Public commentary on familiar themes

The ‘herd instinct’ versus the individual

Throughout this book, contemporary evidence has been the key to unlocking the emotions of the past – both private and public. Although some excerpts have appeared from the numerous books and memoirs generated by the war (and largely written after the event), comparatively little evidence has been cited from the wider contemporary sphere, the exception being the case of the Cambridge Magazine’s vocal support of Bertrand Russell as part of its balanced and humane view of the wider conflict. Now it is perhaps appropriate that some attention is drawn to contemporary newspapers and periodicals – journalistic reactions fully exposed to public scrutiny and in contrast to the enclosed world of intimate diaries and letters.

In summing up one of the main themes of humanistic and aesthetic opposition to the Great War – the friction that existed between the structure of the war-state with its resultant ‘herd instinct’ and notions of the sacredness of the individual – there is perhaps no more apposite personal example than that of Gilbert Cannan, an individual who, like Bertrand Russell, specifically projected his concerns into the public sphere. Cannan was a friend of D.H. Lawrence (who, together with his wife, had moved to Buckinghamshire in August 1914 to be near Cannan and his wife Mary), and he saw himself as a defender of that which he described as ‘a man’s most precious possession’ – human dignity.

He had first expounded on this theme in an article for the Cambridge Magazine in November 1914 in which he wrote that, ‘Every day strips this war of a little more of its dignity, even of the dignity of death, for it is not dignified to die in a trench armed with a rifle and bayonet against a machine miles away out of sight behind a hill’.¹ This commodity of dignity was, he felt, almost the sole guarantee of decency in human affairs, ‘the magnetised needle which swings to the points of the moral world’, violations of which caused ‘untold secret suffering’, due to the fact that many men would submit to indignities in the name of the State rather than see their dignity impaired by the taint of accusations of cowardice, moral or otherwise. Cannan commented that thousands had, by submitting to the dictates of the war-state, inflicted the very damage they sought to avoid (‘though they have realised it only too late’). He concluded sadly that
A war of individuals

in the world created by the war, ‘the living are more ghostly than the dead’. Cannan and the views he expressed in print later attracted the ire of Douglas Goldring, who in his survey of the writings of the war, *Reputations* (1920), thought that the war had narrowed Cannan’s outlook and indeed ‘impaired his mental equilibrium’. Goldring accused Cannan of turning away from everything ‘genuine and essential’ and instead focusing on ‘sub-human types’ who were able, in Goldring’s view, to forget the war and whom he described as ‘wasters and artistic riff-raff’.2 Presumably Goldring included Cannan himself in this category, as Cannan had faced a tribunal in 1916 and claimed exemption from military service on the grounds of his work being of national importance: work which, via his American publishers, brought in three times as much money as the alternative agricultural work. The tribunal, although granting him exemption from combatant service, would not accept his writing as an alternative to military service and gave him a month to find other work of national importance in order to avoid being called up.

It was this supposed injustice that revealed to Cannan the precarious nature of individuality within the war-state and led to the writing of his book, *Freedom* (1917). Initially, Cannan had fired off a letter to the *Nation* in September 1916 in which he railed against the regulations resulting from the Military Service Act of earlier that year, regulations which he felt, ‘were not framed with any regard for the intellectual life of the country’. The strictures governing the aesthetic and spiritual frames of life within the war-state made every day for Cannan and those with similar concerns one of ‘acute suffering’. He continued:

> The convention, the icy gaiety, the hypnotic phrases, the affectation of cynicism, which for most men seem to make the situation tolerable, are useless to me. I believe that only the mind and the will can find an issue from this general degradation and that young men also must contribute thought and imagination if life is to be made sweet again.

Cannan believed that the ‘spiritual impulse’ that was needed from the young men was under threat: ‘It is crushed in those who fight with their bodies by military discipline’, he continued, ‘It should not be crushed in those who fight ceaselessly with their minds by the misapplication of the Military Service Act.’ He concluded that there existed certain ‘enduring things’ in life that were unaffected by the supremacy of the nation in which they existed, things from which human life took its form and quality and, although politicians rarely recognised them, ‘artists must’ and therefore must be mentally free to do so. Hence those resisting attempts to make them act against their convictions represented the only force which was capable of winning the moral victories, ‘without which victory on the battlefield will be utterly without meaning or potency’.3

In November 1916, and by now seen as a voice of dissent due to his writing and experience before a tribunal, Cannan was invited to address the Cambridge University Socialist Society, and he used the opportunity to reiterate his themes of the grave threat posed to the ‘spontaneity and spiritual content’ within
individuals by the ‘heresy-hunts’ of the war-state, and the State’s inability to realise and appreciate the value of the freedom that lay at the heart of each individual that constituted it. With *Freedom*, Cannan was able to expand further on the concerns and concepts he had already expressed, such as that of a war of morals being fought alongside that of territory; the conflict was ‘a suspension of the moral law’ by agreement between states, the terminal result being a ‘moral vacuum’ in which ‘thought can hardly live’.

Bertrand Russell had written in the *International Journal of Ethics* that the young men and their potential creative impulses were being ‘brutalised and morally degraded’ by the war and for Cannan in *Freedom*, as for Russell, war was the ‘removal of the mask of civilisation’ and a subsequent submersion of peaceful creativity in favour of destructive, barbaric impulses. The energies of the people were ‘sucked up’ in the creation and maintenance of sovereign states; according to Cannan, the world of states could be likened to, ‘a great bubble blown out of the energies of humanity’. Here Cannan again mirrored Russell, especially when he (Cannan) went on to state that, though every human being was to some extent mechanical within the routine of habitual actions and thus could be regulated, the impulsive and passionate side of an individual’s life could not be so harnessed ‘without the most injurious suppression’ and hence should be allowed to find liberation and expression via unobstructed creative channels, a process without which the individual would become ‘warped and rendered less effective’, as was occurring within the war-state.

Cannan recognised that the machinery of the State was composed of individuals with their own susceptibilities, and, hence, the State would be most effective in a situation wherein individuals were left to themselves to adjust the balance between mechanical and creative functions. This was especially true in the case of ‘the artist’ within whom life and work were fused into a single passion; here the idea of any form of control was ‘simply ridiculous’.

The war for Cannan signalled a return to a situation of chaos in which the anarchy of the State was able to override the (potentially creative) ‘anarchy of the individual’. Military discipline only served to hold men together under conditions which were a violation of instinct:

> It serves its dreadful purpose, is itself dreadful, and for the purposes of peace worse than useless ... it can only be achieved by relieving men of all moral responsibility for what they do under orders. There is then a complete severance of their public and private lives, and from this severance both must suffer.

This was especially the case when it involved an artist or creative individual in whom the public and the private were most closely intertwined. Cannan surmised that the concept of the ‘state as machine’ had its supporters in that it promised a modicum of existence for all. However, he identified a minority for whom mere existence was not only not enough but which also implied a detestable ‘moral death’. To them and Cannan, the State was only concerned with existence, while they were ‘eager for life’, a life doubly denied to them by the
A war of individuals

confines of the war’s moral and social parameters. Cannan concluded that, ‘Only the release of the spirit of liberty can restore the health of humanity.’ At the same time he warned that the banner of liberty could also be used to lure men deeper into the ‘morass’ because, although the war illuminated the lack of freedom of the individual, those individuals were encouraged to win back that liberty at the expense of that of individuals of other nations – a clear ‘abuse of patriotism’.

Cannan’s article for the Cambridge Magazine of November 1914 on the loss of dignity inherent to the war had stirred up fierce debate within its pages with (the possibly pseudonymous) G. Udny Yule of St John’s College writing to protest that Cannan’s words were ‘enough to make a decent dog sick’. The editor, C.K. Ogden, defended the right of all opinions to be expressed in the pages of his magazine and asked Yule to contribute £5 to the fund for Belgian University Refugees if the paper could find a dozen British army officers ready to publicly endorse Cannan’s article. By the end of the following month (January 1915), the paper had been inundated with signatures from serving officers willing to support Cannan, as well as messages of support from civilians such as one individual, Leonard Doncaster, who applauded the paper for, ‘doing a real service, not only to the University, but to the nation, in encouraging the expression of all shades of opinion’. Ogden summed up the stance of the Cambridge Magazine as, ‘primarily an institution whereby free discussion may be kept alive in troublous times, whether of peace or war.’ As if to back up this claim, Cannan’s original article was reprinted together with a further one in which he declared that, ‘It is for the soldier of 1914 not only to do and die but also to reason why.’ Each soldier, Cannan warned, would have to pass through the ‘moral ordeal’ of battle and he cautioned that it would be well for the young, ‘to set about the detections of unnecessary fictions before their lives and their minds are so encumbered and impaired with them as to be unable to act except through prejudice’.

Gilbert Cannan’s description of military service as a test of morality was later echoed by the poet and dramatist Robert Nichols, who wrote that the very essence of war was compulsion by violence or threat of violence and such compulsion entailed ‘moral suffering’. The act of enlisting (Nichols served in Flanders) signified an exchange of ‘individual liberties for anonymous and collective bonds’. This thought was in turn reflected in a published letter to the Nation of October 1915 from the cultural analyst Caroline Playne who cautioned against the coming of compulsion, pointing out that the military standard imposed by compulsion in other nations had already ‘deadened countless individual souls and produced one vast human machine perfected in brutality’, a result which would, given the opportunity, duplicate itself and thus divert whole populations from the path of progressive civilised enlightenment. ‘We might learn to exploit and dominate rather than how to rule and replenish the earth in its fullness’, her letter warned, ‘What of the loss of individuality, loss of common
humanity, and of some of the rational grasps of the higher purpose of human existence and of human destiny."\textsuperscript{12}

In August 1914, the \textit{New Statesman} had publicly reminded its readers that while war meant ‘the tragedy of broken human relationships’ and admitted that, ‘no man can be satisfied with the idea that war will be one of the permanent moral agencies of the world’, the rush to arms also possessed a ‘nobler aspect’: that of comradeship, men marching as brothers and ‘the spirit of subordination of the individual to the common life’.\textsuperscript{13}

One of Gilbert Cannan’s principal themes was this threat, as he perceived it, to the role of the individual within the State posed by that state at war, a war waged against other states and also, in effect, on some of its own citizens. He began a chapter in \textit{Freedom} on ‘The Man in the Street’ with the maxim, ‘You may make all men don uniform, but you cannot thereby secure uniformity. The infinite variety of humanity remains and will not be denied.’\textsuperscript{14}

There had been much debate concerning the war’s revival of the ‘herd instinct’ amongst populations and the consequent loss of the strength of individual personality. In July 1915, the \textit{Nation} commented upon an essay by Gilbert Murray (Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford and occasional propagandist) entitled ‘The Herd Instinct and the War’, in which Murray argued that the progress of civilisation had not only suppressed this latent collective instinct but had also served to educate and emphasise qualities of individual judgement. The war had reversed this process. Feelings of danger and alarm had drawn out the dormant herd mentality, much as Bertrand Russell argued that it brought forth and encouraged the latent destructive impulses within people. The \textit{Nation} concluded its comment by warning that if the war continued, the capacity for individual thought, built up over many years, could become fatally damaged and individual personality totally submerged under that of a tribal nature. For when war brought forth the herd instinct:

The individual ceases to be a separate source or centre of thought or feeling; his particular nature, what we call his personality, is inhibited. He becomes highly suggestible both to feelings and ideas … The individual member of the herd not only need not, but must not, feel or think for himself.\textsuperscript{15}

In the same month as the analysis of Murray’s essay appeared in the \textit{Nation}, the \textit{Quarterly Review} carried an article on ‘Patriotism’ by W.R. Inge in which he described that concept as a subtle blend of the noble and ignoble and recognised that to many, it marked, ‘an arrest of development in the physical expansion of the individual’. While patriotism for ideals was needed for the peaceful progress of humanity, patriotism of a military aspect could only result in ‘deprecating the value of individual liberty’.\textsuperscript{16} In the November 1914 issue of the \textit{Cambridge Magazine} (which also included Gilbert Cannan’s article on the danger to human dignity posed by the war), a letter was published from 2nd Lieutenant N.B. Bagenal of the Cambridgeshire Battalion, the Suffolk Regiment, formerly of King’s College, in which he stated that some soldiers, including
himself, believed that they were fighting for something more than the concept of patriotism: ‘the English soldier of the 20th Century is fighting for Humanity’. Bagenal thought that England should ‘sacrifice our pride’ and be the first to offer peace terms, and he thought it necessary for those who felt unable to join the army to ‘raise their voices’ against the spirit of greed and hatred that abounded. He pointed out that the soldier who was fighting for humanity took a unique position in that ‘his feet are in the mud, but his head is in the stars; he is battling in the tempest, against the temporary forces of unreason’.

The danger to the forces of reason and the threat of the herd instinct were still being pointed out during the final months of the conflict. An article in the Nation of June 1918 entitled ‘The Havoc of the Mind’ concluded that the war had sapped the supports and ‘undermined the rules of reason’ and thus left reason prey to not only passions of hate and fear but also to ‘the instinct of herding together’. For four years the war had demanded (as a ‘safe condition’ of its duration) that the minds of individuals be reduced to a state, ‘in which the power alike of personal judgement and of the general will has been inhibited’. As the conclusion of the war neared, following the failure of the German spring offensive of 1918, the author of the article was relieved to point out that he, at least, perceived a ‘slow struggle back towards the sanity of individual judgement’ occurring as well as an effort ‘to throw off the passions and superstitions of the herd’. After the Armistice, in early 1919, the Nation concluded that the true ‘disaster of the war’ could be attributed to, ‘a consequence of the increase of the herd by the mechanical annihilation of obstacles between individuals’.

The war as gaoler of the imagination

What had also become apparent to many since the summer of 1914 was the war of minds and words that existed within the war-state and which was waged by some with an equal tenacity to that of the rifles and bayonets which framed it. A gulf existed between the politician and the pacifistic artist or intellectual in terms of the freedom of ideas and the limitations placed upon this concept. This was apparent to the author of an article in the New Statesman on George Bernard Shaw’s supplement ‘Common Sense about the War’ of November 1914. With evident approval, the article described Shaw’s dealing with public affairs to be from an artistic point of view rather than a political one; the approval of Shaw’s words was due not only to his ideas but to their origin – his independent stance and freedom of expression. As the article pointed out, ‘The politician tells you what you ought to think; the artist shows you what you ought to see and leaves you to think what you like.’ The article deplored the fact that, ‘just when it is of the utmost importance that public opinion should be kept as healthy and active as possible’, there existed a ‘conspiracy’ to prevent the expression of differences in opinion on issues of the war, ‘though in point of fact we all differ
violently about them’. Independent thought was being ‘gravely depreciated and sternly suppressed’. The imaginative mind was at risk. In August 1914, the New Statesman commented on ‘War and the Imagination’ and the helplessness of the ordinary mind in comprehending the true nature of war. The ‘ordinary citizen’ was liable to be plunged into gloom by news of a military defeat or the build up of anxiety. However, if that citizen were ‘an imaginative man’, he would find constant reason for sadness, ‘even in a victory’. Regarding the future of civilisation, the Statesman warned that:

Even if we approved of a war yesterday, or approve of one today, we do not necessarily believe that the bursting bomb is going for ever and ever to be the leading agent of dissemination of righteousness among the nations. We may not be a pacifist for the present, but the more the imagination dwells on the actualities of the battlefield, the more likely we are to shrink from war as the natural appeal of statesmen at variance.

While the New Statesman saw imagination as an indicator of war’s horrors and thus a tool for peace, the Nation looked back over four years of conflict in the weeks following the Armistice under the heading ‘The Defeat of Imagination’, declaring that in its essence, the war was the struggle between the power of imagination and ‘the sluggish soul’. Imagination had been prohibited because it weakened the power of the fighting machine and ‘made units men again’. As a result, a wall, knit together by a ‘cement of blood and iron’, had grown up between men of imagination and the rest of mankind. The Nation commented that imagination and a ‘sense of the ideal’ depended for their existence on ‘the effort of the individual mind’ and that on one side of this wall there existed, ‘an incapacity for imagination hardened into a deliberate refusal to imagine’, and on the other (that of men of thought), ‘imagination was purified and completed by experience’. The Nation concluded that if imagination had been free of artificial restraint and deliberate refusal to comprehend, ‘it would have known that victory could not be bought at such a price of pain. Its will to action would have been paralysed by knowledge.’ Instead, the gap of imagination amongst many was filled by ‘experience of pain’, as the war that was already a struggle of the imagination became ‘an orgy of necessity’.

Hence there existed public recognition in some quarters of the threat posed by the war to the independence of both the work of the creative individual and the direction of thought. This recognition was apparent not only in the pages of journals but also in books of the period such as E.S.P. Haynes’s The Decline of Liberty in England which appeared in 1916. Although Haynes’s study looked to the Germans and Prussianism for many of the threats to individual initiative, it also singled out more general concerns, one of which was the misery caused by the war in being allowed to bring about the ‘death of British freedom’. Contained within this concept existed ‘the progressive contempt of the mob for the freedom and privacy of the individual’ which in time of war, grew in direct
proportion to, ‘the speed with which these blessings are abolished by politicians’.24 In a companion volume, *The Case for Liberty* (1919), Haynes concluded bluntly that war and the fear born of war had always been ‘necessarily … the worst enemies of liberty’.

Also published in the year of Haynes’s 1916 work on the danger to liberty was an analysis of the effect of the war upon art and literature by Lawrence Haward, the curator of Manchester City Art Gallery. In this tract, which had originally been given as a lecture at the University of Manchester in February 1916, Haward stated that though the figure of the artist represented a positive and constructive nature, the war was both negative and destructive and, ‘in its general methods it remains blindly and hideously impersonal; it is based on the suppression of the individual, on the emphasis of national distinctions, and on the merging of the will of the unit in the collective impulse of the crowd’.25

Creative work required the concentration and detachment of the individual, states of mind not easily attained during a period of intense conflict and propaganda, the patriotism of which, Haward stressed, was not only temporary and local but also of a vague and mystical nature, ‘rather than human’. He also commented that the theory that the war would draw creative powers out of men via new emotions showed, ‘little appreciation of the working of the artist’s mind or that of the real character of modern warfare’. The notion that contact with war would engender heroic emotions rather than fear and bitterness was, he felt, based on the popular, romantic view of war, and he concluded that modern conflict was no longer – if it ever had been – a romantic adventure: ‘it leaves little room nowadays for make-believe except in so far as it leads to a lowering of standards’.

Writing in 1922, the former chief of Britain’s War Propaganda Bureau, C.F.G. Masterman, agreed. In terms of literary output, he declared that although the ‘broken ends’ of normal life were slowly being re-joined, ‘not only has the war given no real inspiration and the great victory passed unsung, but among the young men, bitterness and cynicism and contempt of human life and the foolishness of men is far more noticeable than any … new inspiration’.26 Frank Swinnerton, in his survey of *The Georgian Literary Scene*, declared that the imagination of writers had been ‘soured’ by their experience of the war, while John Rothenstein, also looking back from the 1930s but, in his case, specifically on British artists and the Great War, concluded that although the war had temporarily closed the ‘gulf’ between art and life (which had been in the process of widening) this had not necessarily been a positive process. Such was the starkness of the war’s reality that ‘few and insignificant’ were the artists who had remained unaffected by it. He described its effect as ‘omnipresent, disturbing, terrible … a reality too powerful and too tangible for artists to be able to neglect’, and hence most were ‘drawn into the maelstrom’. He concluded that, ‘individual opinions regarding it therefore were of little moment’.27
These later views of the war’s influence upon the creative spheres of art and literature were, as shown in the case of Lawrence Haward, not simply recorded with hindsight. In 1915, Henry James declared in an interview with the *New York Times* that the war had:

used up words; they have weakened, they have deteriorated like motor car tires; they have, like millions of other things, been more overstrained and knocked about and voided of happy semblance during the last six months than in all the long ages before and we are now confronted with a depreciation of all our terms, or, otherwise speaking, with a loss of expression through increase of limp-ness, that may make us wonder what ghosts will be left to walk.28

During the same year as James’s public warning, John Galsworthy could be read in the *Times Literary Supplement* ruminating on ‘Our Literature and War’. He stated that ‘to practically all imaginative writers of any quality war is an excrescence on human life, a monstrous calamity and evil’. Galsworthy was at pains to point out that the fact that creative writers comprehended the ‘gruesome inevitability’ of the war in no way lessened their ‘temperamental’ horror at its waste of life and talent. He employed the word ‘temperamental’ to indicate that the creative being would naturally be horrified at any such spectacle of carnage; this was the natural reaction of the artist or writer since, ‘the nature of the imaginative artist is sensitive, impressionable, impatient of anything superimposed, thinking and feeling for itself, recoiling from conglomerate views and sentiment’. For ‘this particular sort of human being’, war held no glamour as it perhaps did for other categories of person. Indeed, writers for whom the war was glamorous he declared, ‘were not those who produce literature’.

Though horrific, the war in Galsworthy’s opinion had to be endured in order that artists and writers could attempt to preserve, ‘that humane freedom which is the life-blood of any world where the creative imagination … can flourish’. Galsworthy thought that for some young artists, ‘innocent hitherto of creative powers’, the experience of the war could possibly be a ‘baptism into art’, and hence creativity could be born of the conflict in some quarters – as discussed in Chapter 5 in the cases of Siegfried Sassoon and, possibly to a greater extent, Wilfred Owen. However, according to Galsworthy, the ‘intense identification’ of the artist and creative writer with the struggle of the war was of a ‘spasmodic, feverish and almost false’ nature, and possessed a kind of ‘deep and tragic inconsistency’ which was, he stated, ‘too foreign to the real self within him’.29

Galsworthy admitted that for some the ordeal of war could be a ‘baptism into art’ and in this he was undoubtedly correct when one takes into account the mass of art, literature and verse that emerged from individual experience of the Great War. In October 1918, the critic Arthur Waugh surveyed the poetic output of the war in the *Quarterly Review* and reached a similar conclusion. He identified that an intellectual aspect of response to the conflict, over and above the ‘material realism of lamp-black and lightning’, was possible and that
A war of individuals

this had provided poetry with a new scope. This was despite the fact that war in its chaotic aspect possessed ‘the worst antagonists of the poet’s art’. If the poet took the war at face value, its aspect was ‘too barren, too hard, too hideous to issue in poetry’. However, if the poet brought an intellectual aspect to his experience (which Waugh labelled the ‘secret interpretation’ though this was concurrently, ‘the very antithesis of war itself’) then the poet might be able to discover ‘the soul beneath the surface’ of the war and be able to express it in creative terms. Waugh hailed this process as unique: ‘it would seem to be not so much an act that the war has made poetry – as that poetry has, now for the first time, made war – made it in its own image’.

The outstanding characteristic of the significant poetry of the war for Waugh was a passionate determination to picture the war as it revealed itself, ‘not to the outsider, but to the enlightened combatant himself’. The key to unlocking a significant response was the personal revelation of direct experience on one who was able to bring an intellectual gaze (which was itself ‘enlightened’) to bear on events witnessed and emotions felt. Something of the true meaning of the war could be revealed in poetry and art, ‘not because war had any virtue in it that would make a poet out of a man, but simply because the poet has himself turned soldier, and concentrated upon the ugly and monotonous business of war the keen searchlight of interpretation’.

Waugh identified differing stages of this vital experience of war, the first being a ‘startling retrogression’ from the universal to the personal point of view. An individual swept onto the field of battle, Waugh maintained, was suddenly ‘disconcertingly conscious of his own individuality’. Following initial experience of the zone of battle this sense of self vanished to be replaced by an awareness of the war as a ‘toiling, moiling business, beset with detail, loaded with obligations’, in the midst of which the individual was merely a small cog in a vast machine. The final stage of experience involved a growing appreciation of the value of comradeship and of the fact that the war was made up of human beings, each with a significance and history of their own. By this stage, ‘the man has passed out of himself into the heart of others’. Waugh warned of the ‘insistent claim of personality’ exerted by the war and, in common with John Rothenstein, the danger to individual opinion. The war had brought with it a realisation that, ‘no man’s life can belong to himself, even for a moment, and that, when all is said and done, the individual life is of very little concern to the world at large’.

In 1915, also within the pages of the Quarterly Review, Lascelles Abercrombie had divided the poetry of the war into two categories: that of a ‘patriotic nature’, such as the gush of verse trumpeting the onset of hostilities (Julian Grenfell, Rupert Brooke etc.) and, secondly, that which was content to merely describe the fact of the war in one or many of its facets, usually with brutal detail, as in Owen and Sassoon. The poetry and art of patriotism – that which was ‘temporary and local’ to Lawrence Haward and which most easily succumbed to the
‘insistent claim of personality’ in Waugh’s view – Abercrombie had found to be ‘polarised … by a pre-determined purpose of morality; in fact, it is a kind of didactic poetry’. The second category of stark expressiveness Abercrombie saluted as ‘very valuable’, due to the order and form of the manner of its realisation, even if in its nature it conveyed the chaos of war and the mental danger thereof – a danger the war presented ‘by throwing thought into disorder and incoherence’. ‘It is terribly likely’, Abercrombie warned, ‘that these events and emotions when we are most conscious of them, are least submissive to mental control’. Here Abercrombie publicly acknowledged what others had been thinking in private: the vandalism that direct experience of the conflict could inflict upon the canvas of the mind.

The value of experience

Despite the warning of Lascelles Abercrombie, it was sometimes deemed necessary to experience the war directly in order to inform one’s art and hence to be able and ‘qualified’ to react against it. This chapter has shown Arthur Waugh’s view that direct experience could trigger an ‘enlightened’ searchlight of artistic interpretation and the Nation proclaiming that, in some cases, imagination could be ‘purified and completed’ by experience. An apposite example of the importance of experience in formulating a response to the conflict is that of the War Artist Paul Nash. Although Nash regarded the conflict as ‘a war of negatives’, he wrote, ‘I expect I should hate the slaughter – I know I should, but I’d like to be among it all’.33 He made this comment while training at the barracks in Roehampton, a situation he described as like being among a ‘herd of beasts’.

Nash had enlisted for Home Defence in the Artists’ Rifles and had been eventually accepted after initial rejection for being under the original (6 ft) standard height requirement. His thoughts on the war and his part in it are graphically illustrated in his letters to the essayist Gordon Bottomley, who had helped persuade him to register at the Slade in 1910 and had acted as a father-confessor figure from that time (also the year of Nash’s mother’s death). During the first weeks of the war, Nash had volunteered for farm work to replace enlisting farm-hands. He commented that he was ‘not keen’ to rush off and be a soldier, describing himself as ‘a gentleminded creature’ unsuited for the ordeal ahead. However, with Bottomley’s advice to strengthen his resolve, he eventually decided to enlist. ‘We thinkers love art and poetry better than war’, Bottomley wrote, ‘but this is one of the times of the world when men must fight if they want to preserve the foundations on which art and poetry can alone be possible.’ Bottomley looked forward to a time when his ‘pupil’ might be able to bring, ‘a new world of experience to your art’.34

In May 1916, Nash became a map-reading instructor at Romford where he formed a close friendship with the rural poet Edward Thomas. Later that summer he began officer training, and he was gazetted as a 2nd Lieutenant in the
3rd Hampshires and sent to France in February 1917. Before his embarkation, Bottomley had written to him that he was envious of the fact that Nash’s vision of life would potentially ‘be keener and more various for these next month’s experience’ and he wished for Nash, ‘the mental energy to let it all feed the various purposes of your art’.

Nash’s first drawings from the Western Front were exhibited in June 1917 and then in a much larger exhibition in May 1918 at the Leicester Galleries under the title ‘The Void of War’. By this time, Nash and the experiences of war recreated on his canvasses were much further in the public eye – in October 1917 he had been seconded to the Department of Information as an official War Artist after a recommendation from John Buchan to C.F.G. Masterman. Following several weeks back in France in November 1917 (after recovering from accidental injury in England for five months), he was granted leave to work up his drawings – this leave was eventually extended to the end of the war.

Nash found himself profoundly affected by what he saw and felt at the front, a place where, ‘Sunset and sunrise are blasphemous, they are mockeries to man ... It is unspeakable, godless, hopeless.’ More crucially, he now felt his status as an artist had changed: ‘I am no longer an artist interested and curious. I am a messenger who will bring back word from the men who are fighting to those who want the war to go on for ever.’ In July 1918, while working on one of his most celebrated pictures, ‘The Menin Gate’, Nash commented to Bottomley on how difficult he found it, while painting in the peace of the English countryside, to recall and ‘brood on those wastes in Flanders, the torments, the cruelty and terror of this war’. However, Nash and the artist within him felt compelled to do so, ‘for it seems the only justification of what I do now – If I can help to rob war of the last shred of glory, the last shine of glamour’.

In addition to a desire to put himself to the test, the artist and poet Herbert Read, a 2nd Lieutenant in the Green Howards by January 1915, also hoped to use the war for artistic purposes. Read hoped the passion of conflict would make him a writer. However, by the time he was wounded and invalided back to England in 1916, it was the passion of anger against the war that fuelled his anti-romantic essays and poems (during the same period he also began a novel which was later abandoned). He claimed not to be afraid of death, only fearful (like Ivor Gurney) that the ‘high projects of my ambitious spirit’ would remain thus incomplete. By the time he returned to the front in April 1917, Read had decided that his possible death would not be for King and Country but for ‘the salvation of my own soul’. At the front, he had found that he had begun to appreciate the values of comradeship and the character of the common soldier; ‘the simple soul’, symbolised by ‘a stout heart’ and the fellowship of endeavour. Conversely, he began to distrust the ‘bombast and swank’ of the military ‘machine’.

Although he was awarded the Military Cross and the DSO, the end of the war found Read, ‘dazed, indifferent, incapable of any creative action’. The
final months of the conflict had seen him much changed as the war exerted its effect over his previous socialism. He found that he now disliked crowds and mobs and instead placed his hope in ‘beautiful anarchy’ and declared that, in order for mankind to comprehend the wrongness of war and thereby arrive at a realisation of its common humanity, ‘I have only one faith … faith born in the experience of war.’

Even some of those who themselves recoiled from the various theatres of war felt themselves drawn to the intense emotions involved and saw fit to offer advice and comment to others who went when they could or would not. Henry James, despite writing from England (to Hugh Walpole, serving with the Red Cross on the Russian Front), described the war as an ‘unspeakably intimate experience’, and he advised Edward Marsh to ‘entertain the pang and taste the bitterness’ of the overall experience in order to comprehend the process of change that was, in James’s opinion, bound to affect individuals caught by the conflict. To James, experience was valuable, and it was worth enduring the ‘aching anguish’ of it in order to, ‘press one’s poor old ponderous and yet so imperceptible “moral weight” into the scale’.

It was important to make one’s point felt, however faintly, amid the clamour of conflict, and one’s point of view would be reinforced by direct (or indirect, in James’s case) immersion in the altered and altering life during wartime. In an article on war-weariness and the search for peace in 1917, the Nation was moved to comment that, as it understood the movement of public opinion, it was not a military decision that was going to bring about the end of militarism but rather a ‘general sense, bred of personal experience, that war is folly and waste and suffering’. The author of a ‘typical’ letter from the front to the Cambridge Magazine in 1916 specifically stated that a motivation in enlisting and going to France had been the fact that ‘we thought we could be better advocates of peace by seeing with our own eyes the futility and ingloriousness of war’. He described himself as a conscientious objector, though not on an official level, because his conscience was not of a religious nature and hence, he thought, would not be recognised by the Military Service Act. There had also been a price to pay for using experience as a tool of peace; he described the result of eighteen months of experience at the front for himself and his fellow soldiers as being as if they had all, ‘sold our souls to unreason, as converts do to the Roman Catholic church’.

In the spring of 1919, the Nation observed that many ‘soldier minds’ were returning to academic courses delayed or cut short by military service. That these soldier-academics were able to find hope renewed was due to their experience, commented the article, entitled ‘Back to the Muses’. Having passed through action, they could now approach the ‘realms of thought’ with greater maturity:

Only those who have learnt through action the true meaning of beauty and of knowledge can know how abundantly it [their hope] will be justified … But, above all, we
look to them with urgent hope for a new form of literature – a literature of reality, not made from cobweb fancies and tender suppositions but from profound truths of life as they have been revealed to them along the hardworn ways of action.

The returning soldier-thinkers, it was sincerely hoped (though no one had asked them), were to be the prophets of a new age of reason, one rejecting all the base values they had encountered in confrontation with the war. ‘For our country’, the article in the Nation concluded, ‘as for the whole region of mind and beauty, they may lead towards a new birth, a later and finer renaissance. It would be hard indeed to over-estimate the value of action upon the thinker’s mind.’ As Henry James had noted, immersion in war, however bad for the soul, was valuable in honing one’s thoughts down to sharp, accurate truths. The war could be thus insidious to specific individuals; so many who opposed it were concurrently drawn to it, especially in the case of the artist or one conscious of aesthetic values.

The creative results of the artist venturing forth to test his sensibilities in the arena of war – in order to present as true an impression as possible – could be dramatic or muted, immediate or delayed, as in the following, concluding example. As late as 1922, in a review of Edmund Blunden’s The Shepherd and Other Poems, the critic Cobden Sanderson remarked that Blunden had ‘suffered the war and survived it’ and that there had been little about the war in his earlier (though post-war) volumes of verse. This was, Sanderson commented, forgivable, as the poems had been written, ‘under the more or less immediate impact of its stupendous and irreducible experiences’. Now however, ‘Mr Blunden has seen Ypres; the iron has been driven into his soul … We can understand why his instinct as a poet was to reserve his experience and perfect his craft.’ If regretful time could not bring back the dead, it could, it seemed, bring some measure of understanding.

Notes

6 Ibid., p. 55.
7 Ibid., p. 13.
8 Ibid., p. 61.
Public commentary

14 Cannan, Freedom, p. 44.
15 ‘Life and Letters: The Herd Mind’, the Nation, vol. 17, no. 15, 10 July 1915, p. 479. This was a comment on Gilbert Murray, ‘The Herd Instinct and the War’ in Humphrey Milford ed., The International Crisis in its Ethical and Psychological Aspects (London, 1915). Murray had pointed out that, ‘in time of danger the individual subordinates himself to the herd’. (p. 31).
25 Lawrence Haward, The Effect of War upon Art and Literature (London and Manchester, 1916), pp. 32, 8–9. Haward met Siegfried Sassoon via a mutual friend, Edward Dent, when Sassoon visited Manchester in December 1917 (in order to see Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, who was also in the city).
31 Ibid., p. 399.
33 Paul Nash to Emily Bottomley, cited in Poet and Painter–Letters between Gordon Bottomley and Paul Nash 1910-1946, ed. C.C. Abbott and A. Bertram (Bristol, 1990), [late Oct.] 1914, no. 96, p. 76.
34 Ibid., Gordon Bottomley to P. Nash, 2 Oct. 1914, no. 95, p. 75.
36 P. Nash to G. Bottomley, 16 July 1918, Poet and Painter, p. 99.
40 ‘A Peace of Conciliation’, the Nation, vol. 21, no. 18, 4 Aug. 1917, p. 444.
42 ‘Back to the Muses’, the Nation, vol. 25, no. 4, 26 April 1919, p. 104.
43 Review of Edmund Blunden’s The Shepherd and Other Poems, Times Literary Supplement, no. 1060, 11 May 1922, p. 305.