

April 2017

## Faculty Focus: The Dark Side of Progress

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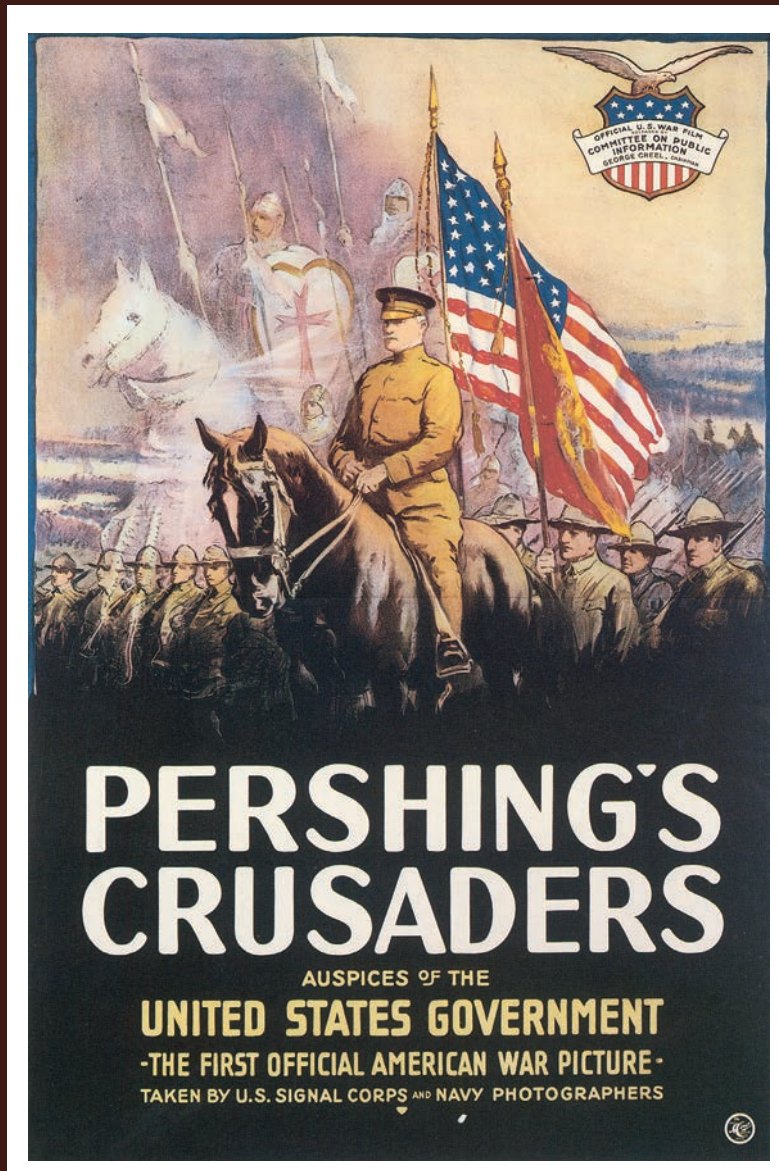
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### Recommended Citation

Hancock, Sarah Caldwell (2017) "Faculty Focus: The Dark Side of Progress," *Seek*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1.

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# The Dark Side of Progress

## English professor Tim Dayton studies, creates archive of American World War I-era poetry

By Sarah Caldwell Hancock

April 6, 2017, marks the centennial of U.S. entry into World War I, a grim chapter of world history. America lost more than, 116,000 soldiers during the war. The loss of life in Europe was even more staggering: Germany and Russia alone lost 3.4 million soldiers. Military and civilian deaths during the war totaled 16.5 million, and 20 million more were wounded. If the total number of American casualties was relatively small, the rate was severe: The vast majority was suffered in just six months.

The scale of loss had pronounced and lingering effects. Tim Dayton, professor of English at Kansas State University, says understanding WWI is central to understanding 20th century culture. Dayton's study of literature and poetry from the period, "American Poetry and the First World War," chronicles a pronounced cultural shift. The book is forthcoming in winter 2017-2018 from Cambridge University Press.

Prior to WWI, poetry tended to be closed-form, following set patterns or structures in terms of rhyme scheme, number of lines or meter, Dayton said. Poetry also was romantic, idealizing its topics, including war. The modern warfare and mass casualties of WWI called into question the idea of noble sacrifice on the battlefield.

"The war amplifies the idea that things don't make sense," Dayton said. "The enormous increase in productive capacity in industrial societies correlates with enormous destructive capacity. Things that make life better also can make life worse."

The dark side of progress led to a struggle in the depiction of war in the literature of the 1920s. "The grounds of judgment change in large part because of reaction to the war," Dayton said.

America's reaction differed from Europe's. Whereas British wartime figures such as Wilfred Owen protested the war through the classics — Owen's best-known poem "Dulce et Decorum Est" exposes "the old lie" that it is "sweet and fitting to die for one's country" — American literature assumed what Dayton calls a deflationary style. Dayton argues this reaction arose from the high-minded reasons Woodrow Wilson and other Americans offered in support of entering the war.

"The U.S. couldn't claim it was defending itself in the war. The

justification was more rhetorical, and more on a moral basis — the Russians could say, 'You must defend the motherland from the Germans;' the Germans could say, 'You must defend the fatherland from the Russians,' and so on. Wilson's justifications for the war were lofty — war to end war, war to make the world safe for democracy — and his prose style was very windy," Dayton said.

According to Dayton, Ernest Hemingway's prose style is one example of an attempt to deflate Wilson's rhetorical speech. Dashiell Hammett provides another example in his prose fiction: He adopted a clipped, direct style devoid of rhetorical flourish.

Dayton discovered his affection for the literature of the post-WWI period while researching his dissertation, which wasn't about the war, and then while teaching undergraduate literature courses at K-State. The Library of Congress online catalog and a bibliography from a dissertation written in the 1960s led him to many forgotten poems. One of his favorite discoveries is "Father Hiram on the World's War," a long poem entirely

in Midwestern dialect. No one had previously written about the poem. Several such instances later, Dayton now has a bibliography of 400 volumes of American poetry — many more than the 120 he started with in his original Library of Congress search results.

Dayton's bibliography forms the basis of another project, a digital archive to allow anyone to access annotated versions of the poems. Although the poetry was usually not written in an elevated style, it can be fairly obscure to modern readers because of historical references, place names and other details, so annotations are helpful. He plans to add biographical and critical introductions for the authors, many of whom published nothing apart from a single volume of war poems.

Dayton is working to obtain funding for the archive, which will be useful for the general public as well as for literature and WWI scholars. He and several graduate students have made good progress; half a dozen volumes are ready for display as soon as a content management system is in place.

The work is valuable for students. "It's a really nice opportunity to teach grad students and some talented undergrads how to do primary research and annotation," he said. [K](#)

