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# From the National Context to its Margins: When the World Used Literature to Respond to the Great War

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## From the National Context to its Margins: When the World Used Literature to Respond to the Great War

### **Abstract**

By shedding light on some original responses to the Great War that are today hardly known, and by asking the same questions of many works written in contexts which were radically different, this *STCL* special issue advocates for a genuinely comparative approach to this literature. Born in a context of nationalist withdrawal, these cultural objects also had a paradoxically wide circulation (due to early translations, commentaries, literary reactions, and so on), which is why study of these apparently isolated writers is so valuable.

### **Keywords**

First World War, Literature

From the National Context to its Margins: When the World Used Literature to  
Respond to the Great War

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Il lettore non troverà, in questo libro, né il romanzo, né la storia. Sono ricordi personali . . . . Non si tratta quindi di un lavoro a tesi: esso vuole essere solo una testimonianza italiana della grande guerra. Non esistono, in Italia, come in Francia, in Germania o in Inghilterra, libri sulla guerra. E anche questo non sarebbe stato mai scritto, senza un periodo di riposo forzato. (Lussu, *Un anno sull'Altipiano* 9)

The reader will not find in this book either a novel or a history. These are my personal recollections . . . . This is not, therefore, a work with a thesis: It is intended merely as the account of an Italian witness to the Great War. In Italy, unlike France, Germany, and England, there are no books about the war. And this one, too, would never have been written but for a period of imposed rest. (Lussu, *A Soldier on the Southern Front* vii)

With the outbreak of the First World War and the appearance of modern, industrial, dehumanized violence, many direct witnesses faced a double crisis when they tried to share their personal experience. The discovery of such extreme physical violence led to a crisis of representation, since traditional ways of depicting war were not up to conveying the nature of modern warfare. Epic representations of the war did not of course disappear overnight. Countless writers chose to locate an epic vision of the war in the trenches, whether in order to support the war effort or to give an aesthetic reading of modern warfare, in continuity with a long and prestigious tradition: “Debout! sauve ta vie, ou, l’arme au poing succombe / Aux forces que suscite un combat de héros!” ‘Get up, save your life, or succumb, weapon in hand / To the forces that provoke heroic combat!’ wrote the Belgian poet André Fontainas, for instance (23). But those authors who sought to denounce the horror of the war felt the need to find new literary tools to share their experience. There was then a second crisis of language, caused by the perverted use of standard language to justify the conflict, notably through political and journalistic lies and heroic descriptions of battle. How were writers to denounce the Great War using the same words with which so many had justified its outbreak and dedramatized the issues at

stake? Nevertheless, much material was in fact produced, representing most of the countries involved directly or indirectly in the war. Large quantities of letters, diaries, novels, poems, and war reportages were written and published, from the beginning of the war right through to the end of the 1930s, with some of them achieving immediate and considerable success.

While some of these works have been extensively studied in order to explore how and why they managed to cope with both crises, the focus has tended to be narrow, and there have been comparatively few attempts to adopt a more global approach. Some literary productions of the time are well-known, but this is often due to the particular experience of a given author rather than to the broader national climate of the country concerned. One of the main goals of this *STTCL* special issue is to offer a global perspective, locating a number of works from the period within the specific framework of their national production. Because of the way the mother tongue of the authors naturally influenced their way of thinking, because of the specificity of each political and cultural context, and because of the rise of nationalisms at the beginning of the century, each author was faced with either embracing or rejecting a national climate. Our work uses this reflection on national responses to the Great War to shed light on some lesser-known or forgotten texts of the period that bring an original response to the challenges of the war. Widening the approach to include several different languages, and a range of countries from Europe and the Americas, offers fresh perspectives on some of the essential themes present in the texts.

The first main line of investigation of the volume focuses on the goals of the war texts. Were there national differences in the rate of decline of jingoistic literature? To what extent were national contexts (e.g. politics, censorship), and not merely dates of publication, important in the development of antimilitarist and pacifist writing? Most of the articles here seek to understand how personal testimonies attempted to make sense of the war or to underline its non-sense. One of the main features of our corpus is the variety of situations that characterized the various writers. Among the poets, to what extent can we compare the image of engagement given by some nationalist authors from European countries (Ernst Jünger, Philippe Barrès, Henry Malherbe) with that given by South American volunteers who served in the French army and whose testimonies are nowadays almost forgotten (Juan Homet, Hernan de Bengoechea, José Garcia Calderon)? How was it possible for war-related writings with opposite political goals to flourish in the same country? With this in mind, one of our key concerns is of course testimony. The desire to be faithful to lived experience often made the fictionalization of war experiences

problematic. That is why the choice of genre was so crucial in many cases, with different countries adopting significantly different approaches: while the English-speaking and German worlds focused mainly on poetry, most of the major French authors of the war (e.g. Genevoix, Barbusse, Céline, Giono) chose more or less fictionalized forms of prose (diaries, novels, journals) to write their war. French poetry of the period, despite some counterexamples, most obviously that of Apollinaire, is now almost totally forgotten. Studying the ethical implications of this choice of genre, in the wake of the Franco-American author Jean Norton Cru (*Témoins* ‘Witnesses,’ 1928), is of course an interesting way to compare some national responses to the issue of telling the truth about the war.

The second line of investigation involves trying to understand both practically and technically the means authors used to answer the question of *how* to write the Great War through an analysis of the styles, characters, tones, rhythms, themes, and registers they employed. Why were humor and irony so important for the expression of suffering by a French writer (Dorgelès or Cendrars) or a Czech writer (Hašek), or for the efforts of Enrique Domínguez Rodiño, a Spanish journalist stuck in Germany, to paint a picture of Europe as having completely lost its direction? What is the significance of the disappearance of the hero in many novels but not in others, whether conventionally patriotic or not? To what extent can we see the war as responsible for an influx of ordinary lower-class characters and their language into European literature? While some novels incorporate slang as never before (Barbusse in France, De Roberto in Italy, Manning in Australia, Karl Kraus in Germany), it is completely absent in many others, which adopt a neutral, diary-like (but also quite original) language to give a faithful and careful account of war experience and the emotions it aroused. What was the impact of the war on European literary movements, both inherited (Realism, Naturalism) and new (Italian Futurism, French “Esprit nouveau,” British Vorticism), as the authors searched for new ways to write the war? And how did the war contribute to the growing erasure of the boundaries between literature and the press which had grown so powerful during the previous century (French trench newspapers, Spanish literary reportages, and chronicles by Ramon de Valle Inclán, Gaziol or Chaves Nogales) or between prose and poetry (Blaise Cendrars, Jean Giraudoux, Robert Vivier, and others)?

Our last major question is the reception of Great War writing and the literary memory of the war. To what extent did the press, the public, and particularly the soldiers influence the production of novels, diaries, and poetry during the war? Why are some works or some genres now forgotten in one

country (French poetry and theater, French pro-war prose) while they are celebrated in others (English poetry, German patriotic diaries)? Our special issue examines the modern reception of these texts, studying for instance significant disparities in the perceived importance of the literary memory of the war. While many major war poems belong to the canon in Great Britain (thanks to countless school syllabuses, anthologies, commemorations, modern fictional accounts, etc.), and while some novels of the period are still well-known in France (Barbusse, Dorgelès, Céline), only five or six literary echoes of the war are still to be found in bookshops in Germany or Italy. How are we to explain these disparities? Focusing on four major linguistic areas (French, English, Spanish, and German), this special issue seeks to offer some answers to the question of the literary memory of the Great War, paying particular attention to the margins of the corpus. Indeed, it explores the *geographical* margins of First World War literature by studying the Argentine journalistic and literary scene and the work of an Anglophone Canadian novelist. It sheds light on the progressive neglect of some specific literary genres that were appreciated during the war. It also showcases some jingoistic writings whose authors tried to erase the memory of them after the pacifist turning point of the thirties. These texts are of great interest today for understanding their national contexts of production and their reception during the war. And finally, there are some examples of authors who were already stranded in the margins of the field when they wrote because of their political position, their gender, or their status.

The first two articles consider countries that were far away from the front lines. They differ in that Canada entered the war as early as 1914, whereas Argentina remained neutral throughout the conflict. The main interest of these two pieces is their focus on non-European countries whose role is often neglected in First World War literary studies. Canada and Argentina present a complex and contrasting political context in which the press and individual writers still had to take a stand with or against the dominant pro-war discourse. Anna Branach-Kallas gives us a rich portrait of the Canadian nationalist literary field through her analysis of Ralph Connor's war novels, *The Major* (1917) and *The Sky Pilot in No Man's Land* (1919). These novels offer a Manichean, epic, and anti-ironic reading of the war (the bestiality and total immorality of the German "race," the heroic, virile figure of the "muscular Christian" who understands the need to defend humanity and Western civilization, the loyalty to Mother Britain) to encourage enlistment and later to justify the war through the reconciliation of Christianity, violence, and Canadian identity. Connor's use of jingoistic clichés reminds us that this kind of patriotic literature developed all around the world during the war. Another example is that of Louis Dumur, a

Swiss journalist and novelist who wrote many anti-German novels, despite the neutrality of his country and the fact that he was a non-combatant. In her study of Juan José de Soiza Reilly's war chronicles (1914-1916), María Inés Tato offers a different but equally original perspective. The goal of this war correspondent (to inform a population far from the front), his medium (war reportage), his experience (from French hospitals to the German front lines), and his political reading of the conflict (which refutes any exclusive German responsibility for it and seeks to show the harsh reality of modern warfare), all signal an uncommon liberty in writing the war, which leads to a complex understanding of the conflict, far from propaganda or aseptic descriptions of the battlefields. His articles also shed light on the "passions and cultural affinities" of this neutral country, split between a dominant Francophilia and a tenacious admiration for Germany, which Soiza Reilly admits himself, and which allows him to avoid the powerful Manicheism and the consensus about the war that we often find in the press of the period.

The following articles study the genesis and reception of two texts, one French and one German, that are now almost totally forgotten. The main point that they have in common is their authors' attempts in later decades to make them disappear from memory, mainly because of their lack of fit with the postwar context and the image of the enemy that they conveyed. In their analysis of Ernst Lissauer's poem "Haßgesang gegen England" (1914) 'A Chant of Hate against England,' Richard Millington and Roger Smith exhume one of the most impressive examples of the international reception that a war text could have during the conflict. They explain the success in Germany of this fierce poetic attack on England in terms of its rhetorical and musical characteristics, but also by analyzing its popular, military, and official reception, demonstrating its wide circulation across national borders through a study of the reactions, rewritings, caricatures, and parodies it provoked in the English-speaking world. Arabella L. Hobbs studies an unfamiliar text by Jacques Rivière, *L'Allemand: Souvenirs et réflexions d'un prisonnier de guerre* (1918) 'The German: Memories and Reflections of a Prisoner of War,' one of the few testimonies of French prisoners of war to be published after the conflict. She draws attention to the ambiguities of this polymorphic work, which ostensibly tries not to contribute to the hatred of the Germans, despite its intention to "essentializ[e] the[ir] character traits" by showing their cruelty and their "néant intérieur" 'inner emptiness.' Torn between a violent subjectivity and an attempt to be objective, between its Catholicism and the French nationalism of the period, the text shows Rivière's original "tussle with his wartime and postwar identities," which aroused conflicting reactions in the postwar context.

Lisa M. Anderson and Cecilia Benaglia both study early and now largely forgotten attempts to deconstruct clichés and standard representations of the Great War through the use of less common genres: drama and short stories. Like many authors such as Jean Cocteau or Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, the work of the German expressionist Ernst Toller describes the shift from an initial juvenile fascination to a deep pacifism on returning from the war. Anderson appeals to many elements (Nazi censorship, focus on Toller's late pacifist novels, the coexistence of many themes in his dramas) to explain why those works were forgotten despite the considerable success they had had. But she also shows in her analysis of a range of plays from 1919 to 1930 why the war can be seen as one of their main themes. Their use of this theme to demonstrate social injustices and the interest the dominant classes had in promoting the war is only one factor among several that justify a re-evaluation of this rich abstract expressionist corpus, a precursor to the wave of realistic literature that so affected the field of testimonial literature in the thirties. Cecilia Benaglia introduces her readers to the work of Marcelle Capy, a French socialist and feminist writer who totally rejected the mainstream adherence to the discourse of the *Union sacrée* 'Sacred Union' (of all social and political tendencies) on the part of most feminist groups. Through a study of *Une voix de femme dans la mêlée* 'A Woman's Voice in the Turmoil,' a collection of Capy's wartime articles that she could only publish finally and fully in 1936 after her earlier attempt (1916) had been frustrated by the censors, Benaglia shows how the use of narration and testimonies in the articles, rather than the political analysis they conveyed, make them unique among 1914-1918 war texts, even if they had little or no success during the conflict. Among her major anti-nationalistic tools is the deconstruction of many wartime clichés, especially those concerning gender, such as the myth of the heroic, virile, and imperturbable French *poilu* (infantryman).

The last three articles in this issue question the importance of genre and the writer's status in the reception and memory of Great War literature. With the outbreak of the war, the ethical dimension of the text, linked to the status of being a witness, often became more important than the literary and aesthetic qualities of the work itself. In her study of *Adorable Clio* (1920), one of the main war narratives by Jean Giraudoux, Flavie Fouchard seeks to rehabilitate the prose-poetic style he chose in opposition to the dominant realism of novels and testimonies. She shows that those six short stories with their indeterminate genre were attacked by critics such as Cru as being unable to convey the reality of the war, because they adopted a poetic way of looking at everyday life at the Front. Giraudoux invented a new way of writing the war by alternating black

humor and irony, metaphorical or lyrical descriptions and the explicit depiction of horrors. He preferred his status as poet to that of *écrivain-combattant* ‘soldier-writer’ to which his battlefield experience entitled him, and he used an original style to convey the ambiguities of this war that so many writers presented in binary terms, bringing together patriotic violence and disgust for war, individual perspective and collective approach. A complementary picture is offered by Nichole T. Gleisner, who notes a major difference between the Francophone and Anglophone worlds in the literary memory of the war. While Britain celebrates its soldier-poets (Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg), French literature has no similar tradition, despite the presence of many major poets at the Front. She explains this oddity through an original historical, cultural, and sociological analysis of the wartime “*champ littéraire*” ‘literary field,’ which invented the figure of the *écrivain-combattant*, showing that testimony formed an integral part of the fighter’s identity as created by the press (particularly trench newspapers) and other institutions. She thereby demonstrates the specificity of the status of *écrivain-combattant*, which paradoxically includes many unknown witnesses of the war while excluding some poets and writers because of their preference for the formal quality of their works over their ethical weight. In the final article of our issue, Susan McCready explains the comparative lack of interest in another major genre of French war literature, namely theater, which was nevertheless extremely popular during and immediately after the war. Noting that Cru’s view of testimonial literature was important in the constitution of our corpus, she demonstrates why narrative forms became almost the only legitimate way to write the war, despite the importance of drama in French cultural life. Through an analysis of many characteristics of dramatic language and scenic potential (e.g. use of non-first-person-centered voices, difficulty of representing war on the stage), she explains the reception of postwar French theater. Her broad perspective also serves to justify the critical rediscovery of this fascinating corpus, which responded in all sorts of ways to the literary crisis intensified by the war. While many playwrights chose commercial theater (propaganda, lyrical and patriotic dramas, etc.), some attempted a modern response to the difficulty of telling the war (self-conscious theatricality instead of dramatic illusion, rejection of the main clichés about war, desire to “test the boundaries of what could be done on stage,” etc.), all of them contributing in a more or less original way to the elaboration of the modern memory of the conflict.

By shedding light on some original responses to the Great War that are today hardly known, and by asking the same questions of many works written in contexts that were radically different, this *STTCL* special issue advocates for

a genuinely comparative approach to World War I literature. Born in a context of nationalist withdrawal, these cultural objects also had a paradoxically wide circulation (due to early translations, commentaries, literary reactions, and so on), which is why the study of these apparently isolated writers is so valuable.

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