

*THE GREAT WAR AND MODERN MEMORY: A BRIEF REVIEW*

A recent “Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition” of Paul Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory*<sup>1</sup> adds a short afterword by the author and a concise bibliography for further reading. The afterword provides an apology for the original work, answers to pertinent criticisms, and suggestions for “what would I do differently” now that both author and book are a quarter of a century older.<sup>2</sup> The paper jacket of the book highlights “Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition” in a red box against a drab charcoal background, but this designation is somewhat misleading since the new printing is not a twenty-fifth edition but rather a reprint of the first edition on its twenty-fifth anniversary. The only other printing besides the original hardback issue in 1975 is a paperback issue that appeared two years later.

Prominent on the front cover is an “inexpressibly touching photograph” of a very young soldier, presumably discovered at the Imperial War Museum in London by the author, who senses the “boy’s expression” as “unmistakably twentieth century.” Fussell hopes that both the boy’s image and *Great War* as a whole will increase the volunteer ranks of the “Boo-Hoo Brigade.” He notes, “If anyone ever looked aware of being doomed to meaningless death, it is this boy” (342). But, while the dejected expression of the young soldier seems to portray a sense of lostness, the meaning is not at all as clear as the author supposes. Alternative explanations are possible, since no interpretative text or context for the photograph is offered. The lad could be upset with superiors, disturbed by lack of news from home, or frustrated as a result of his circumstance. Even so, the empty stare of the soldier cuttingly captures the curious imagination.

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<sup>1</sup>New York: Oxford, 2000. With notes and index, 368 pages. Hereafter referred to as *Great War*.

<sup>2</sup>Fussell wrote from Rutgers University in 1975, but now he serves as Donald T. Regan Professor Emeritus of English Literature at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

Perhaps in this boy's glazed stare, Fussell finds his own senseless war experience repeated. He writes, "As a wounded ex-infantry officer . . . in Europe in the Second World War, I instinctively related my circumstance to theirs [i.e., World War I (WWI) infantry lieutenants like Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon, and Edmund Blunden]" (336). Fussell further dedicates *Great War* "to the memory of Technical Sergeant Edward Keith Hudson, ASN 36548772, Co. F, 410<sup>th</sup> Infantry, killed beside me in France, March 15, 1945." Fussell's viewpoint certainly is not that of the detached academic, but rather of a brother in arms, a fellow soldier, an experienced war veteran. But he is more than that, since he combines his expertise as a savvy literary critic with what he has gleaned about the WWI trench experience from his sources. His combination of Northrop Frye's literary criticism, the creative memorializations of key British memoirists, and conventional mythologies about WWI offer an important interpretative framework for the modern postwar consciousness. The book appropriately claims awards as the National Book Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and one of Modern Library's 100 Best Non-Fiction Books of the twentieth century.

But does Fussell achieve his intended goal in *Great War*? His preface affirms, "This book is about the British experience on the Western Front from 1914 to 1918 and some of the literary means by which it has been remembered, conventionalized, and mythologized. It is also about the literary dimensions of the trench experience itself." He assumes that "the current idea of 'the Great War' derives primarily from images of the trenches in France and Belgium." But an appropriate question is, "Current to whom and for whom (i.e., in Britain or elsewhere, in the year 1974 or 2000)?" Fussell nevertheless narrows his purview to British infantry on the European Continent, as he largely omits the air and naval campaigns. This limitation, he admits, might very well brand his probe something like "The Matter of Flanders and Picardy." But the result intended by Fussell's work is not to be gained by comprehensiveness in its breadth of military operations nor the geographical scope of activity. The real goal Fussell wants to achieve

is to show the intersect of the literary tradition with people, places, and situations, especially in “the way the dynamics and iconography of the Great War have proved crucial political, rhetorical, and artistic determinants on subsequent life.” Fussell sees a “reciprocal process” or dialectic at work—“life feeds materials to literature while literature returns the favor by conferring forms upon life.” In this way, inherited myth gives rise to new myth which in turn becomes “the fiber of our own lives.” However, to analyze the retrospective anamnesis of a critical historical event like a major world war is one thing, but to systematically trace its bewildering complexity from generation to generation, which is fraught with interpretative uncertainties, is quite another matter. Fussell, to bring to remembrance an old proverb, perhaps is biting off more than he can chew.

Instead of a chronological approach, Fussell organizes his work thematically. The logic in this approach comes as a result of his movement from an inclusive framework (i.e., war as irony or satire, chapter 1), to the specific circumstance of the soldier (i.e., the trenches, the adversary, the meaning, chapters 2, 3, and 4), to important British contextualizations (i.e., literary, theatrical, pastoral, chapters 5, 6, and 7), then back to a general framework (i.e., the persistence of war in language and memory, chapter 9).<sup>3</sup> This strategy does facilitate Fussell’s use of poetry to artistically enhance the function of memory in relation to important conceptualizations of WWI. Just like memory transcends time and bounces back and forth at will, Fussell indeed jumps around chronologically in order to illustrate his point.<sup>4</sup> The argument is fluid, as well it should be, but this makes it difficult at times to determine the role of WWI

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<sup>3</sup>In this scheme, chapter 8, which connects war and sexuality and then develops WWI homoeroticism, seems out of place, like a awkward intrusion, unless it is to be viewed as an extension of the British pastoral interest and part of chapter 7.

<sup>4</sup>See pages 4, 24, 25, 32, 33, 34, 74, 107, 108, 109, 127, 203, 232, 324, 325.

memories sequentially or their peculiar function in a precise chronological context.<sup>5</sup> Fussell does pinpoint a few chronological connections as they relate to relished anamnesis. But he really does not overdo this, nor does he need to, since this is not his main concern. Such would plausibly impose an unnecessary rigidity on the text and destroy its fluidity. He instead performs the role of a literary phenomenologist, and in this crowning work, he shines brightly.

*Great War* oozes with remarkable perceptions that connect literary moment with empathetic feeling about a raw and ugly past. By means of both prose and verse, Fussell illuminates the irony of a successful attack (17), the “mechanism of irony-assisted recall” (30), “the troglodyte world” (37-51), poignant literary ideas about sunrise and sunset (55-63), the “enemy to the rear” (82-90), remarkable WWI legends (116-125), and the various uses of John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim Progress* (135-144). Even if he exaggerates comparisons,<sup>6</sup> overestimates contrasts,<sup>7</sup> limits reasons of causality,<sup>8</sup> minimizes primal understandings,<sup>9</sup> and attaches undue

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<sup>5</sup>For example, he says of “the boneyard” that “the work of smoothing it out continues to this day” (69), but does “to this day” refer to 1975, to 2000, or to some other time?

<sup>6</sup>Note the following overstatements. “Every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected” (7). “There seems to be one dominating form of modern understanding [of WWI], that it is essentially ironic” (35). “The Great War paradigm proves adequate to any succeeding confrontation” (86).

<sup>7</sup>Note a bit of caricature concerning French and German trenches (44-45) and his harsh judgment on the village of Albert (70). Also, what does he mean, “by its absurd farce, that in the last third of the twentieth century, after the heaping of violence upon violence, it is no longer possible to ‘describe war’ in traditional literary ways” (34)?

<sup>8</sup>“Eight million people were destroyed because two person had been shot” (8). “What we can call gross dichotomizing is . . . traceable to the actualities of the Great War” (75).

<sup>9</sup>See his assertion that sky-awareness is a “fairly late development” (52), and his deprecation of myth, which he fails to adequately define, as “un-modern” (115).

significance to literary understandings,<sup>10</sup> Fussell proves himself to be a master of literary art and language,<sup>11</sup> although he sometimes excludes the vision of the common, unlearned soldier. But the erudite author displays his absolute best when he treats the British penchant, among learned and unlearned, for literature, the theatrical, and the pastoral (chapters 5, 6, 7, respectively).<sup>12</sup>

Fussell appropriately places mini-biographical sketches of important writers in his narrative, i.e., Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, and Edmund Blunden (90-105, 203-220, 254-269). He concludes sharply, if not densely, with Frye's "Theory of Modes" and hammers an obscene, even grotesque, connection between sexual desire, memories of war, and human excrement from Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. Fussell notes that, with the disappearance of "prohibitive obscenity" in the 1960s and 1970s, novelists and playwrights can now reveal "for the first time the full obscenity of the Great War. The greatest irony is that it is only now, when those who remember the events are almost all dead, that the literary means for adequate remembering and interpreting are finally publicly accessible" (334). For its depth of treatment of literary remembrances about WWI, mostly formal and some informal, Paul Fussell's *Great War* is worth a careful read. In this regard, the book's phenomenology is unsurpassed, but for a careful contextual and chronological study about the relation of WWI to historical memory, the reader should look elsewhere.

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<sup>10</sup>For example, that by the time WWI began, "sunrise and sunset had become fully freighted with implicit aesthetic and moral meaning" (55).

<sup>11</sup>See the feudal language of WWI (21-22), the "curious prophylaxis of language" (23), and his excursus on euphemisms and factual testimony (169-179).

<sup>12</sup>Note especially the wonderful treatment of roses and poppies (243-254).