemed to be the signal to advance” (qtd. in Fussell 27). To modern readers, the soccer balls seem absurd, but to British soldiers, they were an excellent motivator. Nevill’s “little sporting contest,” Fussell claims, “did have the effect of persuading his men that the attack was going to be . . . a walkover” (27). The firsthand account speaks to this soothing effect with the nonchalance of “A good kick” and “That seemed to be the signal to advance” (Fussell 27). Sadly, Nevill was killed just feet from his kickoff, and many scholars believe that Britain’s innocence was another casualty of the Somme.

Given the disaster of the Somme offensive, the British realized that if they won the war it would be a pyrrhic victory. No amount of honor and glory would damper the death toll; indeed, abstractions from their schooldays stuck British soldiers in the mud. Therefore, almost all scholarship marks the Somme offensive as a sea change for the British mentality. For example, Fussell (29), Vandiver (2), Hynes (110-1), Silkin (71), Stout (3), Winter (248), and several others (one could assume) all acknowledge the Somme offensive on July 1, 1916 as the end of sincere abstractions. This conclusion is reasonable because by sundown, “the British suffered 50,000 casualties that day, including 20,000 dead—the worst one-day losses for any army on either side, during the entire war” (Hynes 110). Of the 110,000 British soldiers who fought that day, 27% were wounded, and 18% were killed—almost half of the entire force (Fussell 13). Stout adds, “By its end in November, the Battle of the Somme would generate more than 500,000 Allied and about 600,000 German casualties—more than a million men dead or wounded in slightly less than five months. And to no outcome. The assembled armies still occupied the same basic positions they had before” (3). The futility of this assault made soldiers question their assumptions about war, and many began to resent “the old men at home who lied to them” (Hynes xii). These old men could include family members, teachers, professors, politicians, military leaders, or even the ancients. Despite who spawned the lie, the soldiers’ reaction against propagandistic abstractions was “abrupt and emphatic” (Stout 5).

Probably the two most famous models of this change are Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. First, many scholars deem Sassoon the most outspoken opponent of the war, but even he subscribed to the prewar ethos. For example, when Robert Graves showed Sassoon some drafts from his poetry collection *Over the Brazier*, Sassoon said that “war should not be written about in such a realistic way” (qtd. in Silkin 130). Graves told Sassoon that trench warfare would change that opinion, and like Graves foretold, Sassoon’s “experience of the Somme” “changed his attitude to the war and thus what poetry should be about” (Silkin 136). Sassoon wrote several poems that demonstrate his new attitude, but “Glory of Women” exhibits two important facets of his change: ironic use of abstractions and censure of an oblivious home front. Although “Glory of Women” concerns only women’s misapprehension of the war, a sexist gesture by Sassoon, there was a miscommunication between the frontline and the home front, thanks to the military’s distribution of favorable newsreels and communiqués, censorship of servicemen’s letters, and restriction of journalists (Puissant 14-5). If civilians knew the war’s full devastation, they would have realized that wartime efforts to assist the troops were futile, even insensitive. Sassoon ends “Glory of Women” with this tercet: “O German mother dreaming by the fire, / While you are knitting socks to send your son / His face is trodden deeper in the mud” (132). Clean, dry socks are an effective preventive for trench foot, but socks will not save this soldier. Yes, soldiers appreciate socks and other aid, but ultimately they would rather be home. As long as civilians support the war mentally and materially, though, soldiers will remain in the field. Also, because Sassoon is chastising oblivious noncombatants in the poem, the title’s abstraction *glory* is ironic, not sincere, an exemplar of the language shift.

Like Sassoon, Owen alters his mind set after the Somme offensive. For example, Owen wrote a letter to his mother before he saw action in France, and as he recounts an artillery exercise, one can sense his naive enthusiasm: “This morning I was hit! We were bombing and a fragment from somewhere hit my thumb knuckle. I coaxed out 1 drop of blood. Alas! no more!! There is a fine heroic feeling about being in France. . . . but excitement is always necessary to my happiness” (qtd. in Silkin 200). Only two weeks later, he reversed his opinion, writing more nightmarish letters from, as Edmund Blunden wrote, “the Somme battlefield, where the last sharp fighting was in progress” (qtd. in Silkin 200). Abandoning “heroic” abstractions, Owen begins to denounce the lies of the old men, especially in his antiwar poem “Dulce Et Decorum Est” (qtd. in Silkin 200). After the poem recounts a gas attack, where one soldier fails to seat his gasmask in time, the poem ends with this admonition:

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,

.....

My Friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
Pro patria mori. (Owen 192)

Owen's poem is an apt commentary on the pre-Somme and post-Somme mentality. First, his decision to write *glory* lowercase and to modify it with *desperate* undermines the purity of the abstraction. Second, Owen reprimands the older generation for their exploitation of the younger generation's enthusiasm. Third, Owen labels Horace's dictum "It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country" a Lie—with a capital L—but this indictment could apply to the entire classical curriculum. Indeed, one marker of the language shift is the difference between uppercase and lowercase. For example, Owen drafted a preface for his poetry manuscript before he died, and he upsets the traditional capitalization of abstractions: "This book is not about heroes. English Poetry is not yet fit to speak of them. Nor is it about glory or honour or any might, majesty, dominion or power nor about anything except War. Above all I am not concerned with Poetry. My subject is War, and the pity of War" (qtd. in Corcoran 92). Neil Corcoran articulates this phenomenon well: "The capitalisations speak volumes: the usual motives for and prizes of war, those held in the mouths of politicians and journalists—glory, honour and so on—pale into lower case, and what stands upright is what the soldier must face, almost in the form of an apotheosised abstraction—'War'—and what the poet has to offer—'Poetry'" (92). From just a small selection of Sassoon's and Owen's work, one can witness the fall of sincere abstractions, but one should not ascribe the language shift to all World War I literature.

Owen and Sassoon belong to a group called the war poets, and educators tend to treat them as a cohesive unit because almost all fought in the trenches; however, one must be conscious of the nuance in the group. A similar experience does not necessitate a similar response. For example, Sassoon and Owen were officers, while Ivor Gurney and Isaac Rosenberg were privates (Puissant 9). Puissant comments that "it was the officer-poets who felt most deeply attached to the men for whom they were responsible, while in both Isaac Rosenberg's and Ivor Gurney's work—both of them serving in the ranks—there is a sense of detachment from the troops"

(Puissant 50-1). Knowing that soldiers lived and died by their orders, Sassoon and Owen felt accountable for the survival of their troops; indeed, after treatment for shellshock, both volunteered to serve at the front again out of obligation to their comrades. Despite Sassoon and Owen's best leadership, though, soldiers died in absurd battles, only for the Old Lie to send reinforcements. This explains their anger with the home front. On the other hand, Rosenberg and Gurney do not command any troops, so they feel responsible only for themselves. They pity their situation, not Britain's situation. Moreover, Puissant adds, "While conditions in the trenches were certainly not pleasant, rural poverty before the war had been even worse. For many working-class privates, war was the first time they received three meals a day, a rum ration and the money to buy cigarettes" (124-5). Overall, the transition from home to abroad did not shock privates like it shocked officers, who were often middle- to upper-class, went to a genteel lifestyle. Even if Rosenberg and Gurney were not as poor as some privates, their service with them would have fostered an appreciation of the working-class attitude. When one talks about the language shift, one must consider the nuance of the war poets and not attribute irony universally.

In the last several years, the canon of World War I literature has expanded beyond the war poets to include other military branches and noncombatants. If there are a variety of responses among the war poets, one can imagine that the variety among those without frontline experience. For example, the Royal Flying Corps "was the most glorified and romanticised branch of the military in all European armies. At the beginning of the war, members of the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) mainly came from the upper classes and the aristocracy, and thus increased its charisma by spreading an anachronistic public school ethos of pride and honour" (Puissant 54). Because the air force was a new endeavor, it did not have a tradition of its own, so it appropriated "medieval chivalric rhetoric" to describe its exploits (Puissant 54). Like the air force, the navy recruited upper-class citizens, especially those with a "long naval tradition," and because poetry was a "predominantly middle-class activity," "poetry about war at sea was strongly determined by a long tradition of heroic lyrics about the pride and glory of the British fleet. It is thus not surprising that critical poetry concerning the war was rare" (Puissant 51-2). Although there is little literature from pilots and sailors, one can assume how they would have portrayed their service. Unlike the army's, their poetry would not have been ironic. Even when these other military branches and noncombatants learned about the army's tribulations, they still preferred sincere abstractions. For example, Vera Brittain's fiancé, Roland Leighton, complains in a letter about how "men . . .

poured out their red, sweet wine of youth unknowing, for nothing more tangible than Honour or their Country's Glory" (qtd. in Hynes 112). This is a criticism of Rupert Brooke, the epitome of antebellum naiveté who wrote "red, sweet of youth" in his sonnet "The Dead" (81). Although Leighton commits several lines of his letter to the stupidity of abstractions, Brittain, a Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse, "was quoting in her diary from Brooke's 'If I should die', quite without irony. Even after Leighton's death she seemed to have learned nothing" (Hynes 113). Overall, one should realize that the language shift was endemic in literary officers of the infantry. Ironic abstractions were abnormal outside of that coterie.

Some sources do account for the specificity of the language shift, but to discuss World War I literature as a whole, they revert to a universal application of the shift. It is difficult to qualify every statement that attempts to discuss an entire period, but the language shift must remain with those who thought that "[a]ll a poet can do today is warn," to use Owen's preface again (Corcoran 92). This oversight can be seen in a few sources, but probably the most recent is Jay Winter's "Beyond Glory: First World War Poetry and Cultural Memory," which examines abstractions in French and English World War I literature to comment on wartime reactions. Using a Google database of 6,000,000 books written between 1800 and 2000, Winter charts the words *gloire* and *glory* from 1900 to 1930 and then from 1900 to 2000 (245). Interestingly, the French word increases throughout World War I, while the English word steadily decreases (Winter 246). Although both words maintain a downward trajectory from 1900 to 2000, *gloire* tends to spike in wartimes, especially in World War II, while *glory* remains flat (Winter 246). Winter contends that *glory's* tendency to decrease or remain flat reveals British disgust with abstractions. This is an innovative approach to the language shift, but it corrals all literature at this time into one category. When Winter searches *glory* in Google's database, it returns every reference to that abstraction, from sincere to ironic, from Brooke to Owen. Winter does concede that "the presence of a word in a book does not describe its weight or its significance," but charting the decline of a word without concern for semantics overlooks its delicacy (245). Like an entomologist who pins a butterfly in a display case, Winter destroys the language shift to document its existence. Yes, he supports his thesis that "languages encode widely disseminated messages both about war in general and about the Great War in particular," but the subtle irony of those first messages is lost (245). If Winter could have charted the usage of sincere and ironic *glory*, that data would have meant more than the decline of *glory* altogether. A word can retain its meaning even as it becomes scare. Essentially, Winter is conflating two ideas—the disappearance of

glory and the redefinition of *glory*—and the conflation of the language shift ruins its significance. Placing Owen and Brooke side-by-side betrays what Owen fought for.

Educators must resist the temptation to claim that language shifted because of World War I. Although it is true that language shifted for a small group of soldiers, educators must not attribute that shift to all British citizens—and all the world. Some working-class soldiers “were proud of their war service, and did not shrink from boasting about it,” while many civilians eulogized the dead and wounded with abstractions, namely with the “Roll of Honour” in *The London Times* (Winter 244; Hynes fig. 7). If the language shift were absolute, then present-day charities such as the Wounded Warrior Project and Intrepid Fallen Heroes Fund would carry different names. According to Fussell, words like *warrior*, *intrepid*, *fallen*, and *hero* belong on a list with *glory* and *honor* (22). Also, educators should not trace all language shifts, especially the sexualization of the language, to the Great War’s language shift. For example, one British order from 1918 read, “there will be no intercourse of any description with the enemy,” and one telegram from a gentleman to his demure fiancée read, “THINKING OF YOU HARD” (Fussell 23). Nowadays, these artifacts make one smirk, but again, one cannot thank the language shift for their humor. The language shift is only the ironic use of abstractions by certain infantry officers. If educators exaggerate its influence, the Old Lie becomes a lie itself.

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