

RITES OF SPRING: A BRIEF REVIEW

Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age takes an aesthetic approach in its look at the Great War, the memory of the war, and its lasting effects on western civilization in the twentieth century. The author Modris Eksteins, born in Latvia in 1943 and now a professor of history at the University of Toronto–Scarborough, opens his story of the war with the Parisian ballet *Le Sacre du printemps*, which debuted at the Theatre des Champs-Elysees in Spring 1913, and closes with the popular *Deutsche Volksmusik* of 1945—*Es ist ein Fruhling ohne Ende*. In this rather creative way, he explicates the intense, violent drama of the Great War in the midst of its larger histrionic setting (the prelude to war, the enactment itself, and then the postlude), an overall drama that indelibly results in *weltweit Katastrophe aber Fortschritt*.

Both the French and the Germans, as well as the British, play their part in these rites of spring, and Eksteins also includes the involvement of the Russians, such as Stravinsky, Nijinsky, and Diaghilev, under the guise of an internationally influential *Gesamtkunstwerk*, an idea important to the author since he is a native Latvian (even though he does not claim to treat the role of the Eastern Front and its impact on Russia). Above all, Eksteins labors to illuminate the staggering convergence of strikingly similar—yet not without variations—desires, goals, and outcomes that lead up to, impinge upon, and succeed these bellicose rites of spring that the nations of Europe enacted from 1914 to 1918. *Rites of Spring* first appeared in 1989 but recently has been reprinted in a paperback edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000; 396 pages, including one map, preface, notes, and index).

In his preface, Eksteins asserts, “This is a book about death and destruction. . . . It is also a book about ‘becoming’. It is a book about the emergence, in the first half of this century, of our

modern consciousness, specifically of the significance of the Great War. . . . Our preoccupation with speed, newness, transience, and inwardness—with life lived, as the jargon puts it, ‘in the fast lane’—to have taken hold, an entire scale of values and beliefs had to yield pride of place, and the Great War was, as we shall see, the single most significant event in that development” (xiii-xiv).

In order to get at this thesis, Eksteins adopts as his main motif the sense of movement, which is specially symbolized in “our centrifugal and paradoxical century” by what he calls “the power of ultimate destruction, the dance of death, [an] orgiastic-nihilistic irony” (xiv). This is why, no doubt, he chooses as both title and organizational paradigm—*The Rite of Spring*—“with its rebellious energy and its celebration of life through sacrificial death, perhaps the emblematic *oeuvre* of a twentieth-century world that, in its pursuit of life, has killed off millions of its best human beings” (xiv).

His method of inquiry goes beyond, however, the arts such as ballet and music to include emotions, interests, manners, morals, and values, that is, the articulated and the assumed legacy of early twentieth century Europe. “As difficult as the task may be,” Eksteins confesses, he nonetheless works diligently to uncover a great deal of cultural history in order to state clearly the powerful philosophical substrata of the time—*der Zeitgeist*. But he adds to his difficulty by imposing a kind of reverse perspective on that era’s symbolic expressions. He notes that while the *Zeitgeist* is to be found in “a society’s sense of priorities,” the best evidence of these priorities is seen “most amply in the social response to these symbols” (xiv). Correspondingly, he argues that, for the historian, *the audience* is:

An even more important source of evidence for cultural identity than the literary documents, artistic artifacts, or heroes themselves. The history of modern culture ought then to be as much a history of response as of challenge, an account of *the reader* as of the novel, of *the viewer* as of the film, of *the spectator* as of the actor.

If this point is apposite to the study of modern culture, then it is also pertinent to the study of modern warfare. Most history of warfare has been written with a narrow focus on strategy, weaponry, and organization, on generals, tanks, and politicians. Relatively little attention has been paid to the morale and motivation of *common soldiers* in an attempt to assess, in broad and comparative terms, the relationship of war and culture. The *unknown soldier* stands front and center in our story (xiv-xv; emphasis mine, DWF).

While a noble goal, with this identification of the locus of modern culture with the audience and then by analogy its transference to the common soldier in the case of modern warfare, Eksteins perhaps has allowed his own naive idealism to advance well beyond interpretive reality. Why should this reverse perspective be the case? He does not tell the reader. How does the reader appropriately scissor the perception of the act from the act itself, when the record of an event usually comes by way of explanatory narration? Eksteins may have legitimate grounds for such a distinction between the witness of a thing and the thing itself, that is, when the describer or witnesser discusses their own subjective feelings or thoughts from someone else or a group. But all too often this differentiation is not the case, nor is it always axiomatic even when stated explicitly. At best, Eksteins is left to hypothesize the distinction, since he extracts his own perceptions from both common and “elite” soldiers, who testify about their experience in the Great War from the vantage point of actors and spectators as well as, in Eksteins’ incisive analogy, identification with Stravinsky’s victim. Further, he gives little attention if any to the unknown soldier, except by way of casual reference or as a part of the mass casualties, so it is hard to see how he proposes to give voice to the unknown soldier, a voice which is, after all, impenetrable and unknown!

But in spite of this methodological and philosophical quibble, along with the assumption [although it may be an inarguable truism] that the Great War “like all wars . . . was seen as an

opportunity for both change and confirmation” (xv), Eksteins takes this gigantic but horribly grotesque episode of human affairs and plays it out with a delightful flair of artistic savvy. In his three-act play, Eksteins overlays the military and political aspects of the Great War experience with its cultural and social implications and designs. To highlight the distinctive outlooks of France (and Russia), Germany, and England, he shuffles effortlessly but delicately from Paris to Berlin then to the fields of Flanders (Act One). As if it were a whirling frenzy of a dance to the death, he captures the intensely stark battle drama in all its bizarre ugliness—Rites of War, Reason in Madness, Sacred Dance, and Journey to the Interior (Act Two). Then for his *grand finale*, he reveals the delayed, episodic spinoff of this irrationally fatalistic dance, the feeble yet frantic efforts of the “lost” generation itself and its progeny to reclaim from the rubble heap of utter meaninglessness some bit of consequential stuff from which to build once again and experience the drama of life—Night Dance, Memory, and Spring Without End (Act Three).

Toward the end of some scenes, no doubt, the transitions are hasty, awkward, and not readily apparent. But this critique applies strictly from the vista of narrative history, and the hybrid genre utilized by Eksteins simply explodes all the accepted canons of critical analysis.¹ The bottom line is that the sequence offered by Eksteins, obviously not chronological, always yields a genuine portrayal of the cacophony of war, war as art, and the salient disconnects that quite often attend the staging of a great performance. The connections are both ostensible and

¹Eksteins creates this genre intentionally as indicated in his preface. He notes that “our century is one in which life and art have blended, in which existence has become aestheticized. History, as one theme of this study will try to show, has surrendered much of its former authority to fiction. In our postmodernist age a compromise may, however, be possible and necessary. In search of this compromise our historical account proceeds in the form of a drama, with acts and scenes, in the full and diverse sense of those words” (xvi).

mysterious; the meanings are certain and elusive; and the reality finds embellishment in a factual but paradoxical modern psyche.²

Eksteins certainly is prone to exaggerate on occasion in order to get his point across, but this theatrical license in no way detracts from the veracity and the verisimilitude of his dramatic narration. To the contrary, he appeals to a prodigious concert of sources, among many others, from the Imperial War Museum (London), the Service historique de l'armée de terre (Paris), and the Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv (Freiburg). He includes—with dates, places, events, and names—a remarkable assortment of eminently well-documented evidence from commoners, aristocrats, and the bourgeoisie, and he involves not only the European belligerents, but also conscripts from Australia, America, and Russia. In this respect, the detail in *Rites of Spring* is indeed exquisite, so perhaps, to give Eksteins credit, when he avows priority toward “the unknown soldier,” he really means the heretofore unrecognized soldier.

Above all else, Eksteins skillfully paints broad nationalistic sentiments from a storehouse of diaries, letters, memos, memoirs, orders, plans, and proclamations, and he masterfully crafts nationalistic, continental, and even global *Weltanschauungen* that disclose both *Angst und Lebenserwartung*. To be sure, he must minimize divergent ideologies within a given society in order to portray an integrated outlook, such as his take on French *devoir* or German *Pflicht*. However, this is no criticism—this synthesizing tendency—to Eksteins' representation of a society's psychological and even spiritual energy. Obviously, *Rites of Spring* is not a systematic

²Such is the nebulous feel of the “Prologue: Venice” (1-5); it is an aura amidst the mist of the shadows, an opening into an artificial world of falsified reality. Such is also the stark juncture of art and death in the German *kitsch*, a harsh reality that accompanies the modern rites of spring (325-331).

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treatise of philosophical discourse. So in any such theatrical, albeit historic, concatenation of sentiments, all lesser views recede into the backdrop while the leading persuasion naturally stands center stage. Remarkably, these rites of spring, a central theme for all European cultures affected by the Great War, remain a cryptic mystery—to some a passageway to life (e.g., Charles Lindberg), to others a gateway to death (e.g., Adolf Hitler), but to yet others a bit of both (e.g., Erich Remarque). But whatever way it turns, the drama lingers: “In the beginning was the event. Only later came consequence” (xvi).