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**MYTHS OF THE**  
**WESTERN FRONT**

by

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Submitted for the degree  
Doctor of Philosophy in International Conflict Analysis  
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### **ABSTRACT**

This thesis is an exploratory essay into ways in which a number of myths have emerged from the experience of those who fought on the Western Front in 1914-1918. The approach adopted comprises a presentation of some of the myths, and an analysis of the ways in which they have been represented in literature.

Three principal myths are identified, and are termed “Loss, Anger and Futility” (LAF), “Renewal through Sacrifice” (RTS) and “Reconciliation and Regeneration” (RR). The first two myths are particular examples of general myths of war, which gave rise to ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ experiences of WW1. RR is a myth of reconciliation which evolved from LAF and RTS, and which, it is suggested, underpins the movement for European unity which gained strength in the post-WW2 years.

The tools used to analyse the expression of the myths through literature are ‘mythic consciousness’, and myth as derived from ‘remembered *communitas*’, or from the ‘retrospective transfiguration of a sacrificial crisis’. The theoretical work from which these concepts arise is due respectively to Ernst Cassirer, Victor Turner and René Girard.

These tools are employed to analyse three groups of writings inspired by the experience of the Western Front. These groups are referred to in the thesis as the ‘First Wave’ (during and soon after the war), the ‘Second Wave’ (around 1930) and the ‘Third Wave’ (post-1990). Within the First and Second Waves, particular attention is given to the writings of Siegfried Sassoon and Ernst Jünger.

The perspective adopted in this thesis suggests that, from a mythological point of view, the Western Front may be seen as the ‘founding murder’ of the present-day European Union.



**Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to  
my wife Hilary, my children Stephen, Tim and Sarah  
and to  
all those colleagues, friends and relations who encouraged me  
to persevere with this project of recovered memory.

*“Myths are the souls of our actions” (Paul Valéry)*

*“Beautiful that war and all its deeds of carnage must in  
time be utterly lost,  
That the hands of the sisters Death and Night  
incessantly softly wash again and again, and ever  
again this soiled world ...” (Walt Whitman: ‘Reconciliation’)*



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I should like to express my thanks to Dr Stefan Rossbach of the Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Kent at Canterbury (UKC), for his thoughtful guidance and supervision of the work reported here. Dr Rossbach also introduced me to the thinking of René Girard and Victor Turner, which provides a vital part of the theoretical basis for my work.

I am grateful to the faculty and graduate student members of the regular departmental Research Training Seminar for their attention and supportive comments. I would especially mention Phil Deans, who first drew my attention to the work of Ernst Cassirer and Ernst Jünger, Professors Clive Church and Andrew Williams, who lent me books, and Chris Taylor, who gave me both enthusiastic encouragement and books in the early stages of the work.

I should like to thank many other people who have listened to my ideas and given me advice, materials or practical help. They include: Richard Brem (ORF, Vienna), on Jünger; Dr. Agnès Cardinal (UKC), who first aroused my interest in myth; Colonel Terry Cave C.B.E. (Hon. Vice-President, Western Front Association), for historical advice and information on military authors; Nigel Cave, especially on Western Front place-names; Richard Churchill; Napier Collyns (Global Business Network, Emeryville, California); Dr. Mark Connelly (UKC); Michael Copp (Cambridge University) and members of the weekend programme 'The Great War in Literature', Cambridge, March 1997; Dr Victor Friedman (Ruppin Institute, Israel); Stuart Hall (Brighton: a translator of Jünger); Professor Kees van der Heijden (Strathclyde University) on the 'makes-sense' epistemology; Pat Hocking and Shirley Egarr, (both of Melbourne, Australia), and others who have sent me diaries from relatives who served in WW1; Derek and Leonie Holgate (of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Battlefield Tours, Betchworth, Surrey) and other companions on the 'Somme: Poetry and Prose' tour, October 1997; Professor Beatrice Heuser (King's College, London); Dr John King (Oxford) and members of the Jünger Internet 'list' which he manages; Kathy Kunst (Berkeley, California); Dr Arthur Macadam; the late Professor (emeritus) Donald Michael (San Francisco); Professor Patrick Quinn (University of Northampton) and others associated with the *Mars in Ascendant* conference on WW1 held at Northampton in August 2001; Heide Rieger (Marburg, Germany), who traced poems by Rilke for me; Professor Janet Sayers (UKC); Professor Ben-Ami Scharfstein (Tel Aviv University); and members of my family: my sister Christine Wales (Brighton) and son Dr Stephen Galer (Mainz, Germany) both of whom helped with translation from German; my cousin Brian Galer (Malvern) and late uncle Leon Galer (London), who edited the diary of Guy Buckeridge and made it available to me. Finally, I am grateful for the memories, some in written form, some oral, of late relatives of mine who served on the Western Front and who all, mercifully, survived, in some cases through horrendous experiences: my maternal grandfather Ernest Cady, his son my uncle William Cady, my uncle by marriage Guy Buckeridge and father-in-law Robert Peryer.



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## **Chapter 1** **Introduction**

### **Contents**

1. *Thesis topic and research design*
2. *The 'Western Front'*
3. *The 'battles'*
- 4.. *How the Western Front was experienced*
5. *Memory and myth: the myths of the Western Front.*
6. *Myth and literature*
7. *Outline of thesis*

**1. Thesis topic and research design.** My research interest is the way in which West Europeans remember and commemorate World War 1, and in particular that part of it which was fought on the Western Front, in France and Flanders. As one who was a child during WW2, and grew up in the post-war years, I nevertheless feel that WW1, even more than WW2, continues in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to cast a shadow over the lives of many people. On the war memorials which are to be found in villages and towns throughout the UK, France, and other countries, the lists of the casualties of WW1 are normally far longer than those for WW2. As one author has said:

“The Great War has haunted our century: it haunts us still. It continues to inspire imaginative endeavour of the highest order. It invites pilgrimage and commemoration surrounded by palpable sadness. Eighty years after the war, ‘The Last Post’, intoned every evening at the Menin Gate in Ypres, still summons tears. We wish it all had not happened”.<sup>1</sup>

I suggest that the nature of this ‘haunting’ and of the feelings lying behind it deserve to be better understood. It could be, of course, that if all the modern methods of communication (e.g. printing, film, TV, the Internet etc.) had been in existence at such times as those of the Norman Conquest or the Napoleonic wars, these historic events would have seized the national imagination as forcefully as the memory of WW1 now does for many people. Perhaps they did so at the time, and no doubt the memory of WW1, like the memories of these much earlier wars, will eventually fade away into ‘history’. It may be that we are at the point where this is beginning to happen, evidenced in the groups of English schoolchildren who can be seen visiting the trenches of the Western Front as part of their studies.

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<sup>1</sup> Modris Eksteins; “Memory and the Great War”, in Hew Strachan (ed); *Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p305.



But the feeling persists among many people that WW1, and to a lesser extent WW2, its successor in the European civil wars of the twentieth century, was an especially terrible and portentous experience for the countries of Western Europe, and that its shadow still falls, 80 and more years later, over the lives of present-day Europeans. I am of a generation whose grandparents, and in some cases parents, fought in WW1 and, like some of the writers whose work is discussed in Chapter 7, I wish to understand better the effect that that war had on their lives, on the lives of their contemporaries, and consequently on the lives of later generations.

I am also interested in the way in which society creates myths which, by giving meaning to the experience of the past, help to stabilise and validate the present-day social order. Myths of this kind are, in this way, 'constitutive' of the social order. In particular, I believe that the myths of the Western Front are still alive and continue to affect attitudes to European development, and are in this way constitutive of the social and political order of modern Europe.

A myth, in my preferred definition, is " ... a fiction, but a fiction which conveys a psychological truth".<sup>2</sup> Myth may be derived from remembered experience, and may be seen as one of the foundations of social order, since myths, especially national myths, can be a major factor in defining identity and in determining the attitudes which in turn condition actions. For examples of the power of myth to influence practical politics it is only necessary to look at Nazi Germany, Serbia since the break-up of Yugoslavia, and the British 'Eurosceptics' of the present day. The experience of those who lived through the fighting on the Western Front during the years 1914 to 1918 has, I believe, become incorporated into a modern mythology, and these myths are among the constitutive myths of present-day Europe, of which it is possible to see WW1, and especially the fighting on the Western Front, as the 'founding murder'.

The present thesis is an exploratory essay into these topics. Although I reach some conclusions, which are presented in Chapter 8, my methodology is not that of proposing hypotheses and testing them through case studies or otherwise. Instead, the approach I adopt is descriptive and analytical, covering a presentation of some of the myths which I believe have come down to us, and an analysis of the ways in which

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<sup>2</sup> *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, (London: Penguin Books (third edition), 1992), p562.



they have been represented in literature. Although other scholars in International Relations have discussed aspects of myth (some of this work is briefly reviewed in chapter 2), my thesis is unusual, perhaps pioneering, in the importance it assigns to myth as constitutive of social order, and in the depth to which it conducts the analysis of the myths which are its principal focus.

My research design has three building blocks. The first of these comprises the myths themselves, while the second is based on a review of some theories of myth, resulting in the choice of certain tools of analysis which I believe are especially appropriate for application to the myths of the Western Front. The third building block is a body of literature which, I believe, has been one of the principal means through which the myths have been expressed and disseminated.

The first building block contains three myths, which I term “Loss, Anger and Futility” (LAF), “Renewal through Sacrifice” (RTS) and “Reconciliation and Regeneration” (RR). The first two of these myths are particular examples of general myths of war, based on the notions that war is always both “tragic and unbearably sad” and at the same time “noble and uplifting”,<sup>3</sup> these notions giving rise to what have been called ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ experiences of WW1. RR is a myth of reconciliation which evolved from LAF and RTS, and which I believe underlies the movement for European unity which has gained strength greatly in the post-WW2 years. I rely on various authorities for the identification of these myths, but my specific articulation of them (in section 5 of the present chapter) uses my own words, though combined with words taken from the work of various writers and politicians. In section 5 of Chapter 2 I consider some alternative myths which have been proposed by various writers. While not denying the authenticity of these alternatives, I concentrate my attention on LAF, RTS and RR, mainly because of the general principles of which they are specific manifestations, and of the ways in which each may be seen as constitutive of modern Europe.

The second building block for the thesis comprises the tools I employ as a means of analysing the expression of the myths in the literature I have selected for study. Since literature often does not directly express myth, but indirectly implies it through a meta-narrative, or uses it as a framework, it is helpful to have devices which

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<sup>3</sup> Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning, ; the Great War in European Cultural History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p85.



give some structure to a literary discussion. The tools I have chosen to employ, following an investigation which is reported in Chapter 3, are of 'mythic consciousness' and of myth as derived from 'remembered *communitas*' or from the 'retrospective transfiguration of a sacrificial crisis'. The work from which these concepts derive is due principally to Ernst Cassirer, Victor Turner and René Girard. Many other scholars have developed theories of myth, but I find these three of particular value in the case of the specific myths in which I am interested. Cassirer's concept of 'mythic consciousness', through which rational thinking can co-exist with fantasies related to emotional need, is, although it is a principle capable of general application, especially relevant to the divergence of the LAF myth of the Western Front from what many contemporary historians take to be the 'truth' of those events. Turner's 'remembered *communitas*' as a source of myth has explanatory power in circumstances where so much of the mythology of the Western Front – both LAF and RTS - derives from memories of the comradeship of men thrown by the circumstances of war into extreme experiences. Girard's model of society is based on mimesis, with 'myth, ritual and prohibition' as the devices employed to enforce social order, myth having arisen through the 'retrospective transfiguration of a sacrificial crisis' which has been carried out in order to avoid worse violence. His concepts fit very well a situation in which my interest is in the constitutive function of the myths I am investigating, and in which WW1 has been widely seen as the 'sacrifice' of, or by, a generation of young men.

My approach is not to critique the validity of any of these theories of myth, or to compare them with alternative theories, but to accept them as reliable, so that they may be used for a practical purpose.

The third building block of my research – the literature – comprises a large number of books, of both prose and poetry, written over a period of, by now, over 80 years. A number of novels ('fictionalised autobiographies' would better describe many of them) based on life on the Western Front were published during WW1 or soon after its end, and much of the 'war poetry' was published at about this time. Later came the 'war-book boom' of around 1930, when numerous writers, nearly all war veterans, felt the need to describe their experiences on the Western Front and, in some cases and to some degree, to articulate their feelings about the war and their part in it. A further manifestation of the memory of the war came from 1990 onwards



(although with some precursors) with the publication of many more novels which retold in various ways the story of the Western Front. For clarity of exposition, I refer to these three differently-inspired groups of writings as the 'First Wave' (during and soon after the war), the 'Second Wave' (around 1930) and the 'Third Wave' (post-1990).

Many scholars have identified the widespread acceptance of the 'liberal experience' of WW1 (i.e. the LAF myth) with the influence of the 'war poets' and of the perceived 'anti-war' writers of the Second Wave. In other words, the LAF myth is mostly seen as having had its main expression through literature, including poetry. This is consistent with my preferred definition of myth as " ... a fiction which conveys a psychological truth", the 'psychological truth' in this case lying in the feelings and emotions about the war which many of these writers conveyed. For this reason, I have adopted literature as the main focus of my research, while recognising that this is not by any means the only way through which society develops its myths. By 'literature' I mean novels, poetry and autobiography, of recognised literary quality<sup>4</sup> and, in order to categorise First or Second Wave works as of 'literary quality' or not, I have mostly relied on the judgement of literary critics, such as Bergonzi, Hynes and Linder.<sup>5</sup> This reliance has not always been possible for the Third Wave writers, where I have had to rely to a greater extent on my own judgement of 'quality'. In this way I have developed a personal canon of literature of the three 'Waves', within which, for reasons which I explain later, I have in my research focused on the writings of Siegfried Sassoon, as exemplifying the LAF myth, and Ernst Jünger, who has become associated with the RTS myth. In both these cases I wish to place their work in the context of later novels and poetry by other authors, and to employ my chosen theories of myth-formation to analyse the ways in which the writers and their work have been perceived over the years. In this way, I hope to uncover some of the processes by which 'experience' becomes 'myth'. In reviewing the work of a small group of Third Wave writers, none of whom were alive during WW1 I consider, using the same analytical tools, the ways in which they describe the

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<sup>4</sup> 'Literary quality' is a matter of opinion, of course, and some works are included in my canon, and in the canon of many critics, which may not have very high literary value (in the sense of the calibre of the writing, characterisation, range of allusion, imagination etc.) but which had a substantial effect on the reading public. Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* is a case in point.

<sup>5</sup> Relevant work of these writers and others is noted in the Bibliography.



experiences of their characters, and seek the emergence of new myth, or new ways of expressing pre-existing myth.

Summarising the above: I have conducted research into the myths themselves, into the theory of myth, and into the literature through which the myths have been expressed. From the many ways in which myth has been theorised, I have selected three which I regard as being most appropriate to the particular myths in which I am interested, and I have used these as tools of analysis in order to study some selected literature. The thesis is an account of this programme of exploration.

**2. The 'Western Front'.** The term 'Western Front' was first used during the war of 1914-1918 by the Germans, to distinguish it from the eastern front, on which they were fighting the Russians. The French at first spoke of the *Front Francais*, but later all the allies, as well as the Germans, came to use the now familiar term.<sup>6</sup>

The trenches of the Western Front were born from the failure of the 'Schlieffen Plan', under which in the first phase of the war German forces would trap the French army by encircling Paris from the north and west, subsequently taking the Channel ports. In the event the Germans, weakened by the lack of reserves, which had been drawn off by the demands of the Eastern Front, were out-maneuvred and subsequently halted at the battle of the Marne, 5-8 September 1914. Both sides then dug in on a line which by November 1914 extended for some 400 miles, from the English Channel to the Swiss frontier.

The Western Front divided directionally into three sections, running roughly north-south from Ostend on the Belgian coast to Noyon in France; west-east from Noyon to Verdun, and south-east from Verdun to Belfort, the major French garrison town in Alsace.<sup>7</sup> Most of the major engagements on the Western Front before the final offensives of 1918 took place in its upper two sectors, much of the terrain in the southern sector being less suitable for large-scale operations. Indeed, some authors include only the upper two sectors in their maps and discussion of the Western Front.<sup>8</sup>

The essentially defensive positions of the Western Front remained little changed from late-1914 until the last days of the war, and provided the environment within which

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<sup>6</sup> John Laffin, *Panorama of the Western Front*, (London, Grange Books, 1994), p1.

<sup>7</sup> John Laffin, *Panorama*, p1.

<sup>8</sup> Examples: Malcom Brown, *The Imperial War Museum Book of the Somme*, (London, Pan Books 1996), p.xxxiv; and Martin Stephen, *Never Such Innocence: a New Anthology of Great War Verse*, (London, Buchan and Enwright, 1988), pp16,17.



men of many nations serving in the armies of France, Germany, Belgium, the British Empire and, from 1917 onwards, the United States, lived, fought and died. The early war of movement had turned into a *Stellungskrieg*, “... a war of attrition in which both sides were intent on total victory”.<sup>9</sup> As Laffin puts it: (in terms coloured by one of the myths which are the subject of this thesis):

“The Western Front, in the years 1914 to 1918, was the most infamous military killing ground in the history of war. The shocking toll of casualties, the ineptitude of most of the senior military leaders, the ferocity of the conflict, the horror of life in the trenches and the statistics of destruction have engendered as great a bibliography of the Western Front as that for the entire world-wide six-year history of the Second World War between 1939 and 1945”.<sup>10</sup>

In the minds of most people, at least of most British people, ‘The First World War’ appears to be almost synonymous with ‘The Western Front’. This perception is clearly factually mistaken since, for example, Russia and Italy were also major participants in WW1 and suffered casualties of 6.8m. and over 2m. respectively, although neither country committed troops to fight in France or Flanders.<sup>11</sup> Also, of course, land forces were engaged in several other parts of the world, and not only the armies of the combatants, but also their navies and air forces, played a vital role in the war.

But it was through the activities of the armies on the Western Front that most of the people of Britain, France, Belgium and to a lesser extent Germany experienced, WW1, either directly or indirectly. (Since I am concerned with the European memory of the war I make little reference to the enormous sacrifice and contribution made by troops from Australia, Canada, India, Morocco, Newfoundland, New Zealand, South Africa, the USA and other countries who fought on the Western Front). For that reason the national memories of WW1 in those countries are largely concerned with the Western Front, mention of which evokes images of heroism, of the years of stagnation and suffering in and around the trenches, and of the epic engagements - Verdun, the Somme, Passchendaele and many others - which took place there.

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<sup>9</sup> Frank Field, *Three French Writers and the Great War: Barbusse, Drieu la Rochelle, Bernanos*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1975), p36.

<sup>10</sup> Laffin, *Panorama*, p1.

<sup>11</sup> Figures quoted in Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1998) p296. However, nationals of these countries, including the Italian ‘Garibaldi Brigades’, fought on the Western Front and are commemorated in some of the cemeteries.



3. **The 'battles'**. The warfare that took place on the Western Front is conventionally analysed in terms of 'battles' as, in Holt's cutting words, "... every so often the enemies lumbered dinosaur-like into battle against each other and engaged in periods of ferocious killing that were graced with distinctive names".<sup>12</sup> These battles play an important part in the mythology of the Western Front which subsequently developed.

The characterisation of a period of intense fighting as a 'battle', and the significance - military or otherwise - accorded to individual battles, varies according to the point of view of the observer, including his or her nationality, position in the military or civilian hierarchy, and personal experience. For example, Holt in his list of "fifteen of the most significant" battles, devotes a chapter to the Franco-German battle of Verdun (which lasted for 10 months in 1916), but otherwise deals only with engagements in which British or American forces were involved.<sup>13</sup> By contrast, a German source gives prominence to the October 1914 battle of Langemarck, which to the British was part only of 'First Ypres'.<sup>14</sup> Again, the German writer Ernst Jünger writes at length of the later 'battle of Langemarck' in 1917 which to the British is subsidiary to 'Third Ypres'.<sup>15</sup> And in a popular French history magazine the year 1916, which in British memory is scarred almost exclusively with 'The Somme', is "L'année de Verdun".<sup>16</sup>

The battles which loom largest in most accounts of WW1, including the literary writings which are the subject of my research, are 'Verdun', 'The Somme' and 'Passchendaele'. 'Verdun' was launched in 1916 by the Germans with the objective of wearing down French manpower, while 'the Somme', a 'big push' by the Allies in the same year, was seen in part as a means of diverting German resources and hence taking some of the pressure away from the French at Verdun. Indeed, the French commander-in-chief, General Joffre, at first saw the British participation in the Somme as a *bataille d'usure*, aimed at attrition of their German opponents rather than

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<sup>12</sup> Tonie and Valmai Holt, *Battlefields of the First World War: a Travellers' Guide*, (London, Parkgate Books, 1998), p28.

<sup>13</sup> Holt, *Battlefields*, Introduction. The book contains chapters on each of the 15 battles.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.dradio.de/dlf/sendungen/feldpost/begleitung>, July 2000.

<sup>15</sup> Ernst Jünger, tr. Basil Creighton. *The Storm of Steel: from the Diary of a German Storm-troop Officer on the Western Front (In Stahlgewittern)*, (London: Chatto and Windus 1929. Reprint, with Foreword by Paddy Griffith. London: Constable, 1994), p161ff.

<sup>16</sup> *Historia*, Hors série No. 8, 10 March 1968.



at advance into the French territory they were holding. Winston Churchill, writing in almost mythical terms, saw the similarities between these two battles:

“The anatomy of the battles of Verdun and the Somme was the same. A battlefield had been selected. Around this battlefield walls were built ... of enormous cannon. Behind these railways were constructed to feed them, and mountains of shells were built up. ... Thus the battlefield was completely encircled by thousands of guns of all sizes, and a wide oval space prepared in their midst. Through this awful arena all the divisions of each army, battered ceaselessly by the enveloping artillery, were made to pass in succession, as if they were the teeth of interlocking cog-wheels grinding each other”.<sup>17</sup>

The three battles of Ypres were fought for command of the Ypres salient, capture of which was seen by the Germans early in the war as a step towards their major objective of reaching the Channel ports. ‘Third Ypres’, more often known as ‘Passchendaele’ was launched by the British at the end of July 1917 and is particularly remembered for the mud and rain which, over 16 weeks of fighting, turned the battlefield into a horrendous quagmire. It was General Haig’s perseverance with this campaign in spite of dreadful casualties which earned him the title of ‘Butcher’.

A few casualty figures give an idea of the significance of these battles in human terms:

-At the battle of the Somme in 1916 there were some 600,000 casualties on each side.

-On the first day alone of the battle of the Somme 20,000 British troops were killed, representing 60% of all the officers and 40% of the men engaged. The Somme memorial at Thiepval commemorates 72,085 British and South African men who have no known grave.<sup>18</sup>

-On the Verdun battlefield total French and German casualties in 1916 totalled 709,000, of whom 305,000 were killed.<sup>19</sup>

-After 16 weeks of fighting at Passchendaele in 1917, British losses were over 300,000 and German losses, “ ... never published, variously estimated at between 65,000 and 260,000”.<sup>20</sup> “More British soldiers died on the Ypres salient per square metre than anywhere else in the world.”<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis 1911-1918*, (abridged and revised edition, London: Macmillan, 1931, reprinted 1943), pp649-650.

<sup>18</sup> Figures from Henry Cowper et al, *World war I and its consequences*, (Open University Press, 1990), Martin Gilbert, *First World War Atlas*, (London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1970).

<sup>19</sup> Figures from Ian Ousby, *The Road to Verdun: France, Nationalism and the First World War*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002), p5.

<sup>20</sup> Tonic and Valmai Holt, *Battlefields of the First World War*, p93.

<sup>21</sup> Statement from ‘In Flanders Fields’ museum guide, (Ypres, 2000) p4.



Ashworth distinguishes between such “ ... intermittent, large-scale battles, where one side attacked the other, striving to kill the enemy, capture his trenches, and break through them into the open ground behind” from “ ... continuous but small-scale attacks where each side aggressed the other in a multitude of ways, while remaining mostly in their respective trenches”, asserting that the latter, which he terms “trench warfare” was the way in which most soldiers experienced the war for most of the time.<sup>22</sup>

‘Attrition’ and ‘perseverance’ were the principal themes, not only of the three major battles, but of the whole experience of the war on the Western Front, which eventually became a *Materialschlacht* - a contest based on resources. On one view the struggle came to an end only when the Americans tipped the balance against the Central Powers with the huge resources which they poured into the Western Front from 1917 onwards.

**4. How the Western Front was experienced.** The war on the Western Front was experienced differently by different groups of people. These groups included front-line troops, personnel working in support (e.g. medical staff, signallers and those responsible for supply and logistics), generals and their staff officers, families and friends at home, civilians in the local population, civilians in the home populations of the warring countries, politicians in these countries, and the people of other, non-combatant, nations. These are just a few of the categories which can be identified as sharing in some way in the events of those times.

My interest in this thesis is focused on the direct experience of those who were, for at least some of the time, actively involved in the fighting or in support operations close to the front, and in the ways in which this experience became transmuted into myth.

While these men and women were all members of the military or related services of Belgium, the British Empire, France, Germany and the USA, they comprised a range of nationalities and ethnic groups. For example, the French army included French colonial forces and volunteers from (French) Switzerland, while there were (Belgian) Flemish units in the Germany army. The Belgian army was largely

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<sup>22</sup> Tony Ashworth, *Trench Warfare 1914-1918; the Live and Let Live System*, (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1980), p2.



officered by (French-speaking) Walloons, while the troops tended to be Flemish.<sup>23</sup> The British Empire forces comprised units from all over the empire, including not only the 'old, white' dominions but also India and other territories. Italians and Russians also fought on the Western Front, and Chinese labourers were brought in for trench construction and other support activities.

Some soldiers were fighting in and for their homeland, while some were half a world away from home; some were in familiar cultural surroundings, others in a culture, and climate, which was strange to them. Some were willing volunteers in a great cause, others conscripted more or less unwillingly. Among the soldiers of the three European nations principally involved on the Western Front:

"The French had no doubt that they were defending the sacred soil of France. The British were not at all sure what they were fighting for: they were there because they were there ... The Germans initially believed that they were defending the Fatherland against the Entente that encircled them and was bent on their destruction. On the Somme in 1916 they saw themselves as defending not only their own country but also French civilians against a brutal British assault."<sup>24</sup>

These complexities led to a corresponding complexity in the pattern of response to the experience of living and fighting on the Western Front. Some experienced the war as an obscenity of death and degradation, while others, for at least some of the time, found it to be a time of exhilarating adventure. But all shared a common experience; of life in the trenches, and the war in general, as a 'trap' from which, having once entered, they were unable to escape except through desperate measures.<sup>25</sup> The elements of life in this trap included, at different times and places, coping with mud, squalor, cold, hunger and being shelled and/or shot at; sometimes 'going over the top', seeing comrades killed or wounded, becoming confused and disoriented, perhaps 'shell-shocked'; enjoying relief periods behind the front, going on home leave, comradeship, experiencing inspiring or poor leadership, and of course

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<sup>23</sup> Information from Profs. A.J. Groom, C.H. Church, Research Training Seminar, Dept of Politics and International Relations, University of Kent, June 14, 2000.

<sup>24</sup> Prof Martin Kitchen, Department of History, Simon Fraser University, British Columbia. From BBC website [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/war/wwone/german\\_experience\\_02.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/war/wwone/german_experience_02.shtml), October 12 2002.

<sup>25</sup> See Chapter 19, 'The Trap of the Trenches', in Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: a Moral History of the Twentieth Century*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000).



living through a range of emotions of which boredom and anticipatory fear were among the most common.

Direct experience of life in the trenches was shared by many of the literary writers whose work I shall be discussing. For example, the Englishman Siegfried Sassoon established an outstanding record for bravery during his service in the British army on the Western Front, being awarded the MC and recommended (though unsuccessfully) for the VC.<sup>26</sup> The German Ernst Jünger enlisted as soon as possible at the beginning of the war and rapidly proved himself to be an outstanding young infantry officer, “noted in particular for his involvement in the *Stoßtruppen*, the commando troops whose tactical innovation was designed to break the deadlock of positional (i.e. trench) warfare.”<sup>27</sup> At the end of the war Jünger had accumulated 14 wounds, and had been awarded the Iron Cross first class and the Pour le Mérite, Germany’s highest military honour. The Frenchman Henri Barbusse, although initially exempted from military service on grounds of ill-health, later volunteered (at age 41), and “... conducted himself with exemplary courage at the front”.<sup>28</sup> He received several citations for bravery, and was awarded the Croix de Guerre.

The different responses of these writers to an essentially similar range of experiences helped, in my view, to form the myths which I wish to explore. The myths were then taken up and used as the basis for more imaginative writing by a further group of writers, which I have designated the ‘Third Wave’ (see Chapter 4), most of whom were born long after the end of the First (and, in some cases, the Second) World War.

**5. Memory and myth: the myths of the Western Front.** A character in Barbusse’s *Under Fire (Le Feu)* expresses the belief that “... the work of the future will be to wipe out the present ... to wipe it out like something abominable and shameful”. Front soldiers have “... seen too much to remember”.<sup>29</sup> Many soldiers, returning from the Western Front, felt that they had to attempt to forget what they had been

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<sup>26</sup> Military Cross and Victoria Cross. The VC is the highest British military decoration for bravery.

<sup>27</sup> From John King, “Ernst Jünger and the First World War: History and the Crisis of Theory and Language”, [www.sjc.ox.ac.uk/users/king/ju](http://www.sjc.ox.ac.uk/users/king/ju) (1999).

<sup>28</sup> Field, *Three French Writers and the Great War*, pp33-34.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted and discussed in Geoff Dyer, *The Missing of the Somme*, pp16,17. Barbusse’s contribution to the mythology of the Western Front is discussed in Chapter 5 of this thesis.



through, and it took an early Freudian like the pioneering psychiatrist W.H.R. Rivers to recognise the therapeutic importance of facing up to the memories of what had actually been experienced, as a means of dealing with phenomena like the 'battle nightmares' which the victims of war neurosis so often suffered.<sup>30</sup> European society as a whole faced up to the issue of remembering WW1 in part by building war memorials, as " ... war memorials have been central to the history of European architecture and public sculpture. They have been important symbols of national pride. ... War memorials were places where people grieved, both individually and collectively ..."<sup>31</sup> Another manifestation of societal memory is the mythology which has grown out of the war, based on the stories which have been told, and are still being told, about it. These stories, some of them first-hand accounts of personal experience, others literary creations, help to give meaning to the war to those who survived it and to those who came afterwards.

Many stories have come down to us about the experiences of those who fought on the Western Front. One such is the '*Langemarck-Legende*' of 1914, which recounts the *Studentenschlacht*, in which young *Kriegsfreiwilligen* marched heroically into battle singing '*Deutschland, Deutschland, über Alles*', only to be mown down mercilessly by British machine guns.<sup>32</sup>

A further remarkable example is the tale of the *tranchée des baïonnettes*, which tells how:

"The 3<sup>rd</sup> company of the 137<sup>th</sup> French Infantry Regiment was wiped out on 12 June 1916, in a ravine between Thiaumont and Douaumont. After this engagement, the trench they had occupied was found to have been completely filled in. Protruding from the earth at regular intervals were a number of bayonets, beneath which were the remains of the men of this unit. Legend had it that they had stayed at their posts until buried alive ..."<sup>33</sup>

Another familiar tale is that of the Angels of Mons, which were supposed to have been seen in the sky over Mons in August 1914, protecting the British retreat. A clearly fictional origin can be traced for this tale (starting with a short story in the London *Evening News*), but because it was so clearly connected with the hopes and

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<sup>30</sup> Further discussed in Chapter 7, the (historical) Rivers being also a character in Pat Barker's *Regeneration*.

<sup>31</sup> Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, p79.

<sup>32</sup> Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, p.70.

<sup>33</sup> Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, p99.



fears of the retreating troops and their families, it became widely accepted and, as Fussell says, "it became unpatriotic, almost treasonable, to doubt it".<sup>34</sup>

Perhaps most frequently retold is the story of the Christmas 'truce' of 1914, when soldiers from both sides sang their national carols, emerged from the trenches to exchange gifts and greetings, and played football together.<sup>35</sup>

These stories are folk tales, or legends. They may be substantially true, or at least contain a kernel of historical truth, which has become embellished and overlaid in the telling, and they usually concern specific episodes which are supposed to have taken place during the war. For example, the 'Christmas truce' of 1914 is well documented and discussed by numerous authors.<sup>36</sup> Of games of football, however, Eksteins states that "... no convincing evidence exists that such an event took place".<sup>37</sup> Although the 3<sup>rd</sup> company of the 137<sup>th</sup> French Infantry regiment was undoubtedly defending a position in the Ravin de la Dame near Douaumont on 12 June 1916, it seems, from the accounts of survivors, highly unlikely that those who died did so as the legend supposed.<sup>38</sup> Mosse asserts that the '*Langemarck-Legende*' was a distorted account of what happened, in that only 18% of those who fought there were students or teachers, the battle was fought at Bixchote, not Langemarck, and the encounter was a failure for the Germans. The soldiers probably did not even sing the *Deutschlandlied*.<sup>39</sup> The British 'machine guns', too, were actually massed rifle fire at 15 rounds or more per man per minute.<sup>40</sup>

By contrast to folk tales and legends, myths are also stories, but of a character which is both broader and deeper. They are told by many people, and can exist in many variants.

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<sup>34</sup> Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp.115-6.

<sup>35</sup> The modern cultural relevance of the 'Christmas Truce' is discussed in Chapter 7.

<sup>36</sup> Notably in Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, (London: Bantam Press, 1989) especially pp109-114; Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: a Moral History of the Twentieth Century*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), pp159-164; Tony Ashworth, *Trench warfare 1914-1918: the live and let live system*, (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1980), p24ff; Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001) and Malcolm Brown and Shirley Seaton, *Christmas Truce*, (London: Pan Books, 2001).

<sup>37</sup> Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, p113.

<sup>38</sup> Ousby, *The Road to Verdun*, pp266, 267.

<sup>39</sup> Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, pp 70, 71.

<sup>40</sup> Private communication: letter to the author from Colonel Terry Cave, C.B.E., Honorary Vice-President, the Western Front Association, Jan 21 2002.



Linder identifies two principal myths arising from WW1.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps it is not surprising that there should be two (and not three, four or more) over-arching myths of the war, since they essentially represent the truths that war can be at the same time both “noble and uplifting” and “tragic and unbearably sad”.<sup>42</sup> In this sense, these myths are archetypical of the general myths of war.

The first myth is a story of loss, anger and futility, underlying and growing from the work of such writers as Sassoon and Owen. Expressed in British terms, but seen to some degree also, *mutatis mutandis*, in the work of German and French writers such as Erich-Maria Remarque and Henri Barbusse, this myth could be expressed as follows:

*‘WW1 was a terrible tragedy in which a whole generation of our best young men was lost. It was fought mainly in the trenches of Flanders, with one disastrous side-show at Gallipoli. The war itself was probably un-necessary, and the losses incurred would have been much less had the military leadership been less incompetent. Our young soldiers were ‘lions led by donkeys’. The human and economic losses we bore brought about the beginning of Britain’s long slide from world power to our present state of relative impotence and economic decline. This was the first ‘industrial’ war, in which industrial methods of slaughter were used against troops unprovided with adequate defence. It marked a major divide in time between the pre-war and post-war social organisation and consciousness’.*

Linder refers to this as the “liberal experience” of the war, quoting Leed, who confronts it with a “conservative” experience.<sup>43</sup> If one epithet only were permitted, I would prefer to call it the ‘futility’ myth although, as indicated above, I believe that ‘Loss, Anger and Futility’ (LAF) captures its content better. Linder, this time quoting Hynes, also designates it the ‘British’ myth, which speaks of “... a damaged nation of damaged men, damaged institutions, and damaged hopes and faiths.” Linder asserts that this myth has become “pervasive” in Anglo-American literary criticism.<sup>44</sup>

Wohl gives a variant of the LAF myth, focusing on the experience of the British upper classes. He states -

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<sup>41</sup> Ann P. Linder, *Princes of the Trenches*, (Columbia, SC, Camden House, 1996), pp1-2.

<sup>42</sup> Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, p85.

<sup>43</sup> Ann P. Linder, *Princes of the trenches*, (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1996), p2, referring to Eric J. Leed, *No Man’s Land: Combat and Identity in World War 1*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1979), p25.

<sup>44</sup> Linder, *Princes of the Trenches*, p2, quoting Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture*, (London: The Bodley Head, 1990), p353.



*“There is a legend about the history of twentieth-century England. Like all legends, it exists in many variants and was the product of many minds. Though it is nowhere written down in its entirety, fragments of it are to be found in many books and it lives in the national memory and the oral tradition. It goes something like this. Once upon a time, before the Great war, there lived a generation of young men of unusual abilities. Strong, brave, and beautiful, they combined great athletic prowess with deep classical learning. ... When the war broke out, they volunteered for service in the fighting forces and did whatever they could to hasten their training and transfer to the field of battle. ... Most of them were killed on the battlefields of Gallipoli, Ypres, Loos, the Somme, Passchendaele, and Cambrai. Those who were not killed were mutilated in mind and body. They limped home in 1919 to find that their sacrifice had been in vain. The hard-faced, hard-hearted old men had come back and seized the levers of power. ... The peace was lost; English hegemony in the world was lost; the empire was lost ... Eventually a second war came to seal the disaster of the first, and England slipped pusillanimously into the category of second-rate powers. All might have been different if only the splendid young men of 1914 had not given up their lives on the fields of Flanders and the beaches of Gallipoli. This myth had its origins in a disillusioning experience shared by many Englishmen of the privileged classes ...”*<sup>45</sup>

While this is a cogent formulation, I believe that it is best thought of as a variant to the LAF myth as I expressed it above, since the former version arose from the experience of all those, of all nationalities, who fought on the Western Front, including especially those small groups of men, definitely not of the ‘privileged classes’, with whom writers like Sassoon empathised so strongly.

Although the LAF myth of the Western Front is well-established, other views are possible. At the most general level, it may be argued that all myths can contain their opposites,<sup>46</sup> and the general nature of the LAF myth certainly tends to lead one to construct an ‘opposing’ version. And indeed, “It would not be difficult in fact to compile a thick anthology of first-hand accounts of the war that testify to its having been a positive, even life-enhancing experience.”<sup>47</sup>

The quality of the myth associated with the experience of the war which is termed “conservative” by Leed is well captured in Linder’s words - “... a myth of spiritual survival through comradeship, and of individual and national renewal

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<sup>45</sup> Robert Wohl, *The Generation of 1914*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1980), p85.

<sup>46</sup> “... that Greek thing that, with any myth, the opposite is also true. ... It chimes with our ironic, late 20<sup>th</sup> century sensibility ...”. (Sir Peter Hall, quoted in the *Guardian*, Feb 12 1999).

<sup>47</sup> *A Muse of Fire*, A D Harvey, Hambledon Press, 1998, p99.



through a community of comrades".<sup>48</sup> For brevity, one might call it the myth of 'Renewal through Sacrifice' (RTS). It seems that it emerged in the wake of the controversy which followed publication of Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* in 1928,<sup>49</sup> and, it has become particularly associated with the writings of Ernst Jünger. Some aspects of the myth are found in other writers - e.g. Ferguson quotes Guy Chapman and Teilhard de Chardin on "war as adventure"<sup>50</sup> - but it is in the writing of Jünger that, in literature, the myth finds its fullest expression. The RTS myth could be articulated as follows:

*'The 1914-1918 war was the inevitable consequence of rivalries for economic and military dominance among the European powers – principally France, Germany, Russia and the UK – which grew during the 50 or so years preceding it, and of the mutual fears which that rivalry engendered. A series of treaty obligations ensured that war was bound to follow the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia caused by the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand in July 1914. A European war had been widely anticipated and its outbreak was welcomed by enthusiastic crowds in Berlin, London and Paris. The story of the human race is war. The norm of relations between groups is not peace, but war, and except for brief and precarious interludes there has never been peace in the world.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, war is an activity fundamental to the human spirit, and in it man can realise his highest potential.<sup>52</sup> As well as liberating the nation in political terms, it can liberate the individual in spiritual terms.<sup>53</sup> The comradeship of the trenches was an experience that those who went through it will never forget. The soldiers on both sides were fighting for a cause they thought to be right and, although they underwent horrific experiences and suffered terrible losses, they accepted these as the necessary cost of supporting their comrades in arms, and as a sacrifice necessary for the future survival of their national societies.'*

As previously observed, Linder calls LAF and RTS the 'liberal' and 'conservative' myths<sup>54</sup>, and it is certainly true that writers significantly associated with them - e.g. Sassoon with the 'liberal' myth and Jünger with the 'conservative' - were involved after the war in left-wing and right-wing politics respectively. However, I do not believe that these rather simplistic names do justice to the complex content of the

<sup>48</sup> Linder, *Princes of the Trenches*, p2.

<sup>49</sup> Leed, *No Man's Land*, p25.

<sup>50</sup> Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, p361.

<sup>51</sup> This sentence comes from Ian Ousby, *The Road to Verdun*, p190 and Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis 1911-1918*, p451.

<sup>52</sup> This sentence is a modification of a sentence in J.P. Stern, *Ernst Jünger*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), p21.

<sup>53</sup> This sentence comes (modified) from Ousby, *The Road to Verdun*, p67.

<sup>54</sup> In Linder, *Princes of the Trenches*.



myths, which are stories encapsulating the experience and emotions of - by now - at least three generations of Europeans.

In addition to the two myths of 'Loss, Anger and Futility' and 'Renewal through Sacrifice' I suggest that a further myth, which might be termed 'Reconciliation and Regeneration', has emerged in Western Europe since the end of WW2. It was given greater emphasis by the experience of WW2, but finds its principal origins in the slaughter of the Western Front during WW1. It could be expressed thus:

*'West European countries have been ravaged by invasion and war for centuries. The fighting on the Western Front in 1914-1918 brought with it for the first time killing on an industrial scale. No-one was the victor: all sides lost in the fighting. The whole war was an episode of social and political madness. The peoples of Western Europe must learn from this experience, so as to ensure that it never occurs again. Our differing national cultures form part of a greater Christian civilisation and we share the same classical roots. German, French, British ...we must become reconciled to each other and cooperate in the regeneration of a society and economy in which we are all partners'.*

This myth clearly shares some elements with the first two myths sketched above. While these two persist in the European imagination, 'Reconciliation and Regeneration' has perhaps evolved from them and may be seen as a synthesis of them, as well as a reformulation of the much older myth of 'European Unity'.<sup>55</sup> Later in the thesis (Chapter 7) I demonstrate some ways in which this process of evolution has been represented in literature.

Although in Section 5 of Chapter 2 I discuss some alternative formulations of the myths of the Western Front, later analysis will focus only on the three myths of 'Loss, Anger and Futility', 'Renewal through Sacrifice' and 'Reconciliation and Regeneration'. In order to avoid tedious repetition, I will in future refer to these as 'LAF', 'RTS' and 'RR'.

**6. Myth and literature.** There are of course many ways in which the myths of the Western Front may be expressed, and many sources from which they may have been derived. I believe that literature plays an important role in both the formation and the

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<sup>55</sup> See, e.g., Sonjan Puntischer Riekmann, "The Myth of European Unity" in Geoffrey Hosking and George Schöppflin (eds.), *Myths and Nationhood*, (London, Hurst and Company (in association with the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University of London), 1997), pp60-71.



expression of myth. Myths can grow out of - often simplify - literature, literature itself containing an enormous range of responses, and literature can contain or represent a pre-existing myth or myths.

The processes by which the experience of the Western Front has been transmuted into myth through the medium of literature constitute the principal subject of my thesis. Some theories concerning the nature and sources of 'mythical discourse' are discussed in Chapter 2. These theories are applied in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 to the three myths of the Western Front which I have identified, using as raw material a personal literary canon which I specify in Chapter 4.

It has been noted that:

"The 1990s have seen a boom in memory. ... its presence is palpable. One way of making sense of it would be to use the languages of postmodernism, where the turning to memory is a 'nostalgia for the present' ... in which representations of the past ... spell the desire for holding onto the familiar ... In this understanding, 'memory' becomes the crucial site of identity formation in the late twentieth century".<sup>56</sup>

In respect of the Western Front this assertion regarding identity formation may possibly be true of some of the manifestations of memory in the 1980s and 1990s. There certainly were a large number of books, films and ceremonies recalling WW1, and especially the Western Front, during that period, to the degree that WW1 images such as devastated landscapes and attacking soldiers 'going over the top' became 'familiar' to most people.

However, there appears to be a thread of continuity running through the manifestations of the memory of the Western Front during the 80 or so years following its ending which implies that other, possibly deeper, forces may also have been at work. Many vehicles for 'remembrance' came into existence soon after the end of WW1 in those countries which took part in the fighting of the Western Front. These included the listing of those who died, the designation of war cemeteries, the erection of war memorials and the initiation of rituals such as the daily sounding of the 'Last Post' at the Menin Gate in Ypres. These manifestations of remembrance continue in most cases until the present day, often with greater resonance after the

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<sup>56</sup> Geoff Eley, Foreword (pvii) to Martin Evans and Ken Lunn, *War and Memory in the Twentieth Century*, (Oxford and New York, Berg, 1997).



further suffering of WW2.<sup>57</sup> They were supplemented and continue to be supplemented by the work of artists of many kinds. I cannot believe that the continuing persistence into the 1990s and 2000s of the memory of the Western Front is due only to a “desire for holding on to the familiar”. It points instead to the existence of a powerful and evolving mythology, which forms part of our societal memory of those events. It is the nature of this societal memory, and the place in it of mythology, which I wish to explore.

The approach to the study of societal memory which I take in my research is to ‘observe the observers’ of the Western Front. I mean by this that I am interested in the ways in which the war on the Western Front was experienced by those who lived through it, what they recorded of their experiences through writing and other means, how later ‘observers’ interpreted the same events and experiences, and how others received and interpreted all these observations. All these observations taken together, I assert, constitute an important part of our memory of the events which took place in that place and time, and hence the major source of our myths.

There are many categories of ‘observer’, of course. They include writers, who in turn include diarists, historians<sup>58</sup>, biographers, novelists, poets, writers of memoirs, auto-biographers and playwrights. Visual artists include painters, photographers, sculptors, architects and film-makers. There are also musicians, who in some notable instances have used their own special language to express emotional reactions to the events of wartime. Sometimes several of these modes can come together, as when the composer Benjamin Britten’s ‘War Requiem’, combining powerfully emotive music with both the Latin mass and the words of the WW1 poet Wilfred Owen, was first performed at the opening in 1952 of the rebuilt Coventry Cathedral, itself an icon of WW2 devastation and rebirth.

Most of the work of sculptors and architects commemorates the war on the Western Front. In particular, many towns and villages in Western Europe have war memorials, usually in sculptural form, which record and commemorate the losses incurred by the local community in both world wars. Published studies of some of these memorials describe the part they have played in the way in which the wars are

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<sup>57</sup> See, for example, Bob Bushaway, “Name upon Name: The Great War and Remembrance” in Roy Porter, ed., *Myths of the English*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992) and, for a broader European survey, Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*.

<sup>58</sup> Including oral historians, the results of whose researches may or may not be recorded in writing.



remembered.<sup>59</sup> To the extent that the sculptor or architect takes a particular point of view in his memorialisation of the war, he could be said to be an 'observer': this would certainly apply to the 'transcendent' memorials identified by Winter - the dramatic *Tranchée des Baïonettes* at Verdun, Lutyens' overpowering British memorial at Thiepval to the missing of the Somme, or Käthe Kollwitz's moving *Die Eltern* at Dixmuide.<sup>60</sup>

But, equally, the work of some of the 'observers' in other media could in part also be seen as 'commemoration'. For example, some of the canonical writings of the most famous of the WW1 writers - e.g. Brooke, Owen, Remarque, Barbusse - are by now so well established that the widespread celebration of their existence and significance could be said in itself to form part of our modern commemoration of the war. Museums, such as the In Flanders Fields museum in Ypres, the Historial de la Grande Guerre in Peronne and the Imperial War Museum in London, commemorate, as well as record and explain, the war. Finally, an enormous number of Internet Web sites are devoted to WW1, and many of these are specifically intended to be 'commemorative' rather than purely to provide resources for research or discussion.<sup>61</sup>

Recognising that the boundary between 'commemoration' and 'observation' may be blurred, I nevertheless intend to concentrate on 'observation', and out of the 'observations' emanating from all the possible sources noted above I choose to concentrate on literature, meaning by this novels, poetry and autobiography, of recognised quality. I have found that autobiography may be admitted by the author to be 'fictionalised' (as is the case of the lightly disguised 'George Sherston' in Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* and its companion volumes) or not (as in Ernst Jünger's *The Storm of Steel*).<sup>62</sup> Of course, the study of history, in the sense of 'what actually happened, why, and with what consequences?', plays an essential role in the development of societal memory, and historians, especially in recent years,

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<sup>59</sup> E.g., Alex King, *Memorials of the Great War in Britain*, (Oxford and New York, Berg, 1998); Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* (Chapter 4); Catherine Moriarty, 'Private Grief and Public Remembrance: British First World War Memorials', in Martin Evans and Ken Lunn (Eds.), *War and Memory in the Twentieth Century*, (Oxford and New York, Berg, 1997).

<sup>60</sup> Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, p108-113.

<sup>61</sup> The 'Hellfire Corner' site at <http://www.fylde.demon.co.uk/links.htm> (June 2000) is a good example of a large class of sites. Most museums which play a role in commemorating the war also have web sites.

<sup>62</sup> I stretch this definition to include in my personal canon Ernst Jünger's *Der Friede*, which is neither a novel nor 'fictionalised autobiography', but comes from an author much of whose work is in these genres.



have come forward to challenge the truth of the myths that I am exploring (this topic is further discussed in Section 6 of Chapter 2, where I consider the ‘historicity’ of the myths of the Western Front). However, although some of the political and military history of WW1 is sufficiently well-written to rank as ‘literature’, for present purposes I exclude it from consideration.

The reason for this exclusion is that literature, while it may often simplify or distort history in the factual sense, gains power through its aesthetic and emotional qualities. In this way it becomes a valid means, perhaps even more than history, of approaching the ‘truth’ of the past. Many writers have reached this conclusion, subscribing to the view that “historiographic accounts (for example, of the battles of the First World War) are scarcely closer to the truth (if there is such a thing) than the most extravagant piece of fiction”.<sup>63</sup> It has even been suggested that “You can’t get at the truth by history; you can only get it through novels”.<sup>64</sup> In contrast to history, to quote a contemporary novelist; “Fiction adds a different dimension that the purely documentary and historical cannot aspire to. And, as Ernest Hemingway said on another occasion: ‘I make the truth as I invent it truer than it would be’.”<sup>65</sup>

One problem here is that the literary writers I have selected for study may not be representative in their portrayal of the experience of the Western Front. For example, it has often been pointed out that it is only the angry and disillusioned among the ‘war poets’ who have become well known.<sup>66</sup> Additionally, there were many novelists, whom Bracco terms ‘middle-brow’,<sup>67</sup> whose representation of the Western Front was in most cases not disillusioned in the way that that of better-known writers was. And finally, there were all those who did not write, or who wrote only

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<sup>63</sup> W. G. Sebald, quoted in an interview with Sebastian Shakespeare, *Literary Review*, October 2001, p.50. A similar point is made in Chapman’s Introduction to Guy Chapman, (ed), *Vain Glory: A Miscellany of the Great War 1914-1918 Written by Those who Fought In It On Each Side and All Fronts*, (London: Cassell, 1937), pviii: “Many so-called works of fiction are direct experience ... they are truthful, more truthful ... than the vast number of unit and formation histories, which are often wholly unreliable”.

<sup>64</sup> Gerald Brennan M.C., quoted in Hugh Cecil; “British war novelists”, in Hugh Cecil and Peter H. Liddle (Eds); *Facing Armageddon: the first world war experienced*, (London, Leo Cooper, 1996).

<sup>65</sup> See introduction by William Boyd to the 1999 unexpurgated edition of Manning’s *Her Privates We*, p.xv.

<sup>66</sup> E.g. “Like many poets of the First World War who did not suffer the disillusion of a Sassoon or an Owen, Cannan is little read today”. From review by Peter Parker in ‘Daily Telegraph’, July 1 2000 of *The Tears of War: the Love Story of a Young Poet and a War Hero*, by May Cannan and Bevil Quiller-Couch, ed by Charlotte Fyfe.

<sup>67</sup> In Maria Rosa Bracco, *Merchants of Hope: British Middlebrow Writers and the First World War*, (Providence and Oxford, Berg Publishers, 1992).



unpublished diaries and memoirs. Who is to know what these people really thought or felt?<sup>68</sup>

My response to these difficulties is to reassert that I am principally interested in myth - i.e. the stories widely told in society which give meaning to the individual experience of the Western Front. I am not interested in the literal 'truth' of these stories, but in the effect that they have, or have had, on society. Further, I believe that, although myths have many sources, including elements in popular culture, the literary canon is an important means by which the myths of society are expressed, and remains one of the strongest influences in determining their survival and evolution.

In selecting literary texts for study, some issues of definition can arise. For example, the quality of some historical writing is undoubtedly high enough to rate as 'literature', and the fictional content of some fictionalised autobiography, such as Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, is not easy to separate out from historical 'fact'. I deal with these problems by accepting that any autobiographical work of literary quality is bound to include some imaginative 'fiction' and, as already mentioned, excluding from my analysis all works of 'history', whether or not they may be classified as 'literature'.

I am working primarily on British, German and French literature and, for reasons to be explained later, I have made a particular comparative study of the British writer Siegfried Sassoon and the German Ernst Jünger. I am also interested in the wave of writing by mainly British writers (Pat Barker, Sebastian Faulks and others) which appeared in the 1980s and 1990s, and in the precursors of this phenomenon. I classify as 'British' works written in English by British authors, plus a small number of English-language works which, though written by non-British authors, have been widely read in Britain and may be seen as part of a recognised European canon of writing on WW1. This latter category includes writers such as Manning (Australian) and Fitzgerald (American): the number of relevant works is small since most works in English by such non-British writers relate to national memories and myths which, though they have much in common with the memories held in Britain, are also distinctively different. The classification of literature as 'French' or 'German' has not caused me any problems of definition.

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<sup>68</sup> In respect of British soldiers, a partial answer is given in Lyn Macdonald's excellent books: *1914; The Days of Hope; 1915; The Death of Innocence; They Called it Passchendaele; Somme; The roses of No Mans Land*. All published by Penguin, in the 1990s, based on the memories of survivors.



In principle I am interested in any literature relevant to the collective European memory of the Western Front, but I have not so far come across any works by, for instance, Belgian authors (to name another European country which suffered serious losses in the war) which I regard as significant and relevant.

Some novels which are clearly part of the canon of WW1 do not concern the Western Front. In this category I would place, for example, the classic works of Hemingway, Lussu and Hašek.<sup>69</sup> I make occasional reference to these since the experiences to which they refer - the fighting on the Austro-Hungarian/Italian front in the cases of Hemingway and Lussu, and general military and political incompetence under the Austro-Hungarian régime in the case of Hašek - are so closely related to those described by some writers about the armies of the Western Front that the authors are clearly writing about essentially similar memories of war.

In the end I have arrived at a personal canon of WW1 literature which is inevitably incomplete, due simply to the enormous volume of material available. The canon omits some works of generally recognised significance and quality only because of the limitations of time and perhaps language. But, as Chapters 5, 6 and 7 demonstrate, the works I have studied in some depth provide an adequate expression of the LAF and RTS myths, and to some degree the RR myth also. For this reason, the incompleteness of my personal canon does not invalidate the conclusions I reach, which are presented in Chapter 8.

As the basis for literary judgements I rely to a certain extent on a number of literary critics, whose work is cited at appropriate points, and listed in the Bibliography. This thesis is written from the point of view of the discipline of International Relations, emphasising the significance of myth for the discipline, and attempts to build on the expert knowledge of literary specialists by drawing out the mythical implications of the literature, using for this purpose techniques drawn principally from anthropology.

**7. Outline of thesis.** The chapter sequence and content of the thesis, following the present introduction, is as follows.

Chapters 2 and 3 provide the theoretical basis for the study of literature which takes up chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 of the thesis.

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<sup>69</sup> See bibliography for details.



In Chapter 2 (“Mythic discourse and the myths of the Western Front”) I review and discuss some definitions of ‘myth’, finally reaching the preferred definition given above. I emphasise the importance of the rôle which myth performs in a functioning society, and review some means by which the myths current in society may be identified, giving reasons for my choice of literature as my chosen field for research into the myths of the Western Front. The chapter concludes with a discussion of some of the objections to the myths of the Western Front, and especially the LAF myth, which have been put forward by historians and other scholars.

In Chapter 3 I review some theories of the nature and formation of myth which will be employed in the later chapters in order to analyse the literature which I have studied, focusing on the fields of political science and anthropology, and briefly reviewing the place of psychology. As tools for the analysis of the literature I select Victor Turner’s theory of myth as the ‘remembered *communitas*’ of liminal groups and René Girard’s view, which I regard as complementary rather than conflicting, of myth as the ‘retrospective transfiguration of a sacrificial crisis’. I regard literature as playing a part in what the political theorist Ernst Cassirer conceives as ‘mythical discourse’.

I begin Chapter 4 by setting out in more detail my view of the relationship between literature and other ways by which myth may be conveyed, influenced or originated. I then identify three ‘waves’ of literary writing inspired by the experience of the Western Front – the writing published during or soon after the war, the ‘war book boom’ of the late-1920s onwards, and the work of authors writing from about 1990 onwards. I then set out the criteria I have employed for defining a personal ‘canon’ out of all these works, the canon itself consisting of the works analysed in Chapters 5, 6 and 7.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 are studies of the three myths of the Western Front, as they may be seen in and through the writings of various authors.

In Chapter 5 I focus on LAF and the work of Siegfried Sassoon. I set Sassoon’s writings in the context of his life and wartime experience, and conclude that his association with the LAF myth comes about mainly through his communication in poetry of the liminal experience. I also discuss the contribution to this myth of other writers who wrote what I see as ‘novels of *communitas*’.



In Chapter 6, following a similar pattern to that established in Chapter 5, I associate the RTS myth with the early work of Ernst Jünger, whom I selected for study partly because, like Sassoon, he survived the war and continued to write for the rest of his life.

I move on to consider, in Chapter 7, the RR myth, the social function of which, I suggest, is to validate the process of integration which for many years has been under way in Western Europe. Jünger's post-WW2 work *The Peace (Der Friede)* is seen as providing a bridge to the writers of the Third Wave whose work, however, while sometimes introducing themes of reconciliation and healing, tends on the whole to reassert the earlier, evidently still very powerful, LAF myth.

Finally, in Chapter 8, I consider, for each of the myths, of what they are 'constitutive', discuss the inter-relationships of the myths with the three waves of literature, review the strengths and weaknesses of the analytical scheme I have adopted, propose some further questions arising from this research, and provide conclusions concerning the ways in which the carnage of the Western Front may be seen as the 'founding murder' of modern Europe.



## **Chapter 2**

### **Mythic discourse and the myths of the Western Front**

#### **Contents**

1. *Introduction*
2. *What is a myth?*
3. *The social function of myth*
4. *Identifying myths*
5. *Some alternatives to LAF, RTS and RR*
6. *The historicity of the myths of the Western Front*

**1. Introduction** This chapter and the following Chapter 3 provide the theoretical basis for the study of literature which takes up chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 of the thesis. The present chapter discusses the nature of myth and reviews some of the objections to the myths of the Western Front, and especially the LAF myth, which have been put forward by historians and other scholars.

**2. What is a myth?** Kirk emphasises the need for precise definition: “ ... the historical, analytical and philosophical approach must be taken first. In the vital area of definition, of deciding what myths are, what are not myths, what makes one symbol material and another not, analysis must precede intuition ... ”.<sup>1</sup> In this and the next two sections, therefore, I discuss ways in which ‘myth’ has been defined, and arrive at a preferred definition which, I suggest, is both general and appropriate in the context of International Relations.

Bergonzi states that “the word ‘myth’ is perhaps easier to use than to define, but it refers to those actions, persons, events, stories, which escape from their historical context and have the continuing power to haunt our imaginations, to modify or distort our thinking, and sometimes to direct our behaviour. Myths are not necessarily false, but they contain a large element of the unverifiable”.<sup>2</sup> Eliade produces three examples to bring out the distinctions, as he sees them, between modern ‘stories’ which are sometimes seen as ‘myths’ but which, he believes, do not in fact fall into that category. The British General Strike of 1926 is, he says, sometimes spoken of as “one of the rare myths created by the modern world”. But since it has no mythical precedents, it cannot be given mythical status. A truly modern myth, in other words,

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<sup>1</sup> G.S.Kirk, *Myth, its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1970 (reprinted 1993)), p2.

<sup>2</sup> Introduction by Bernard Bergonzi to Michel Roucoux, ed., *English Literature of the Great War Revisited*, (University of Picardy Press, 1986).



must in some way recreate or build on an earlier myth if it is to deserve the name. In this way, Marxist communism, building as it does on many myths of the ancient world (e.g. the redemptive part to be played by the 'elect') is truly a modern, optimistic, myth. The mythology of the German National Socialists, built as it was on Nordic myth which foresaw an apocalyptic end of the world, was also "authentic", though in a profoundly pessimistic way.<sup>3</sup> In respect of myths of war, it has been proposed that a myth is " ... not a fabrication or fiction ... (but) the simplified narrative that evolves from a war, through which it is given meaning: A Good War, a Bad War, a Necessary War".<sup>4</sup> A myth is a story (but it does not follow from this that all stories are myths, of course).

*Encyclopaedia Britannica (EB)*, in its article on "Myth and Mythology", distinguishes between myths and *fables*, *fairy tales*, *folktales*, *sagas* and *epics*, *legends* and *parables*. *Fables* are fictitious or untrue stories, often involving animals, and carrying a moral message. *Fairy tales*, such as Jack and the Beanstalk, or Cinderella, are "stories (directed above all at an audience of children) about an individual ... who confronts strange or magical events. *Folk tales* comprise a category about which there is scholarly dispute. The best definition of a folk tale, to my mind, is that of Kirk. Quoted by *EB*, Kirk defines *folk tales* as "stories that reflect simple social situations and play on ordinary fears and desires." While this definition could clearly include some myths, Kirk suggests that the purpose of myths (of which more later) goes beyond that of mere story-telling. *Sagas* and *epics* are even less easy to distinguish from myths: one way of doing so, according to *EB*, is to restrict the term "saga" to its original sense of "a group of medieval Icelandic prose narratives" and to think of "epics" as heroic stories, almost always composed in poetry, which "characteristically incorporate mythical events and persons". For this reason, "myth is .. a prime source of the material on which epic draws". A *legend* is "a traditional tale thought to have a historical basis, as in the legends of King Arthur and Robin Hood". In this case the distinction from myth is that legends are historically grounded, while myth (according to *EB*) concerns the supernatural and the sacred.

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<sup>3</sup> Micea Eliade, "Myths, dreams and mysteries: the encounter between contemporary faiths and archaic realities", in F.W. Dillistone (Ed.), *Myth and Symbol*, (London, SPCK, 1966).

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale; Bearing Witness in Modern War*, (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1997), pxiii.



Finally, *parables*, such as those of the New Testament, are stories which “have as their explicit purpose the illustration of a doctrine or standard of conduct”.<sup>5</sup>

*EB*’s initial definition of a *myth* is that it is a specific account “of gods or superhuman beings involved in extraordinary events or circumstances in a time that is unspecified but which is understood as existing apart from ordinary human experience”. Clearly, this definition as it stands need some exegesis or modification if it is to be related to the sense in which I propose to use the term in respect of the Western Front. Many myths dating from classical times, which fall within the *EB* definition, are still widely accepted as bearing essential truths about the human condition. But a further large and influential body of material which most people would classify as ‘myth’ is based on historical events in which identified historical personages took part: i.e. this material does not concern superhuman beings in an unspecified time. One might place much of the Old and New Testaments in this category, together with versions of more recent history, including the mythology of the two World Wars.

A better modern definition of myth might be “... a fiction, but a fiction which conveys a psychological truth”,<sup>6</sup> the nature of this ‘truth’ deriving from the fact that “... a myth is a story that organizes experience through telling something explicitly about meaning -- where we’re going, where we came from, or who we are.”<sup>7</sup> I understand by ‘fiction’ in this context a work of the verbal imagination, which may or may not be based on or closely related to actual events or characters. A necessary condition for imaginative ‘fiction’ to become transmuted into ‘myth’ is that it contains messages about the human condition which people perceive to be ‘true’, their perceptions being influenced by the need, referred to above, to organise experience in a way that gives it meaning. It is this need to give meaning to experience which, based on the memories of appalling wartime experiences, accounts for the power of the myths of the Western Front which were set out in Chapter 1. As Campbell states:

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<sup>5</sup> “Myth and Mythology”, in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15<sup>th</sup> ed., (Chicago, London, Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 1992), p715ff.

<sup>6</sup> See *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, (London: Penguin Books (third edition), 1992), p562.

<sup>7</sup> Professor Betty S. Flowers, Professor of English, University of Texas. From Shell website, <http://www.plausiblefutures.com/text/shell.html> September 18 2002.



“Myth is metaphor ... myths come from where the heart is, and where the experience is, even as the mind may wonder why people believe these things”.<sup>8</sup>

Even though we may accept an updated definition of ‘myth’, the purposes of myth are surely much the same today as they were in ancient times, or are today among peoples living outside modern society. These purposes are of *explanation* (e.g., in primitive societies, explanation of the origin of a plant or animal), of *justification or validation* (e.g. of tribal customs), of *description* (e.g. of the beginning or end of the world), or of *healing, renewal and inspiration*. This last category is one which I believe underlies some of the writing in Barker’s *Regeneration* (to be discussed in Chapter 7), inspired in part by her researches into the (historical) anthropological work of Rivers in the Torres Strait Islands, and is clearly the purpose served by the RR myth. The LAF myth, I suggest, mainly relates to ‘explanation’ and ‘healing’, while the RTS myth serves the purposes of ‘explanation’ and ‘justification’. The three purposes taken together may be seen as giving meaning to the life of the community, and LAF, RTS and RR are a group of myths which help Europeans find meaning in the otherwise apparently senseless suffering and loss of the Western Front.

It is because most of the purposes which myth has always served, or the needs which it has met, remain as valid in modern society as they were in less sophisticated times or places, that myth remains, as McNeill observed, “at the basis of human society”.<sup>9</sup> It has become secularised, and many of its ‘explanations’ have been falsified by science and replaced with explanations which do not require supernatural forces or heroic figures. But modern culture is diffused with myth, most fundamentally perhaps with the myth of ‘Western’ political and cultural superiority. Furthermore, mythical or semi-mythical figures - Superman, the spy, the immigrant, the soldier in the trenches - have emerged to represent values, desirable models of social order, or the nature of modern war. It is examples of myths and mythical figures of this kind, relating to the experience of war on the Western Front in 1914-1918, which I seek in this thesis to identify and to trace through the study of literature.

As to kinds of myth, *EB* identifies myths of *origin*, of *eschatology and destruction* (e.g. the origin of death, or the end of the world), *Messianic and millenarian* myths, myths of *culture heroes*, of *time and eternity* (e.g. explanations of

<sup>8</sup> John M. Maher and Dennie Briggs, *An Open Life: Joseph Campbell in Conversation with Michael Toms*, (New York, Larson Publications, 1988), p21.

<sup>9</sup> McNeill, William H., “The Care and Repair of Public Myth”, *Foreign Affairs* 61, 1982-3, p1.



the movements of the sun and the moon), of *memory and forgetting* (e.g. remembering a previous existence), of *high beings and celestial gods*, of *founders of religions*, of *kings and ascetics* and of *transformation*. This latter category covers not only stories of the transformation of plants, animals and persons (as recounted, for example, in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*), but also myths concerning 'rites of passage', which I shall discuss in more detail later.<sup>10</sup> Another analytical scheme sees three main kinds of myth: *historical* ("narratives of real events coloured by the light of antiquity, which confounded the divine and the human, the natural and the supernatural"), *philosophical* ("such as clothe in the garb of historical narrative a simple thought, a precept or an idea of the time"), and *poetical* ("historical and philosophical myths (sic) partly blended together, and partly embellished by the creations of the imagination, in which the original fact or idea is almost obscured by the veil which the fancy of the poet has woven around it").<sup>11</sup> Both of these schemes, with their reference to antiquity and the supernatural, require some modification if they are to accommodate a modern mythology. But, using these terms, one could perhaps in a preliminary way classify the LAF, RTS and RR myths of the Western Front as primarily 'philosophical' myths of 'transformation'.

'Myth' is spoken of in different ways in the literature of International Relations. Buffet and Heuser, seeking a definition of myth relevant to the interests of IR scholars, give their own definition but also allow the authors of the papers in their book to propose and use alternatives.<sup>12</sup> The editors themselves quote Friedrich von Schelling, Ernst Cassirer, Edmund Leach and the German *Brockhaus* encyclopaedia. *Brockhaus* defines myth as "a vision of the masses which is supposed to trigger political action ... the myth does not give a scientific explanation, but wants to be believed". Buffet and Heuser go on to say that "Myth is thus used in this book primarily as a shorthand for a particular interpretation of a historical experience or policy, or a policy with some acknowledged historical antecedents, that is invoked in the present to justify certain policies".<sup>13</sup> This is a very broad definition (although it

<sup>10</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, pp723-726. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, (London, Penguin Books, 1955).

<sup>11</sup> D.F. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, (London, SCM Press, 1973), p53; quoted in Maurice Wiles, "Myth in Theology", in John Hick (ed), *The Myth of God Incarnate*, (London, SCM Press, 1977), p150.

<sup>12</sup> Cyril Buffet and Beatrice Heuser, *Haunted by History: Myths in International Relations*, (Providence and Oxford, Berghahn Books, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> Buffet and Heuser, *Haunted by History*, p.ix.



excludes the category of myths which are not invoked to justify policy), and Michael Howard has termed it “so wide as to be almost self-defeating”.<sup>14</sup>

Later in the same book, Peter Krüger states that “Myths reduce the complexity of reality to unambiguous, comprehensible, symbolically compressed events, conditions and truths”, giving as examples the “balance of power” and the “European concert”. This statement tells us some of the things which myths do, but does not necessarily help us to recognise a myth when we see it.<sup>15</sup>

Providing a much tighter specification, Ann-Sofie Dahl proposes that a myth has 5 characteristics - A. “a collection of universally, collectively or commonly (to a specific community) held *beliefs*, in other words empirical or normative ideas about a certain part of reality”, B. “the beliefs of which a myth is made have been collected, established, formulated and repeated ... during a prolonged period - *over time*.” C. (invoking Jung) “... it is capable of evoking a *certain response or association*. As such, it requires a public capable of responding”. D. “The way this response is evoked is often by *repetition*.” E. “a myth has a loose relation to - or is *detached from reality*”. This useful set of characteristics provides us with a good model for testing potential myths, but still omits, in my view, some of myth’s essential features.<sup>16</sup>

Rémy Leveau quotes Gilbert Durand who “... has defined myth as a ‘dynamic system of symbols, of archetypes and dynamic plans’.. He sees myth as ‘an attempt to rationalise’. Myths have influenced inter-group relations for some time, and there are links between the internal structuring of societies and their external behaviour”. Leveau also quotes Daniel Maguire: in this view myths consist of “a complex of feelings, attitudes, symbols, memories and experienced relationships through which reality is refracted, filtered and interpreted”.<sup>17</sup> A further contribution comes from Antonio Varsori: “... myths in international relations can be interpreted as the values, beliefs and perceptions of a society, mainly based on the experiences of its members and on historical realities, which exert some influence on the decision-

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<sup>14</sup> Michael Howard, reviewing Buffet and Heuser in the *Times Literary Supplement*, August 7 1998.

<sup>15</sup> Buffet and Heuser, *Haunted by History*, p.3.

<sup>16</sup> Buffet and Heuser, *Haunted by History*, p.28ff.

<sup>17</sup> Buffet and Heuser, *Haunted by History*, p.41ff.



making process, as well as on the attitude of public opinion towards this society's relations with those of other countries".<sup>18</sup>

While all of these definitions contain something of value, none of them is complete and, in particular, none of them contains the essential defining characteristic of a myth as a story. A large literature has grown in recent years about 'scenario analysis' as a means of thinking about the future, for large entities such as business enterprises, or nations or even the world as a whole.<sup>19</sup> Scenarios in this usage are most frequently defined as 'stories about the future'. Many myths, then, could be thought of as 'stories about the past and present', accounts which are used to make sense of the complexity, sometimes perhaps unknowable (just as the future is unknowable) of past events and their relationship to the present. And, just as futurists use multiple scenarios to take account of the different ways in which the future could develop, so different and sometimes contradictory myths can arise about the past and present. Different scenarios of the future reflect different interpretations of the present: different myths reflect different interpretations of the past and consequently the present. And just as scenarios can represent wishful thinking about the future (what we would like to happen), so different myths can arise from wishful thinking about the past (what we wish had happened). There is little wishful thinking in the myths of the Western Front (except perhaps RR), but the LAF and RTS myths most certainly represent different interpretations of experience, or different 'stories' about the war.

I proposed earlier that a good definition of a myth would be "... a fiction, but a fiction which conveys a psychological truth". While accepting that some of the definitions of "myth" given above contain useful elements, I find this still the truest definition, not only for myths in general, but also for the myths which will most interest scholars of international relations, and in particular for the LAF, RTS and RR myths. As Schöpflin points out, it is not necessary for the whole fiction to be rehearsed - for the whole story to be told - for the power of the myth to have its effect. It can be sufficient to evoke symbols (flags, anthems), build monuments or carry out

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<sup>18</sup> Buffet and Heuser, *Haunted by History*. p.135.

<sup>19</sup> E.g. Peter Schwartz, *The Art of the Long View*, (New York, Doubleday Currency, 1991); Kees van der Heijden, *Scenarios; The Art of Strategic Conversation*, (London, John Wiley, 1996).



rituals for the underlying myth to be implied, without losing any of its evocative power.<sup>20</sup>

If we were able to relate the myths of the Western Front to other myths, including especially other myths which have relevance for the study of international relations, we would perhaps come to understand them better. Little work of this kind appears to have been done in IR, but two attempts at the classification of myth are of interest, and provide at least a starting point.

Schöpflin gives a taxonomy of myths which are relevant to ways of thinking about nationhood. Such myths may be:

1. Myths of territory (often identifying a particular territory as 'sacred' to a nation).
2. Myths of redemption and suffering, where a nation, through suffering, will be redeemed, perhaps even redeem the world. (The RTS myth falls under this heading).
3. Myths of unjust treatment (where the world owes the victims a special debt).
4. Myths of election (unique virtues providing the basis for a special, civilising mission).
5. Myths of military valour.
6. Myths of rebirth and renewal, or of foundation (which, I suggest, might include the European RR myth).
7. Myths of ethnogenesis and antiquity - the particular property of ethnic groups.
8. Myths of kinship and shared descent - which provide the basis for excluding 'aliens'.<sup>21</sup>

This list is followed by a series of documented examples (the USA, Afrikanerdom, Israel etc.) where such myths have played a vital, perhaps decisive, part in the growth of a nation. Where such myths do not exist, they may have to be invented if society is not to break down; for example, Georgian nationalists in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century graphically described the nation's 'perpetual' (but actually non-existent) conflict against 'foreign invaders', which became a central part of historical mythology.<sup>22</sup> And the malign phenomenon of 'warlordism' in parts of

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<sup>20</sup> George E. Schöpflin, "The functions of myth and a taxonomy of myths", in Geoffrey Hosking and George E. Schöpflin, eds., *Myths and Nationhood*, (London, Hurst and Company (in association with the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University of London), 1997), p20.

<sup>21</sup> George Schöpflin, "Myth", pp28-34.

<sup>22</sup> Thonnike Goradze (Paris Institute d'Etudes Politiques and Centre for International Studies, CERI); "Interpreting wars and victories and the making of the Georgian nation: the paradoxical evolution of their inter-relation", paper given at ASEN conference, London School of Economics, April 1999.



the developing world where government has ceased to function has been characterised as threatening “... the cohesion of post-colonial states which have failed to develop well rooted attachments at the local level to national myths and symbols”.<sup>23</sup>

Buffet and Heuser give a different taxonomy, in the form of “families of myths” which have some general relevance for international relations. These are -

1. Myths of special relationships (e.g. that between France and Germany in the post-WW2 period).
2. Personified myths (e.g. of the relationship between German Chancellor Kohl and French President Mitterand).
3. Myths of events (e.g. the rescue of the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk in WW1). Myths of events are subdivided into “betrayal and perfidy” (e.g. Suez), “politico-military disaster” (e.g. Vietnam) and “inevitable disaster” (e.g. Munich).
4. Myths of order (e.g. the “Concert of Europe”).
5. Myths passed on through visual images (e.g. raising the flag at Iwo Jima).
6. Myths as rites (e.g. “Franco-German friendship and reconciliation as a ritual symbolising German redemption and reintegration into the community of the righteous”).<sup>24</sup>

Neither of these taxonomies fully encompass the myths of the Western Front in the way in which I have stated them, since myths of loss, such as LAF, are not assigned a category either by Schöpflin or by Buffet and Heuser. The only category in either taxonomy which is entirely appropriate to the general myth is Buffet and Heuser’s category 5 (myths passed on through visual images), the images of devastated landscapes and of dead soldiers in trenches, reinforcing the LAF myth, being central to our memory of the Western Front

There are of course places where sub-myths of the Western Front fit clearly into either Schöpflin’s or Buffet and Heuser’s taxonomies. For example, the national myths of the Australians which derive from WW1 may be thought of as combining elements of Schöpflin’s category 2 (redemption and suffering), 5 (military valour) and 6 (rebirth and renewal).<sup>25</sup> And there are many more or less mythologised events of WW1 to place in Buffet and Heuser’s category 3 (myths of events), such as ‘The

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<sup>23</sup> Paul Rich (Dept of Politics, University of Luton); “Warlords, sub-state conflict and the fragmentation of post-colonial nationalism”, paper given at ASEN conference, London School of Economics, April 1999.

<sup>24</sup> Buffet and Heuser, *Haunted by History*, p260 ff.

<sup>25</sup> See further brief discussion of this in Chapter 3.



Battle of the Somme' or 'The 1914 Christmas Truce'. Furthermore, WW1 produced many 'personified' myths (Buffet and Heuser's category 2), such as 'General Haig' and 'The War Poets'.

But even combining all of these categories does less than justice to the WW1 myths in their greatest generality. They are special cases of the general myths of war, a mythical category which, while it overlaps with or subsumes some of the categories mentioned above, should in my opinion be assigned a place in any taxonomy of myths.

**3. The social function of myths.** As argued above, myths in modern society are the stories we tell, the account we give ourselves, of how things came to be as they are, and how the world works. They help to make sense of the present, and to assign meaning to past experience, thus inevitably playing a part in forming the assumptions and beliefs which underlie our actions and policies. Myths therefore form part of 'reality', in the paradoxical sense that, while in my preferred definition they are 'fictions', they constitute a vital component of the environment within which policies are developed and actions contemplated. It has even been argued that myths are "more real than reality".<sup>26</sup>

On one level, myths are stories about individual life and death. Dunne thinks mainly in these terms, giving as an example the "earliest epic of adventure that is known ... the story of Gilgamesh and his hopeless quest of life."<sup>27</sup> Campbell, in the course of a large corpus of thought and work about mythology, arrives at four "traditional mythological functions" - first, "to waken and maintain in the individual an experience of awe ... in recognition of that ultimate mystery ... from which words turn back", and second "to render a cosmology, an image of the universe". Campbell's third and fourth categories of mythological function are "the validation and maintenance of an established order" and "the centering and harmonization of the individual".<sup>28</sup> It is Campbell's third function of mythology with which I am primarily concerned here, although I suspect that study of the literature of WW1, my principal

<sup>26</sup> Andrew Williams, "Meaning and International Relations: Some Thoughts". Paper presented to the Vienna Conference of the ECPR Standing Group on International Relations, September 16-19, 1998, quoting Denis de Rougemont.

<sup>27</sup> In John S. Dunne, *Time and Myth: a Meditation on Storytelling as an Exploration of Life and Death*, (Notre Dame and London, University of Notre Dame Press, 1973), p7.

<sup>28</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The masks of God: creative mythology*, (London, Penguin Books, 1976), pp609-624.



research interest, will lead me from time to time into aspects of the fourth function. Myths are certainly employed to validate nationalism, and indeed a 'nation' has been defined as "a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members"<sup>29</sup>, while citizens may be enthused by the "politicization of myths of ethnic selection and covenant which inspire people with a sense of renewal and glorious destiny".<sup>30</sup> As McNeill writes: "Myth lies at the basis of human society. That is because myths are general statements about the world and its parts, and in particular about nations and other human in-groups, that are believed to be true and then acted on whenever circumstances suggest or require common response."<sup>31</sup>

Myths, in other words, could be said to be "... the souls of our actions ...".<sup>32</sup> They may be encountered everywhere in modern life: for example, in business management, where iconic firms and outstanding innovators give rise to heroic myths.<sup>33</sup> McNeill gives as an example of the power of myth the resistance of the British early in WW2, when the situation appeared hopeless. That the British did not surrender at this point was due, according to McNeill, to the national myth, absorbed through history lessons in school, that the British always win the last battle, even though they may have lost in the earlier stages of a conflict. The lost battles themselves enter national mythology as glorious (and temporary) defeats: "When the skies are dark, the situation is hopeless and our backs are to the wall, then (and only then, unfortunately) we rise up with ... courage and fight to the last. This often results in a magnificent defeat which enters national folklore"<sup>34</sup> (and which, according to this myth, is seen as only the forerunner of a final triumphant victory).

By contrast, the prevailing German national myth in the 1930s and early 1940s was, according to McNeill, of Aryan racial superiority, a myth which ultimately led to national disaster. For, as he further states: "It is in directing and redirecting

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<sup>29</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity*, (London: Penguin Books, 1991), p14.

<sup>30</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p253.

<sup>31</sup> McNeill, "Public Myth", p1.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Valéry (tr. Denise Folliot and Jackson Mathews), *The Outlook for Intelligence*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p44.

<sup>33</sup> Alfred Kieser, "Rhetoric and Myth in Management Fashion", in *Organization*, Volume 4(1): 49-74, 1997.

<sup>34</sup> Stephen Pile, *Daily Telegraph*, July 3 1998, writing on Argentina's defeat of England in the 1998 football World Cup.



actions that myth comes into play”, and it is the actions, not the myths themselves, that eventually have practical consequences.<sup>35</sup>

Myths of these kinds, though they may have their roots in historical experience, express faith in the nature of the world rather than a considered opinion based on rational analysis. They are “... (mostly tacit) social constructions of reality”.<sup>36</sup> And underlying national myths is the dominant mythology of the West, which:

“... includes beliefs that take the following as natural and right: scientific objectivity, efficiency, democracy, progress, competition, the earth as a resource, a “Greco-Judeo-Christian” god, moral superiority, technological know-how, male dominance, and the inherent separation (through independence and isolation) of person, objects and ideas.”<sup>37</sup>

Fussell identifies a “Meliorist” myth of progress, which, before 1914, “... had dominated public consciousness for a century”. To this myth, WW1 was “... a hideous embarrassment”.<sup>38</sup> Myths can of course be a fruitful source of conflict as, for example, they have been for many years in Northern Ireland and in Serbia. But the sheer existence of public myths is of vital importance to a society if it is to function at all. Jung diagnosed the problem of modern man as that of mythlessness, and his life’s work can be seen as an attempt to find his own, and society’s, new myth.<sup>39</sup> As McNeill states: “A people without a full quiver of agreed-upon statements, accepted in advance through education or less-formalised acculturation, soon finds itself in deep trouble. For, in the absence of believable myths, coherent public action becomes very difficult to improvise or sustain.”<sup>40</sup>

Believable myths can be absent either through lack of a generally accepted interpretation of experience (consider, for example, contrasting views about the history of Northern Ireland) or, perhaps more damagingly, due to public silence about events, often of a shameful kind, which many of those involved would prefer to forget or to deny the existence of. No doubt the history of most countries contains such

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<sup>35</sup> McNeill, “Public Myth”, p2.

<sup>36</sup> Donald M. Michael, “Barriers and bridges to learning in a turbulent human ecology”, in Gunderson, Holling and Light, *Barriers and Bridges to Learning: the Renewal of Ecosystems and Institutions*, (New York, Columbia University Press, 1995).

<sup>37</sup> Michael, “Barriers and Bridges”.

<sup>38</sup> Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, p.8.

<sup>39</sup> See Edward F. Edinger, *The Creation of Consciousness*, (Toronto, Inner City Books, 1984), pp.11-13.

<sup>40</sup> McNeill, “Public Myth”, p1.



episodes, but Laborie believes that the public suppression of unpleasant memories is a particular feature of French culture. Writing about WW2, he states that the “silences of memory” are: “... the expression of a sort of inability to assume the shame of crimes of the past, in a country where history records a long string of civil wars. From this comes a natural inclination to denial, which is amplified in France by frequent recourse to amnesty, a sort of legal obligation to silence.”<sup>41</sup>

The absence of myth, for whatever reason, is one of the sources of individual or social disorder: madness, in other words. Kennan saw WW1 as an episode of madness,<sup>42</sup> and Michael sees madness, individual or social, as a loss of control, a relapse into irrationality.<sup>43</sup> Since myths constitute a means of making sense of a world which is in some respects beyond the reach of rationality, it follows that their absence, or the wide acceptance of false myths, can lead to the social disorder of which Kennan and Michael speak.

Here we see a close link between myth-making and the possibility of war or other conflict. However, the precise nature of this link, or any other link, between myth, or its absence, and practical affairs, is not easy to discern. Indeed, no methodology has yet been developed within the discipline of International Relations which could be used to elucidate such a link.<sup>44</sup> Partly for this reason, in this thesis I stop short of asserting any particular practical consequence of the myths of the Western Front which are under discussion here, and attempt only to identify the myths and trace their literary expression.

There are perhaps two principal reasons why mythic modes of thinking retain their attraction, alongside the rational thinking which, on the surface at any rate, characterises the modern world. These are, firstly, that (as asserted by McNeill) a society needs myths if it is to function effectively, and secondly, that the ‘realities’ of history are too complex for most people, and become simplified in popular discourse.

The view that living myths are a necessary condition for the effective functioning of society is fundamental to Campbell’s influential work. Myths are “no mere archaic relics but a potent force in everyday life, part of our collective

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<sup>41</sup> See Pierre Laborie, “The silences of memory, memories of silence”, *Journal of Area Studies*, 1995, No. 7, pp. 16-27.

<sup>42</sup> George F. Kennan, “The War to End War”, in *At a Century's Ending: Reflections 1982-1995*, (New York, Norton 1996).

<sup>43</sup> Professor Donald M. Michael: private conversation, Kent, August 8 1997.

<sup>44</sup> Advice from Prof. J.H. Groom and other faculty members of the Research Training Seminar, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Kent, June 14 2000.



unconscious. Old myths are constantly reworked and new myths continually created as people make sense of untidy and traumatic memories and give meaning to their lives”<sup>45</sup>.

The myths that emerge from these processes can have great power, especially in establishing and sustaining national cohesion and even identity. Sorel speaks of people who live in the world of myths “secure from all refutation”<sup>46</sup> For this reason myths are frequently appropriated by politicians, who may have played no significant role in creating the myth, but who find them useful, even invaluable, as tools for appealing to the fundamental feelings and emotions of their populations. Used in this way, myths play an important role in the functioning of a modern society. And of course the promulgation and acceptance of false myths, such as the Nazi myth of Aryan racial superiority, can also lead to disastrous consequences. Myths of this kind can be damaging, permitting society to function, but in a way that is socially pathological.

The second reason for contemporary society’s persistence in mythical thinking is that the ‘realities’ of history may be too complex for most people, and become simplified in popular discourse. In a contemporary age where respite is difficult to find from the deluge of daily news, they try to find ways of increasing the ‘signal to noise’ ratio of the information, about both past and present, which reaches them. One simple mental process which is employed for this purpose has been called the “makes-sense epistemology”. In this approach, we interpret - make sense of - a situation or set of events, by using the minimum of mental modelling which both hangs together well and is congruent with prior beliefs. This may not call for detailed analysis or modelling of the situation. A bald assertion of a claim without much supporting analysis, but which seems self-evident, may already meet these criteria. Once a story which makes “sense” has been built up there is no need to continue and, indeed, early closure may provide protection from the danger of contrary evidence.<sup>47</sup> This “makes-sense epistemology” sounds reasonably convincing as a means whereby contemporary

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<sup>45</sup> From Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, *The Myths We Live By*, (London, Routledge, 1990); Papers from Sixth International Oral History Conference on “Myth and History”, Oxford, 1987, introductory page.

<sup>46</sup> Georges Sorel (translated T.E. Hulme and J. Roth), *Reflections on Violence*, (Glencoe, Ill., Free Press, 1950), p35.

<sup>47</sup> See D.N. Perkins, M. Faraday and B. Bushey, “Everyday Reasoning and the Roots of Intelligence” in James F. Voss, David N. Perkins and Judith W. Segal (Eds.), *Informal Reasoning and Education*, (Hillsdale, N.J and London: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1990).



phenomena – e.g. the growth of the European Community, wars in Africa, the former USSR and Yugoslavia - can be understood by the ordinary citizen. From this simplified understanding, once reached in common by a fairly large number of people, probably influenced by stories promulgated in the news media, it seems a short step to the formation of modern myths, often themselves derivatives of older myths, which in turn influence and sometimes determine behaviour.

To argue this is not to argue that all myths are simplifications of reality, nor to deny that other, much more fundamental, myths of the human condition are also simultaneously in play in society; nor that other channels for myth may exist, creating new myths or building on the foundations of older myths. Important among these other channels, I would suggest, is the creative vision of artists - writers, poets, painters, sculptors, musicians - which influence the way in which society views the world. It is part of this particular source of influence on the myths of WW1 – the work of literary writers and poets - in which I am interested and which I am attempting to explore.

Myths of war arise initially because of the need to assign meaning to the individual experience and suffering of the past, and each of the myths of the Western Front has a particular social role in helping to make sense, not only of the past, but also of the present. The role of LAF is to permit the expression of anger at the suffering that so many endured, and to grieve for those who were lost. The need for these expressions of feeling, although it may have weakened with the passing of time, remains strong. RTS, no less 'authentic' than LAF, is a myth that asserts the worth of military and patriotic values, allowing those who fought on the Western Front to believe that, if they were on the winning side, they faithfully completed a worthwhile task while, if they were the losers, they did their best in fighting for what they believed, and for the survival of their nation. RR then developed so as to assert the need for reconciliation and healing among peoples who each recognised the worth of the others. RTS endures, but with diminishing strength at the national level as the nation states whose soldiers fought on the Western Front become ever more closely intertwined economically and politically and RR increasingly takes over as the constitutive myth of Europe.



**4. Identifying myths.** How can we discover what are the ‘prevailing’ myths in a given society? In this thesis I have used secondary sources to identify the myths of the Western Front which I wish to study. But myths are never subscribed to throughout society, and they change over time. Paxman gives an entertaining account of contrasting views held about the English (some by themselves, some by foreign observers), which mythologise the English in different ways: their “stand-offishness and gaiety; their tolerance and prejudice, their ignorance and enlightenment” (Voltaire, 1720); “Derby Day, Henley Regatta, Cowes ... a Cup Final, ...boiled cabbage, ... Gothic churches and Elgar” (T.S.Eliot, 1920s); “their love of flowers, their hobbies, their need for privacy, their hypocrisy and their anti-intellectualism” (George Orwell, 1930s); “punk, crosswords, bad hotels, ... DIY curry, and Christmas Eve at Kings College Cambridge” (Jeremy Paxman, 1998). All this against the background of the “still potent myths about English landscape and its qualities of order, security and peace which are held to have drenched the English soul”.<sup>48</sup> But although these views are the opinions of perceptive and imaginative observers, what is remarkable is their diversity.

This raises the possibility, indeed likelihood, that myths, though widely believed to be ‘true’, may be countered by other myths held elsewhere in society. But a start has to be made somewhere. Many possible areas of study come to mind as places to look for myths, which may or may not turn out to be the ‘prevailing’ myths of society. These places might include:

*The history taught to children in schools.* A superficial review of some educational books written for children about WW1 while the war was still in progress reveals a view of the world which was imperial and confident. An example of books in use in schools in 1998 is more questioning and open in its approach.<sup>49</sup> The British National Curriculum requires every fourteen-year-old to study WW1 in outline, with the Western Front as an option which may be studied in greater depth, but, although teachers have some flexibility in the approach to be adopted, it seems that not all the books they use allow for ‘revisionist’ historical thinking of recent years: they are

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<sup>48</sup> See Henry Porter, Review in the “Guardian”, 31/10/98 of Jeremy Paxman, *The English: a Portrait of a People*, (London, Michael Joseph, 1998).

<sup>49</sup> Neil Demarco, *The Great War: “Hell’s Last Horror”*, Hodder 20th Century History series for GCSE, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1997).



imbued with earlier myths, in other words.<sup>50</sup> Comparative study of these and other similar books (including of course the history taught to children in other countries) could reveal the myths which underlie them. It is also possible that the teaching of other subjects than history may shed light on the myths of the war, especially the teaching of English, where the identification of the 'war poets' as a group may well have reinforced the LAF myth.<sup>51</sup>

*Oral history and the first-hand memoirs of soldiers and other participants.*

The oral history and 'history workshop' movements are based on " ... the universality of myth as a constituent of human experience ... myth is a fundamental component of human thought ... myth has lost neither its imaginative purchase nor its living power as a historical force today."<sup>52</sup> A large body of work records the first-hand memories of people who experienced war and the way in which they create and reflect their own myths. In respect of WW1, the work of Lyn McDonald is particularly comprehensive and, more generally, Hynes, exploring the accounts given by soldiers of their wartime experiences, has written of the "meaning" of war to the individual soldier, showing how myth develops and stating that: "By 'myth' I don't mean a fabrication or fiction; I mean rather the simplified narrative that evolves from a war, through which it is given meaning: a Good War, a Bad War, a Necessary War. ... The myth of a war tells what is imaginable and manageable; the soldier's tale, in its infinite variety, tells the whole story".<sup>53</sup>

*War memorials and other monuments.* The design of war memorials, their placing and the inscriptions on them appear to reveal something of the assumptions of their creators and those who commissioned them. One is very struck by the contrast between the stupefying scale of the British memorial by Lutyens at Thiepval on the Somme, and the feeling of quiet despair conveyed by Käthe Kollwitz' statues of *Die Eltern* at the German cemetery at Dixmuide, near Ypres.<sup>54</sup> This is no doubt in part a personal reaction, and other reactions are possible, but a contrast in style and scale

<sup>50</sup> Gary Sheffield, "Oh! What a Futile War", in Ian Stewart and Susan L. Carruthers, eds., *War, Culture and the Media: Representations of the Military in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Britain*. Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 1996, p63.

<sup>51</sup> Gary Sheffield, "Oh! What a Futile War", p63.

<sup>52</sup> Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, *The Myths we Live By*, (London, Routledge, 1990), pp4, 6.

<sup>53</sup> Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale; Bearing Witness in Modern War*, (London, Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1997), pxiii.

<sup>54</sup> See photographs and further analysis of these monuments in Graham Galer, *The Writer as Interpreter and Prophet: Late Twentieth Century Images of the First World War*, MA thesis collection, University of Kent at Canterbury, 1997.



remains to be explained, and it would be surprising if differing national myths of the war did not play a part in this. As a further example, French war memorials normally carry the inscription “morts pour la patrie” and their British equivalents words such as “died for their country”. These words no doubt accurately convey widely-held national myths in the two countries, but contrast with the findings of American studies which concluded that soldiers did indeed fight for their country, but that what really inspired them to ‘carry on’ was the knowledge of the solidarity of their group and the support of their loved ones.<sup>55</sup>

Literature, theatre, music, painting and sculpture. These are enormous fields, each possessing and requiring its own specialised scholarship. It seems to me that the visual and musical arts convey feelings more effectively than they communicate the discursive content of myths. For example, the piano sonatas Nos. 6, 7 and 8 of Prokofiev are described as his ‘war’ sonatas and were composed and first performed in Russia during WW2. The pianist Sviatoslav Richter wrote, in respect of the 7th sonata, of “the disorder and uncertainty and raging of death-dealing forces in the sonata with the continuation of what man lives for, love and the affirmation of life.”<sup>56</sup> These are feelings evoked by the music, and feelings of a similar general kind, but evoked by visual art, might follow the viewing of Picasso’s *Guernica* or Goya’s series of paintings on the *Horrors of War*. The written or spoken word, by contrast, while it can also call forth great emotion, can much more precisely describe the content of a myth, or at least convey clues as to what the underlying myths are on which it is based.

There is material in the above paragraphs for any number of substantial research projects. As a simplifying procedure, the method I have adopted in this thesis for identifying the myths of the Western Front has been to use secondary sources found in the historical literature, relying principally on Leed and Linder and comparing their approaches with some others.<sup>57</sup> As already stated, my chosen approach is then to concentrate on literature as the main focus of my study, principally because I believe, in common with many others, that it was mainly through literature that the LAF and RTS myths were most powerfully articulated.

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<sup>55</sup> Bourke, Joanna. *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-face Killing in Twentieth-century Warfare*. London: Granta Books, 1999, p142.

<sup>56</sup> Record notes, Naxos CD 8.553021.

<sup>57</sup> Leed, *No Man’s Land*, Linder, *Princes of the Trenches*.



**5. Some alternatives to LAF, RTS and RR.** This thesis concentrates on three myths – LAF, RTS and RR – because the first two are specific examples of the general myths of war, and because RR is a synthesis which has evolved from them. Additionally, LAF is widely recognised as the principal myth of the Western Front, perhaps even the only myth, which arose from the work of the ‘war poets’ and the ‘anti-war’ books of around 1930. However, some historians and other scholars have put forward mythical views of WW1 which differ in certain respects from this analysis, and I propose briefly to comment on four of them.

Hynes, concerning himself only with English society, speaks of a myth of “disruption and fragmentation” which is the ‘Myth of the War’, seeing it as a myth of “... world-before-the-war, the gap of the war itself, and the world-after-the-war”. For the war period, his formulation is very similar to LAF, and I therefore see his view as both an extension and a narrowing of LAF, in the sense that he takes a broader view of the relationship of the war to society as a whole, but limits himself to English society.<sup>58</sup>

Mosse also identifies a ‘Myth of the War Experience’ which bears some resemblance to the RTS myth. It “.. looked back upon the war as a meaningful and even sacred event. This vision of the war developed, above all ... in the defeated nations, where it was so urgently needed ... (it) was designed to mask war and to legitimize the war experience: it was meant to displace the reality of war”. There are differences as well as similarities here with RTS, the principal difference being that RTS in no way seeks to hide the essential realities of the war. For Mosse, this ‘Myth of the War Experience’ is the only myth of WW1, and it certainly relates closely to the view of the war as a ‘sacrifice’ which RTS encompasses. However, my own view is that it is an inadequate representation of the mythological consequences of the war, although it can help to explain, as Mosse demonstrates, many of the post-war phenomena of remembrance.<sup>59</sup>

Ferguson devotes a chapter to “The Myths of Militarism”, in which he surveys some of the pre-war writing, dating from at least as early as 1899, which predicted a war which most of these writers saw as inevitable. Ferguson then reviews the politics

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<sup>58</sup> Hynes, *A War Imagined*, Chapter 21, “The War Becomes Myth”, especially pp436-439.

<sup>59</sup> Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, pp 7-8.



of militarism and antimilitarism, concluding that “The evidence is unequivocal: Europeans were not marching to war, but turning their backs on militarism”. These earlier myths form a subset of the general mythology of the WW1 period, not directly related to the myths of the war experience, but of interest in their relation to these later myths, especially LAF.<sup>60</sup>

Leed, although he sets out the ‘conservative experience’ of the war, does not articulate a general myth of the experience of the Western Front, but he does discuss some features of the mythology of war, focusing on the fantasies that even a modern, mechanised war can produce. The themes of these fantasies included ‘flying’ and the experience of being ‘underground’, and stories included “...a shepherd betraying the positions of batteries by the arrangement of his sheep, ... the transposition of the trench into a river of blood ... the ‘German corpse-rendering works’ and ... the army of deserters living beneath No Man’s Land”. These fantasies are not ‘false’, they are “... the necessary articulation of the combatant’s experience of realities”, and represent an escape from the actuality of the war. They certainly form part of the body of legend which underlies the more broader myths with which I am primarily concerned, but they do not in themselves constitute a clearly articulated myth.<sup>61</sup>

**6. The historicity of the myths of the Western Front.** Our principal source of information about the past is not literature, but history. But modern history rarely reaches universally accepted conclusions. As the distinguished military historian Sir Michael Howard states in the foreword to his introductory history of WW1, “Anyone who ventures more deeply into the subject will find that behind almost every sentence in the book lies a scholarly controversy that still remains unsettled ...”.<sup>62</sup> It has been asserted that even the official histories of military units and formations may be “wholly unreliable”.<sup>63</sup> History is a ‘swamp’ of evidence, too complex in many cases for the non-professional to comprehend in its full richness. It is from this swamp that myths arise by selection.<sup>64</sup> They are the “history everyone already knows”.<sup>65</sup> (And

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<sup>60</sup> Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, Chapter 1, pp1-30.

<sup>61</sup> Leed, *No Man’s Land*, Chapter 4 (“Myth and Modern War”), quotations from pp.115, 116.

<sup>62</sup> Michael Howard, *The First World War*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pv.

<sup>63</sup> Guy Chapman, *Vain Glory*, pviii.

<sup>64</sup> This view is due to Professor Ben-Ami Scharfstein; private conversation, University of Tel Aviv, May 1998.

<sup>65</sup> Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, p313, quoting Michel Tournier, *Le Vent Paraclet*, p189.



historians themselves are not immune to the power of myth, as demonstrated, for example, by the symbolic categories, such as ‘the nation’, which they employ).<sup>66</sup>

It has been said of historians that “.. most commonly historians are apt to see myth, if they notice it at all, as an impediment to their true work ... historians seem happiest at work puncturing legends ... showing the artificiality of myth and its manipulable, plastic character”.<sup>67</sup> It is certainly true that many historians have attempted to demonstrate, sometimes convincingly, that some of the myths and legends of WW1 are not ‘true’. For example, the historian John Terraine identifies a ‘futility’ myth, associating it closely with what he terms the ‘great Casualty Myth’, formulating the latter as “... the fixed belief that the First World War was the deadliest experience in human history”.<sup>68</sup> The ‘futility’ myth, according to Terraine, “... offers two arguments: that wars (especially the First World War) have been fought in a ‘futile’ manner, and that they have been fought for a ‘futile’ cause (or lack of cause)”.<sup>69</sup> Terraine then deploys various historical arguments in order to demonstrate that these myths are ‘untrue’. Elsewhere Coker, arguing that “20<sup>th</sup> century warfare had much in common with its practice in the 19<sup>th</sup> century”, points out that, contrary to the implication of the LAF myth, “The actual proportion of casualties to the total number of combatants was not significantly higher in the First World War than in any other major conflict the previous century”.<sup>70</sup> More generally, since about 1980, a ‘revisionist’ school of historians has returned to the study of the military history of WW1 concluding, in the words of one of them, that it was “... a good, justified war”, that the public (at least, the British public) accepted this, and was prepared to make great sacrifices in to achieve the victory which was finally won through the skill and courage of the Allied forces and their unjustly maligned generals.<sup>71</sup>

This approach through political and military history, though valuable and necessary, is not the approach I adopt in this thesis. I am not interested, in the present

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<sup>66</sup> Samuel and Thompson, *The Myths We Live By*, p4.

<sup>67</sup> Samuel and Thompson, *The Myths We Live By*, pp3, 4.

<sup>68</sup> John Terraine, *The Smoke and the Fire: Myths and Anti-myths of War 1861-1945*, (London: Leo Cooper, 1992), p35.

<sup>69</sup> John Terraine, *The Smoke and the Fire*, p205.

<sup>70</sup> Christopher Coker, *War and the Twentieth Century: the Impact of War on the Modern Consciousness*, (London: Brassey's, 1994), p6.

<sup>71</sup> Gary Sheffield, “Oh! What a Futile War”, in Ian Stewart and Susan L. Carruthers, eds., *War, Culture and the Media: Representations of the Military in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Britain*. Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 1996, p59.



investigation, in the historical ‘truth’ or otherwise of the myths which I have identified. It seems quite possible that both the revisionist historians and the mythmakers can be ‘right’, in the sense that the historians are looking at the war from the point of view of the interests of the nation states involved, while myths arose in this case from the experience of individuals, to whom, at the battlefield, their experience of the war may well have appeared ‘meaningless’. The myths represent an attempt to derive meaning from apparently meaningless experience. My interest is in the genesis of the myths, the societal needs in response to which they grew up, how they have evolved through the work of writers, and the later influence they may have had on practical people.

It is often asserted, e.g. by Terraine, that preoccupation with WW1 is a peculiarly British phenomenon.<sup>72</sup> Anecdotally, I have found this to be true, at least to the extent that most continental friends and colleagues believe that it is only the British, among Europeans, who are ‘obsessed’ with WW1, while for other Europeans it is the memory of WW2 which dominates. There is certainly evidence that the search for national identity in Germany concentrates on societal memories of the Nazi period and later.<sup>73</sup> It may also be asserted that the LAF and RTS myths are principally associated with, respectively, British (or Anglo-American) and German culture.<sup>74</sup> I do not know whether this hypothesis is true or not - although I suspect that it is true, I have not encountered any serious attempt to test it (and Sheffield points out that no properly conducted study of public opinion on the matter has so far been carried out).<sup>75</sup> Anecdotally again, I find that German friends and contacts are unfamiliar with the LAF myth, asserting that Germans, and other continental Europeans, are more familiar with the myths of WW2. However, I wish here only to assert that the myths I identify have been both articulated and widely recognised and discussed, and I make no attempt to locate them in any particular national culture, although I would concede that the extent to which they are accepted probably differs in different countries.

It has also been pointed out that LAF and RTS are ‘male’ myths, which are dominated by the experience of those who took part in the fighting. The experience of

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<sup>72</sup> John Terraine, *The Smoke and the Fire*, pp35-37.

<sup>73</sup> Gerd Knischewski and Ulla Spittler, “Memories of the Second World War and National Identity in Germany”, in Martin Evans and Ken Lunn, eds., *War and Memory in the Twentieth Century*, (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1997), pp239-251.

<sup>74</sup> E.g. Linder, *Princes of the Trenches*, pp1-2.

<sup>75</sup> Gary Sheffield, “Oh! What a Futile War”, p69.



those civilians, largely women, who had support roles in the war as nurses, munition workers and many other occupations was equally valid and may have given rise to myths of a quite different nature – concerned, for example, with the changing social role of women - as well as contributing to the myths I have identified. This does not invalidate the present approach, which is only concerned with the translation into myth of the experience of front soldiers, but it does point to the existence of other significant ‘stories’ about the war experience in general.<sup>76</sup>

The LAF myth appeared very soon after the end of the war and remains strongly entrenched still. The history of the RTS myth is rather different: also formulated soon after the war by Jünger and others, it has perhaps weakened in later times, not least through the work of Jünger himself who, like many if not most people, “... was constantly writing and re-writing his own myth”.<sup>77</sup> It has been suggested that the notions of ‘Social Darwinism’ and the ‘struggle for life’, which became fashionable in the second half of the nineteenth century, contributed to the belief, enshrined in RTS, that war was an inescapable aspect of human society.<sup>78</sup> Mosse finds some deep origins for the RTS myth in German culture, with more modern roots in the enthusiasm of the volunteers (in Britain and France, as well as in Germany) who came forward in such numbers in 1914. He also suggests that the post-war cult of the ‘Fallen Soldier’ contributed to the myth.<sup>79</sup>

There are two principal ways in which the LAF myth of the Western Front has been countered, by historians and others. Firstly, it has been argued that this myth has been excessively influenced by writers such as Fussell, by the supposedly anti-authoritarian atmosphere of the 1960s and, earlier, by the large number of books published in the Second Wave of writing (the ‘war book boom’ of the late 1920s onwards - see Chapter 4) which were seen as ‘anti-war’. And secondly, it has been pointed out that Sassoon, Owen and other poets of the WW1 period, who played a large part in articulating the myth, were ‘literary’ writers whose views were not always shared by the large number of ‘middle-brow’ writers who were widely read in the 1920s and 1930s, but whose work has not survived.

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<sup>76</sup> See Introduction (pp1-8) to Agnès Cardinal, Dorothy Goldman and Judith Hattaway, *Women's Writing on the First World War*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1999).

<sup>77</sup> Email from Richard Brem (Austrian Broadcasting Corporation, Vienna), editor of new anthology of writings by Jünger to be published in 2002; August 10 2000.

<sup>78</sup> Ousby, *The Road to Verdun*, p190-193.

<sup>79</sup> Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, p136.



Bond takes the former view. Writing as a historian, he asserts in two interesting papers that “... the anti-war writers were not at all representative of the vast majority of civilians in uniform who experienced active service” and that the influential play (later film) *Oh! What a Lovely War* of 1963 presented the message that: “the war as a whole was visited upon a compliant lower class by an upper class which claimed a superiority it could not justify” - a view Bond terms “claptrap”.<sup>80</sup> Bond is supported by writers such as Carrington, who puts the point of view of many soldiers who felt that they were simply doing their duty, believing, in respect of the Second Wave of writing, that “... this flood of misanthropy has engendered a myth about the First World War which has started many an enquirer on a false trail”, but also that “... the soldiers kept it (the war) to themselves to be discussed in private, like a masonic secret”.<sup>81</sup>

However, *Oh! What a Lovely War* has endured - it was taken on a successful tour by the British National Theatre in 1998, and a reviewer of this production felt that over the years it had done “... as much as anything to alter popular attitudes to the first world war and feed a suspicion of political and military authority”.<sup>82</sup> Its power perhaps comes in part from that way in which it “... reduces historical complexities to Brechtian simplicities”.<sup>83</sup> Bond recognises, reluctantly and with some irritation, the power of the ‘futility’ myth, expressing the hope that “... in the course of the twenty-first century those who shape British public opinion will come to accept the First World War as history ... rather than as a black hole or national trauma - a gap in history - redeemed and rendered meaningful for them only by disenchanted memoirs and the poetry of pity”.<sup>84</sup> In a later book, however, he points out the “paradox” that the writers perceived as ‘anti-war’ (i.e. as associated with the LAF myth) have actually influenced public opinion to a greater extent since the 1960s than they did in the 1930s, as a consequence of the movement of opinion which *Oh! What*

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<sup>80</sup> Brian Bond, “British ‘anti-war’ writers and their critics” in Hugh Cecil and Peter H. Liddle (Eds.), *Facing Armageddon: the First World War Experienced*, (London: Leo Cooper, 1996); and “A victory worse than defeat? British interpretations of the First World War”, (London: Annual Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives Lecture, November 1997).

<sup>81</sup> Charles Carrington, *Soldier from the Wars Returning*, (London: Hutchinson, 1965), pp264, 263..

<sup>82</sup> Michael Billington in the *Guardian*, April 4 1998.

<sup>83</sup> Bernard Bergonzi, *Heroes' Twilight: a Study of the Literature of the Great War*, (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996 (third edition)), p203..

<sup>84</sup> Brian Bond, in Cecil and Liddle, *Armageddon*, p829.



*a Lovely War* helped to create, and of the way in which ‘war poetry’ has been taught by teachers of English in schools.<sup>85</sup>

The second counter-view is developed by Bracco.<sup>86</sup> The “middlebrow” writers she discusses tried, in her view, to assert traditional values of fortitude and courage as they wrote about WW1 experience. A good example is the play *Journey’s End* (still, in the 1990s, a mainstay in the repertoire of English amateur dramatic societies) which, though it contained representations of drunkenness and fear, nevertheless asserted ‘traditional’ English values of loyalty and restraint and “ ... came as a soothing, balancing statement within the controversy about war books in 1929”.<sup>87</sup>

However these countervailing forces, seeking to establish a historical ‘truth’, have clearly not prevailed. The fact that they have not suggests either that the historians have not yet reached a sufficient degree of consensus, that their work has little correspondence with individual experience, or that the experience of the trenches, especially through its literary expression in poetry of high emotion, created a myth of overwhelming power. But, in fact, the historical ‘truth’ is irrelevant for our present purposes: the relevant fact - the reality - is that the ‘story’ of the Western Front is still widely told in this way, and that beliefs, and consequently sometimes actions, are based on it. Even iconoclastic historians may be indirectly affected by the myth: Ferguson, like Pat Barker (see chapters 4 and 7), was inspired to write about WW1 in part by the memory of his grandfather, stating that the war “ ...remains the worst thing the people of my country have ever had to endure”<sup>88</sup>. And a reviewer of Ferguson’s book (which sought to overturn much conventional wisdom about the war) saw it as a “cultural document” - a reflection of the hold which the myths of those times still have over the British.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Brian Bond, *The Unquiet Western Front: Britain’s Role in Literature and History*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp 28, 88.

<sup>86</sup> Rosa Maria Bracco, *Merchants of Hope: British Middlebrow writers and the First World War, 1919-1939*, (Oxford and Providence: Berg Publishers, 1993).

<sup>87</sup> Bracco, *Merchants of Hope*, p199.

<sup>88</sup> Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, pxxi.

<sup>89</sup> Benjamin Schwartz, “Was the Great War Necessary?”, *Atlantic Monthly*, May 1999.



### **Chapter 3**

#### **Some theoretical approaches to myth**

##### **Contents**

1. *Introduction*
2. *Myth, language and political science*
3. *Myth and anthropology: Girard and Turner*
4. *Myth and psychology*
5. *Conclusions: tools for analysis*

1. **Introduction.** This chapter reviews some theories of the nature and formation of myth which will be employed in the later chapters in order to analyse the selected literature which I have studied.

The study of myths and mythology has over the centuries produced an enormous body of very diverse scholarship. My approach has been to attempt to find, within all this material, concepts which might be useful for my limited objective of identifying, through the study of literature, the expression of the myths of the Western Front. Taking advice from those better qualified than I am to enter this specialised field, I select two main approaches to the meaning of myth and its place in modern and other societies, namely through language and political science, and through anthropology. Because of the prominence of the ideas of Jung in studies in mythology, I also briefly review the approach to myth through psychology. However, I eventually conclude that this approach, valid though it may be, does not easily yield the analytical tools I seek, and I therefore consign it to general background, sometimes providing insights, but not usable for my present purpose.<sup>1</sup>

I now make brief selections from the fields of language and political science, anthropology and psychology, choosing one or more authorities in each field (the criterion of selection being their appropriateness for the particular myths in which I am interested) and sketching their principal relevant contributions.

2. **Myth, language and political science.** It is sometimes asserted that, since the Enlightenment, most educated people have believed that all human and natural phenomena are susceptible to reason, and can in the last analysis be rationally

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to my supervisor, Dr Stefan Rossbach, for introducing me to the work of Victor Turner and René Girard, and to Philip Deans, formerly of the Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Kent, for suggesting that the work of Ernst Cassirer might be relevant to this research. My approach to myth is intentionally not comprehensive, excluding, for example, important thinkers such as Barthes, Lévi-Strauss and Malinowski.



‘explained’. But, it is simultaneously asserted, reason has nothing to say when confronted with some of the greatest horrors of the twentieth century, such as the Holocaust. Earlier, mythic, ways of thinking have, according to this view, been swept aside.<sup>2</sup>

An alternative view to this is that ‘mythic consciousness’, although it is an earlier form of consciousness than the rational consciousness which later developed, can co-exist with rational consciousness even in a highly educated society. Indeed, it has done so in modern times, as Cassirer demonstrates in his exploration of some of the techniques of myth generation and manipulation which inspired the Nazi movement in Germany.<sup>3</sup> The characteristic of mythic thinking is that “... in this mode, thought does not dispose over the data of intuition ... but is captivated and enthralled by the intuition which suddenly confronts it.”<sup>4</sup> In this view, mythic thinking is an intuitive mode of thought which can perfectly well co-exist with rational thought, within the consciousness of a single individual, and hence *a fortiori* within a society.

I believe, following Hosking and Schöpfung, Buffet and Heuser and no doubt many others, that in this regard Cassirer is right.<sup>5</sup> Widely-known myths, and the intuitive mode of thinking that goes with them, survive alongside the apparent rationality of modern culture: even the pursuit of science is not immune from this.<sup>6</sup> I am principally concerned in this work with the myths of the Western Front, but these myths co-exist with much older myths. The persistent English myth of ‘winning the last battle’ was referred to in Chapter 2. Other cultures have their own stories, often originating, like the example given, in events which took place in historical times. And, of course, the myths of the Christian bible and of Graeco-Roman antiquity not

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<sup>2</sup> An instance: Karen Armstrong, theologian, on BBC Radio 4, “In Our Time”, in conversation with Melvyn Bragg, April 1999. See also Schöpfung: “The difficulty is that at some level Enlightenment rationality presupposes that all actions can be understood by the cognitive instruments that its practitioners fashioned” (George Schöpfung, *Nations, Identity, Power*, (London: Hurst and Company, 2000), p79).

<sup>3</sup> “The technique of the modern political myths” in Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), Chapter XVIII.

<sup>4</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, (London: Dover Publications, 1953), p32-33.

<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey Hosking and George Schöpfung, *Myths and Nationhood*, (London: Hurst and Company (in association with the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University of London), 1997); Cyril Buffet and Beatrice Heuser, *Haunted by History: Myths in International Relations*, (Providence and Oxford, Berghahn Books, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> An example: the apparent phenomenon of ‘global warming’ has become conflated into a myth (not necessarily ‘untrue’, of course) of man’s destruction of his natural environment.



only remain alive, but retain in the modern world their ability to influence both thinking and behaviour.

Such myths, whether of recent history, the remoter past, or antiquity, can carry with them enormous emotional and consequently practical power. They can give authenticity to assertions of group or national identity, colouring the way in which national or international events are interpreted, with consequences for any resulting action. A way in which this interpretative process might work has been proposed by Voss, who emphasises the significance of “prior beliefs” when assessments are made, by citizens, journalists, politicians or scholars, of events - e.g. conflicts, changes of regime, the formation of alliances - which occur in the national or international arena.<sup>7</sup> Voss identifies three main processes by means of which he believes such assessments are made:

1. Generate and test: i.e. generate explanations (using various heuristics) and test them either through “belief evaluation” (i.e. their consistency with prior beliefs) or through “reasoned evaluation”.
2. Use analogy (e.g. “this could be another Munich”)
3. Adhere to prior beliefs even if the evidence contradicts them.

The third of these methodologies has little connection with rational thought processes, while the second, although it may employ rationality, bases it on a model (e.g. ‘Munich’) of a prior event judged to possess similarities with the situation under review. And even the first methodology, although it is overtly rational, can introduce mythical thinking through the involvement of ‘prior beliefs’, which are often expressed in the form of ‘stories’ (i.e. myths) about how the world became what it is, or how it works. One sees daily examples of each of these modes of interpretation in the work of journalists and academics, and in the speeches of politicians - concluding, therefore, that mythical ways of thinking are very much alive and well in modern society including, in particular, in contemporary international relations.

Ernst Cassirer was a major thinker in this field.<sup>8</sup> It has been said that he “... devoted more time and thought to the philosophy of myth than anyone else.”<sup>9</sup> Cassirer was interested in the nature of ‘mythical consciousness’ and its relationship

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<sup>7</sup> James F. Voss, “Informal reasoning and international relations”, in James F. Voss, David N. Perkins and Judith W. Segal, eds., *Informal reasoning and education*, (Hillsdale, N.J and London, L. Erlbaum Associates, 1990).

<sup>8</sup> His key works for the present purpose are: *The Myth of the State; Language and Myth*, (Dover Publications, 1953) and *An Essay on Man*, (Yale University Press, 1962).

<sup>9</sup> Kirk, *Myth*, p263.



with religion and politics. He believed that human intelligence, as it evolved beyond the instinctive life of animals, began with the ability to form concepts, and that concepts can only become established when they are given symbolic form. Of the many different manifestations of symbolic form - artistic, scientific, religious, historical etc. - language and myth are the oldest. Cassirer's insight was, in this respect: "... the realization that *language*, man's prime instrument of reason, reflects his myth-making tendency more than his rationalizing tendency. Language ... expresses itself in different forms, one of which is *discursive logic*, the other *creative imagination*."<sup>10</sup>

However, Kirk attempts to refute much of Cassirer's thinking, asserting that, "One cannot help admiring the passion and confidence of Cassirer's vision and the poetical vigour of his expression. Yet it is purely conjectural, and rather improbable at that."<sup>11</sup> He goes on to say:

"Cassirer's positive contribution to the study of mythical forms of imagination and expression lies primarily ... in his emphasis on their emotional nature. Most of his description of the act of myth-making is pure fiction; yet it is permeated, like all his work, by flashes of acute diagnosis. One such perception, that mythical thinking is distinguished 'as much by its *concept of causality* as by its *concept of the object*' may suitably lead to a more positive examination of the relation of myth to imagination and fantasy."<sup>12</sup>

Myths of war, it could reasonably be asserted, always carry a strong emotional charge, so that Cassirer's emphasis on emotion as a normal feature of myths is helpful in providing a context for their study. Kirk asserts that "fantasy", which "deals in events that are impossible by real-life standards" is the result of a particular kind of imagination. In myths, fantasy "tends to exceed the mere manipulation of the supernatural and expresses itself in a strange dislocation of familiar and naturalistic connexions and associations".<sup>13</sup> This, he believes, is what Cassirer means by the "mythical concept of causality". Kirk finds it helpful analytically, following Cassirer, to distinguish between such causal processes and the objects (e.g. ogres, giants, monsters etc.) which form the cast of mythical stories. This is to distinguish between

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<sup>10</sup> Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, Translator's Preface, ppviii-ix.

<sup>11</sup> Kirk, *Myth*, p265.

<sup>12</sup> Kirk, *Myth*, pp267-8.

<sup>13</sup> Kirk, *Myth*, p268.



dynamic and static fantasy.<sup>14</sup> Kirk points out that, although in a myth events can proceed normally for a while, “there is no consistency of thought or action, and many problems are left unanswered”.

The relation of myth to imagination and fantasy is, in respect of the literature of WW1, part of the present study, in that I am considering ways in which literature reflects or helps to originate the prevailing myths. It may prove to be useful, adopting Cassirer’s insight, to distinguish between some of the mythologised figures and events of the war (e.g. General Haig, the ‘young poet in the trenches’, ‘the battle of the Somme’) and the ‘stories’ told by the myths of LAF, RTS and RR, which represent different ways in which the war and its aftermath were perceived by different observers and participants. It is certainly the case that in these myths “problems are left unanswered”: for example, in the LAF myth, why were so many on both sides willing to go on fighting in such appalling and often hopeless circumstances?

Goodman develops further the place of imagination and fantasy in the study of myth, through his discussion of ‘mythic discourse’.<sup>15</sup> Dismissing the notions that the ‘primitive mind’ is incapable of logical reasoning, or that there is some common core of meaning underlying all myth, he asserts that:

“Myths are stories told to answer some human need, so we should not feel overly surprised if they respond more faithfully to such needs than to the demands of abstract logic, of science, or even of morality. Myths are fictions, and like all fictions achieve precision in one domain at the expense of imprecision ... in another. ... myths are as prominent in modern, industrial cultures as they were in ancient cultures, and as powerful as they remain in tribal cultures. ... When maximally effective, myths remain almost unnoticed. But for that very reason myths are never fully ... “believed”. For beliefs, once articulated as beliefs, do not remain unnoticed”.<sup>16</sup>

The discourse of modern society is thus according to this view sustained by a largely unarticulated mythology. Goodman argues further that this mythology consists of : “ ...stories sustained by the values they express - by hope and fear, love, hate, anger and resentment, joy and contentment. Myths may be true stories, but truth

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<sup>14</sup> Kirk, *Myth*, p278.

<sup>15</sup> Lenn E. Goodman, “Mythic discourse”, in Shlomo Biderman and Ben-Ami Scharfstein (Eds), *Myths and Fictions*, (Leiden, New York, Köln, E.J. Brill, 1993).

<sup>16</sup> Goodman, “Mythic discourse”, p107.



is only one among the values that sustain them, and the role of other values is more than strong enough to ensure that literal falsity is insufficient to disarm them”.<sup>17</sup>

There is a clear relationship here with the work of Hynes on the formation of myths about wars by servicemen who fought in them, and the extensive work of Fussell. Hynes traces the process by which the war ‘became’ myth, basing his analysis on literature, film and memorial art, forms in which factual ‘truth’ is filtered through the sensibility of the artist, whose values colour his artistic response.<sup>18</sup> Fussell, primarily interested in WW1 as “ironic action”, believes that the actors in WW1 both relied on inherited myth and generated new myths and legends, and that “the whole texture of British daily life could be said to commemorate the war still.”<sup>19</sup>

**3. Myth and anthropology: Girard and Turner.** The study of mythology in the twentieth century was “dominated by the trends initiated by J.G. Frazer”, the first edition of whose *The Golden Bough* was published in 1890.<sup>20</sup> Frazer’s enormous (thirteen-volume) compendium of worldwide anthropological observation, unified to a degree through the theme of the ‘slain god’, provided a new basis to the study of myth and religion.<sup>21</sup> Of those many scholars who have further developed the relationships between anthropology and myth, I choose to review some ideas of Girard and of Turner.

**René Girard.** Girard trained in France and the USA as a historian, turned to the teaching of literature, and has written extensively on the philosophy of religion. He is therefore not an anthropologist in the conventional sense but has developed anthropological theories - “discourses about what it means to be human”<sup>22</sup> - based on his studies of comparative literature and of biblical texts.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Goodman, “Mythic discourse”, p109.

<sup>18</sup> “The War Becomes Myth”, Chapter 21 of Samuel Hynes, *War Imagined: the First World War and English Culture*, (London: The Bodley Head, 1990).

<sup>19</sup> Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, p315.

<sup>20</sup> Kirk, *Myth*, p2.

<sup>21</sup> Introduction by Mary Douglas to Sir James George Frazer, (abridged by Sabine Maccormack), *The Illustrated Golden Bough*, (London: Macmillan, 1978).

<sup>22</sup> J.G. Williams, Foreword to René Girard *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2001), p.ix.

<sup>23</sup> Girard’s thinking on myth and sacrifice are set out in a number of texts. Those on which I have principally relied, apart from the above, are René Girard, tr. Patrick Gregory, *Violence and the Sacred*, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977); and tr. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, (London: Athlone Press, 1987). Clear brief descriptions of the concepts which underlie Girard’s theories are given in Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, “Sacred Violence, Deformed Desire, and Generative Scapegoating; The Theory of René Girard” in Hamerton-Kelly,



Girard presents a view of the functioning of society which is based on the presumed existence of ‘mimetic rivalry’. In this view the characteristic of humanity which is most distinctive of the species is ‘mimetic desire’, by which humans desire, not only what their neighbours have, but also what their neighbours desire. The rivalry that ensues can lead to the breakdown of social order, and may result in violent conflict. This view of ‘mimesis’ as a defining feature of humanity identifies an aspect of society which, Girard believes, has been undeservedly neglected by other thinkers.<sup>24</sup> Girard asserts that the fear and anger of a social group arising from rivalry and mimetic desire can be diverted on to a surrogate victim, who then becomes the subject of sacrifice, or of ‘scapegoating’, which is the ritual of transferring the sins of society onto a victim (in biblical times a he-goat) and of expelling the victim from the society. The fear and anger themselves will have arisen from the perceived possibility of violence, which comes about because of the need for revenge, and the purpose of the sacrifice or scapegoating is to tame or divert the violence. In this way, when a threat to the established social order arises a ‘sacrificial crisis’, uniting the community, can establish order. Seen in this way, the sacrificial crisis represents a “hidden structuring principle” for any society.<sup>25</sup>

The connection with the sacred, implied in the title of Girard’s seminal book, comes about because the sacred “consists of all those forces whose dominance over man increases or seems to increase in proportion to man’s effort to master them”.<sup>26</sup> These forces include, as well as such obvious things as storms and other natural phenomena, violence itself. For, in spite of the socialising effect of sacrifice, we are always on the edge of violence which, once it emerges, can easily “bring about a catastrophic escalation”.<sup>27</sup> And so society inflicts ritual violence in order to protect itself from the violence which it fails to comprehend or control. Once the sacrifice has taken place, the victim may become sanctified or deified, as society sees in him the means by which social order has been restored.

In the Girardian scheme there is a specific chronology through which these processes develop. At the beginning, mimesis engenders violence and revenge which,

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*Sacred Violence: Paul’s Hermeneutic of the Cross*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), and in the Foreword by Williams mentioned above.

<sup>24</sup> Girard, *Things Hidden*, p9.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Dumouchel, ed., *Violence and Truth: on the Work of René Girard*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), p228.

<sup>26</sup> Girard, *Violence*, p31.

<sup>27</sup> Girard, *Violence*, p30.



by creating a vicious (mimetic) circle, can engulf and destroy a whole society. Examples of this may be seen in many societies, past and present, in such phenomena as the long-term persistence of vendettas and of ethno-religious conflict. A means of breaking the vicious circle then emerges through the identification of a scapegoat on to whom the burden of blame may be placed, and of a sacrificial crisis of which the scapegoat is the victim.<sup>28</sup>

The choice of scapegoat as the victim to be sacrificed will depend on the specific circumstances of the time. Surrogate victims are sometimes chosen from groups which are outside or on the margins of society: Girard gives as examples prisoners of war and “children who have not yet undergone the rite of initiation”.<sup>29</sup> In an interview Girard has interpreted the political travails of former US President Clinton during his second term as the sacrifice of a scapegoat who was “a compendium of all that his accusers found most embarrassing, troubling and loathsome about themselves, especially those who came of age, as he did, in the deep, narcotic prosperity that enveloped the nation after WW2”. In every such situation the scapegoat “... has the capacity to relieve the burden of guilt from a society ... It is the way tension is relieved and change takes place”.<sup>30</sup>

The sacrificial crisis marks the end of the pre-existing social order, because it implies that the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence has been lost. Once it has occurred, the sacrificial crisis brings about social unity, and is seen as the ‘founding murder’ through which the ensuing social order has been introduced, and on which it is based. The new social order is subsequently maintained through ‘ritual’, ‘myth’ and ‘prohibition’.

Ritual is the formal means through which the memory of the sacrificial crisis is kept alive: it reproduces the crisis, possibly through the performance of further ritualised sacrifice, society remembering through this ritual the way in which social order has been established.<sup>31</sup> If the ritual involves further sacrifice, this can be seen as ‘secondary’ to the ‘primary’ sacrifice which represented the founding murder of the

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<sup>28</sup> For simplicity I conflate two notions here – that of the ‘sacrificial victim’ and of the ‘scapegoat’. The ‘sacrificial crisis’ may involve the actual killing of the victim, or his being driven out or excluded from society, in the way that the biblical ‘scapegoat’ was driven out into the desert.

<sup>29</sup> Girard, *Violence*, p12.

<sup>30</sup> Joe Klein, *The Natural: the Misunderstood Presidency of Bill Clinton*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2002), p184. The degree to which Clinton was actually ‘sacrificed’ is clearly open to discussion.

<sup>31</sup> Hamerton-Kelly, *Sacred Violence*, p29



new social order. Such ‘secondary’ sacrifice may be either ‘symbolic’ (e.g. an act, such as the Christian Eucharist, which recalls the sacrifice without repeating it), or ‘substitutive’ (when, e.g., an animal is sacrificed in place of the human(s) who died in the original sacrifice).

Myth ‘updates’ societal memory as time goes by, social and political circumstances change, and different views of the original sacrificial crisis may emerge. In this view, myths are “the retrospective transfiguration of sacrificial crises, the reinterpretation of these crises in the light of the cultural order that has arisen from them”.<sup>32</sup> The myths which arise from the sacrificial crisis themselves become part of the new social order, having as their social function a way of making sense of, or finding meaning in, the experiences of the past.

Prohibition, the purpose of which is to avoid future mimetic crises, is then the basis of the legal system which enshrines the new social order.

Girard’s view of myth can clearly contain the “slain god”, the “god, ancestor or mythic hero” who then “... dies himself or selects a victim to die in his stead. In so doing he bestows a new life on men”.<sup>33</sup> In this way, Girard’s theories may be used to provide an exegesis of the basic texts of Christianity, and indeed Girard himself has provided this.<sup>34</sup> The story of Cain and Abel, in which Cain is sent out by God to be a “fugitive and a vagabond in the earth”<sup>35</sup> because he murdered his brother Abel, is an account of the ‘founding murder’ of human society, and represents a myth through which it is remembered. Girard argues, however, that the stories of the Christian Gospels, like indeed many of the stories of the Old Testament, are unique in the history of myth in that they are told from the point of view of the victim. Although the Passion of Jesus take the form of a classic ‘sacrificial crisis’, the “... chief figure, the one who teaches, dies, and rises again, is *innocent* of all the charges against him”. For Christians, then, “The cross of Christ is the sign of salvation, which is revealed as the overcoming of mimetic desire and violence through the non-violence of love and forgiveness”.<sup>36</sup> In this sense, the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus represent a final unburdening of the sins of mankind, establishing a social order in which the Cross remains as a reminder of the ‘founding murder’ and a warning against its repetition.

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<sup>32</sup> Girard, *Violence*, p64.

<sup>33</sup> Girard, *Violence*, p64.

<sup>34</sup> Notably in Girard, *Satan*.

<sup>35</sup> Book of *Genesis*, Chapter 4, v.12.

<sup>36</sup> J.G.Williams, Foreword to Girard, *Satan*, pp.xviii, xix.



However, although many Christian believers, and apparently Girard himself, regard the Christian revelation as uniquely different from other sacrificial crises, it is relevant in the present context principally because it provides a image of sacrifice familiar to most citizens of the nations which were fighting on the Western Front, who nearly all came from the Christian culture of Europe.

*WW1 as a sacrificial crisis.* The mimetic desire which underlies Girard's scheme was clearly present in pre-WW1 Europe. As Hamerton-Kelly asserts; "Mimetic desire is infectious. It is the 'hunger for the envy of the other.' Fashion is driven by mimesis, so is the arms race ...".<sup>37</sup> The arms race between the UK and Germany in the early years of the twentieth century, and the struggle for supremacy of the two countries, has been well-documented historically, notably in Ferguson's history of WW1 but also in many others.<sup>38</sup> Glover describes the situation in August 1914 as a typical "Hobbesian trap", where war resulted from the fear of being attacked, as well as from actual attack.<sup>39</sup> In Girard's writing mimesis is seen as working mainly at the level of the individual, not the group, but the widespread sense of exaltation and relief which broke out in all the major belligerents on the outbreak of the war shows that, in this case, mimesis was working for both individuals and states. That the force of mimesis would lead to war, in which soldiers would have to sacrifice themselves, was seen and even advocated by writers such as von Bernhardt, a senior member of the military class which Ernst Jünger so eagerly joined when war eventually broke out.<sup>40</sup> Kern, discussing the 'self-images' of the major belligerents before the 'July Crisis' of 1914 describes how in Germany "... there was widespread concern that the coming years might bring an eclipse of the military superiority on the European continent that it had enjoyed since 1870"<sup>41</sup>. And this military superiority was needed if Germany was to be able to maintain the national unity which 'older' countries such as England, France and Russia had enjoyed for hundreds of years.

WW1 was, and still is, seen by many people as representing the sacrifice by society of a generation of young men or, alternatively, as the self-sacrifice of a

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<sup>37</sup> Hamerton-Kelly, *Sacred Violence*, p23.

<sup>38</sup> Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, esp. chapters 2,3,4.

<sup>39</sup> Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: a Moral History of the Twentieth Century*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), pp131, 188-194..

<sup>40</sup> General Friedrich von Bernhardt, tr. Allen H. Powles, *Germany and the Next War*. (London: Edward Arnold, 1914).

<sup>41</sup> Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996). p283.



generation of young men who were willing to die for their country. At its beginning the war was certainly widely seen in Europe as time of sacrifice, as exemplified by the words of the British minister David Lloyd George, later Prime Minister, in a speech in September 1914:

“We have been too comfortable and too indulgent ... and the stern hand of Fate has scourged us to an elevation where we can see the great everlasting things that matter for a nation - the great peaks we had forgotten, of Honour, Duty, Patriotism and, clad in glittering white, the great pinnacle of Sacrifice pointing like a rugged finger to Heaven”.<sup>42</sup>

After the war, in Britain, “The language of remembrance was based on the notion of sacrifice rather than the patriotic virtues of duty and service”, and “sustaining ideologies” became transformed, so that the experiences of soldiers became seen as analogous to Christ’s crucifixion, victory to expiation and redemption and the battlefields of France and Flanders as holy or sacred ground.<sup>43</sup> At Verdun, the French named (and continue to name) as the ‘Voie Sacrée’ the road which during the eponymous battle was used to bring up supplies to the front, and the area was seen as the site of a modern Calvary.<sup>44</sup> A French novel of the 1920s was entitled *Les Suppliciés* (*The Victims*),<sup>45</sup> and the angry realist poet Henry-Jacques wrote of “ ... livid, crucified corpses”.<sup>46</sup> For the Germans, the war was “ ... a holy war on behalf of a holy nation”, and each death was a sacrifice, the dead “ ... truly made sacred in the imitation of Christ”. In one (German) view, the “ ... sacrificial death of the best of our people ... is only a repetition of the Passion of Christ”.<sup>47</sup>

It has also been pointed out that, in the circumstances of trench warfare, the attacker was far more vulnerable than the defender, due to the power of technology, which provided machine-guns that could wipe out large numbers of men advancing

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<sup>42</sup> Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, quoting from John Grigg, *Lloyd George: From Peace to War, 1912-1916*, (Berkeley, 1985), p166.

<sup>43</sup> Bob Bushaway, “Name upon Name: The Great War and Remembrance” in Roy Porter, ed., *Myths of the English*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992) p148ff, p160.

<sup>44</sup> Ousby, *The Road to Verdun*, pp7,9. Ousby comments: “ ... the name seemed to evoke the Via Dolorosa ... and to compare the suffering and sacrifice of the soldiers who fought at Verdun with Christ’s journey to Calvary and the Crucifixion.” He notes, however, that the Voie Sacrée was also seen as a descent into the Inferno.

<sup>45</sup> René Naegelen, *Les Suppliciés*, (1927; Paris: Editions Colbert, 1966). Discussed in Ousby, *the Road to Verdun*, p199, 200.

<sup>46</sup> Henry-Jacques (Henri-Edmond Jacques), “The Mass Grave”. Private communication: documentation for University of Cambridge Board of Continuing Education programme “The Great War in Literature”, Madingley Hall, Cambridge, January 24-26 1997.

<sup>47</sup> Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, p.75, paraphrasing Walter Flex..



across open ground. As a consequence, one of the lasting images of the war has become that of the “victimized crowd of attackers in no man’s land”, men who had no choice other than to advance into a deadly chaos of hostile fire, thus readily becoming, in the eyes of later observers, sacrificial victims.<sup>48</sup> On one view the notion of a ‘war of attrition’ was invented by the Germans, who saw it as a means of “exhausting the enemy by self-sacrifice instead of defeating him by dashing enterprise”.<sup>49</sup> More generally, the composer Michael Tippett saw the ‘Child of Our Time’, the everyman figure of the twentieth century in his eponymous oratorio, first performed in 1940, as a scapegoat for the evils of Europe and the world. The chorus sings: *A star rises in mid-winter/Behold the man! The scape-goat!/The child of our time*. In an interesting link with both world wars, the title of Tippett’s oratorio comes from *Ein Kind unserer Zeit* by the German-language Hungarian writer Ödön von Horváth, which was translated into English in 1938 and deals with the disillusionment of a young Nazi soldier. The persistence of views such as the above into more recent times is exemplified by the publication in 2001 of a new history of the battle of Passchendaele which refers to it as ‘sacrificial’.<sup>50</sup>

It is possible to take a cynical view of this interpretation of the war, seeing the preparation for sacrifice, and the sacrifice itself, as representing no more than a device used by the ruling classes to maintain control of their people. As Hašek wrote of the beginning of WW1:

“Preparations for the slaughter of mankind have always been made in the name of God or some supposed higher being which men have devised and created in their own imagination ... throughout all Europe people went to the slaughter like cattle, driven there not only by butcher emperors, kings and other potentates and generals, but also by priests of all confessions ...”.<sup>51</sup>

Henry Williamson, in his angry book *The Patriots Progress*, wrote, surely ironically, of the devoted padre who had worked for three days and nights without sleep, that “ ... he believed that Christ had come again to the world, arising in the comradeship of men crucified on the battlefields. He died of nervous exhaustion soon

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<sup>48</sup> Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, p145.

<sup>49</sup> Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, p156.

<sup>50</sup> Nigel Steel and Peter Hart, *Passchendaele: The Sacrificial Ground*, (London: Cassell, 2001).

<sup>51</sup> Jaroslav Hašek, tr. Cecil Parrott, *The Good Soldier Švejk*, (London: Penguin Books, 1974), p125.



after the Armistice”.<sup>52</sup> This view is similar to that expressed by Wilfred Owen, in his angry poem ‘The Parable of the Old Man and the Young’, in which the poet makes explicit reference to a familiar Bible story, interpreting it as a Girardian ‘sacrificial crisis’ in which a generation (“half the seed of Europe”) was sacrificed in an attempt to preserve the pre-existing social order.

*The Parable of the Old Man and the Young*  
“So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,  
And took the fire with him, and a knife.  
And as they sojourned both of them together,  
Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,  
Behold the preparations, fire and iron,  
But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?  
Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,  
And builded parapets and trenches there,  
And stretchèd for the knife to slay his son.  
When Lo! An angel called him out of heaven,  
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,  
Neither do anything to him. Behold,  
A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;  
Offer the ram of Pride instead of him.  
But the old man would not so, but slew his son,  
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.”<sup>53</sup>

Owen is here describing a Girardian sacrificial crisis, where mimesis is explicitly invoked through Owen’s choice of “the ram of Pride” as the victim which could have been offered instead of the young man.

Denham suggests that German poets writing around the beginning of the war “mythologized” the political forces which were its cause, seeing an approaching “war-god”.<sup>54</sup> With Girard, we can see the sacrificial victims of the war as transmuted into figures, such as the ‘Unknown Soldier’, or the ‘Lost Generation’, which are remembered in ritual and myth, and which have taken on an aura of sanctity. The tombs of the Unknown Soldiers, especially in Britain and France, have become the foci for national observation of the memory of war, and Gregory points out that the ceremonies of remembrance on Armistice Day in the UK employ “... a language of

<sup>52</sup> Henry Williamson, *The Patriot's Progress*, (1930; Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1999), p176.

<sup>53</sup> Wilfred Owen, *Collected Poems*, edited by C.Day Lewis, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1963), p42.

<sup>54</sup> Scott D. Denham, *Visions of war: ideologies and images of war in German literature before and after the Great War*, (Berne, Peter Lang, 1992), p46.



sacrifice ...” which is “ ... informed by Christian concepts of redemption through blood”<sup>55</sup>

It seems, then, that these new ‘gods’ and rituals have replaced the ‘war-god’ of 1914 through a process which could be interpreted in Girardian terms. However, as alluded to above, there is some ambiguity about the precise nature of the sacrifice being made. Within the LAF myth, the sacrifice was certainly seen by many as the sacrifice by society of a large number of its young men in order to preserve the pre-existing social order. The victims may have been willing to die, at least in the early stages of the war, when young men volunteered in huge numbers, but the agent of sacrifice was clearly society as a whole. This has been seen as an attempt by society in European countries to extend the life of the old social order, and hence was, in Girardian terms, a sacrifice aimed at preservation, rather than restoration. In the RTS myth, by contrast, soldiers willingly laid down their own lives, and did not see themselves as the ‘victims’ of society. Theirs was a sacrifice for society by its young men. They willingly made themselves sacrificial victims in order, not to preserve the pre-existing social order, but to bring about a new order. They thus subjected themselves to a ‘founding murder’ of something new, a new social order which would be better than that which went before. It has been pointed out that most peoples in recorded history have developed a cult of sacrificial death in battle, and this attitude to war certainly underlies some of the writings of Ernst Jünger, whose contribution to the RTS myth is discussed in chapter 6.<sup>56</sup>

The important distinction between sacrifice ‘by’ and ‘for’ society will be further developed in both Chapters 5 and 6.

**Victor Turner.** Turner’s interest was in rites of passage. Van Gennep had studied these rites - rituals such as initiation, marriage, burial etc. - and concluded that they had three phases: *separation*, *margin*, and *aggregation*.<sup>57</sup> In separation and aggregation the individual is removed from the group and later rejoins it. In the marginal period, which Turner preferred to call the *liminal* (from the Latin *limen*, a

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<sup>55</sup> Adrian Gregory, *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day 1919-1946*, (Oxford and Providence: Berg Publishers, 1994), p225..

<sup>56</sup> Walter Laqueur, “Life as a weapon: the twisted history of the suicide terrorist”; review of Christoph Reuter, *Mein Leben ist eine Waffe*, (Munich: Bertelsmann, 2002), (*Times Literary Supplement*, September 6 2002, pp3,4).

<sup>57</sup> Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960).



threshold), the individual neophyte is in between, neither one thing nor the other. Turner himself stated that: "Liminality is a concept, borrowed from the French folklorist Arnold Van Gennep ... which, like a pebble, I tossed speculatively into the pool of my anthropological data in 1974, to try to make more sense that I had previously been able to do of ritual processes I had observed in Central Africa".<sup>58</sup> While his early anthropological field work was with the Ndembu people of north-western Zambia, later empirical and theoretical work was directed at understanding how different societies handled this liminal stage.

In his conclusions Turner makes a number of observations and assertions about the liminal period, which he sees as society's 'subjunctive mood', a time in which many things are possible and little is certain. For the neophytes who pass through it the normal hierarchical relationships of ordinary society dissolve, reshaping themselves into the form of unstructured comradeship among the neophytes, accompanied by an authoritarian relationship between them and their instructor(s). There is a discontinuity for the neophytes, a change of being which has not come about through their own actions. They are in touch with the sacred, their faculties are more alert and, since they see the structures of society from the outside, they achieve an enhanced understanding of 'how things work'.

Turner gives the name *communitas* to the new form of society which emerges, albeit temporarily, during the liminal period. *Communitas* is a society which is unstructured (or with only rudimentary structure) and relatively undifferentiated, in contrast to the structured, normally hierarchical society of everyday life. It is a society of comrades, of human beings stripped of the artifice of normal human society. What remains in *communitas*, according to Turner, is that which is genuinely human, a new model of inter-relatedness which is based on 'humankind ness'.<sup>59</sup>

Turner cites as an example of the liminal period and *communitas* in advanced societies the early years of the Franciscan movement. St. Francis, who grew up in prosperous circumstances in Assisi in the later years of the twelfth century, rejected material things and chose instead a life of extreme poverty, surrounded by a group of like-minded companions. Within this group, on the margins of society, the early

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<sup>58</sup> "Variations on a Theme of Liminality" in Victor Turner, ed. Edith Turner, *Blazing the Trail: Way Marks in the Exploration of Symbols*, (Tucson and London: University of Arizona Press, 1992), p.48.

<sup>59</sup> The brief account of Turner's theory given here is based on "Liminality and *Communitas*" in Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process, Structure and Anti-structure*, (Chicago: Aldine Press, 1969), pp94-130; and the above-mentioned "Variations on a Theme of Liminality".



brothers formed their own version of *communitas*, sharing everything, supporting each other and finding no need to own property. Eventually, however, even Francis had to accept the need to establish a papally-accredited order, which once established grew rapidly. In due course the brothers found that, in order to do their work effectively, they had to build churches and dwellings, and consequently had to acquire the resources needed to finance their construction and maintenance. In this way the early *communitas* evolved into the structured form of the later Franciscan community, and the accompanying stress between *communitas* and community (or between ideals and necessity) continues within the Franciscans to the present day, having brought about several splits in the order over the course of time.<sup>60</sup>

Some liminal groups can have great influence in society. As Turner states: “Members of despised or outlawed ethnic and cultural groups play major roles in myths and popular tales as representatives or expressions of universal human values. ... among these are the good Samaritan ...” and “ ... in the traditional ‘Western’ we have all read of the homeless and mysterious ‘stranger’ without wealth or name who restores ethical and legal equilibrium to a set of local power relations by eliminating the unjust secular ‘bosses’ who are oppressing the smallholders”.<sup>61</sup>

It seems that these mythical figures, often belonging to liminal groups on the margins of society, can represent for a structured society its most humane values, demonstrating these values through their own individual version of *communitas*. Turner asserts that, if a society is to function effectively, it needs to promote *communitas*, and that it needs to achieve the right balance of *communitas* in relation to its social structures.

The relationship of myth to liminal experience, in Turner’s view, is twofold: during the liminal experience itself the myths of society are re-enacted, and later myth derives from the remembrance of the *communitas* of the liminal group. It is the second of these two processes which I intend to pursue in the analysis which in later chapters I make of the literature of the Western Front.

In this context, it is worth noting that Turner saw literature itself as a ‘liminoid’ genre, stating that:

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<sup>60</sup> Turner, *Ritual Process*, p141ff, quoting from M.D.Lambert, *Franciscan Poverty*, (1961).

<sup>61</sup> Turner, *Ritual Process*., p110.



“In this interim of ‘liminality’, the possibility exists of standing aside not only from one’s own social position but from all social positions and of formulating a potentially unlimited series of alternative social arrangements. That this danger is recognised in all tolerably orderly societies is made evident by ... legislation against those who in industrial societies utilise such ‘liminoid’ genres as literature, the film and the higher journalism to subvert the axioms and standards of the *ancien regime* - both in general and in particular cases”.<sup>62</sup>

Perhaps the writings of those who contributed to the LAF myth (to be further discussed in Chapter 5) were seen as threatening to the political élite of the day because, from a liminal position from which quite different outcomes were possible from those desired and anticipated by their leaders, they challenged the values and judgement of those who had initiated and directed the war on the Western Front.

In another example of liminality, Ekstein, in a discussion of the range of artistic responses to WW1, speaks of the ‘journey to the interior’<sup>63</sup> which many artists - and indeed less artistically gifted people - undertook. Their horrendous, extreme, experiences drove them in on themselves, causing them sometimes even to question the nature of the reality through which they were living. This reaction to events may readily be interpreted as a natural stage in the development of a liminal group, and corresponds well with the writer Ernst Jünger’s ‘internal emigration’ (further discussed in Chapter 6), in which after WW1 he retreated into science and art, seeing language as the only true reality, leaving the myth behind him for the time being. But this process could have many different outcomes and indeed did so, in particular as many Germans (including again, for a time, Jünger) underwent ‘internal emigration’ during the period of the Nazi régime.

Furthermore, the whole society of the time could be said to undergo liminal experience in two respects: the new (industrial) kind of war, for which no-one was prepared; and the sense of WW1 as marking a ‘great divide’ (in time), a feeling recognised by many other writers.<sup>64</sup>

*Liminality and the Western Front.* There are clear parallels in Turner’s analysis with the situation of conscripted service people in WW1 (and indeed in other wars also). They were taken out of society, placed under strict discipline and made to undergo experiences which can be seen as rites of passage from one state of peace and

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<sup>62</sup> Turner, *Drama, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, (Cornell University Press, 1975), p13.

<sup>63</sup> Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, p208ff.

<sup>64</sup> E.g. Eksteins, Fussell, Hynes (see Bibliography).



social order to another. A liminal group, they formed their own *communitas*, in which although a hierarchical disciplinary structure existed, most of the normal relations of peacetime life were shattered. Leed identifies important differences in their situation from the situation of the initiates in what he calls the “traditional, agrarian, premodern” cultures which are the principal basis for Turner’s theories. In these cultures what is most often revealed to initiates during the liminal stage is “the sacred underpinnings of the group”, whereas to the conscripts on the Western Front the revelation, according to Leed, was of the power of modern military technology to cause slaughter on an industrial scale.<sup>65</sup> But although the nature of their experience was different, service people on the Western Front went through analogous processes of separation, living through the liminal period, and aggregation as did the initiates studied by Turner.

In the period of separation, both society as a whole and individual soldiers underwent change, society adjusting away from the previously normal conditions of social life, and citizen-soldiers being removed from their status as civilians and having to accept the wearing of uniform, unfamiliar discipline and eventually, for those who were sent to the Western Front, departure from their homeland. To the civilian society they left behind, soldiers became invisible, separated from the society to which they owed allegiance through a process which bore the characteristics of a rite of passage.<sup>66</sup>

One of the most durable images of the Western Front is that of No Man’s Land, seen as “... the very image of the marginal, the liminal, the ‘betwixt and between’”<sup>67</sup> where, in an attack launched from the trenches:

“... men fall. Some cry out. Most are silent. The wounded rarely feel pain initially. Officers try to keep the line together. But these men in the limbo of no man’s land, these “wanderers between two worlds,” need little encouragement, for isolation in this situation means fear. Only in the group is there any emotional safety, any comfort. Indeed, the attackers are inclined to bunch, to herd together for mutual protection.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Leed, *No Man’s Land*, p.29.

<sup>66</sup> Leed, *No Man’s Land*, pp.14-17.

<sup>67</sup> Leed, *No Man’s Land*, p.142.

<sup>68</sup> Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, p.142. The internal quotation is a reference to Walter Flex’s, *Der Wanderer zwischen beiden Welten*.



Comrades in adversity and hardship, a form of *communitas* inevitably developed among them, since only in groups could soldiers find comfort and emotional safety. And *communitas* went further than simply assisting feelings of group security: at the time of the battle of *Langemarck* of 1914, (at which, as noted in Chapter 1, young *Kriegsfreiwilligen* marched heroically into battle singing ‘*Deutschland, Deutschland, über Alles*’), “... the separation of the front-line soldier from the home front, and even the local headquarters, encouraged the ideal of a generation apart, endowed with a special mission”.<sup>69</sup> Clearly, liminality was operating here at more than one level.

In the liminal stage of his rite of passage, the initiate may become associated with the earth, pollution and corruption.<sup>70</sup> No Man’s Land, that region in which so many died or were lost to their comrades, became the paradigm of a place of foulness and decay. Through their frequent exposure to the environment of No Man’s Land, front soldiers on the Western Front acquired the association with earth, pollution and corruption which placed them in a category analogous to that of initiates in the liminal stage of a rite of passage. However, this is the view of the society from which the initiates come: for the initiates themselves the liminal stage may also be the beginning of something new, a place where new insights may be gained, and where one is free from the constraints of society. Thus the liminal stage is fundamentally ambiguous, being a place both of foulness and of potential regeneration.

The potential for the development of *communitas* in the liminal period is well conveyed in an episode in Jules Romains’ *Verdun*, in which an officer, Jerphanion, develops a fantasy of forming a group of soldiers who would roam the country and live as an independent group. He believes that by living in this way he and his comrades might be able to build and perpetuate the *communitas* (although he does not use that term) which he believes is emerging in the group of which he is a member. His men have lost faith in the war and feel that their comrades’ lives were being wantonly thrown away. How could the world be made to remain habitable for ordinary people? In his fantasy, his little band take off into the countryside, foraging for themselves, defending themselves and surviving through the interdependency which their *communitas* together has created. This episode, part of a long and

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<sup>69</sup> Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, p.74.

<sup>70</sup> Leed, *No Man’s Land*, pp17,18, quoting from and paraphrasing Turner’s *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, (Cornell University Press, 1970), p.99.



complex novel, illustrates well Turner's view of *communitas* as 'society's subjunctive mood' - a time in which things may change and anything is possible.<sup>71</sup>

Two recorded events in which the writer Robert Graves was involved are notable for their symbolic suggestiveness in this respect. On July 20 1916 Graves was hit by shrapnel from a shell-burst close to him, and was severely injured. Seeing him lying at the dressing-station that evening, his commanding officer believed him to be dead and shortly afterwards wrote to Graves' mother informing her of this. But the following morning, when the dead were being cleared Graves was found to be breathing and was sent to the field hospital: he later made a good recovery.<sup>72</sup> The second episode involves Siegfried Sassoon: when Graves, who was a friend of Sassoon, learned of the latter's proposed pacifist 'manifesto' (see Chapter 5), for which Sassoon would be liable to be court-martialled, he persuaded Sassoon to accept instead being sent to the Craiglockart Hospital in Edinburgh as a victim of what was then known as 'shell-shock'.<sup>73</sup>

These episodes may be interpreted in two ways. First, a man 'died' but yet survived, while another was sane, yet mad. It seemed that, as theorised by Turner for all liminal situations, there was a suspension of the normal rules of everyday life in these cases. More significantly, Graves and Sassoon both became in a sense 'invisible' to society, Graves because he was perceived to be dead, Sassoon because he could no longer be seen as a 'normal' officer. They were both 'outside' society at these times, and their experiences represent failures in the reaggregation stage of their rite of passage.

So far, there is a good correspondence between Turner's anthropological observations and the liminal experience of front soldiers. However, there is a difference in the final stage of initiation - reaggregation. According to Turner:

"In the third phase, the passage is consummated. The ritual subject, individual or corporate, is in a stable state once more and by virtue of this has

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<sup>71</sup> Jules Romains, tr. Gerard Hopkins, *Verdun*, (French original Paris: Flammarion, 1938. London: Prion Books, 2000), pp.81-88.

<sup>72</sup> Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, (1929. Reprint, revised, London: Penguin Books, 1957), pp180-186. This episode is also referred to by other authors, including Sassoon in *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, in which Graves is given the pseudonym 'David Cromlech'.

<sup>73</sup> Sassoon gives an account of this episode in *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, pp220-225; Robert Graves in *Goodbye to All That*, pp213-217. It is also fictionalised in Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy.



rights and obligations of a clearly defined and ‘structural’ type, and is expected to behave in accordance with certain norms and ethical standards”.<sup>74</sup>

Although the rituals and symbols of veterans’ groups celebrate liminality, soldiers from the Western Front were generally not readily ‘reaggregated’ back into society. The experiences of Graves and Sassoon mentioned above are an early example of this but, later on and more generally, returning soldiers felt separated from society. Veterans saw themselves as an “initiate generation”, a “secret army”.<sup>75</sup> As has often happened in other wars, “Veterans’ groups attempted to ritualize and preserve the position of the soldier as a man who has lived beyond social categories and status distinctions”.<sup>76</sup> Traditionally, a man who returns from war having killed is seen as “dangerous, polluted or stained until he has undergone a ritual cooling and cleansing”,<sup>77</sup> but it seems that in the case of WW1, perhaps because of the extremity of the experiences which returning soldiers had gone through, this ‘cooling and cleansing’ process - telling their stories, exorcising their worst moments - was uniquely difficult of achievement. As late as 1968 a veteran of WW1 could state: “We are still an initiate generation, possessing a secret which can never be communicated. ... Middle-aged men ...are united by a secret bond and separated from their fellows who were too old or too young to fight in the Great War”.<sup>78</sup> Such men felt that the experiences through which they had lived were so extreme that they could not be communicated to civilians, even to close members of their own families.

Veterans’ groups in most countries which fought on the Western Front played, and continue to play, a major role in preserving its memory and mythologizing it. They “... attempted to ritualize and preserve the position of the soldier as a man who had lived beyond social categories and status distinctions”<sup>79</sup> - i.e. veterans’ groups saw themselves as liminal groups, in which myth and ritual was to be both originated and articulated. Writers such as Ernst Jünger played a part in this process, closely associated as he was with the *Stahlhelm* and other veterans’ leagues, in particular as a

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<sup>74</sup> Leed, *No Man’s Land*, p32, quoting Victor Turner, “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*”, Warner Modular Publication, Reprint 772.

<sup>75</sup> Leed, *No Man’s Land*, p13.

<sup>76</sup> Leed, *No Man’s Land*, p25.

<sup>77</sup> Leed, *No Man’s Land*, p13.

<sup>78</sup> Leed, *No Man’s Land*, p12; quoting from Charles Edmund Carrington, “Some Soldiers,” *Promise of Greatness. The War of 1914-1918*, ed. George A. Panichas, New York, 1968, p157.

<sup>79</sup> Leed, *No Man’s Land*, p25.



contributor in the 1920s to *Die Standarte*, the *Stahlhelm*'s weekly paper.<sup>80</sup> These and similar writings were a manifestation of the 'remembered *communitas*' of which Turner speaks, and it is probably true to say that the myth emerging from the *communitas* of veterans of the Western Front is in all countries much closer to RTS than to LAF. Members and their descendants of the British Western Front Association, or the French *Anciens Combattants de Guerre*, like the *Stahlhelm*, believed, and continue in the present day to believe, that the sufferings of those who survived the war, like those of their dead comrades, were in the best interest of the salvation of their country, and many would have felt their lives to be intolerable if these sufferings did not have the meaning that RTS gave them.

*The Western Front, liminality and myth.* Turner asserts that myth can arise from 'remembered *communitas*'. How did this mechanism for the generation of myth operate to produce the myths of the Western Front?

Some of the clearest examples of this process come from the experience of the Australians and of other forces of the then British Empire. For example, called to volunteer to fight for 'King and Empire', the Australians performed heroically on the Western Front and in the disastrous Gallipoli expedition. Out of their liminal experiences grew myths that both provided a new sense of national identity among Australians and which changed the way in which they were seen in the rest of the world.<sup>81</sup>

The part played by literature in originating or reflecting the more general myths which are the subject of this thesis is the subject of later chapters. But a general view of the relationship of liminality and myth in this context has been proposed by Leed, who distinguishes the memories of comradeship from those of horror:

"After the war the glowing memories of comradeship and common endeavor were commonly separated from the horrors of war. Emphasis of one at the expense of the other often split veterans' groups into contending factions ... But an adequate rendering of the war experience is not a matter of judiciously balancing its undeniably positive and negative features, but of showing how both the positive and negative sides of war are emanations of the same phenomenon.

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<sup>80</sup> Thomas Nevin, *Ernst Jünger and Germany: into the Abyss 1914-1945*, (London: Constable, 1997), p86.

<sup>81</sup> See, e.g., Joan Beaumont, "The Anzac legend" in Joan Beaumont (Ed); *Australia's war, 1914-18*, (Allen and Unwin, 1995); and Helen Pringle, "The making of an Australian civic identity: the bodies of men and the memory of war" in Geoffrey Stokes (Ed), *The Politics of Identity in Australia*, (Cambridge University Press, 1997).



The *Gemeinschaft* experience of war, like the horrors of war, is a product of the essential liminality of the war”.<sup>82</sup>

Leed here echoes Turner, in that *Gemeinschaft* (community, partnership) bears similarities to the latter’s *communitas*. Turner’s contribution is to show that, since myth grows from ‘remembered *communitas*’, different myths, such as LAF and RTS, can grow from the same *communitas*, depending upon the meaning which those who formed it give to their experiences. But not only LAF and RTS, but also RR can grow from remembered *communitas*, since *communitas* can and did grow up among groups fighting on opposite sides in the war, as exemplified by the ‘live and let live’ system which developed at times in the trenches.<sup>83</sup> Reflections of this more extensive *communitas* occur in a number of places in the literature I have studied..

As well as the actual *communitas* of those living and fighting on the Western Front, a ‘virtual’ *communitas* may emerge which arises from the perception of liminal experience by society. Through this process people as well as events may become mythologised, and as a result of this process characteristics may become associated with them which may or may not correspond with the ‘truth’ as that changes over time. This is certainly true of some of the generals who commanded the armies of both sides, and also of some of the writers. The *communitas* in this case is that of a group of people who experienced the Western Front during the same years, but not necessarily fighting on the same side. For example, soon after the war was over Siegfried Sassoon became for ever the ‘angry young British poet’. Ernst Jünger, it might be said, became the ‘heroic chronicler of German valour’: but while the mythologised ‘Sassoon’ remained more or less unchanged for the rest of his life, ‘Jünger’ evolved, into ‘great German writer’, ‘good German and symbol of Franco-German reconciliation’ and perhaps also to ‘prophet of the European future’. The work of these and other writers provides the basis for the following four chapters.

**4. Myth and psychology.** 80 years after the end of WW1 there undoubtedly remains a collective sense of loss among the populations of the principal Western European participants: a feeling that something terrible happened during those years.

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<sup>82</sup> Leed, *No Man’s Land*, p25.

<sup>83</sup> See Tony Ashworth, *Trench Warfare 1914-1918; the Live and Let Live System*, (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1980).



Campbell states that “Mythology is an expression of the collective unconscious ...”.<sup>84</sup> Campbell leaves open the possibility of other ways of defining mythology, and of other ways in which the collective unconscious could express itself. But the notion of the collective unconscious clearly plays an important role in his understanding of the working of myth.

Jung saw the unconscious as, in part “...a multitude of temporarily obscured thoughts, impressions and images that, in spite of being lost, continue to influence our conscious minds”<sup>85</sup> Memories can be temporarily lost to consciousness due to simple “forgetting” - the human mind can only deal with so much at a time - or they can be more permanently “repressed”, if they deal with experiences which are harmful or in some other way deeply unpleasant. Memories lying in the unconscious can resurface when “triggered” by some conscious observation or experience, as when Proust’s journey into memory was initiated by the action of dipping a madeleine into a cup of tea. The unconscious can also produce new material, often through dreams, which has never been part of conscious experience. An interesting and relevant example of this process was the dream by Jung himself, in early 1914, of a horrible flood of blood pouring out all over Europe. Was this a prescient dream of war, arising from unconscious fears, or did it arise, as he believed at the time, from an apprehension that he might be going mad?<sup>86</sup>

Jung spoke of the unconscious, as sketched above, as the *personal unconscious*. The *collective unconscious* is a “deeper layer” on which the personal unconscious rests. The collective unconscious:

“... does not derive from personal experience and is not a personal acquisition but is inborn. ... I have chosen the term “collective” because this part of the unconscious is not individual but universal; in contrast to the personal psyche, it has contents and modes of behaviour that are more or less the same everywhere and in all individuals. It is ... identical in all men and this

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<sup>84</sup> John M. Maher and Dennie Briggs, *An Open Life: Joseph Campbell in Conversation with Michael Toms*, (New York, Larson Publications, 1988), p50.

<sup>85</sup> Carl G. Jung, *Man and his symbols*, (London, Aldus Books, 1964), p32.

<sup>86</sup> This dream is more extensively reported in Anthony Storr, *Feet of Clay; a Study of Gurus*, (London, Harper Collins, 1996), pp90-91. An acquaintance has pointed out that Jung was in Aberdeen at the beginning of WW1, giving talks on his work, and hypothesises that the pioneering psychiatrist W.H.R. Rivers, who treated Siegfried Sassoon, might in this way have come across his ideas, or possibly even met him. The latter is unlikely, since Rivers was not posted to Craiglockart until 1916: however, he was certainly familiar with early Jungian (as well as Freudian) ideas. (Kathy Kunst, Berkeley, California; private communication, Mar 5 1997).



constitutes a common psychic substrate of a suprapersonal nature which is present in every one of us.”<sup>87</sup>

The common features shared in the collective unconscious are, according to Jung, the symbols and archetypes which he believed exist in most human mythologies and religions, from “primitive” times onwards, and which therefore can be thought of as representing some fundamental aspects of human nature. Symbols may be very general - a circle, a star or a fish - or more culturally specific, such as the Christian cross; archetypes include the “hero”, the “mother” and many others. Jung points out that the term “archetype” has a long history, dating from classical times, and that it is important to distinguish between the expression of archetypes in myths and fairytales and their internal existence in the human psyche. For, while many scholars accept the notion of archetypes as deriving from life experiences which are common to all humanity, Jung went further and equated archetypes with Platonic ideas, writing that: “... there are present in every psyche forms which are unconscious but nevertheless active - living dispositions, ideas in the Platonic sense, that pre-form and continually influence our thoughts and feelings and actions”<sup>88</sup>

In spite of the fact that Jungian archetypes can easily be recognised in many well-known myths, the account of mythology as arising from the collective unconscious is not generally accepted by scholars. *EB* gives two broad categories of objections; first, that Jungian symbols are static, representing personal types, and do not illuminate the dynamic aspects of myth; and second, that they relate to the personal psyche, while myth is “above all a social phenomenon, embedded in society and requiring explanation with reference to social structures and social functions”.<sup>89</sup> Kirk concedes that Jung avoided the “Freudian fallacy” - that the evolution of society parallels the growth of an individual, with myths representing the “infant memories” of a race. He sees Jung’s theory of the collective unconscious as “more serious ... a theory which, although he confused himself and everyone else by the term ‘archetype’, deserves our consideration”.<sup>90</sup> But he believes that Jung’s theory can be easily refuted through lack of adequate statistical evidence. He states: “Jung has

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<sup>87</sup> Carl. G. Jung, *Four archetypes: Mother, Rebirth, Spirit, Trickster*, (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), pp3,4.

<sup>88</sup> Quoted in Storr, *Feet of Clay*, p99.

<sup>89</sup> “Myth and Mythology”, in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, p720.

<sup>90</sup> Kirk, *Myth*, p275.



somehow succeeded in persuading many people that his general symbols are of universal occurrence; but the probability is that they are nothing of the sort ...the earth-mother, the divine child, the anima, and so on, simply do not occur often ... enough to make a general theory necessary ... and neither do the typical myth-sequences (swallowing by a sea-monster, betrayal of the hero, and so on) that are implied ... to enshrine these symbols”.<sup>91</sup>

Kirk states that many people believe the significance of myths to lie mainly in the symbols they make use of. He refutes this view, pointing out that many myths do not emphasise symbols, and that often the main point of the myth lies in the processes it describes rather than its characters or symbols. He stresses this idea:

“ ... it is important ... since it disposes of the idea that myths are created by the emission of pregnant symbols, rather like a rabbit having babies. My own view of the possible origin of myths lays much more stress on the gradual development of narrative structures, of stories, with complex symbolic implications coming in almost incidentally”.<sup>92</sup>

This thinking supports the view taken in this thesis, that the myths of the Western Front find their origin, and the vehicle for their dissemination, principally in the literature which arose from it. In spite of his objections, Kirk credits Jung, as he does Cassirer, with valuable intuition and insight, and feels that the notion of basic mythical symbols is useful. One might go further, and say that the concept of the ‘collective unconscious’, while it may not have secure scientific foundations, has entered our vocabulary and is at the very least a valuable shorthand for talking about modern mythology: the stories, assumptions and mythical figures which underlie contemporary discourse about twentieth century war. The term is often loosely employed when what is being referred to is a collective memory or imagination rather than the ‘collective unconscious’ of Jung’s rigorous definition. I find the looser usage more helpful in the present context, and the interesting questions to be about how ‘collective’ the memory and imagination are, in Britain and in Western Europe as a whole.

The significance of the unconscious had been first asserted by Freud who, like Jung, attached great importance to the analysis of dreams as a technique of

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<sup>91</sup> Kirk, *Myth*, p276.

<sup>92</sup> Kirk, *Myth*, p279-80.



psychological diagnosis. Freud's invention of the 'Oedipus complex', deriving from Greek mythology, posited on the part of male children a repressed desire to kill the father and marry the mother. The relevance of this and other studies to the study of myth is due, according to *EB*, to " ... his view that the formation of mythic concepts does not depend on cultural history" but on " ... an independent, trans-historical mechanism, based on a highly personal biologic conception of man".<sup>93</sup> Freud's anthropological theories appear now to have little scholarly support and it is interesting to conjecture what path psychoanalysis would have taken if, for example, it had been based on the Odysseus-Telemachus myth (of "intergenerational continuity between father and son") rather than the Laius-Oedipus myth.<sup>94</sup>

For the above reasons I find Jungian ideas on mythology more helpful than those of Freud for my present purpose. However, one possible exception is Freud's introduction of the notion of the 'death wish', which is discussed by Coker. Freud, says Coker, "postulated a new psychological polarity between life and death. The death instinct inspired man to strive for his own personal obliteration. The life instinct impelled him to survive. ... Man must either destroy himself or destroy others. Holding back aggression ... was in general unhealthy and could lead to neurosis". As for WW1; "The war ... seemed to have provided European man with an opportunity to release a pent-up aggression, one that hitherto had been denied expression by the state. ... the destructiveness of the Great War had arisen from an in-built human capacity for psychic regression".<sup>95</sup> The outbreak of WW1 was received with widespread enthusiasm in London, Paris and Berlin. Monk reports: " ... the feeling that pervaded Europe during the summer of 1914 - the sense of perpetual seething, and the hope that things will come to an eruption once and for all. Hence the scenes of joy and celebration that greeted the declaration of war in each of the belligerent nations. In his autobiography, (Bertrand) Russell described how, walking through the cheering crowds in Trafalgar Square, he was amazed to discover that 'average men and women were delighted at the prospect of war'".<sup>96</sup> This phenomenon, and the way in which hundreds of thousands of men were persuaded of their duty to go 'over the top' to almost certain death, may well have had something to do with a death wish in the

<sup>93</sup> "Myth and mythology", in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, p720.

<sup>94</sup> Michael Vannoy Adams, "The archetypal school", in Polly Young-Eisendrath and Terence Dawson (Eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Jung*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>95</sup> Coker, *War and the Twentieth Century*, pp65-76.

<sup>96</sup> Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein; the Duty of Genius*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1990), p111.



Freudian sense, although this is difficult to trace in most accounts of their war experiences later published by those who served in the front line.

**5. Conclusions: tools for analysis.** Sections 2, 3 and 4 above represent a necessarily brief and superficial account of a very large and complex field. The areas reviewed in relation to myth - language and philosophy, anthropology and psychology - are of course not exhaustive, nor are they mutually exclusive in the insights they provide. The insights of anthropology and psychology, for example, are clearly closely inter-related. But this material serves the purpose of identifying some concepts which, used analytically, help in addressing the literature in which I am interested.

The concepts I find helpful for my purpose are those of -

Mythic discourse. Mythology is not the sole prerogative of pre-modern societies. It exists today - indeed it is essential for the effective functioning of society. Literature is one important way in which we 'tell our stories' - conduct our mythic discourse, in other words - and hence the study of literature is an appropriate method for the understanding of contemporary myths. As a character in a novel asserts: "It seems that philosophy deals only with truth, while perhaps it contains only fantasies, and literature seems to deal only with fantasies, but perhaps it tells the truth".<sup>97</sup>

Liminality and *communitas*. The experience of the Western Front can be seen as a rite of passage, perhaps for whole societies in Europe, and certainly for the service people who took part in it. The phenomenon of liminality touched them all in various ways. In Turner's scheme myths arise from remembered *communitas*, and it is literary descriptions of the ways in which liminality was experienced, and *communitas* developed, which I will review and discuss in Chapters 5, 6 and 7. These literary descriptions, I suggest, represent a form of 'remembered *communnitas*'.

The sacrificial crisis. WW1 was, and still is, seen by many people as a sacrifice, most often by society of a generation of young men (the LAF myth), or sometimes for society by self-sacrificing young soldiers (the RTS myth). One interpretation of this sacrifice is as a 'sacrificial crisis' in Girardian terms, in which case one might wish to study the apprehensions which underlay society's need for sacrifice, the way in which it contributed to the maintenance or restoration of social order, and the relationship between the pre-war and post-war social order. However,

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<sup>97</sup> Antonio Tabucchi, *Sostiene Pereira*, (Milano, Feltrinelli, 1997), p30. Author's translation.



to do this would be to go far beyond the boundaries set for the present thesis. In the following chapters I seek only to use the concept of the ‘sacrificial crisis’ as a further means to analyse the literature and the myths which found expression through it.

In conclusion, then, Cassirer provides the basic theory of ‘mythic discourse’. Turner gives an account of a way in which myths can arise which is particularly relevant to the circumstances of the Western Front, where men taken from their homes and thrown together in sometimes desperate circumstances inevitably developed *communitas* of an extremely close kind. Girard provides an explanation of the way in which myths both arise and can contribute to the establishment or maintenance of social order. Girard’s theories are therefore helpful in understanding myths which, like LAF, RTS and RR, are constitutive of modern social and political order.

I find Jungian and Freudian ideas less helpful in analysing the Western Front literature, although I suspect that the death wish may have some connection with Germanic myths of *Liebestod*, and perhaps through this with the homoerotic overtones of some WW1 writing. I therefore retain Jungian and Freudian ideas in the background, and adopt as my principal tools the theories of Cassirer, Girard and Turner.



## **Chapter 4**

### **The three waves of literature of the Western Front**

#### **Contents**

1. *Introduction*
2. *The contribution of literature to the development of myth*
3. *The literary response to the Western Front – the first two waves*
4. *The third wave of literary response*
5. *A literary canon?*
6. *Conclusions – the relationships between the three waves and the myths.*

**1. Introduction.** The purpose of this chapter is to propose a relationship between literature and myth, and to identify literature, inspired by the experience of the Western Front, which I regard as relevant to the present thesis. Following the theoretical section 2, I define three ‘waves’ of literary writing: writing published during or soon after the war, the ‘war book boom’ of the late-1920s onwards, and the work of authors writing from about 1990 onwards (with some precursors in earlier years of the post-WW2 period). I use these waves of writing as the basis for a literary ‘canon’ which has provided the main basis for my research.

**2. The contribution of literature to the development of myth.** I stated in Chapter 1 my interest in ‘literature’ as one of the principal vehicles for the societal memory of WW1, and in Chapters 2 and 3 discussed some of the inter-relationships of literature, history and myth in this regard, going on to describe two processes by which myths can arise. It remains to set out more specifically the ‘mental model’ I employ when using the myth-generating notions of ‘remembered communitas’ and ‘retrospective transfiguration of the sacrificial crisis’ to interpret the literature I have selected for study.

The popular view of historical events can become changed, simplified, and perhaps distorted, as succeeding generations of writers revisit them. For instance, it has been observed of the French Revolution that:

“..once it had occurred, it entered the accumulating memory of print. The overwhelming and bewildering concatenation of events experienced by its makers and its victims became a ‘thing’ - and with its own name: The French Revolution. Like a vast shapeless rock worn to a rounded boulder by countless drops of water, the experience was shaped by millions of printed words into a ‘concept’ on the printed page, and, in due course, into a model. Why ‘it’ broke



out, what 'it' aimed for, why 'it' succeeded or failed, became subjects for endless polemics on the part of friends and foes: but of its 'it-ness' as it were, no one ever after had much doubt".<sup>1</sup>

The 'concept', or 'model', referred to in this account will contain, or perhaps even itself constitute, a myth or myths about what the 'French Revolution' was and how it began, continued and ended. The "accumulating memory of print" includes the work, not only of journalists and historians, but also of writers of biography and autobiography, of novelists and of poets. From all these sources, together with their own life experiences and preconceptions, readers and students distil a personal account of the 'French Revolution' - or of WW1 - which, at least to those who are not professional historians, represents a believable story which can form part of their total view of the world.

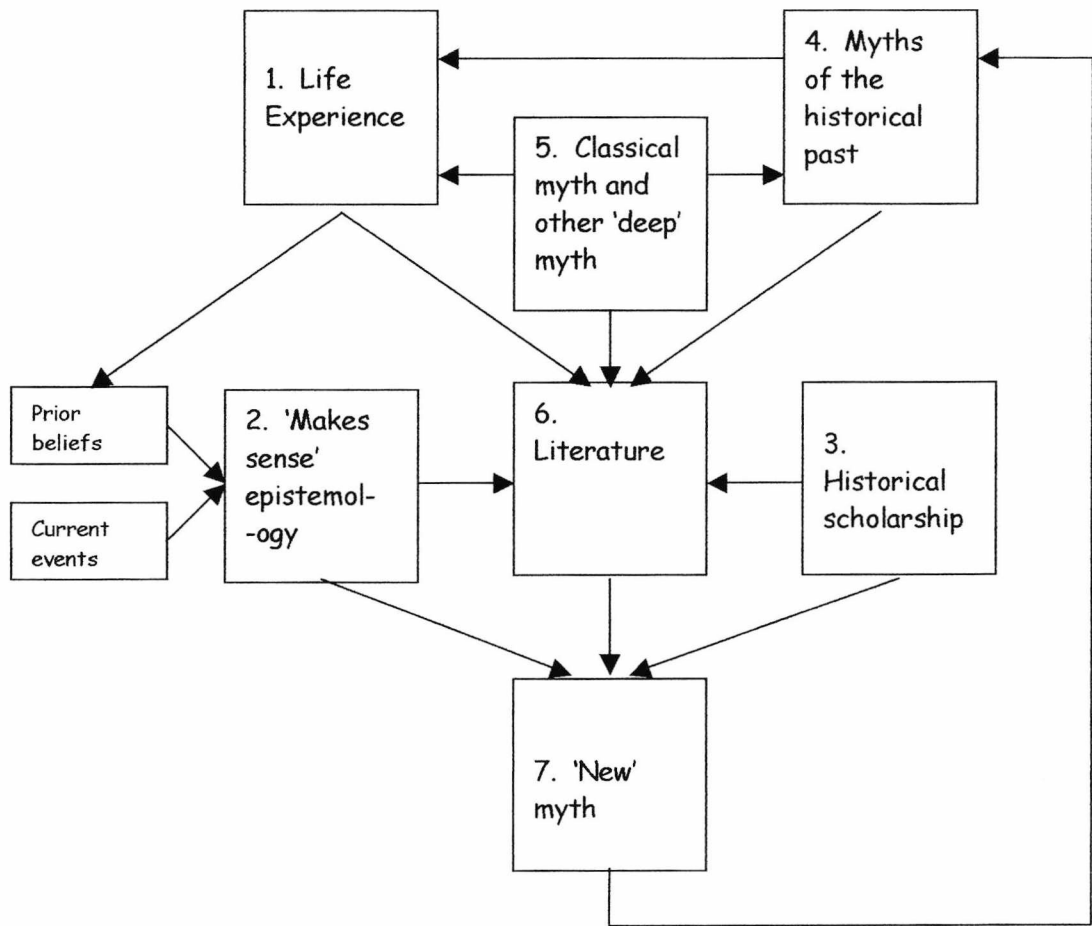
I conceive the relationships among all the elements involved in this process of myth-building and transmission to be as represented in the diagram which appears on the following page.

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<sup>1</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1991), p80.



**Diagram:** Sources of the content of myth.



The diagram is simplified, and includes only the relationships which I believe are most relevant for the present purposes. For example, arrows might well be drawn showing inputs into box 3, 'Historical Scholarship', but since it is only the influences on literature and myth with which that I am concerned, box 3 is given only outputs. Commenting on the numbered boxes in the diagram –

1. Life experience. The 'life experience' of those who served on the Western Front was the raw material for much of the literature which came out of the war. But the interpretation given to experience depended to some extent on national and other elements of the writers' background, expressed here in the input from boxes 4 and 5. Additionally, an important mental process of 'making sense' (box 2) can take place before or during the creative work of producing literature..

2. The 'makes sense' epistemology. This simple mental process for understanding current or historical events was sketched in Chapter 2.



3. Historical scholarship. The relationship of historical scholarship to literature and myth was briefly discussed in Chapters 1 and 2. It is worth making two additional points, however: first that literature may contribute directly to historical scholarship, because it can give to the historian a sense of the “atmosphere and sensibilities of the period”.<sup>2</sup> And secondly, some novelists saw themselves as occupied in writing history – a notable example was Ford Madox Ford, whose *Parade’s End* has been seen as a “... new kind of history-in-faction”.<sup>3</sup> The approach to history via ‘faction’ has also been seen as a literary trend in the 1980s and 1990s, and is exemplified in the work of the writers of the ‘Third Wave’ which I shall be identifying later in the thesis.<sup>4</sup>

4, 5. Myths of the historical past, and ‘deep’ myth. As discussed in Chapter 2, effective human action requires the existence of generally accepted myths, some of them ‘deep’ myths about the nature of human existence, others based on recorded history. These myths both affect the way in which ‘life experience’ is interpreted, and provide part of the background against which literary writers create their art.

6. Literature. Other forms of art than literature could be included in this box, but are excluded here because literature is the principal focus of the present study. Literature is the vehicle for much of the ‘mythic discourse’ discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. It is not the only means for the expression of myth (historical scholarship, and the simplified understanding of the ‘makes sense’ epistemology also contribute), but I suggest that it is an important means by which society as a whole experiences ‘remembered communitas’ and ‘the retrospective transfiguration of the sacrificial crisis’. Literature is written against the background of pre-existing myth, but principally draws on imagination and life experience including, certainly in the case of WW1, trauma, both individual and social. On the individual level serious trauma can take possession of a person, blotting out normal everyday life and causing them to live in a simplified way, comparable in its lack of dimensions to the lives of characters in classical myth.<sup>5</sup> Such trauma, directly experienced or observed, eventually takes its place in the memory of individuals, and writers can find in these

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<sup>2</sup> Hugh Cecil, “Henry Williamson: Witness of the Great War”, in Brocard Sewell (ed), *Henry Williamson, the Man, the Writings: a Symposium*, (Padstow, Cornwall: Tabb House, 1980), p69.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined*, p431.

<sup>4</sup> Comment by Dr Ian Manners at Research Training Seminar, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Kent, March 13 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Professor Ben-Ami Scharfstein; private conversation, University of Tel Aviv, May 1998.



memories a rich source of material for imaginative recording and further development. All the modern literary writers on WW1 I have studied dwell on the damage done to people who were in some way connected with the war, and on the sense of loss which still pervades European culture.

7. 'New' Myth. New myth, which will normally be a modified form of an earlier myth, or the contemporary manifestation of a general myth, emerges in society in forms like those articulated in Chapter 1. These 'new' myths eventually become seen, as time goes by, as 'myths of the historical past', as has indeed happened to the myths of the Western Front which I have identified.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 of the thesis develop further the process by which writers of literature, and especially 'fiction', inspired by the Western Front represented and developed the predominant myths of the time. To read 'fiction' is to extend one's life experience vicariously: fiction works partly, but importantly, by acting as a means of confronting our fundamental fears and anxieties, and reworking them in the imagination.<sup>6</sup> Since it is through mythology, too, that we try to bring order to our world by confronting fears (e.g. of death) and anxieties, it seems clear that the social roles of myth and literary fiction are closely related.

**3. The literary response to the Western Front – the first two waves.** All the great wars of modern times have produced a literary response, and it was therefore inevitable that an upheaval on the scale of WW1 should do so.<sup>7</sup> These accounts, it has been suggested, are born from the need men have to tell their story and, in the telling, to remember. War as experience is turned into 'war-in-the-head'. As Hynes says:

"Redefinition: you could say that every war narrative is that, that every young man who goes to war finds the experience strange and disorienting beyond his expectation, and so must redefine his war terms and turn the imagined war-in-his-head into another, stranger, story. But I think the narratives of the Western Front had particularly to be acts of redefinition, because of the young men who wrote them and because of the radical, terrible differences in the war they found there"<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> See Ken Follett, "Fiction is sacred", *RSA Journal*, Volume CXLVI, No 1/4 1998.

<sup>7</sup> John Keegan, *The Face of Battle*, (London: Penguin Books, 1978), p287.

<sup>8</sup> Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined*, p72.



In fact, there were further special circumstances in this case – one commentator exclaimed “Oh what a literary war!” noting that, at least in the case of English soldiers: “By 1914, it was possible for soldiers to be not merely literate but vigorously literary, for the Great War occurred at a special historical moment when two ‘liberal’ forces were powerfully coinciding in England. On the one hand, the belief in the educative powers of classical and English literature was still extremely strong. On the other, the appeal of popular education and ‘self-improvement’ was at its peak, and such education was still conceived largely in humanistic terms”.<sup>9</sup> A characteristic figure in the British imagery of WWI was that of the young officer, in a dugout in the trenches, reading from a work of classical literature, a copy of which he kept in his pocket. It seems that, typically, such officers would read reflective literature and poetry as a means of deriving comfort, and of abstracting themselves for a period, mentally and emotionally, from their surroundings. And, as well as reading, they would write – diaries, memoirs, autobiography, autobiographical fiction and, notably, poetry. German and French soldier-authors also wrote extensively of their experiences, although the French literary response to the war was “... surprisingly muted considering that it was being fought on French soil”.<sup>10</sup>

Many reviews of the literature of WWI have been published, including notably the work of Bergonzi, Denham, Field, Fussell, Harvey, Hynes, Klein, Linder, Roucoux and Travers.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, some historians have had interesting things to say about the way in which literature has influenced the societal memory of the war, in part through what is sometimes seen by historians as literature’s distortion of the ‘truth’: these historians include Bond, Eksteins, Ferguson, Mosse, Sheffield, Terraine and Winter.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, heading of Chapter V, and p157.

<sup>10</sup> Ian F.W. Beckett, *The Great War 1914-1918*, (Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd, 2001), p450.

<sup>11</sup> Bernard Bergonzi, *Heroes' Twilight: a Study of the Literature of the Great War*, (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996 (third edition)); Scott D. Denham, *Visions of War: Ideologies and Images of War in German Literature before and after the Great War*, (Berne: Peter Lang, 1992), Frank Field, *Three French writers and the Great War: Barbusse, Drieu la Rochelle, Bernanos*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975); A.D. Harvey, *A Muse of Fire*, (London and Rio Grande, Ohio: The Hambledon Press, 1998); Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: the First World War and English Culture*, (London: The Bodley Head, 1990); Holger Klein, ed., *The First World War in Fiction*, (London: Macmillan, 1976); Ann P. Linder, *Princes of the Trenches*, (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1996); Michel Roucoux, ed., *English Literature of the Great War Revisited*, (University of Picardy Press, 1986); Martin Patrick Anthony Travers, *German Novels on the First World War and their Ideological Implications, 1918-1933*, (Stuttgart, Akademischer Verlag Hans-Dieter Heinz, 1982).

<sup>12</sup> Brian Bond, ‘A Victory Worse than Defeat? British Interpretations of the First World War’. Annual ‘Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives’ Lecture, November 1997, (Kings College London, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives); Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: the Great War and the Birth of*



(The ‘distortion’ referred to, which was discussed in Chapter 2, is the way in which the memory of the war, at least in British and American culture, is seen by many writers to have become dominated by the LAF myth). It seems generally recognised that the WW1 literature emerged in what I shall call two ‘waves’, the first consisting of writings published during the war or very soon after its end, while the second wave began in the late 1920s, when participants in the war had had time for reflection.

Most of the ‘First Wave’ writers whose work has proved of lasting value were poets, nearly all of whom had served in the trenches, writing in English. Several of the British poets - e.g. Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, Edmund Blunden, Edward Thomas, Siegfried Sassoon - received much acclaim, posthumously in some cases, for their achievement: indeed, the best of their work could be said to have joined the canon of poetry in the English language. Much of the work of the poets of the First Wave was intensely personal, and in different cases ironic, sad, poignant, despairing, or angry. Little of their poetry was inherently patriotic, except for some of the writing in the early years of the war, when disillusion and war-weariness had not yet set in. These poets provided much of the emotional force behind the LAF myth, as will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Little of the prose that was written during the same period, other than journalism, seems to have been published at the time (while many poems of Sassoon and Owen were published very soon after they were written), and little prose of high literary quality has come down to us from this period. The First Wave contained few significant memoirs or works of fiction, except for two works of outstanding importance in this context. The first of these, chronologically speaking, was Henri Barbusse’s *Under Fire (Le Feu)* of 1916 (see Chapter 5), which has become one of the most highly regarded books of the war. It was still in print in France and the UK in the 1980s and 1990s, and soon after its publication was read and admired by Sassoon and Owen. The second outstanding memoir published in the First Wave was Ernst Jünger’s *Storm of Steel*, which is discussed in Chapter 6.

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*the Modern Age*, (London: Bantam Press, 1989); Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1998); George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Gary Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory - The First world War: Myths and Realities*, (London: Headline, 2001); John Terraine, *The Smoke and the Fire: Myths and Anti-myths of War 1861-1945*, (London, Leo Cooper, 1992); Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning; the Great War in European Cultural History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).



Following the First Wave there was “... a steady trickle of war books appearing from 1919 onwards, ranging from artless personal narratives to official histories of regiments or campaigns, which ... attracted dedicated readers.”<sup>13</sup> I have the manuscript of one of these ‘artless narratives’, a handwritten memoir of some 400 pages, written by Guy Buckeridge (1880-1956), an uncle of mine by marriage, who volunteered in 1914 and served in France for the whole of the war.<sup>14</sup> There must be many other records of this kind - human documents, having no great literary value, which ordinary people wrote as they tried to come to terms with the unprecedented situations they had faced during the war. As well, a great deal of amateur verse was published, notably in Western Front newspapers such as the famous *Wipers Times*.<sup>15</sup>

In the late 1920s, after time had passed, allowing for reflection and the internalising of experiences and feelings, a Second Wave of writing began to appear. As Bergonzi writes:

“... several of the poets who survived returned to their experiences in longer, retrospective prose works written ten or more years after the Armistice. The years 1928-30 witnessed a remarkable return to public favour of books about the war, which coincided with the further stage of war literature represented by autobiographical works such as Blunden’s *Undertones of War*, Sassoon’s *Memoirs of a Fox-hunting Man*, and *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, and Graves’s *Goodbye to all That*; and by novels like Aldington’s *Death of a Hero* and Manning’s *Her Privates We*. The success of Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* and E.M.Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* in Germany, showed the international nature of this interest”.<sup>16</sup>

Many of the writers of the First Wave had been killed in the war, but several of those who survived - e.g. Sassoon, Graves and Blunden - also appeared as authors in the Second Wave. They had come back from the war with “the artist’s load, a great, shapeless chunk of experience”<sup>17</sup>, which took time to absorb before they could make more considered judgements about their experiences and their reactions to them. One

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<sup>13</sup> Bernard Bergonzi, *Heroes' Twilight: a Study of the Literature of the Great War*, (Manchester: Carcanet (1965, third edition 1996)), p139.

<sup>14</sup> A typescript of this memoir, which had been transcribed by Leon Galer, Guy Buckeridge’s brother-in-law, was lodged at the Imperial War Museum, London, in 1976. (Ref. letter DOC/RWAS/RS dated 4 May 1976 from the museum to L W Galer).

<sup>15</sup> ‘Wipers’ = Ypres in British army slang. Many examples of this amateur verse have been republished, e.g. in Martin Stephen, *Never Such Innocence: a New Anthology of Great War Verse*, (London: Buchan and Enwright, 1988).

<sup>16</sup> Bergonzi, *Heroes' Twilight*, p139.

<sup>17</sup> “... Evelyn returned to Europe with ‘the artist’s load, a great, shapeless chunk of experience’” (from Selina Hastings, *Evelyn Waugh: a Biography*, (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994), p517).



writer has seen the reason for this lapse of time as being the need to attain ‘ironic distance’ from the war.<sup>18</sup> Many other explanations for the almost decade-long “curious imaginative silence about the greatest occurrence of recent history” have been ventured, including the influence of both psychological and physiological factors on potential authors, that “the past takes its time in becoming history”, or that “the presence, there at the end of the decade, of a possible future war made the telling of the past war’s story both possible and imperative”. At all events, it took time before the war could be ‘imagined’ in this way.<sup>19</sup>

The Second Wave has been called the ‘war boom’ in book publishing. Some commentators see it as beginning with the appearance of Remarque’s *Im Westen Nichts Neues* (*All Quiet on the Western Front*) in Berlin in 1929,<sup>20</sup> although the republishing in the UK of Barbusse’s *Under Fire* (*Le Feu*) in an Everyman edition in 1926 indicates the earlier existence of a market for books inspired by the war, and the first volume of Siegfried Sassoon’s *Sherston* trilogy, *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*, was published in 1928. A possible definition of the main outlines of the Second Wave is given by Hynes, who lists the “classic war books” which were published between 1926 and 1933.<sup>21</sup> Dyer gives a very similar list,<sup>22</sup> to which I would certainly add the works of Ludwig Renn and, although his contribution came a little later, Jules Romains.<sup>23</sup> Some of these writers, including notably Remarque, wrote in a personal, autobiographical mode, confining their topic to wartime experience, while others, such as Graves and Aldington, while basing their writing on personal experience during the war, set it against a broader social and historical background. Some other notable books were published during this period, or slightly later, which did not relate to experience on the Western Front, but did enter into the general canon of European WW1 literature and, because both of their international readership and of the way in

<sup>18</sup> Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, pp.29-35.

<sup>19</sup> Samuel Hynes, *War Imagined: the First World War and English Culture*, (London: The Bodley Head, 1990), pp.424-5.

<sup>20</sup> E.g. Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, pp.275-277.

<sup>21</sup> Hynes, in *The War Imagined*, lists works by Ford Madox Ford, T.E. Lawrence, Herbert Read, Max Plowman, Edmund Blunden, Siegfried Sassoon, E.E. Cummings, Arnold Zweig, R.C. Sherriff, Erich Maria Remarque, Richard Aldington, Robert Graves, Ernest Hemingway, Ernst Jünger, Charles Carrington, Henry Williamson, Frederic Manning, Wilfred Owen (the Edmund Blunden edition) and Vera Brittain.

<sup>22</sup> Geoff Dyer, *The Missing of the Somme*, (London: Phoenix Press, 2001), p.30, lists works by Herbert Read, Edmund Blunden, Siegfried Sassoon, E.Cummings, Erich Maria Remarque, Richard Aldington, Robert Graves, Ernest Hemingway, Ernst Jünger, and Frederic Manning.

<sup>23</sup> Ludwig Renn, tr. Willa and Edwin Muir, *War (Krieg)*, (London: Martin Secker, 1929); Jules Romains, tr. Gerard Hopkins, *Verdun*, (French original Paris: Flammarion, 1938, London: Prion Books, 2000).



which they shared some of the ‘disillusionment’ of so many Second Wave writers, may be noted in this context.<sup>24</sup>

The Second Wave of writing was characterised by expressions of disillusionment about the war. Aldington’s outburst is typical: “Their enemies – the enemies of German and English alike – were the fools who had sent them to kill each other instead of to help each other”,<sup>25</sup> and his well-known novel has the deeply ironic title, *Death of a Hero*. As the wave of writing proceeded the “... disenchanted genre became increasingly fashionable ... the runaway success of Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* was part of this vogue”<sup>26</sup> and, by 1933, “... pity had become the standard, conventional attitude towards the war and its victims”.<sup>27</sup> Some later writers have questioned and criticised this tendency and, indeed, the requirements of publishers who saw commercial opportunities in the ‘war book boom’ may have had some distorting effect on the writing. An example of this later revision of feeling appears to have arisen in the case of Henry Williamson’s *The Patriot’s Progress*, where Williamson later came to feel that he had been “... carried along by a fashionable interpretation which he recognised was only half true”.<sup>28</sup> As one writer rather unfeelingly noted: “Nothing is stranger in the history of the First World War than the sudden outburst of soldiers’ autobiographies which reached its climax in 1929 and 1930. Until then a dumb protest, now a phase of exhibitionism ... great numbers of soldiers in 1930 indignantly repudiated the character which was foisted on them by the self-pitying school”.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>24</sup> These would include Jaroslav Hašek, tr. Cecil Parrott, *The Good Soldier Švejk*, (London: Penguin Books, 1973); Emilio Lussu, tr. Marion Rawson, *Sardinian Brigade*, (London: Prion Books, 2000); Arnold Zweig, tr. Eric Sutton, *The Case of Sergeant Grischa*, (London: Martin Secker, 1930). First publication in the original Czech of *The Good Soldier Švejk* was (in fascicles) 1921-1923; of *Sardinian Brigade* in Italian in 1939 and of *The Case of Sergeant Grischa* in German in 1927. Hašek was a major exponent of the ‘futility’ school of thought about WW1, but the anger expressed by many other Second Wave writers was concealed in his case under a beguiling surface of humour and sarcasm. Less well-known is Roland Dorgelès, *Les Croix de Bois*, (Paris: Albin Michel, 1925), which has been described as ‘a minor masterpiece’ (Private email communication: Juenger-list/Umberto Rossi, March 29, 2001). It was made into a film by Raymond Bernard, 1930-1932 (noted from <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/classics/rr1199/gwrrimages/gwrr6.htm>, May 27 2002).

<sup>25</sup> Richard Aldington, *Death of a Hero*, (1929; London, The Hogarth Press, 1984), pp258, 259.

<sup>26</sup> Hugh Cecil, “Henry Williamson: Witness of the Great War”, in Brocard Sewell (ed), *Henry Williamson, the Man, the Writings: a Symposium*, Padstow, Cornwall: Tabb House, 1980, p72.

<sup>27</sup> Hynes, *A War Imagined*, p435.

<sup>28</sup> Henry Williamson, Henry, *The Patriot’s Progress*, (1930. Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1999). The quotation is from Hugh Cecil, “Henry Williamson: Witness of the Great War”, p73.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Carrington, *Soldier from the Wars Returning*, (London: Hutchinson, 1965), p14, 264.



The mythology of the Western Front became established principally through the writings of the Second Wave. For most writers the only myth was LAF: as Hynes states of some of the best-known writers: "All of these memoirs - Graves's, Brittain's and Sassoon's - share that central point: their common subject is the power of the war to change individuals in radical ways. ... they are all disjunctive memoirs for a disjunctive time, parts of the myth of disruption and fragmentation that is the Myth of the War" ... The elements of the Myth,

"... compose one story - the received, accepted version of what happened in the First World War, and what it means in human terms. The elements of that story are everywhere in the war narratives published in the myth-making years. We know them all by now: the idealism betrayed; the early high-mindedness that turned in mid-war to bitterness and cynicism; the growing feeling among soldiers of alienation from the people at home for whom they were fighting; the rising resentment of politicians and profiteers and ignorant, patriotic women; the growing sympathy for the men on the other side, betrayed in the same ways and suffering the same hardships; the emerging sense of the war as a machine and of all soldiers as its victims; the bitter conviction that the men in the trenches fought for no cause, in a war that could not be stopped".<sup>30</sup>

Two of these writers of the Second Wave, Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon, appear as characters in Pat Barker's 'Third Wave' *Regeneration* trilogy, and for that reason are of especial interest in the present context. Graves' well-known book<sup>31</sup> is an autobiography of his life to date, from childhood to his time as a professor in Egypt in the mid-twenties, and according to Bergonzi is "... a classic in the exacting art of autobiography".<sup>32</sup> It is not specifically 'about' the war, but Graves' war experiences nevertheless take up much of the book - pages 60-237, out of 278 pages - and he gives detailed accounts of many actions in which he took part.

These First and Second Waves of writing of high literary quality have done a great deal both to form, and to help perpetuate, the perceptions of the Western Front, and of WWI in general, which are now held by many people. The work of these writers has a quality of permanence: "... everything about them suggests that they will continue to be read ... as moving and enduring expressions of truth about how man confronts the inevitability of death."<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Hynes, *A War Imagined*, p439.

<sup>31</sup> Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, ([1929, revised 1957], London, Penguin Books (1960)).

<sup>32</sup> Bergonzi, *Heroes' Twilight*, p146.

<sup>33</sup> Keegan, *The Face of Battle*, p288.



**4. The third wave of literary response.** The large number of new novels, plays, films and TV programmes about WW1, nearly all of which concentrate on the Western Front, which have come out since around 1990 (and are still coming) constitute a cultural phenomenon which both perpetuates and develops the mythology of the war. The work of the writers involved may be seen as a 'Third Wave', as yet incomplete, of literary response to the experience of WW1.

The writers of the Second Wave were all either dead or approaching the end of their lives by the 1960s, and nearly all the Third Wave authors come from a different generation.<sup>34</sup> However, the work of many of the First and Second Wave writers was still in print during the time of the Third Wave, or in some cases was revived and republished, so that some of these writers can be seen as contributing to the Third Wave also: indeed, as mentioned in Chapter 2, they may even have had more influence on perceptions of the war in the 1960s than they did in the 1930s. The musical *Oh! What a Lovely War*, also briefly discussed in Chapter 2, can be seen as a precursor of the Third Wave, in the sense that through its popularity it helped to arouse, perhaps to revive and certainly to stimulate memories of the Western Front in the public mind. The publication in the early 1960s of revisionist military histories such as those of Clark and Wolff no doubt further engaged the interest of many people.<sup>35</sup>

The first novel I would identify as forming part of the Third Wave of literary writing was Jean Rouaud's prize-winning *Les Champs d'Honneur (Fields of Glory)*, which was published in 1990 and was followed in 1991 by Pat Barker's *Regeneration*, the first of a trilogy two of which also won prizes. Other contributors, up to the year 2001, include Julian Barnes, William Boyd, Geoff Dyer, Robert Edric, Sebastian Faulks, Susan Hill, William Rivière and Adam Thorpe.<sup>36</sup> All these writers retell aspects

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<sup>34</sup> One exception, although not quite forming part of the Third Wave as I have defined it, is Henry Williamson (1895-1977), volumes 4,5,6,7 and 8 of whose remarkable 15-volume autobiographical novel sequence *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* concerned his experiences on the Western Front, and were published between 1954 and 1960. Further details are given in Anne Williamson, *A Patriot's Progress: Henry Williamson and the First World War*, (Stroud, Sutton Publishing, 1998). Stuart Cloete's *How Young They Died*, (London: Fontana Books, 1971), is another example, but not really of literary quality.

<sup>35</sup> Alan Clark, *The Donkeys*, (London: Pimlico, 1961, (reprinted 1994)); Leon Wolff, *In Flanders Fields*, (London: Pan Books, 1961. Reprint as Penguin Military Classic, 2001).

<sup>36</sup> Details of the works concerned are given in the Bibliography. Dyer's book is not a novel, but neither does it fall into any other clearly defined category.



of the story of WW1, providing their own individual 'retrospective transfiguration of the sacrificial crisis' through their accounts of the experiences of liminal groups of fighting soldiers.

What motivated, and continues to motivate, the novelists of the Third Wave? Why, do they choose to write about such harrowing times, of which they had no personal experience?

Pat Barker has stated that, although she had established her reputation as a novelist with works based on the lives of working-class women living in the northeast of England, she had always wanted to write about WW1. This desire was based on her relationship with her grandfather, who had been wounded on the Western Front and who had a bayonet wound across his abdomen which as a child Barker sometimes used to see when he stripped to the waist to wash. Like so many others, he would not speak about the experiences which had led to his injury. In spite of her desire to write about the war, Barker found that she could not find a way to begin, and believes that this was due to the fact that she herself had no personal experience of it. The eventual solution to this writer's block came when, in a university library, she came by chance upon the notebooks of the psychologist W.H.R. Rivers. The fact that Rivers had himself been a non-combatant in the war, although deeply involved in it through his pioneering treatment of 'shell-shocked' officers at the Craiglockart Hospital in Edinburgh, gave Barker the opportunity she had been seeking. She gave Rivers, together with other historical characters, especially Robert Graves, Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, major roles in her *Regeneration* trilogy.<sup>37</sup>

An interesting example of a different process of motivation is provided by Susan Hill, the author of *Strange Meeting*, to be discussed in Chapter 7. Hill's feelings about WW1 were originally aroused by a first hearing in 1962 of Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*, a work which combines powerfully expressive choral music, the Latin words

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<sup>37</sup> This account was given by Pat Barker herself in response to my question at a public reading of her work given at Kensington Public Library, London, on March 3 1997. A slightly different and fuller account was given by Blake Morrison, in "War Stories", an article in *The New Yorker*, January 1 1996, on the life and work of Pat Barker. Her early novels were all centred on the lives of working-class women living in the North-East of England, and she became known as an "uncompromising, working-class regionalist". But her fourth novel, *The man who Wasn't There* tells the story of a boy obsessed with his missing father. Morrison hypothesises that the significance of this theme for Barker lay in the circumstances of her own life. She was born as a consequence of an affair her mother had while in the WRENS (Women's Royal Naval Service), and has never known the identity of her father. She was brought up mainly by her grandmother, and the 'grandfather' she speaks of was in fact a step-grandfather, her grandmother's second husband. Morrison associates this background with the vulnerability of Barker's male characters, and with her "preoccupation with gender, emasculation, bisexuality and role reversals".



of the *Missa pro Defunctis* and the WW1-inspired poems of Wilfred Owen. In an Afterword to *Strange Meeting* which she added in 1989, Susan Hill describes childhood visits to the home of her maternal grandmother, whose brother had been killed, on his nineteenth birthday, at the battle of the Somme. A photo of the lost brother, in uniform, stood in her grandmother's house and Hill used to take it down to look at. The family's surname was Owen, and the memory of her childhood visits created an imaginative link for the writer with the (unrelated) poet Wilfred Owen and also with another young soldier, Owen Wyngrave, the hero of a short story by Henry James on which Benjamin Britten had based an opera. Britten's *War Requiem*, which so moved Hill, was first performed in Coventry Cathedral soon after the cathedral's reconsecration. (The cathedral had been rebuilt, the former structure having been almost completely destroyed by bombs during WW2.) Britten's masterpiece affected Hill deeply ("I came out of it feeling dazed, as though something very important had happened - to me")<sup>38</sup> and eventually, as a means of exorcising her feelings, she decided to write the novel which emerged as *Strange Meeting*. She had felt she 'had' to write about WW1 but, having once dealt with her feelings in this way she lost the desire to return to the subject, either by writing about it again or through responding to requests to comment on books by others. She quite lost interest in the war.

If one were to attempt to describe the development of a (primarily English) sensibility in relation to WW1 during the post-WW2 period, it seems to me that the above account of Hill's experience would provide one thread in the story, Britten's *War Requiem* providing a response to the suffering of WW2 which simultaneously referred back to WW1 and evoked powerful feelings in a generation which, for the most part, had experienced WW2 as children.

Several collections of 'Literature of the Great War' have been published contemporaneously with the work of the Third Wave writers, or in some cases slightly earlier. Prose anthologies include those edited by Agnès Cardinal, Dorothy Goldman and Judith Hattaway; Tim Cross; Jon Glover and Jon Silkin; and Trudi Tate,<sup>39</sup> while

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<sup>38</sup> *Strange Meeting*, p.181.

<sup>39</sup> E.g.: Agnès Cardinal, Dorothy Goldman and Judith Hattaway, *Women's Writing on the First World War*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press: 1999); Tim Cross, ed. *The Lost Voices of World War I*, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989); Jon Glover, and Jon Silkin, eds., *Penguin Book of First World War Prose*, (London: Penguin Books, 1990); Trudi Tate, ed. *Women, Men and the Great War: An Anthology of Stories*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).



editors of poetry include Robert Giddings, Jon Silkin and Martin Stephen.<sup>40</sup> The contents of these anthologies include work from both First and Second Waves of writing, and is sometimes of 'literary' quality, sometimes in the less ambitious form of short memoirs, letters or diary entries, and poetry, or verse (the literary standard of some of which approaches doggerel). A further phenomenon of this period is the publication, often privately, of memoirs and diary extracts of WWI experiences by the children and grandchildren of war veterans, or in some cases by the veterans themselves in old age.<sup>41</sup> The appearance of all these publications is a further indication of the fascination the war continues to exert in modern times, and supports the notion that the mythology of the Western Front remains very much alive.

While the work of novelists and poets is my principal concern, some other late twentieth century writers have produced interpretations of WWI which are of interest both in themselves and because of the way in which they may affect present-day perceptions, thus further distancing the reader from the original experience of the war. These writers include Modris Eksteins, Paul Fussell and Jay Winter, who in different ways address the nature of our memory of the war; Samuel Hynes, who revisits and reinterprets some eye-witness accounts of the war (and other wars) provided by participants in it; and John Keegan, who in the course of a work of military history reflects on the factors which made WWI so different from its predecessors both in the way it was waged and in its consequences for British society. Additionally, Coker has written a work of much broader scope in which he addresses the ways in which modern "consciousness" - imagination, political language, the view of history - has been affected by war in the twentieth century.<sup>42</sup> In this context I would also mention Bergonzi's

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<sup>40</sup> E.g. Robert Giddings, *The War Poets*, (London: Bloomsbury, 1988); Jon Silkin (ed), *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, (London: Penguin Books (second edition) 1981); Martin Stephen, *Never Such Innocence: a New Anthology of Great War Verse*, (London: Buchan and Enwright, 1988). Brian Gardner's collection of 1964, with an Introduction by Edmund Blunden, may be seen as a precursor to these anthologies (Brian Gardner (ed.), *Up the Line to Death: The War Poets 1914-18*, (London: Methuen and Co, 1964)).

<sup>41</sup> Some examples known to me, not all related only to the Western Front, and mostly given to me by friends and acquaintances, two of them Australian, include: H.N. Edwards, narrated by James Bonsor, *I Did My Duty*, (Northampton: Cloverleaf Publications, 1998); Patricia Hocking, *Twice a Digger*, Richmond, Victoria: Spectrum Publications, 1996); Ernest Lye, *An Experience at Suvla Bay*, (unpublished typescript in author's possession, received 1997); Herbert Ransom, *War Diary 1914-1915*, (unpublished typescript in author's possession, received 2000); Edward Campion Vaughan, *Some Desperate Glory*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981).

<sup>42</sup> Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: the Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*, (London: Bantam Press, 1989); Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975); Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale; Bearing Witness in Modern War*, London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1997), John Keegan, *The Face of Battle*, (London: Penguin Books 1978); Jay Winter,



interesting analyses, but place his work in a different category, since it is concerned almost exclusively with literary criticism, and not with the social and cultural context of the many writers whose works he has studied.<sup>43</sup>

These works all introduce ideas and ways of interpretation which have often proved to be in various ways controversial (for example, it has been alleged that "Most of Fussell's assumptions about the way the war was fought ... are quite wrong".)<sup>44</sup> The works are mentioned in this context only because their existence raises the issue of mediation, between the actual experience of the war and the perceptions of it developed by those living in later times. Fussell's book, notwithstanding the above opinion about his working assumptions, is of particular significance, partly because it was one of the first to be published (in 1975), but principally because of its focus on the war as 'ironic action'. The nature of so much of the experience of those serving on the Western Front meant, according to Fussell, that an ironic distance had to be preserved before many participants could later face up to and shape their memories. He asserts further, that "The irony which memory associates with the events, little as well as great, of the First World War has become an inseparable element of the general vision of war in our time".<sup>45</sup> LAF is the primary ironic myth: of sacrifice and heroism in a cause which was ultimately (according to the myth) futile. The significance of irony for Fussell's purpose, and perhaps for many people in modern times, is that recall of the experience of the Western Front was assisted by "the ironic pattern which subsequent vision has laid over the events." Illustrating this idea by reference to one of the works of the Second Wave, he states: "In reading memoirs of the war, one notices the same phenomenon over and over. By applying to the past a paradigm of ironic action, a rememberer is enabled to locate, draw forth, and finally shape into significance an event or a moment which otherwise would merge without meaning into the general undifferentiated stream".<sup>46</sup>

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*Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: the Great War in European Cultural History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Christopher Coker, *War and the Twentieth Century: the Impact of War on the Modern Consciousness*, (London: Brassey's, 1994).

<sup>43</sup> Bernard Bergonzi, *Heroes' Twilight: a Study of the Literature of the Great War*, (Manchester: Carcanet, 1965 (Third edition 1996)).

<sup>44</sup> Ian F.W. Beckett, *The Great War 1914-1918*, (Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd, 2001), pp442,443.

<sup>45</sup> Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, p33.

<sup>46</sup> Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, p30. The Second Wave book Fussell refers to is Henry Williamson's *The Wet Flanders Plain*, (London: 1929), in which Williamson describes a return visit to Flanders some years after the war.





It is a theme of this thesis that the myths of the Western Front have come into being, and are being regularly developed and reinforced, largely through the mediation of the three waves of literary writers I have identified, whose descriptions of 'remembered *communitas*' and 'retrospective transfiguration of the sacrificial crisis' provide imaginative articulations of the myths. The structure of most of these writings, and especially those of the Third Wave, help to give the ironic distance needed. But the writings of Fussell and other commentators introduce a complicating factor for, as one writer has observed, in the course of an analysis of Susan Hill's *Strange Meeting*: "The issue of mediation has been confounded by Paul Fussell ... If it was impossible to write about the war except through Owen's and Sassoon's eyes, it is now difficult to read about it except through the filter of Fussell's ground-breaking investment and collation of its dominant themes. ...If Hill's *Strange Meeting* is an example of primary mediation, *The Great War and Modern Memory* raises the possibility of secondary or critical mediation".<sup>47</sup> The originator of these observations, Geoff Dyer, gives interesting reasons for writing his unusual book: "Like the young Christopher Isherwood who wanted to write a novel entitled 'A War Memorial', I wanted to write a book that was not about 'the War itself but the effect of the idea of [the War] on my generation'. Not a novel but an essay in mediation: research notes for a Great War novel I had no intention of writing, the themes of a novel without its substance ..."<sup>48</sup> This takes us beyond the Third Wave: beyond a novel which will have been mediated through the work of earlier writers to a philosophical essay on the nature of mediation itself. Some consequences of this problem of mediation are further discussed in Chapter 7.

The writers of the Third Wave, both literary and scholarly, form part of a substantial Western Front 'industry' which has grown up since WW2. Various organisations, commercial and non-commercial, promote tours of the Western Front battlefields for purposes of commemoration, education or tourism, and groups of schoolchildren are a common sight in these places. Excellent WW1 museums have opened in Peronne and Ypres, and the British Imperial War Museum devotes considerable resources to displays and special exhibitions on WW1. Local authorities in France and Flanders signpost routes around the battlefields for tourists and others to

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<sup>47</sup> Geoff Dyer, *The Missing of the Somme*, (London: Phoenix Press, 2001), p84.

<sup>48</sup> Geoff Dyer, *The Missing of the Somme*, p85.



follow, and there are visitor centres at Verdun, along the Chemin des Dames and elsewhere. Universities run adult education programmes and conferences on WW1 poetry and literature<sup>49</sup>. There have been TV series on the subject, including a BBC series scripted mainly by Jay Winter, the author of *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*. Radio programmes and theatrical productions have also tackled WW1 and its memories. Of theatrical productions, the best known has been the previously-mentioned satirical musical of 1963 *O, What a Lovely War!* Another, later, creation, was the very moving production, subsequently televised, by the Glasgow Shed company of the experience of Glaswegian infantry in WW1 trench warfare.<sup>50</sup> *Regeneration*, the first of Pat Barker's novels, was filmed in 1997, and a 1997 episode of a popular British TV courtroom drama (*Kavanagh*) featured the case of an officer who, devastated by his feelings of personal guilt over a harrowing episode in Bosnia where he had been unable to save a group of people from massacre, was shown to be reading *Regeneration*, presumably as means of helping himself to understand and come to terms with his mental anguish. In the late 1990s the concluding episode of the popular BBC TV comedy *Blackadder* took place in the trenches, moving at the end from sardonic comedy to poignancy and tragedy as, in slow motion, the troops went 'over the top'. Returning to the written word; in addition to the substantial works of reflection and analysis by Fussell, Winter, Hynes and Keegan discussed above, other useful books and collections of papers have continued to emerge in recent years. A good example is Cecil and Liddle's *Armageddon*, based on papers given at the Leeds WW1 Commemoration Conference of 1994, which provides many accounts of the military and civil experience of the war from the point of view of participants of many different nationalities. Most of the papers presented at this conference were written by historians, but are noted here since they deal principally with the experience of war at the individual level, and not with strategic analysis or with military or political history. My interest is not so much in the content of the papers, as in the fact that such events continue regularly to take place.

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<sup>49</sup> Seminars and conferences have included *No Man's Land and Beyond - Poetry and the Great War, 1914-18* held by SOCE at the University of Kent, March 12 1994; *The Great War in Literature* held by the University of Cambridge Board of Continuing Education, January 24-26 1997; Symposium on *British Literature of the First World War* held at the University of Picardy in 1986; International Commemoration Conference held at the University of Leeds in September 1994.; WW1 conference *Mars in Ascendant* held at the University of Northampton and the Imperial War Museum in August 2001.

<sup>50</sup> *The Big Picnic*, by Bill Bryden, performed at Harland and Wolff's Engine Shed in Govan, Glasgow and broadcast live on BBC2 TV to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the Battle of the Somme in July 1996.



Some of these cultural manifestations, and especially the TV programmes, were prompted by the occurrence in 1996 of the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the battle of the Somme.<sup>51</sup> This particular anniversary gained poignancy from the fact that few veterans of that battle then remained alive, and from the likelihood that there would be almost none left alive by the time a further 10 years had passed. But the distribution in time of the many events alluded to above, and of the writings of the Third Wave and its precursors, shows that this cannot have been the only source of motivation. One critic has referred to the “fin de siècle” literature of WWI<sup>52</sup>. Could what we saw in the 1990s (and are still seeing) be described as a ‘fin de siècle’ phenomenon?

If this is so, the meaning of the term must be taken as substantially different from that used of the end of the nineteenth century. The OED defines ‘fin de siècle’ as “1890 [Fr]...: characteristic of the end of the (nineteenth) century; advanced, modern; also, decadent”. My own view is that, while the end of the twentieth century inevitably and naturally provoked a mood of reflection in which writers of many kinds (including writers on WW1) played an important part, the logic driving the group of novelists which are of principal interest to me is different. These are writers who, because of their youth, participated neither in WWI nor in WW2 but whose feelings about WWI were aroused either by the work of another artist (who was himself perhaps seeing the war mediated through the work of a poet who had been writing at the time) or by the experience of living alongside a relation who had lived through WWI and had been injured or in some other way clearly affected by it. The logic principally at work here is that of the chronology of the two wars and of the generations who lived through and after them, not that of our numbering of the years. However, while it may be purely coincidental that these writers happen to have produced their work as we were approaching the end of the twentieth century, they do form, consciously or not, part of a fin de siècle phenomenon of the twentieth century.

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<sup>51</sup> Actually, the Leeds conference of 1994 commemorated the 80th anniversary of 1914, while the University of Picardy seminar of 1986 marked the 70th anniversary of the Battle of the Somme. Blake Morrison (in the *New Yorker*, January 1 1996, p78) discussing Pat Barker’s *Regeneration*, refers to “... a mood of nostalgia. Last year marked the fiftieth anniversary of V-E Day, the end of the Second World War in Europe, and though her trilogy is set during an earlier war, and demolishes many cherished myths, it has tapped some commemorative need.”

<sup>52</sup> Penelope Lively in the *Spectator*, quoted on the cover of Faulks’ *Birdsong*.



**5. A literary canon?** I have mentioned above the ‘canon’ of literature of WW1, and my intention to establish a personal canon of literary works which I consider valuable and relevant to my project of studying the myths of the Western Front.

It seems that literary studies take place inside national envelopes - for example, Bergonzi’s valuable critical volume *Heroes’ Twilight*, although it is subtitled *A Study of the Literature of the Great War*, is almost exclusively confined to British writers, making only brief reference to some of the better known continental authors, such as Barbusse and Jünger. This is a factor which, to the student approaching the topic from the discipline of International Relations, and with no professional expertise in literary criticism, poses a considerable challenge. However, I have developed a personal literary canon and incorporate it in the Bibliography of Works Consulted, in sections 1a, 1b and 1c, the latter two sections being confined to works by Sassoon and Jünger, my two principal research interests among the earlier writers. Within the bibliography, the works I consider ‘canonical’ are those I discuss in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 of the thesis. This canon has been arrived at through a combination of personal discovery and reading over many years, the recommendations of friends and colleagues, and the following up of citations in book reviews and literary studies. The criteria for inclusion in my personal canon are that the work can be described as ‘literature’, and that it relates directly to the experience of front-line soldiers on the Western Front.

My reasons for excluding works from my personal canon fall under two headings. Firstly, some writings inspired by WW1, and generally recognised to be of high literary quality, do not contribute directly to the myths I have identified and am exploring. A notable example is David Jones’ *In Parenthesis*,<sup>53</sup> which is written in a ‘mythical’ style, but refers more to pre-existing national myths than to myths arising from the experience of the war, and aspires to set the war into the context of these broader myths. I exclude it even though Bergonzi considers it “... the greatest work in English to have come out of the First World War”.<sup>54</sup> Another exclusion is Céline’s *Journey to the End of Night* (*Voyage au Bout de la Nuit*), which has been called “one of the great masterpieces provoked by the war”<sup>55</sup> but which actually has little to say about

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<sup>53</sup> David Jones, *In Parenthesis*, (1937. Reprint, Boston and London: Faber and Faber, 1978).

<sup>54</sup> Bergonzi, *Heroes’ Twilight*, p201. Bergonzi gives an extensive exegesis of *In Parenthesis* in pp190-201.

<sup>55</sup> Field, *Three French Writers and the Great War*, p39.



the experience of the war itself, even though for Céline “... the First World War had been the one truly momentous and illuminating experience of his life, opening his eyes definitively and in an unforgettably cruel fashion to the stupid, internecine ways of men”.<sup>56</sup> Another case is Ford Madox Ford’s tetralogy *Parade’s End*,<sup>57</sup> which Bergonzi judges to be “... the finest novel by an Englishman to have been produced by the Great War”, and Hynes describes as “... a great historical novel ...exact in its intricate rendering of the myth of history that would henceforth describe what happened in England during the first quarter of this century.”<sup>58</sup> But although Ford’s experience as an officer during the battle of the Somme, in which he was wounded, provides some of the material for this work, its scope is much broader than that of the war, being concerned more with the life experience of Tietjens, its principal character. Jones, Céline and Ford all moved in their work into broader literary or mythical territory than I am currently considering.

My second reason for excluding works from my personal canon is that some of the books which at first sight appear worthy of serious consideration for inclusion in such a canon are not, in the end, of sufficient literary merit. An interesting study has been made of ‘middlebrow’ books inspired by the war, and I would exclude these by definition from my canon.<sup>59</sup> But lying between these and those works which are of undoubted literary quality are a number of borderline cases, among which I would include, for example, Mottram’s frequently cited *Spanish Farm Trilogy*. Although this is a notable work (and, interestingly, Mottram contributed the foreword to the first English edition of Ernst Jünger’s *Storm of Steel*) Mottram has been called “... a superficial writer, who is most at home in rendering the characteristics of the social surface, rather than in plunging to moral or psychological depths”, an opinion I share.<sup>60</sup> Another example is Henry Williamson’s *The Patriot’s Progress*.<sup>61</sup> His experiences in the war haunted Williamson for the rest of his life, and provided material both for his political activities and, as mentioned above, for parts of his *Chronicle of Ancient*

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<sup>56</sup> John Sturrock, *Louis-Ferdinand Céline: Journey to the End of Night*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p7.

<sup>57</sup> Ford Madox Ford, *Parade’s End*, (1924, 1925, 1926, 1928. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1997).

<sup>58</sup> Bergonzi, *Heroes’ Twilight*, p167; Hynes, *A War Imagined*, p433.

<sup>59</sup> Rosa Maria Bracco, *Merchants of Hope: British Middlebrow Writers and the First World War*, (Oxford and Providence: Berg Publishers, 1992).

<sup>60</sup> R.H. Mottram, *The Spanish Farm Trilogy*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1927). The opinion is that of Bergonzi, *Heroes’ Twilight*, p164.

<sup>61</sup> Henry Williamson, *The Patriot’s Progress*, (1930. Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1999).



*Sunlight*, but *The Patriot's Progress* is more remarkable for the rather self-conscious 'literary' quality of its writing than for its insight into the nature of the experience of the Western Front.

My personal canon is of course subject to growth and change as time goes by. As it stands at the time of writing this thesis, however, it is quite extensive and, in my opinion, adequate to bear the weight of the conclusions I have drawn from studying it.

**6. Conclusions – relationships among the three waves and the myths.** As described above, it was through the literature of the First and Second Waves that the myths of the Western Front became established. The Second Wave – the 'war book boom' of around 1930 – is particularly associated with the LAF myth. The following two chapters discuss in detail the formation and articulation of this and the RTS myth in the work of Siegfried Sassoon, Ernst Jünger and other writers. The succeeding chapter, Chapter 7, then discusses the RR myth in the context of the Third Wave writers.



**Chapter 5**  
**Literature and myth I: Sassoon and the myth of**  
**'loss, anger and futility' (LAF).**

**Contents**

1. *Introduction*
2. *Biography*
3. *Bibliography*
4. *Some comments on Sassoon's writings*
5. *The myth: Sassoon's contribution*
6. *Some other literary contributors to the myth: Owen, Barbusse, Remarque and Manning.*
7. *Liminality, communitas, sacrifice and the diffusion of the myth*
8. *Conclusion: Sassoon and the LAF myth*

**1. Introduction.** Myth, together with ritual and prohibition, is the basis for social order in the Girardian scheme. Myth has a social function as a way of making sense of the present; of assigning meaning to experience. In the face of the enormous human losses which occurred on the Western Front, the LAF myth in the post-war period provided a means for people to express the anger they felt at their loss, 'making sense' of experience by identifying the incompetence of generals and politicians as the principal source of their pain. This was clearly the social need which the myth fulfilled and, in so far as it continues to exist, continues to fulfil.

In this chapter I apply the ideas of Girard and Turner to the work of Siegfried Sassoon and some other writers. I will suggest that the LAF myth with which these writers is associated emerged from the liminality of the experience of those who fought in it, and the *communitas* which this engendered. In its subsequent diffusion, the myth was transmuted into a Girardian 'retrospective transfiguration of a sacrificial crisis', as those killed in the war came widely to be seen as a 'lost generation' and the war itself as a period in which an older generation sacrificed its young in order to preserve the existing social order.

Siegfried Sassoon is one of a group of writers about the First World War - poets, novelists and auto-biographers - some at least of whose work has entered the canon of English literature. Mention of the name of any of these writers - Blunden, Graves, Owen, Rosenberg, Sorley, and others, as well as Sassoon - evokes the LAF myth of that war, which has become entrenched in present-day consciousness. Other



European writers, notably Barbusse and Remarque, also contributed to the origination and dissemination of this myth.

Sassoon was “one of the great twentieth-century literary all-rounders ... he loved sport and was a keen cricketer, golfer and fox-hunter ... (he was a ) highly complex, multi-talented and deeply mixed-up man”.<sup>1</sup> The study of his life and work is ground well-trodden by professional literary scholars and, to a lesser extent, biographers.<sup>2</sup> My present purpose is to use some of the available critical and biographical material to show how Sassoon and his work contributed to the myths of the Western Front.

My first reason for selecting Sassoon as a primary focus of my study of writers inspired by the Western Front was that, unlike the greater poets Owen, Sorley or Rosenberg, but like Ernst Jünger, he survived the war and continued to write for the rest of his life; in his case, until the 1960s. It seemed possible that study of his later writings would give further insight into his personal vision of the experiences he had during the war. This did indeed prove to be the case, although not in the way I had anticipated.

Another reason for concentrating on Sassoon is suggested by Wilson:

“ ... of all the First World War poets Sassoon is the most pivotal, his relationships shedding light over a wide area of modern literature. Not only was he a close friend of well-known patrons of the day, such as Edmund Gosse, Edward Marsh, Robert Ross and Ottoline Morell, but he also had links with almost every poet of the period. He knew Robert Graves, Robert Nichols and Wilfred Owen intimately, exercising a significant effect on all of these. Though Charles Hamilton Sorley died before he had a chance to meet him, Sassoon recognised his fellow-Marlburian's power and after the war helped to promote the work of another outstanding but neglected poet, Isaac Rosenberg. He also became a lifelong friend of Edmund Blunden.”<sup>3</sup>

All these links into the literary world of his time give many opportunities for comparing Sassoon with other writers, for assessing him through the opinions of his

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Curtis, “After Mad Jack was sent to Dottyville”, *Literary Review*, June 1999, p22, (reviewing Roberts' biography of Sassoon).

<sup>2</sup> See Bibliography section 1c; “Works by or about Siegfried Sassoon”. Some works listed in section 2 of the bibliography, “Literary criticism, social, political and cultural analysis”, also of course contain references to Sassoon.

<sup>3</sup> Jean Morecroft Wilson, *Siegfried Sassoon: the Making of a War Poet 1896-1918*, (London, Duckworth, 1998), p1.



contemporaries and for studying the ways in which the ‘myth’ of which he was one originator and exponent was later propagated.

Finally, Sassoon figures as a major character in Pat Barker’s *Regeneration* trilogy of novels, a circumstance which links his own life and times with a late-twentieth century reinterpretation of the meaning of the WW1, thus increasing his significance as a figure in the myths which emerged from the experience of the Western Front.

**2. Biography.** The facts of Sassoon’s life and work have been extensively recorded in his own autobiographical writings, in various biographies and in the biographies of others who knew him.<sup>4</sup> The extreme contrast between his sheltered, privileged upbringing (and also his later life) and the experiences in trenches and hospitals which characterised his life during WW1 emphasis the feeling of separation – of liminality – which pervades much of his writing about the war. A brief sketch of his life circumstances is therefore relevant in the present context.

Siegfried Loraine Sassoon<sup>5</sup> was born into comfortable circumstances in Kent in 1886. His father left the family when Siegfried was 7, dying two years later, and much of the boy’s upbringing was at the hands of his highly artistic mother, Georgina (née) Thornycroft. He was educated at Marlborough College and Clare College, Cambridge, leaving the university without a degree. Subsequently he lived the life of a country gentleman, hunting (he became an excellent and enthusiastic horseman), playing cricket and writing poetry.

Sassoon joined the Sussex Yeomanry at the beginning of the war, and in 1915 was commissioned and sent to France, where he quickly established an outstanding record for bravery. Wounded in 1917 and convalescing in England, he wrote and circulated a strong attack on the conduct of the war, in defiance of military regulations.<sup>6</sup> This led, through the intervention of his friend and brother officer

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<sup>4</sup> See Bibliography section 1c; “Works by or about Siegfried Sassoon”. In addition, a search of the Web discloses many pages giving biographical and other information on Sassoon, from English and American universities, and from school projects.

<sup>5</sup> According to his biographer Wilson, he was named Siegfried because of his cultured mother’s love of the music of Wagner, and also because he was such a large baby; Loraine after the clergyman - his godfather - who helped to arrange his parents’ marriage in difficult family circumstances, his father being Jewish and his mother a member of the Church of England.

<sup>6</sup> This ‘manifesto’ has been widely reproduced, including in Sassoon’s *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (p207) and later in the *Diaries 1915-1918* (pp174-174). A footnote in the *Diaries 1915-1918* advises



Robert Graves, to his being sent as a victim of 'shell-shock' to the Craiglockart War Hospital near Edinburgh, where he was treated by the pioneering Cambridge psychologist W.H.R. Rivers. It is this period of his life that was later used by the novelist Pat Barker as material for her *Regeneration* trilogy of novels.

Sassoon's first commercially published book of poems, *The Old Huntsman*, came out in 1917, and the "savagely realistic and compassionate"<sup>7</sup> *Counterattack* in 1918, some of the poems having been published earlier in the *Cambridge Magazine*. According to the *Dictionary of National Biography*, all these poems taken together "... had established his stature as a fully fledged poet, and despite all his later prose and verse, and his growing aversion to the label, it was mainly as a war-poet that he was regarded for the rest of his life".

Sassoon returned to the war from Craiglockart and was sent to Ireland, then posted to Palestine, later anew to France, where he was again wounded, accidentally shot by his own side when returning from one of his rather entrepreneurial 'raids'. He was unable to return to the war, and left the army in 1919. He became briefly involved in politics and journalism, but eventually returned to country life, publishing in 1928, 1930 and 1936 his renowned memoirs of the pre-war and war-time years.<sup>8</sup> He married in 1933 and settled at Heytesbury House in Wiltshire, where a son was born in 1936 and where Sassoon spent the rest of his life. The marriage did not last - Sassoon was avowedly bisexual - but the peace of his country retreat facilitated his

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that it was sent to Sassoon's Commanding Officer on July 6 1917, read out in the House of Commons on July 30, and printed in *the Times* the next day. The manifesto also appears in Wilson, *Sassoon*, p373-4: and is reproduced in full in Barker's *Regeneration*. It read as follows: "Finished with the War, A Soldier's Declaration. I am making this statement as an act of wilful defiance of military authority, because I believe the war is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it. I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers. I believe that this war, upon which I entered as a war of defence and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest. I believe that the purposes for which I and my fellow soldiers entered upon this war should have been so clearly stated as to have made it impossible to chage them, and that, had this been done, the objects which actuated us would now be attainable by negotiation. I have seen and endured the suffering of the troops, and I can no longer be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust. I am not protesting against the conduct of the war, but against the political errors and insincerities for which the fighting men are being sacrificed. On behalf of those who are suffering now I make this protest against the deception which is being practised on them; also I believe that I may help to destroy the callous complacency with which the majority of those at home regard the continuance of agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realize. S. Sassoon, July 1917."

<sup>7</sup> Words (by Rupert Hart-Davis, who also edited Sassoon's *Diaries*) taken from the entry on Sassoon in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford, OUP, 1992).

<sup>8</sup> Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of a Fox-hunting Man*, (1928; Reprint, London: Faber and Faber, 1960), *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, (1930; Reprint, London: Faber and Faber 1989), *Sherston's Progress*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1936).



later writing, of poetry and of further volumes of autobiography, much of the latter going back to his very early years.

He was received into the Roman Catholic Church in 1957, and died in 1967. The writer Anthony Powell visited Sassoon at his home in 1963, reporting that, at nearly 80 years of age, Sassoon looked “like a ghost haunting the fields of Passchendaele or Bapaume”. In the house, “life seemed to have stopped perhaps half a century before”, and its owner “... seemed to walk in a dream through a dream world”. The tea-time conversation was concerned mainly with current preoccupations, but it seemed to Powell that his host “... belonged to another era, another civilisation than one’s own ...for Captain Sassoon, though no longer himself involved in it, the first war was still in progress.”<sup>9</sup> It seems that Sassoon was so steeped in the myth which he had helped to create through his writings that he was unable to escape it. In fact his post-1930 autobiographical writings, as will be shown later, simply went over ground he had already covered, or dug further into the earlier periods of his life.

**3. Bibliography.** Before the war, Sassoon had published some of his poetry privately. Later, as he gained in confidence and in strength of feeling about the war, he began the sequence of commercial publications which continued for much of the rest of his life. His prose works were exclusively autobiographical, and their publication was interspersed with that of his poetry. He authorised the publication of *Collected Poems* in 1947 and *Collected Poems 1908-56* in 1961, these volumes containing the poems from previously published collections which he wished to preserve. His collected *War Poems*, edited by Rupert Hart-Davis, were published in 1983.<sup>10</sup>

In his first commercially published work, *The Old Huntsman and other Poems*, which appeared in 1917, the long poem of the title is a reflection, in the persona of an old hunt servant, on his life, times and religious views. The volume continues with *War Poems 1915-1917* (35 poems) and *Lyrical Poems 1908-1916* (33 poems). There followed, the next year, *Counter Attack and other Poems*, a set of 38

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<sup>9</sup> This account comes from Anthony Powell, *To Keep the Ball Rolling: The Memoirs of Anthony Powell*, (London: Penguin Books, 1983), pp350, 351.

<sup>10</sup> References to these and other volumes mentioned are given in the bibliography. A full bibliography is given in Geoffrey Keynes, *A Bibliography of Siegfried Sassoon*, (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1962).



poems, all of them on themes clearly related to Sassoon's experiences on the Western Front or at the Craiglockart Hospital. In *Picture Show* (1919) the horror of war begins to lift, and the collection of 34 poems concludes with the celebrated short poem "Everyone sang". (*Everyone suddenly burst out singing/And I was filled with such delight/As prisoned birds must find in freedom/ ...horror/drifted away ...O, but Everyone/Was a bird; and the song was wordless; the singing will never be done*).<sup>11</sup>

In 1926 Sassoon published the 37 *Satirical Poems*,<sup>12</sup> the tone of which is indeed satirical, mainly about contemporary events, including Sassoon's post-war visit to the USA, but with occasional flashbacks to the war. A year later there followed *The Heart's Journey*, in which the mood changes to one of quiet reflection, with occasional flashes of anger, as in Sassoon's response to the Menin Gate memorial opened in Ypres: "*Well might the dead who struggled in the slime/Rise and deride this sepulchre of crime*".<sup>13</sup>

In 1928 he turned to prose, with *Memoirs of a Fox-hunting Man*. This work initiated Sassoon's series of autobiographical, or presumably autobiographical, writings, some of which have become minor classics, read by several generations of English schoolchildren, their teachers and parents. *Memoirs of a Fox-hunting Man* begins with the author's childhood in Kent, continues with his early exploits in the cricket and hunting fields and ends with his move as an army officer to France in 1914. *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* followed logically in 1930, continuing the life story chronologically, and ending with Sassoon's "Soldier's Declaration" and subsequent hospitalisation at Craiglockart (disguised as "Slateford") in 1917. These books are "presumably autobiographical" because, although they follow closely the known events of Sassoon's life and are written in the first person, the author fictionalises himself as "George Sherston" and similarly conceals the identity of various friends, relatives and places. Sassoon described Sherston as "a simplified version of my outdoor self",<sup>14</sup> the simplification lying principally in the fact that Sherston is not a poet. These memoirs represent a recollection in tranquillity of Sassoon's pre-war and wartime experiences, and perhaps at that time he did not, even

<sup>11</sup> *Collected Poems 1908-1956*, p124.

<sup>12</sup> Keynes gives the date of publication as 1926, but later dates - up to 1933 - are assigned to some of the poems presented under this title in the *Collected Poems 1908-1956*. Clearly Sassoon rearranged some of his work in preparing the later volume.

<sup>13</sup> From "On passing the Menin Gate", number XXI in this collection.

<sup>14</sup> From *Siegfried's Journey*; quoted in Michael Thorpe, *Siegfried Sassoon: a Critical Study*, (Leiden: Universitaire Pers/London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p73..



though his work was by then part of the Second Wave of WW1-inspired writings, feel ready to write without at least a degree of fictional concealment.<sup>15</sup>

Returning to poetry in 1933, he provided, in *The Road to Ruin*, 9 poems whose mood is of despairing premonition, introduced with a quotation from Einstein about the evil of the manufacture and sale of arms, and including titles such as “The ultimate atrocity” and “News from the war-after-next”.<sup>16</sup> The next year there followed *Vigils*, 35 intensely introspective poems on themes of childhood, lost youth and death. These include ‘Revisitation’ (subtitled (W.H.R.R.)) in which Sassoon fantasises a return to his “heart’s room” of Rivers, his psychiatrist and father figure from ‘Slateford’.

Resuming his prose autobiography, 1936 saw the publication of *Sherston’s Progress*, in which, still writing in the first person, Sassoon picks up the story from the end of *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, describing his life at ‘Slateford’, Sherston’s return to the army with assignments in Ireland and Palestine, then his return to the Western Front, further injury and hospitalisation in London.<sup>17</sup>

Having arrived autobiographically at the end of his war experiences, Sassoon returned, in *The Old Century and Seven More Years* (1938) to the ‘lost years of childhood’, with a sketch of his early years in Kent, his schooldays at Marlborough and his time at Cambridge. The tone is affectionately nostalgic, with no reference to the war apart from his reflections upon encountering, during a return visit to the location of childhood holidays in Norfolk, a memorial table to a young lance-corporal of the Norfolk Regiment, lost at sea in 1915. He continued his autobiographical work with *The Weald of Youth* (1942) stating, “... I have defined this book as an attempt to compose an outline of my mental history” (p27). It is inscribed “*Looked on, the darling weald grows dearer/Weald of youth, a remembered word*”. Most of the writing concerns his development as a poet from 1906 or so onwards, interleaved with his continuing involvement with the country life of golf, hunting and cricket, and also with his interest in music, inspired largely through his friend and muse “Wirgie” (his

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<sup>15</sup> Bernard Bergonzi, *Heroes’ Twilight: a Study of the Literature of the Great War*, (Manchester, Carcanet, 1965, (third edition 1996)); p150.

<sup>16</sup> Although the original collection dated from the 1930s, Sassoon adds a later poem in the *Collected Poems 1908-1956*: “Litany of the lost”, a post-atomic-bomb poem dated 1945.

<sup>17</sup> A further publication of interest is Paul Fussell (Ed), *Sassoon’s Long Journey: an Illustrated Selection from Siegfried Sassoon’s “The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston”*, (London, Faber and Faber, 1983). *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston* comprise the three books *Memoirs of a Fox-hunting Man*, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* and *Sherston’s Progress*.



mother's friend Helen Wirgman). It ends with his impending departure for the war. Finally, in 1945, at the end of WW2, came *Siegfried's Journey: 1916-1920* in which Sassoon wrote mainly of his experiences in England during the later years of the war, and of his lecture tour to the USA shortly after its end. Beginning with his hospitalisation in Oxford in 1916, it also covered his meetings at Garsington with Lady Ottoline Morell and other pacifist sympathisers, his later impressions of Wilfred Owen at Craiglockart, the support he received as a writer from Edward Marsh (who facilitated his meeting with Winston Churchill in 1918) and Robbie Ross, and his growing reputation in England and the USA, the latter as 'England's young soldier-poet'. His only other prose publication was a compilation, published in 1951 under the heading *The Flower Show Match and Other Pieces* of 15 pieces under the headings "Childhood and Youth", "War Experiences" and "Retrospect", taken from *Memoirs of a Fox-hunting Man*, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, *Sherston's Progress* and *The Old Century*.

Sassoon published four further volumes of poetry, of which only *Rhymed Ruminations* (1939) contained any glances back at WW1. His later, post-WW2, poems were, apart from some references to the horrors of nuclear destruction, generally reflective of life, with premonitions of its ending.

Relating this account of Sassoon's writings to the 'Three Wave' model of Western Front-inspired literature, his 'war poems' were an important component of the First Wave, while *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* appeared very early in the Second Wave, the final volume of the trilogy comprising, like Romains' *Verdun*, something of an outlier to the Second Wave. *Siegfried's Journey* mainly fills in some gaps in the earlier books (e.g. the accounts of his relationship with Wilfred Owen, and his dealings with the Garsington group) and is perhaps best seen as an appendix to them, and hence essentially as part of the Second Wave.

Two features relevant to the present thesis stand out from this briefly summarised record. Firstly, that the time periods covered by the autobiographical prose move forward in time until the publication of *Sherston's Progress* in 1936, after which they go back to Sassoon's earlier years and never subsequently deal with any date after 1920. Sassoon, having once completed his account of the wartime and pre-war years, devoted much of his subsequent prose writing to revisiting those times. Like Jünger (but see the following chapter for some substantial differences), "... he



was constantly writing and re-writing his own myth ...”<sup>18</sup>. As Fussell puts it: “Exactly half his life he had spent plowing and reploting the earlier half, motivated by what – dichotomizing to the end – he calls ‘my queer craving to revisit the past and give the modern world the slip’. The life he cared to consider ran from 1895 to 1920 only”.<sup>19</sup> Secondly, and by contrast, while war experience directly inspired the poems of 1917-1919, it was largely left behind in Sassoon’s later, less well-regarded, poetry. The extreme experiences of the war allowed a creative power to surface in him that he was never able subsequently to recapture. When he did revisit the war, he did so in prose, the intense feeling that inspired his poetry having subsided with the passing of time.

**4. Some comments on Sassoon’s writings.** Both Bergonzi and Lane place the early poems of Sassoon, together with those of Rupert Brooke and others, in the Georgian school of poetry - what Lane unkindly terms the “weekend-in-the-country” tradition of pastoral versifying.<sup>20</sup> But Sassoon was also an admirer of Thomas Hardy, the great realist, recording a visit to him in 1921,<sup>21</sup> and dedicating *The Old Huntsman* to him. He was certainly influenced by Hardy; as Bridgwater states: “ ... a sceptical attitude towards all things military, supposedly a British characteristic, was there for all to see in the anti-Boer-War poems of the most firmly established and respected of English poets, Thomas Hardy (admired by Brooke, Grenfell and Sassoon, among others) ...”<sup>22</sup>

The mood of “The Old Huntsman”, the poem which opens the eponymous volume, is reflective, nostalgic and sceptical of formal religion (“ ... *I’m amazed at folk/Drinking the Gospels in and never scratching/Their heads for questions ...*”) but ultimately expressive of a kind of gentle pantheism (“*Now I know/It’s God that speaks to us when we’re bewitched/Smelling the hay in June ...*”). The old huntsman looks back on his life with regret: “*I never broke/Out of my blundering self into the world./But let it all go past me, like a man/Half asleep in a land that’s full of wars*”.

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<sup>18</sup> Private communication: email to the author re Jünger from Richard Brem, August 10, 2000.

<sup>19</sup> Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, p.92.

<sup>20</sup> Bernard Bergonzi, *Heroes’ Twilight*, pp91-92; Arthur E. Lane, *An adequate response: the war poetry of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon*, (Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1972), p88.

<sup>21</sup> Sassoon’s *Diaries 1920-1922*, pp83-85.

<sup>22</sup> Patrick Bridgwater, “Discovering a post-heroic war poetry”, in Franz Karl Stanzel and Martin Löschnigg (eds.), *Intimate Enemies; English and German Literary Reactions to the Great War 1914-1918*, (Heidelberg, Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1994), p51.



This material clearly has roots in Sassoon's pre-war life, as country gentleman and huntsman, as does the content of the "*Lyrical Poems*" published in the same volume. He tended to separate in his work lyrical evocations of countryside and home from his responses to the experience of war. The "*War Poems 1915-1917*" begin in a detached mood of confidence: "*War is our scourge; yet war has made us wise,/And, fighting for our freedom, we are free*".<sup>23</sup> Even the death of his brother Hamo, killed at Gallipoli, fails to provoke any feeling beyond necessary acceptance: "*Give me your hand, my brother, search my face/ ...in the gloom I see your laurell'd head/And through your victory I shall win the light*".<sup>24</sup> The poet celebrates victory: "*Return to greet me, colours that were my joy,/Not in the woeful crimson of men slain,/But shining as a garden ...*",<sup>25</sup> and romanticises the weapons of war: "*To these I turn, in these I trust/Brother Lead and Sister Steel ...*".<sup>26</sup> (Of this Stanzel comments: "Graves, who knew Sassoon well at this time, says: "I had never known such a fire-eater as he" and is not entirely convinced by Sassoon's later declaration that the poem was meant as a satire<sup>27</sup>).

It is in the "terrifying sequence of poems"<sup>28</sup> of *Counterattack* that Sassoon emerges as an angry observer of and commentator on the life of soldiers in the trenches of the Western Front. He emphatically contrasts their experience with the cosy and complacent lives, as Sassoon saw them, of staff officers based in comfort behind the front lines, or those at home in England. It was these poems that, according to Bergonzi, "... secured Sassoon's reputation as a poet".<sup>29</sup> Two examples give the flavour of, first, Sassoon's power of observation and attitude of sympathetic identification with the soldiers' lot -

#### *Attack*

*At dawn the ridge emerges massed and dun  
In the wild purple of the glow'ring sun,  
Smouldering through spouts of drifting smoke that shroud  
The menacing scarred slope; and, one by one,  
Tanks creep and topple forward to the wire.*

<sup>23</sup> "Absolution", verse 1, lines 2 and 3, *Collected Poems 1908-1956*, p11.

<sup>24</sup> "To my Brother", v1 l1, v2 l3,4, *Collected Poems 1908-1956*, pp11,12.

<sup>25</sup> "To Victory", v1, l1-3, *Collected Poems 1908-1956*, p13.

<sup>26</sup> "The Kiss", v1, l1,2, *Collected Poems 1908-1956*, p15.

<sup>27</sup> Franz K. Stanzel, "The beauty of the bayonet: hand-to-hand combat in English and German poetry" in Stanzel and Löschnigg (eds.), *Intimate Enemies*.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, (1929. Reprint, revised, London: Penguin Books, 1957), p217.

<sup>29</sup> Bergonzi, *Heroes' Twilight*, p103.



*The barrage roars and lifts. Then, clumsily bowed  
With bombs and guns and shovels and battle-gear,  
Men jostle and climb to meet the bristling fire.  
Lines of grey, muttering faces, masked with fear,  
They leave their trenches, going over the top,  
While time ticks blank and busy on their wrists,  
And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling fists,  
Flounders in mud. O Jesus, make it stop!*<sup>30</sup>

- and, second, his capacity for angry satire -

### **Base details**

*If I were fierce, and bald, and short of breath,  
I'd live with scarlet Majors at the base,  
And speed glum heroes up the line to death.*<sup>31</sup>  
*You'd see me with my puffy, petulant face,  
Guzzling and gulping in the best hotel,  
Reading the Roll of Honour. 'Poor young chap,'  
I'd say - 'I used to know his father well;  
Yes, we've lost heavily in this last scrap.'  
And when the war is done and youth stone dead,  
I'd toddle safely home and die - in bed.*<sup>32</sup>

*Counterattack* includes some poems written during Sassoon's time at Craiglockart. There are references to his feelings about 'shell-shock', some sarcastically ambivalent ("... in my belief/Such men have lost all patriotic feeling")<sup>33</sup>, some agonised ("... O Christ, I want to go out/And screech at them to stop - I'm going crazy;/I'm going stark, staring mad because of the guns.")<sup>34</sup>. Of the whole of *Counterattack* perhaps most expressive of the intensity of his feeling are the lines at the end of the poem "To any Dead Officer". This is written in the form of an imaginary telephone conversation with a companion who has been killed in action -

*... and the War won't end for at least two years;  
But we've got stacks of men ... I'm blind with tears,  
Staring into the dark. Cheero!  
I wish they'd killed you in a decent show.*<sup>35</sup>

<sup>30</sup> *Collected Poems 1908-1956*, p71.

<sup>31</sup> "... up the line to death" - a powerful phrase, used as the title of Brian Gardner's anthology *The War Poets, 1914-1918*, published in 1964.

<sup>32</sup> *Collected Poems 1908-1956*, p75.

<sup>33</sup> "Lamentations", 110, *Collected Poems 1908-1956*, p76.

<sup>34</sup> "Repression of war experience", last 3 lines, *Collected Poems 1908-1956*, p90.

<sup>35</sup> "To any dead officer", last 4 lines, *Collected Poems 1908-1956*, p85.



*Counterattack* opens (in the “Collected” edition), with a quotation from Barbusse’s *Le Feu* (*Under Fire*) which, according to Wilson, Sassoon had “almost certainly” begun reading in June 1917, just before the battle of the Somme. He “greatly admired” the book.<sup>36</sup> The quotation reads:

*“In their troubled truce of the morning, these men whom fatigue had tormented, whom rain had scourged, whom night-long lightning had convulsed, these survivors of volcanoes and flood began not only to see dimly how war, as hideous morally as physically, outrages common sense, debases noble ideas and dictates all kinds of crime, but they remembered how it had enlarged in them and about them every evil instinct save none, mischief developed into lustful cruelty, selfishness into ferocity, the hunger for enjoyment into a mania”.*<sup>37</sup>

It is difficult to imagine a stronger ‘anti-war’ statement than this, and it clearly had an inspirational effect on Sassoon. Sassoon was an extremely sensitive young man, from a sheltered and privileged background, thrown with little preparation into situations of unparalleled horror. His war experiences drew from him a poetic response of far greater power than anything he had written before, or indeed afterwards. As Bergonzi states: “When Sassoon attempted to write straightforward poems on subjects remote from the war, he dwindled to the stature of a minor Georgian survival: the bulk of his later poetry, sententious or laxly pastoral, is carefully written and very dull. ... it is the poems of 1916-18 that count, and that represent Sassoon’s major contribution both to English poetry and the records of the Great War”.<sup>38</sup>

It is interesting to observe, as noted above, that in his first prose accounts of wartime experience, which appeared in the Second Wave of WW1 writings, Sassoon wrote in the fictitious persona of ‘George Sherston’, who was “... not the sensitive, articulate, angry man who emerged from the war, but ... another, earlier, more ordinary self, living through his experiences, and being changed by them”<sup>39</sup> The books of the *Sherston* trilogy are indeed written in a relaxed, civilised, discursive

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<sup>36</sup> Wilson, *Siegfried Sassoon*, p375.

<sup>37</sup> From Henri Barbusse, tr. Fitzwater Wray, *Under Fire (Le Feu)*, (London and Toronto: J.M.Dent and Sons, 1917; revised edition London: J.M.Dent and Sons, 1929) p330. Sassoon gives the quotation in its French original.

<sup>38</sup> Bergonzi, *Heroes’ Twilight*, p105.

<sup>39</sup> Hynes, *A War Imagined*, p436.



style, providing “ ... on an extended scale the basic paradigm on which so many wartime poems were based: A poignant contrast between rural England and the horrors of trench warfare ...”.<sup>40</sup> Here we have a double liminality; not only the liminality of the peacetime/wartime contrast, but that of Sassoon the straightforward country gentleman drawing back, as life resumed some semblance of normality, from his earlier, perhaps temporary, persona as Sassoon the angry poet.

Bergonzi regards the trilogy as “ ... an incomplete success ...”, although “ ... the first two volumes, at least, deserve a significant place in the literature of the Great War, though a lower one than that occupied by Sassoon’s wartime poems.”<sup>41</sup> Certainly these books convey little of the emotion of the poetry, nor the sharp observation and sense of dramatic engagement of Ernst Jünger’s writing, to be discussed in Chapter 6. Sherston’s account of his participation in the Battle of the Somme, for example, although it has flashes of dramatic action and contains scenes of carnage, is softened by reflective asides and by a style of writing which portrays the whole affair as though it were an outing on the hunting field, as Sherston wonders “ ... whether anyone would take a pot-shot at us ...” or, of the beginning of a bombing raid with an accompanying Lance-Corporal “I felt adventurous and it seemed as if Kendle and I were having great fun together”.<sup>42</sup> Although the sense of *communitas* among comrades is described here, it is always with a certain detachment, which detracts from the emotion which helps to generate myth through ‘remembered *communitas*’. Even Sherston’s account of the development of his ‘manifesto’ is curiously passionless.<sup>43</sup> However sometimes, as in the poetry, an angry view of the war as ‘sacrificial crisis’ breaks through Sassoon’s civilised prose. A notable moment occurs in *Sherston’s Progress* where, at the end of his period in ‘Slateford’, Sherston reflects on the fate of men who suffered shell-shock, saying, of the “unspeakable tragedy of shell-shock” that “ ... it was in this that their humanity had been outraged by those explosives which were sanctioned and glorified by the Churches; ... In the name of civilization these soldiers had been martyred ...”.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Bergonzi, *Heroes’ Twilight*, p150.

<sup>41</sup> Bergonzi, *Heroes’ Twilight*, p154.

<sup>42</sup> *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, p44, p57.

<sup>43</sup> *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, pp167-195.

<sup>44</sup> *Sherston’s Progress*, p89.



**5. The myth: Sassoon's contribution.** Turner goes so far as to see the whole of literature as a 'liminoid genre'. In this rather extreme sense one can view much of Sassoon's wartime poetry, and indeed the work of many other literary writers of both First and Second Waves, as challenging to what Turner calls the *ancien regime*: indeed, Sassoon went on after the war to play a modest role in left-wing politics. But we do not need to go to these lengths to perceive the ways in which Sassoon's writings about the war derive from his experiences of the rites of passage of wartime. These experiences may be associated with Van Gennep's and Turner's periods of 'separation', 'liminality' and 'aggregation', as follows.

Firstly, in 1915 Sassoon made the transition from comfortable country life in Kent to the life of the army and, later, the trenches. In the concluding pages of *The Weald of Youth* (published in 1942) he recounts his unease and concern, during the summer of 1914, at the increasingly ominous reports coming from the continent. He decided that a long bicycle ride would help to clear his mind and, on July 31 1914, set off from his home to the Sussex town of Rye. As he cycled, Sassoon "... felt very much as if I were pedalling away from my past life" and, on the return journey later the same day, felt that he was "... travelling towards something portentous ... the aspect of things was within me, imbuing what I beheld with significances of impending disaster". In this mood he "... was ready to meet whatever the war might ask of me".<sup>45</sup> This episode can be seen as part of the period in Sassoon's life that encompassed the 'rites of separation' which the initiate must undergo and which ensure that the break with his familiar life should be gradual rather than abrupt.

Next came the liminal period of life in the trenches: Sassoon adapted well to army life, and became in many ways an exemplary officer, respected, even loved, by his men, with whom he in turn sympathetically identified. This led him into feelings of exclusion and repulsion from those who were not part of the war in the trenches - civilians, relatives, senior staff officers, generals - well-expressed in the poem "Base Details" discussed above, and described in many places in his various autobiographical writings about his visits home during the war. This was of course a familiar experience, widely reported and described, to those who served actively on the Western Front. In anthropological terms, again, it represents the participation of the writer in a liminal group separated from 'normal' society, and the growth of

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<sup>45</sup> *The Weald of Youth*, pp270, 271, 276, 278.



*communitas* within it. It seems clear that the sympathy of Sassoon and others with pacifism, a component of the LAF myth, though in Sassoon's case emotional and not intellectual in both origin and expression, grew directly, not only from "revulsion from the horrors of war" but from " ... the growth, under the stress of war of comradeship and cooperation between men" – from *communitas*, in other words.<sup>46</sup>

Another aspect of liminality was that of the pacifists and other protestors with whom Sassoon became associated. Prior to the submission and publication of his anti-war manifesto, in 1917, he had become friendly with, and influenced by, members of the pacifist-inclined circle around Lady Ottoline Morell, centred upon Lady Ottoline's home at Garsington, near Oxford. (Some of the activities of pacifist groups at the time, and the issues of conscience they raised, are explored in *The Eye in the Door*, the second book in Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy). The 'Garsington' group supported and encouraged Sassoon in his protest, and his visits there gave him a sense of association with a different way of looking at the war than he had previously encountered.<sup>47</sup> This was again a liminal group, though of a quite different nature from that formed in the trenches, since the *communitas* that developed in it was based on shared opposition to the war rather than on companionship in adversity. 'George Sherston' does not refer directly to this relationship in any part of the *Sherston* trilogy, except for an account of his meetings with the philosopher 'Thornton Tyrell' (a pseudonym for Bertrand Russell),<sup>48</sup> who advises him during the preparation of his manifesto.<sup>49</sup> It was not until the publication of *Siegfried's Journey* in 1945 that Sassoon himself wrote openly about Lady Ottoline, Russell, and the Garsington group. This evasiveness was perhaps an example of Sassoon 'rewriting his own myth'.

Finally, there was the liminality of those damaged by their experiences on the Western Front: this was encountered especially during Sassoon's period at the Craiglockart Hospital, where he met and was much affected by W.H.R. Rivers, and also met the younger Wilfred Owen. Here Sassoon became part of a different kind of community, " ... dumped down among nurses and nervous wrecks".<sup>50</sup> As Wilson

<sup>46</sup> Thorpe, *Siegfried Sassoon*, p294.

<sup>47</sup> See Wilson, *Siegfried Sassoon*, esp. pp294-297; and Sassoon's *Siegfried's Journey*, pp20-24.

<sup>48</sup> Thorpe, *Siegfried Sassoon*, p100n6.

<sup>49</sup> *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, pp190-196.

<sup>50</sup> *Sherston's Progress*, p24.



states, Craiglockart was “not unlike boarding-school or university”.<sup>51</sup> Sassoon felt both an outsider there (because not in his own view medically ill) and yet inevitably linked with his fellow patients through their common experience. There was thus for him a double liminality, as a ‘soldier’ among ‘patients’ and yet as one officially classified as being incapable of active service. Rivers became a father-figure to him, eventually facilitating his decision to apply for return to active service: indeed, Rivers never thought Sassoon was suffering from ‘shell-shock’, responding to the obvious question at their first interview with the statement, “... you appear to be suffering from an anti-war complex”.<sup>52</sup> Sassoon ends his last book of war memoirs, *Sherston's Progress* with an account of Rivers visiting him in hospital in the summer of 1918. Of this meeting, Sassoon says; “He did not tell me that I had done my best to justify his belief in me. He merely made me feel that he took all that for granted, and now we must go on to something better still. And this was the beginning of the new life toward which he had shown me the way ...”<sup>53</sup>

The myth which arose around Sassoon and his work perhaps gained power from the fact that, as well as undergoing the rites of passage which begin the liminal experience, he became associated with not just one but three liminal groups - pre-eminently that of those living and fighting in the trenches, but also the pacifists and the ‘shell-shock’ victims. All these formed their own ‘*communitas*’, cumulatively therefore adding resonance to the resulting myth. If, as Turner asserts, myth is ‘remembered *communitas*’, Sassoon’s writings and accounts by others of his life powerfully convey the nature of the *communitas* in which he was caught up in all these three cases.

In the first - the trenches - he describes almost affectionately his relationships with his men and with his brother officers (these feelings complicated to some degree, as Wilson and others believe, by his underlying bisexuality) and indeed was decorated for his valour in rescuing one of his men, Cpl. ‘Mick’ O’Brien, his “dear bombing corporal” from No Man’s Land after the latter had been injured.<sup>54</sup> Sassoon’s expressions of delight in the freedom temporarily gained when he is able to take a break from the front, in England or behind the lines in France, carry with them a

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<sup>51</sup> Wilson, *Siegfried Sassoon*, p391.

<sup>52</sup> Sassoon, *Sherston's Progress*, p15.

<sup>53</sup> *Sherston's Progress*, p280.

<sup>54</sup> Wilson, *Siegfried Sassoon*, p259.



strong sense of contrast with the '*communitas*' left behind in the trenches, sometimes (and especially during the Craiglockart episode) extending to guilt that he is not back there suffering with his men.

In the second - the association with the Garsington group and the publication of his manifesto - '*communitas*' of a different nature existed within the group of pacifist-inclined thinkers with whom, for a time, Sassoon associated himself. Myth here emerged due perhaps in part to the very high level at which Sassoon's inflammatory words circulated, and in part because of the difficult and dangerous times in which they were published (1917), after the disastrous battle of the Somme and when no end to the war seemed in sight. Questions were asked in Parliament and a year later, when the tide of war had turned, Sassoon was invited to see Winston Churchill, whose interest he had aroused, and had a long interview with him. It is also the case that Lady Ottoline Morell's salon became a close-knit group operating at a high level of intensity of both thought and feeling; indeed, Sassoon developed a close rapport with Lady Ottoline herself, to the extent that in the early stages of their relationship he suspected her of amorous intentions towards him.<sup>55</sup> It has also been suggested that the pacifist press of the time "... delighted at having caught a genuine war hero, tried their best to make a conspicuous martyr of him, and Sassoon allowed himself to be offered as a sacrifice".<sup>56</sup> If this is true, it adds another dimension to the view of Sassoon as one of the 'sacrificial victims' of the war.

In the third period of '*communitas*' - at Craiglockart - Sassoon was enveloped in fourfold nexus of experience and feeling: his relationship with Rivers, his relationship with Owen and his thoughts and feelings about both his fellow-patients and the comrades who remained in France. His anger at the lot of many of his fellow-patients is powerfully expressed in a poem written at Craiglockart in October 1917 and published in *Counterattack* -

***Survivors***

*No doubt they'll soon get well; the shock and strain  
Have caused their stammering, disconnected talk.  
Of course they're 'longing to go out again' -  
These boys with old, scared faces, learning to walk.  
They'll soon forget their haunted nights; their cowed  
Subjection to the ghosts of friends who died, -  
Their dreams that drip with murder; and they'll be proud*

<sup>55</sup> Wilson, *Siegfried Sassoon*, p296.

<sup>56</sup> Charles Carrington, *Soldier from the Wars Returning*, (London: Hutchinson, 1965), p265.



*Of glorious war that shatter'd all their pride ...  
Men who went out to battle, grim and glad;  
Children, with eyes that hate you, broken and mad.*<sup>57</sup>

Here the *communitas* is more complex, involving both people within the hospital and the memory of those (comrades in France) far away. A hospital is a classic example of a liminal group in the sense in which Turner uses it and, although Craiglockart was a military hospital, in which military conventions were largely observed, powerful emotions were released there, which inevitably produced sympathetic responses in the poet.

As noted above, although Sassoon continued to write both poetry and prose for the rest of his life, none of his autobiographical writings go beyond the war years and their immediate aftermath, and few later poems have any direct connection with the war. It seems that the sheer extremity of the war-time liminal experiences enabled him to break the bounds of his previous modes of expression and write poetry which spoke to the heart of millions of people. It took poetry and literature based on first-hand experience to communicate to the civilian community the reality of what had happened, since: “... all those who had no immediate trench experience were quite incapable of believing the horrors of the chaos that trench soldiers (writing letters or wounded or on leave) reported. ... such trench soldiers were taken either for cowards, braggarts or madmen. ... H.G.Wells could only write his shockingly realistic war novel *Mr Britling Sees It Through* (1916) in the context of a visit to the Western Front”.<sup>58</sup>

But Sassoon (and Owen, and others) were able through the power of poetry to break through this barrier of understanding. In fact, Sassoon himself was influenced by Wells' novel, reading it at the end of 1916, the year before the circulation of his 'manifesto'. He felt that it “... illuminated the whole background of the war for him and confirmed his worst suspicions”.<sup>59</sup>

The 'aggregation' period of the rites of passage of war for Sassoon was quite different in character from that of many others, at least as far as his writing was concerned. His later writings were reflective, seemingly retreating into his own past,

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<sup>57</sup> *Collected Poems 1908-1956*, p90.

<sup>58</sup> Rolf P. Lessenich, “*Where Death Becomes Absurd and Life Absurder*”: *Literary Views of the Great War 1914-1918*, <http://www.ph-erfurt.de/>, April 1999.

<sup>59</sup> Wilson, *Siegfried Sassoon*, p318.



the years before and during WW1. As Wilson writes: "As though caught in a time warp, Sassoon seemed to have a compulsive need to re-live that particular part of his life in his work".<sup>60</sup> He sought escape from war at the beginning of WW2 by beginning to write, in October 1939, *The Weald of Youth*.<sup>61</sup> Carter speaks of the "sustaining values" of Sassoon, contrasting him in this respect with his friend Robert Graves. He states: "... Sassoon appointed himself custodian to the values of a wrecked civilization, cherishing qualities and abstractions long since, he felt, betrayed ... his life's work was lovingly to recreate that world where first he met and adopted them - *The Old Century*, *The Weald of Youth*, *Siegfried's Journey*. Graves ... found his enduring value in the heroic camaraderie of the front line ... So Graves battled through a modern, uncongenial world where Sassoon ... retreated ...".<sup>62</sup> It seems that, through this 'retreat', Sassoon was expressing a denial of the rite of passage through which he had passed during the war, and perhaps trying to recapture and preserve what had become inevitably lost to him.

In turn, society in the post-WW2 period saw Sassoon only as "an interesting link with the past".<sup>63</sup> While in 1948 T.S.Eliot was given the Order of Merit and Vita Sackville-West was made a Companion of Honour,<sup>64</sup> the most that Sassoon received by way of public recognition was the Queen's Medal for Poetry and two honorary D.Litts. The second of these, from Oxford in 1965, only two years before his death, was perhaps a sign of the reawakening of interest in WW1 in the 1950s and 1960s on which many writers have commented and, if this is the case, a further indication of the way in which Sassoon was seen almost exclusively as a 'war poet'.

**6. Some other literary contributors to the myth: Owen, Barbusse, Remarque and Manning.** Many other writers than Sassoon helped to build up and transmit the LAF myth, either during the war or in later years. In fact, Hynes, asserting that it was during the years 1926-1933 that "... the Myth of the War was defined and fixed in the version that still retains authority", gives a substantial chronology of publications

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<sup>60</sup> Wilson, *Siegfried Sassoon*, p526.

<sup>61</sup> John Stuart Roberts, *Siegfried Sassoon*, (London, Richard Cohen Books, 1999), p276.

<sup>62</sup> D.N.G. Carter, "Two fusiliers - Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon", in Stanzel and Löschnigg (eds.), *Intimate Enemies*, p81.

<sup>63</sup> Roberts, *Siegfried Sassoon*, p294, (quoting Max Beerbohm).

<sup>64</sup> The OM and CH are the highest orders of recognition for achievement in the British system of honours.



which he regards as relevant in this respect.<sup>65</sup> (Actually, as discussed in Chapter 1, Hynes tends to conflate more than one myth into his 'Myth of the War', including in his list of writers Jünger and Hemingway who, in my opinion, have no association with the LAF myth). The period 1926-1933 is approximately that which covers the writers of what I have called the 'Second Wave', and it was undoubtedly during those years that the myths of the war - RTS as well as LAF - came to be widely disseminated and known.

While, out of all the authors who helped to build LAF, I have concentrated on Sassoon, I propose also to refer briefly to the work of the poet Wilfred Owen, and to three novels by other authors, which I see as a group sharing some common characteristics. In fact, using Turner's language, I would describe these novels as 'novels of *communitas*'.

Wilfred Owen (1893-1918), has come to be recognised as a greater poet than Sassoon, and Bergonzi regards him as " ... by common consent, the greatest English poet of the First World War".<sup>66</sup> Although Owen in his days at Craiglockart needed and received encouragement from the more experienced Sassoon, in the end his influence on the emergence and durability of the LAF myth has probably been stronger than that of Sassoon, because of the superior quality of his poetry and also perhaps because of his poignant, early, death a week before the end of the war. He has become an archetype of the 'war poet' of WW1, and it was highly appropriate that his words were those chosen to convey the anti-war sentiments of Benjamin Britten's post-WW2 *War Requiem*. Poems such as "Anthem for Doomed Youth" (the poem used by Britten) and "Dulce et Decorum est", beautifully constructed and carrying a raw emotional power, invariably appear in anthologies of WW1 poetry, may be regularly heard on the radio<sup>67</sup> and have surely entered the canon of great poetry in the English language. Owen's *Collected Poems* were first brought to the attention of the general public through Blunden's edition of 1931 and have been regularly re-published.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Hynes, *A War Imagined*, p424/5. Actually, as discussed in Chapter 1, Hynes tends to conflate more than one myth into his 'Myth of the War', including in his list of writers Jünger and Hemingway who, in my opinion, have no association with the LAF myth.

<sup>66</sup> Bergonzi, *Heroes' Twilight*, p116.

<sup>67</sup> E.g. in programmes such as BBC Radio 4's regular *Poetry Please*.

<sup>68</sup> See Wilfred Owen, *Collected Poems*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1963, reprinted 1977). This edition was edited by C.Day Lewis and contains a memoir by Edmund Blunden from the 1931 edition. A later volume, *The Works of Wilfred Owen*, was published by Wordsworth in 1994.



Owen's point of view is invariably that of sympathy with the lot of the front-line soldier, and all of his poems included in Gardener's anthology<sup>69</sup> are placed in the section titled "O Jesus, make it stop!" (which is itself a quotation from Sassoon's "Attack"). One of the most cogent of Owens' poems, found among his papers after his death, extends the range of his sympathetic feeling to his opponents: he writes of the dreamed encounter with a dead soldier:

*'Strange friend', I said, 'here is no cause to mourn.' 'None',  
said the other, 'save the undone years, The hopelessness ... I am the  
enemy you killed, my friend.*

...  
*Let us sleep now ...*<sup>70</sup>

Due his concentration on suffering, the power and quality of his work and his consequent place in the canon of British poetry, Owen's has perhaps been the greatest influence of all in entrenching in late-20<sup>th</sup> century consciousness the LAF myth of the Western Front. It is worth noting, however, that his place in the canon has not been unquestioned, since W.B. Yeats excluded Owen from the 1936 edition of the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* on the grounds that "passive suffering was not a proper subject for poetry".<sup>71</sup> This may have been a purely aesthetic judgement, but perhaps also a reflection of the fact that, even in the 1930s, the LAF myth encountered some hostility. It is also somewhat ironic since, as the poem quoted above demonstrates, Owen also expressed a *communitas* of the trenches which crossed national lines, thus looking forward to the RR myth. The soldier in "Strange Meeting" sees the enemy he killed as his friend, as one of his own group, and they share a *communitas* of sleep and death. Owen's liminal experience in the trenches and at Craiglockart was every bit as intense as that of Sassoon, and his intense sympathy with his fellow soldiers, together with his great poetic powers, ensured that he made a major contribution to society's 'remembered *communitas*'. He is generally associated, through his articulation of the

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<sup>69</sup> Brian Gardner (ed.), *Up the Line to Death: the War Poets 1914-18*, (London, Methuen and Co., 1964).

<sup>70</sup> "Strange Meeting", Lines 14-16, 40, 44. Owen, *Collected Poems*, p35,36.

<sup>71</sup> See Bergonzi, *Heroes' Twilight*, p119.



“pity of war”,<sup>72</sup> with the LAF myth, but the breadth of his sympathies suggests that it is quite appropriate also to think of him as at least weakly associated with RR.

The three ‘novels of *communitas*’ which I wish to identify are Barbusse’s *Under Fire*, Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Manning’s *Her Privates We*. Like Owen’s poetry, these works have been repeatedly re-printed and re-published, most recently (in English) in 1990, 1996 and 1999 respectively.<sup>73</sup> For this reason, the novels may be thought of as constituting not only part of the First Wave or Second Wave of works inspired by the memory of the Western Front, but as sharing in the Third Wave of books published in the post-WW2 period.

Of the three novels the first to be published was *Under Fire (Le Feu)*, which came out in 1916, an English translation following in 1917. Sassoon’s admiration of this work, of which he possessed both French and English editions,<sup>74</sup> was noted earlier. Stallworthy records that Wilfred Owen also read *Under Fire*, while at Scarborough in 1918 awaiting embarkation for France,<sup>75</sup> and Bergonzi adds of Owen that the book ‘... set him alight as no other war book had done’.<sup>76</sup> Dyer remarks that in this book Barbusse “... established an imaginative paradigm for much subsequent writing about the war”.<sup>77</sup>

Barbusse (1873-1935) began writing *Le Feu* in the trenches and finished it in hospital. In it he sought both to provide a first-hand account of life in the trenches and to denounce war. King places the book in the literary tradition of ‘social realism’,<sup>78</sup> although, as Field adds, “... the book combines a great deal of indisputably authentic and realistic detail with passages of undisguised rhetoric ...”.<sup>79</sup> Dedicated to “The memory of the comrades who fell by my side at Crouÿ and on Hill 119, January, May and September 1915”, it follows the experiences of a group of men

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<sup>72</sup> “My subject is war, and the pity of War. The poetry is in the pity”. From Preface to Wilfred Owen, *Collected Poems*, Edited by C.Day Lewis (London: Chatto and Windus, 1963 (reprinted 1977)), p.31.

<sup>73</sup> Henri Barbusse, *Under Fire*, (London: Everyman, 1990); Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, (London: Vintage, 1996); Frederick Manning, *Her Privates We*, (London: Serpents Tail, 1999).

<sup>74</sup> Wilson, *Siegfried Sassoon*, p568, end note 106.

<sup>75</sup> Jon Stallworthy, *Wilfred Owen*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998 (first published OUP/Chatto and Windus, 1974)), p242.

<sup>76</sup> Bergonzi, *Heroes’ Twilight*, p101. According to Bergonzi, Owen had borrowed his copy from Sassoon, and read it while at Craiglockart, not Scarborough.

<sup>77</sup> Geoff Dyer, *The Missing of the Somme*, (London: Phoenix Press, 2001), p16.

<sup>78</sup> Jonathan King, “Henri Barbusse: *Le Feu* and the crisis of social realism”, in Holger Klein (ed.), *The First World War in Fiction*, (London: Macmillan, 1976).

<sup>79</sup> Field, *Three French Writers and the Great War*, p38.



of differing ages and backgrounds as they went through the war on the Western Front. A brief quotation (in translation) gives an indication of its style:

“A shower of bullets spirts (sic) around me, increasing the number of those who suddenly halt, who collapse slowly, defiant and gesticulating, of those who dive forward solidly with all the body’s burden, of the shouts, deep, furious, and desperate, and even of that hollow and terrible gasp when a man’s life goes bodily forth in a breath. And we who are not yet stricken, we look ahead, we walk and we run, among the frolics of the death that strikes at random into our flesh”<sup>80</sup>

*Le Feu* was awarded the Prix Goncourt in 1916 and was a “tremendous popular success”, selling 250,000 copies by 1918 and being translated into several languages. As well as in England, it was read in Germany and Austria, in spite of an official ban on it in those countries. It was “one of the few works to survive the proliferation of wartime novels” and continues to be cited frequently as part of the literary canon of WW1.<sup>81</sup> Barbusse, like Sassoon, involved himself in left-wing politics after the war but, unlike Sassoon, became first a pacifist and later a communist. His subsequent writing become overtly political and he eventually died in Moscow. While *Le Feu* undoubtedly made a significant contribution to the LAF myth Barbusse himself did not attain and maintain mythological status as an individual in the same way that Sassoon has done.

13 years after publication of *Le Feu*, Erich Maria Remarque (1898-1970), published *All Quiet on the Western Front* (*Im Westen Nichts Neues*),<sup>82</sup> which became “... perhaps the best-known and most representative novel dealing with World War I”,<sup>83</sup> although it has also been seen as “vulgar and meretricious”<sup>84</sup> and “... a piece of sensational fiction ... the nearer the characters came to the front the more did critical readers doubt whether the author had ever been there”.<sup>85</sup> The book was a huge and immediate popular success, with total sales in all languages of 3.5m in the fifteen months following first publication in 1929, and world-wide sales reaching over 8m.

<sup>80</sup> Barbusse, *Under Fire*, (J.M.Dent 1929 edition), p249.

<sup>81</sup> Field, *Three French Writers*, p39.

<sup>82</sup> Erich Maria Remarque, tr. A.W Wheen. *All Quiet on the Western Front* (*Im Westen Nichts Neues*), (1929. Reprint, New York: Fawcett Crest, 1958. Further reprint, London: Vintage, 1996).

<sup>83</sup> Article on Remarque in Encyclopaedia Britannica CD 2000.

<sup>84</sup> Hugh Cecil, “Henry Williamson: Witness of the Great War”, in Brocard Sewell (ed), *Henry Williamson, the Man, the Writings: a Symposium*, Padstow, Cornwall: Tabb House, 1980, p73.

<sup>85</sup> Charles Carrington, *Soldier from the Wars Returning*, p264.



by the end of Remarque's life.<sup>86</sup> It was made into one of the first talking films in the USA in 1930, and this too was a great popular and commercial success. It also caused great controversy in Germany, due to its unvarnished representation of the 'reality' of the lives of front soldiers. Although Jünger had privately published his equally dramatic *Storm of Steel* (to be discussed in the Chapter 6) in 1921, sales of this book were not large and it was initially treated as just another example of the specialised military memoirs of which a great number were produced in Germany during the 1920s.

Although it is for *All Quiet on the Western Front* that Remarque is chiefly remembered, he went on to write a further nine novels in the next 40 years, none of which sold less than 150,000 copies in Germany.<sup>87</sup> Remarque was thus not just a 'one-book' author, and while the timing of *All Quiet on the Western Front* was an important factor in determining the attention it received, the book's qualities of journalistic readability and literary style also worked strongly in its favour.<sup>88</sup>

Although Remarque claimed not to have read *Le Feu*, the two books share a common structure, that of an account of the lives of a group of common soldiers living through the horrors of day-to-day existence on the Western Front. The writer uses the present tense and employs short sentences in a style which sometimes approaches reportage, as in this example:

"The attack does not come, but the bombardment continues. We are gradually benumbed. Hardly a man speaks. We cannot make ourselves understood.

Our trench is almost gone. At many places it is only eighteen inches high, it is broken by holes, and craters, and mountains of earth. A shell lands in front of our post. At once it is dark. We are buried and must dig ourselves out. After an hour the entrance is clear again, and we are calmer because we have had something to do."<sup>89</sup>

Unlike Sassoon, Barbusse or Owen, Remarque does not overtly express emotion, or display sympathy for the suffering of his characters. Instead, he tries simply to tell the story " ... of a generation of men who, even though they may have

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<sup>86</sup> Brian A. Rowley, "Journalism into fiction: Im Western Nichts Neues", in Holger Klein (ed), *The First World War in Fiction*, p101.

<sup>87</sup> Rowley, "Journalism into Fiction", p102.

<sup>88</sup> Rowley, "Journalism into Fiction", p103.

<sup>89</sup> Remarque, *All Quiet* (Fawcett Crest edition), p107.



escaped shells, were destroyed by the war”.<sup>90</sup> In this way he can be seen as contributing mainly to the feeling of ‘loss’ that pervades the LAF myth. Following the enormous commercial success of the book and the subsequent film Remarque, based by then in the USA and later in Switzerland, wrote several other novels on war-related themes, “...but none achieved the critical prestige of his first book”.<sup>91</sup> Although his later life experience was very different from that of Sassoon, Remarque in his period of ‘aggregation’ also did not succeed in escaping fully from the experience of the war. Indeed, the title of Remarque’s most famous book seems to summarise Sassoon’s personal retreat into the past, or denial of the rite of passage, as it asserts that there is ‘nothing new’ on the Western Front.

The case of Manning’s *Her Privates We* is rather more complex. The book is more literary in style than the work of Barbusse or Remarque, using as it does the narrative device of a complex central character (Bourne) who, though a private soldier, is an intellectual and a ‘gentleman’, and whose reactions to events provide a commentary on the continuing action. Each chapter is headed with a quotation from Shakespeare, and the book’s title is itself a vulgar pun on a passage from *Hamlet*.<sup>92</sup>

The book contains language which at the time was regarded as unacceptably strong. It was published in a limited edition in 1929 under the title *The Middle Parts of Fortune*, a variant on the same pun from *Hamlet*. An expurgated version, now entitled *Her Privates We*, followed in 1930, the author presenting himself anonymously as ‘Private 19022’. Though not in the same league commercially as *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the quality of the book “... was recognised widely when it was first offered to the public at large in 1930 ...”<sup>93</sup>, and critics, including Edmund Blunden and William Boyd, who wrote introductions to the 1964 and 1999 editions respectively, unanimously assert its significance in the canon of WW1-inspired literary works.<sup>94</sup> Boyd in his introduction refers to “this unique and extraordinary novel, the finest novel, in my opinion, to have come out of the First World War”, and Hemingway, himself a noted writer on WW1 (from the Italian front) is quoted on the

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<sup>90</sup> From the dedication to *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

<sup>91</sup> Article on Remarque in Britannica CD 2000.

<sup>92</sup> See *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 1980 edition, p432/11.

<sup>93</sup> C.N. Smith, “The Very Plain Song of It: Frederic Manning, *Her Privates We*”, in Holger Klein (ed), *The First World War in Fiction*, p174.

<sup>94</sup> See, as well as Blunden and Boyd, Bergonzi, *Heroes’ Twilight*, pp180-183, Smith, in *The First World War in Fiction*, pp174-182.



book's cover (the 1999 edition) as saying that this is "The finest and noblest book of men in war that I have ever read".

Frederic Manning (1882-1935) was an Australian from a distinguished family, his father having been Mayor of Sydney and his brother becoming Attorney General of New South Wales. He was mainly educated in England, privately, and before the war developed a reputation as a writer of rather precious poetry. Manning volunteered for the British army, and *Her Privates We* was based on his experiences on and near the Somme in 1916, together with a period spent behind the lines. Like the other two novels, it has at its centre the exploits of a group of soldiers, and the relationships among them, and it is told from the point of view of a private soldier, which Manning himself had been. Its greater complexity comes, apart from the 'literary' quality of its writing, from its broadly sympathetic attitude towards the military hierarchy and from the subtlety of its depiction of the responses of individuals to their experiences.

This complexity results in a contribution to the LAF myth which is less straightforward than that of the other two novels. Indeed, the book could even claim some association with the RTS myth, due to its emphasis on the comradeship of Bourne and his companions, and its sympathetic portrayal of the care and conscientiousness with which officers carried out their tasks. Wohl, commenting that for both Barbusse and Remarque war was "... experienced as an irretrievable disaster ...", contrasts this with Manning's view that "Life was a hazard enveloped in mystery, and war quickened the sense of both in men".<sup>95</sup> This remark could have been made by Jünger. However, although it is perhaps capable of association to some extent with either of the two major myths, on balance I link this novel mainly with the 'LAF' myth. At its end Bourne is killed and, sitting in the dugout afterwards his companions were:

"... all bowed over their own thoughts again, listening to the shells bumping heavily outside, as Fritz began to send a lot of stuff over in retaliation for the raid. They sat there silently: each man keeping his own secret."<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Robert Wohl, *The Generation of 1914*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1980), pp217/8, 219.

<sup>96</sup> Manning, *Her Privates We* (1999 edition), p247.



While these three novels differ considerably in style, they share a common theme in that each is the story of a group of front-line soldiers experiencing together the rigours of life on the Western Front. It is perhaps relevant that none of the authors was an officer (unlike Sassoon or Owen) and that each was writing from direct personal experience. The protagonists of the novels build a '*communitas*' together, and it is the recollection of that *communitas*, expressed with literary skill, which provides the basis of the myth with which the novels are principally associated. An important point here is that, while the point of view taken by the books differs, their sheer popularity and literary quality as first-hand accounts of the experiences of a small group have itself helped to establish, if not in every respect to shape, the LAF myth.

7. **Liminality, *communitas*, sacrifice and the diffusion of the myth.** In all the cases discussed above, the myths clearly emerged from the liminality of the experience of the Western Front, recalling the '*communitas*' which developed among front-line soldiers. This is most strikingly invoked in the work of the three novelists, because of the way in which they present their material in the form of stories of small groups of men, told from the point of view of the 'little man'. Comradeship within small groups, necessary to build '*communitas*', was one of the principal values of front-line soldiers.

The poets Sassoon and Owen, through their empathy with the sufferings of their men (both were officers), may also be seen as part of the *communitas* of all those who served on the Western Front. They themselves, unlike those whose experience was mainly of comradeship, saw this *communitas* as a *communitas* of victim hood, the victims being those who, due to the incompetence or lack of feeling of decision-makers, found themselves trapped helplessly in the trenches or, injured, in the hospitals. Eksteins writes that the "victimized crowd of attackers in no man's land ... has become one of the supreme images of the war".<sup>97</sup> The power of Sassoon's and Owen's poetry, together with their identification with the suffering of front-line soldiers, ensured that the myth that emerged from the 'remembered *communitas*' they evoked would be LAF, and not RTS or any other myth.

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<sup>97</sup> Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, p145.



The LAF myth, first expressed in the work of Sassoon and other writers, including those referred to above, developed and became entrenched in four principal ways.

Firstly, through the identification of what Bergonzi calls the ‘collective image’<sup>98</sup> of the ‘war poets’ who, of course, included Sassoon and Owen, as well as Rosenberg, Sorley, Graves and, earlier, Brooke, to mention only a few of the most well-known of the English poets. As Bergonzi states, “Ever since the First World War the idea or image of the war poet has been a focus of mythical thinking and feeling”, adding “There is ... an attractive mythic drama that underlines the study of these poets, which exists almost independently of their poetry. The particular protagonists are Owen, Sassoon and Graves.”<sup>99</sup> Brooke was the first of these poets to become a hero of British culture, but his brand of flag-waving nostalgia for empire, although it lasted for many years, became supplemented and later replaced by the views of those who, unlike Brooke, had actually experienced the Western Front. In modern times the ‘war poets’ have remained a clearly specified group, identified for post-WW2 readers in Garner’s and Giddings’ anthologies of 1964 and 1988 respectively.<sup>100</sup> Interestingly, Giddings, unlike Garner, does not confine himself to poets writing in English, but includes several poems translated from German, French and Italian. The ‘war poets’ can indeed themselves be seen as a ‘liminal’ group, separated from society through the extremity of their experiences and speaking with voices which, although they varied in emphasis over time, on the whole conveyed images of death and suffering. Mythologised as a group, they remain associated principally with the LAF myth.

A second important way in which LAF became clearly identified and distinguished from other myths of the Western Front followed from the debate stimulated by the writers of the Second wave. As Leed states: “The controversy that erupted in Germany after the publication of Remarque’s *Im Westen Nichts Neues*, in 1928, over the nature of the war experience eventually produced a liberal experience of war that emphasized the loss of youth, the death, horror and pollution of war, and also produced a conservative experience which centred upon the experience of

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<sup>98</sup> Bernard Bergonzi, “The First world War: poetry, scholarship and myth”, in Michel Roucoux (ed.), *English Literature of the Great War Revisited*, (Presses de l’UFR Clerc Université Picardie, 1986), p8.

<sup>99</sup> Bergonzi, in *English Literature of the Great War Revisited*, pp8, 216.

<sup>100</sup> Brian Gardner (ed.), *Up the Line to Death*; Robert Giddings, *The War Poets*, (London, Bloomsbury, 1988).



comradeship and community”.<sup>101</sup> Although the ‘liberal experience’ - the LAF myth – had been well described by the end of the war, it did not immediately take general hold. As discussed in Chapter 4, during the 1920s there was a steady flow of books and articles in Britain, France and Germany, ranging from “artless personal narratives”<sup>102</sup> to official regimental histories. Many of these writings, with their memories of comradeship in adversity, may be associated mainly with the RTS myth, itself clearly articulated, as will be demonstrated in Chapter 6, in Jünger’s *Storm of Steel*, which was first published in 1922. However, the controversy over *Im Westen Nichts Neues*, and indeed the whole phenomenon of the ‘war book boom’ of the late-1920s, gave enormous publicity to the difference between the major myths, and hence to each of them severally. In this way the LAF myth became not only well established, but clearly differentiated from the RTS myth.

Thirdly, it was through the immediacy of ‘remembered *communitas*’ that the myths of the Western Front first became established. Indeed one would not have expected writers of the First Wave to produce a ‘retrospective transfiguration of a sacrificial crisis’. This would take time and would come later, as indeed it did, principally through the writers of the Second and Third Waves.

Sassoon, of course, contributed to both the First and Second Waves, and it was the public’s interpretation of the ‘remembered *communitas*’ of his First Wave poetry that provided his initial literary contribution to the LAF myth. His Second Wave writing, nearly all in prose as far as wartime reminiscence was concerned, was much less angry and emotional, and not obviously interpretable as the ‘retrospective transfiguration of a sacrificial crisis’. At some points in his wartime writings Sassoon does associate the suffering of front soldiers with Christian notions of sacrifice, but this is an exception in his work. An example is ‘Via Crucis’:

*‘Mud and rain and wretchedness and blood’.*  
*Why should jolly soldier-boys complain?*  
*God made these before the roofless Flood –*  
*Mud and rain.*

*Mangling crumps and bullets through the brain,*  
*Jesus never guessed them when He died.*  
*Jesus had a purpose for His pain,*

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<sup>101</sup> Leed, *No Man’s Land*, p25.

<sup>102</sup> Bergonzi, *Heroes’ Twilight*, p139.



*Ay, like abject beasts we shed our blood,  
Often asking if we die in vain.  
Gloom conceals us in a soaking sack –  
Mud and rain.*<sup>103</sup>

But this poem was unpublished until it appeared in the *Diaries 1915-1918* in 1983 (thus becoming effectively part of the Third Wave) and so cannot have influenced the way in which his work was generally appreciated in earlier years. Another example is his poem 'The Redeemer', where he sees, in the form of a soldier struggling to carry a load of planks, the figure of Christ with its implications of sacrifice:

...  
*A rocket fizzed and burned with blanching flare,  
And lit the face of what had been a form  
Floundering in mirk. He stood before me there;  
I say that he was Christ; stiff in the glare,  
And leaning forward from His burdening task,  
Both arms supporting it ...  
But to the end, unjudging, he'll endure  
Horror and pain, not discontent to die  
That Lancaster on Lune may stand secure ...*<sup>104</sup>

In Barker's *Regeneration* Owen mentions this poem, and Barker makes Sassoon respond that it is " ... the first poem that even attempts to look at the war realistically". But this is a perception mediated through the work of a Third Wave writer, and is thus best seen as a later interpretation rather than a view widely held at the time.

Those lost on the Western Front came to be seen as a 'lost generation'. They were the husbands, fathers and leaders that Europe would have had but for their untimely death. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Terraine calls the sense of a 'lost generation' the 'Great Casualty Myth', adducing comparative casualty figures in order to support his view that there is " ... something very morbid and unhealthy about this blinkered concentration down the decades on British loss, ... irrespective of British achievement".<sup>105</sup> However, Terraine concedes that this myth has powerful support in

<sup>103</sup> Sassoon (ed. Rupert Hart-Davis), *Siegfried Sassoon Diaries; 1915-1918*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), p102.

<sup>104</sup> *Collected Poems 1908-1956*, pp16,17.

<sup>105</sup> John Terraine, *The Smoke and the Fire: Myths and Anti-myths of War 1861-1945*, (London: Leo Cooper, 1992), pp35-37.



British and American culture, due mainly, he suggests, to the influence of British war literature. An eponymously entitled book published in 1999<sup>106</sup>, which perpetuates this view, contains the letters between Vera Brittain (who herself had published a notable book of memoirs in 1933)<sup>107</sup>, and four men close to her during WW1 - her fiancé Roland Leighton, brother Edward and two close friends, Geoffrey Thurlow and Victor Nicholson, all of whom died on the Western Front. These young men, and all their lost comrades, were seen as having ‘sacrificed’ themselves for their country, or sometimes as having been sacrificed by their elders. The word ‘sacrifice’ frequently appears in the dedications inscribed on British and other war memorials, and British military cemeteries, in France and elsewhere, are centred on the Christian Cross of Sacrifice.<sup>108</sup>

The words of Wilfred Owen’s poem *The Parable of the Old Man and the Young*, quoted in Chapter 3, provide an explicit view of the war as the sacrifice of a generation. While in its early formulation the LAF myth is clearly related to the liminal experience of the Western Front, the reader’s perception of the basis for the myth may shift, on reading this poem, to the Girardian concept of ‘sacrificial crisis’. But although *The Parable of the Old Man and the Young* was written during the war, and published in 1920, it did not become widely known until Edmund Blunden’s edition of the poet’s work came out in 1931, therefore forming part of the Second Wave of writing, rather than the First Wave. In the early post-war years ‘anger and futility’ predominated, but as time went by the sense of ‘loss’ began to gain relative weight, and in Bergonzi’s opinion “... Owen came to replace Rupert Brooke as a culture-hero and symbolic victim of the war”.<sup>109</sup>

In the Girardian scheme, a scapegoat is sacrificed in order that greater violence in the community may be avoided. It is not suggested here that national decision-makers in the European powers anticipated, as the outbreak of war appeared increasingly inevitable in the years before 1914, that it would be necessary to sacrifice a generation in order to save the existing social and political order. But to many this was the perceived objective (pace Terraine) of their actions (with the additional irony that the existing social order was not in fact preserved), and the realisation that this

<sup>106</sup> Alan Bishop and Mark Bostridge (eds.), *Letters from a Lost Generation*, (London: Abacus, 1999).

<sup>107</sup> Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, (1933. London: Virago, 1978, (reprinted 1984)).

<sup>108</sup> Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, pp82-84. Mosse notes, however, that the “... symbolism ... was somewhat vague. It could signify sacrifice in war or simply the hope of resurrection” (p83).

<sup>109</sup> Bergonzi, *Heroes’ Twilight*, p117.



sacrifice had been made grew as the populations of Western Europe began to appreciate the extent of their loss. Winter cogently documents how, after the war's end, the ways in which it was commemorated changed from the overtly patriotic, such as production of the German 'iron-nail' crosses, to various modes of recording a sense of loss and bereavement.<sup>110</sup> The erection of public war memorials, especially in Britain and France, permitted people to recognise and to mourn the extent of their loss. One of the most powerful of such monuments, cited by Winter,<sup>111</sup> and of German provenance, is the pair of statues - "Die Eltern" - by Käthe Kollwitz, in the Roggevelde German war cemetery at Vladslo, near Dixmuide, Belgium. The grieving couple represented by the statues - the Kollwitz' eldest son had in fact been killed in the war and is buried in the Roggevelde cemetery - stand in attitudes of both mourning and apology. The mourning is for the loss, the apology for the betrayal of their children in sacrificing them in a war which was, in the end and according to this myth, an exercise in futility.

While Terraine may well be correct in his statistical analysis of military losses, the fact is indisputable that the sense of loss, and the feeling that a generation had been sacrificed, was widespread in Western Europe in the post-war years and, indeed, persists to the present day. The work of Sassoon and the other writers discussed here, since it arose from and described experiences on the Western Front in which they were personally involved, did not specifically articulate this general sense of loss and sacrifice (Owen's visionary poem "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young", cited above, is an exception), but the myth to which it gave rise was transmuted, as the sense of loss made itself felt, into the larger LAF myth which I have identified. The LAF myth, in other words, first appeared in First Wave as the 'remembered *communitas*' of those who served on the Western Front, only later being perceived as the 'retrospective transfiguration' of the huge sacrificial losses which were made there.

Finally, in tracing the ways in which the LAF myth has become so firmly established, one may note that it was the basis of the writings of many of the Third Wave writers discussed in Chapter 7, and they, in turn, established and elaborated it further. Of these writings, two are especially worthy of note in this context.

The 1963 stage production *Oh What a Lovely War*, followed by the film in 1969, set the tone for many of the later treatments of the Western Front. Its narrative

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<sup>110</sup> See Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, Chapter 4: "War Memorials and the Mourning Process"

<sup>111</sup> Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, pp.108-113.



was based on some contemporary texts which themselves contributed to, and built upon, the LAF myth<sup>112</sup> and, according to Paget, it took the view that “... the War as a whole was visited upon a compliant lower class by an upper class which claimed a superiority it could not justify.”<sup>113</sup> Its popularity (it is regularly revived) means that, for “... the present younger generation ... (its) representation of the Great War is now a received, rather than a discovered, truth ...”.<sup>114</sup> The LAF myth has in fact become the orthodox view of the Western Front, reaffirmed in many television documentaries and entertainments (although countered in some battlefield tours and in museum displays, such as those at the excellent WW1 museums at Ypres and Peronne and in the British Imperial War Museum, which tend to take a more straightforwardly factual approach in their presentations).

Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy, in which Sassoon is a major character in the first two novels (he does not appear in the third novel, *The Ghost Road*) plays an interesting part in the life of the LAF myth. On the one hand, through its sympathetic approach to all the characters whose lives are in various ways damaged by the war, it implicitly builds upon and perpetuates the myth - explicitly, too, as in a moving scene near the end of *The Ghost Road* where Hallett, a hopeless case in hospital, is able to speak only the garbled word “Shotvarfet”, meaning “It's not worth it”. Also, it further mythologises Sassoon by building up and developing his character and actions. On the other hand, it is a complex work with much to say about other subjects and other myths. This thinking is further developed in Chapter 7.

**8. Conclusion: Sassoon and the LAF myth.** Finally, returning to Sassoon, I suggest that four principal factors ensured that his writings would be seen as providing a significant contribution to the mythology of the Western Front, and that the myth with which he would be associated would be LAF.

The first factor was the power and quality of his war-time poetry, which he was never able to reproduce later in his life, or to equal in his prose writings. In fact, few of the canonical writers and poets of the Western Front who survived it were able

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<sup>112</sup> Barbara Tuchman's *August 1914*, Alan Clark's *The Donkeys* and Leon Wolff's *In Flanders Fields* (See Derek Paget, “Remembrance Play: *Oh What a Lovely War and History*”; in Tony Howard and John Stokes, *Acts of War: the Representation of Military Conflict on the British Stage and Television since 1945*, (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996), pp88-89).

<sup>113</sup> Paget, “Remembrance Play”, p89.

<sup>114</sup> Paget, “Remembrance Play”, p86.



to continue their artistic development much beyond that which they achieved during and soon after the war. The war provoked them to extremes of creativity which left them, as Remarque once observed “burnt out”.<sup>115</sup> As one of this liminal group, Sassoon’s poetry played a major role in providing the ‘remembered *communitas*’ which generates myth.

Second came the reinforcement given to Sassoon’s earlier work by the later publication of the three volumes comprising *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston* which, apart from their factual content, were well written and have been studied by generations of English schoolchildren. For example, Ferguson recounts how his interest in WW1 was stimulated by, among other things, reading *Memoirs of a Fox-hunting Man* as a set text at school.<sup>116</sup>

Again, the poet himself became a mythologised figure, beginning perhaps with his American tour shortly after the war as ‘England’s young soldier-poet’. In this public role his image became conflated with those of his fellow-soldier-poets - the ‘war poets’ - into one icon representing for many people the articulate soldier speaking for all those who had fought and suffered in the trenches.

And fourthly, all myths fulfil some social need, typically the need for explanation; justification or validation; description; or healing, renewal and inspiration. Winter’s documentation of the way in which European populations mourned the losses of the Western Front was mentioned above: mourning easily turns to anger, and the LAF myth was a way of expressing such anger, while ‘explaining’ the way in which the war had proceeded. (A related ‘angry’ myth later arose in Germany as a founding myth of National Socialism). Sassoon’s war poetry, (and famously his behaviour in throwing his MC into the Mersey), was in large part angry in tone and feeling, thus qualifying it for incorporation into the myth. It is worth recalling that he also expressed anger after the war at the way in which, to his mind, memorials in France sanitised or glorified the war.<sup>117</sup> For instance, in the poem “On Passing the New Menin Gate”, he included the words: “ ... *Here was the world’s*

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<sup>115</sup> Quoted in Hynes, *A War Imagined*, p464.

<sup>116</sup> Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, pxxiii.

<sup>117</sup> This point is made in David W. Lloyd, *Battlefield Tourism: Pilgrimage and the Commemoration of the Great War in Britain, Australia and Canada, 1919-1939*, (Oxford: Berg, 1998). Lloyd points out that Vera Brittain expressed the same unhappiness at this kind of memorialisation.



worst wound. And here with pride/'Their name liveth for ever,' the Gateway claims./Was ever an immolation so belied/As these intolerably nameless names?"<sup>118</sup>

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, I chose to study Sassoon principally because it seemed possible that his later work would shed further light on his war-time experience and on his feelings about it. As I have shown, this did not turn out as I had anticipated, in the sense that the rest of his life was in some ways a retreat from the post-war world. It is true that the prose of the *Sherston* series, published between 1928 and 1936, includes detailed accounts of his wartime experiences, and passages in other later prose works look back at his earlier experiences and feelings. For example, in *The Weald of Youth*, he surveys himself in the late summer of 1914, commenting that:

"... I find it difficult to imagine and share his emptiness and immaturity of mind, so clueless, so inconsequent, and so unforeseeing ... No one could have been more unaware that he was in for one of the most unrestful epochs in human history, and that the next twenty years would be a cemetery for the civilized delusions of the nineteenth century"<sup>119</sup>

- a passage that could be seen as part of his own Girardian 'retrospective transfiguration of the sacrificial crisis'. However, the real power of Sassoon's response to his experience of the Western Front came with the poetry written during or very shortly after the war.

During the rest of his life Sassoon himself remained (as he still remains) a mythologised figure, as the 'angry young poet' of WW1. The LAF myth of which he was a major disseminator was of course propagated in part through the continued popularity of his writings, most of which are still in print. His particular contribution was to provide a powerful, angry, first-hand witness to what he regarded as the waste of the war, and the incompetence with which he felt it was being conducted. Further development of the content of the myth - i.e. a fuller telling of the story - depended on others, especially those writers who, after WW2, were inspired to visit or revisit the earlier war.

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<sup>118</sup> *Collected Poems*, p188.

<sup>119</sup> *The Weald of Youth*, pp273, 274.



**Chapter 6**  
**Literature and myth II: Ernst Jünger and the myth of**  
**‘Renewal through Sacrifice’ (RTS).**

**Contents**

1. *Introduction*
2. *Biography*
3. *Jünger’s WW1-related writings: In Stahlgewittern (Storm of Steel) and successive works*
4. *Some other relevant writings by Jünger*
5. *Some other literary contributors to the RTS myth*
6. *The nature of Jünger’s contribution to the RTS myth*
7. *The diffusion of the myth.*
8. *Conclusion: Jünger and the RTS myth.*

**1. Introduction.** In this chapter I focus on the myth of ‘Renewal through Sacrifice’ (‘RTS’) which, among its various literary manifestations, is I believe most distinctly revealed in the writings of Ernst Jünger (1895-1998). I review aspects of the life and work of Jünger and make some comparisons with Sassoon, whose role in the development of the ‘Loss, Anger and Futility’ (‘LAF’) myth was discussed in Chapter 5.

The RTS myth, as will be discussed later in the chapter, fulfilled a need for the defeated German nation, and provided a foundation (assisted by Jünger’s writings) for the later pathological mythology of the Nazi movement. However, in the general form articulated in Chapter 1, it would probably attract sympathy from many of those who fought on both sides in the war, and from their present-day successors in the armed services and veterans’ organisations, who find LAF unattractive, even repulsive, and cannot accept that the suffering and sacrifice of the Western Front was in any way ‘futile’

I selected Jünger for study partly because, like Sassoon, he survived the war and continued to write for the rest of his life. It seemed possible that study of Jünger’s later writings would give further insight into the nature of his response to his WW1 experiences. While this supposition turned out to have some validity in Sassoon’s case, it had rather less for Jünger, who continued to change and develop in often surprising ways throughout his extremely long life.

There is a large body of scholarship on Jünger’s life and writings, which quickly leads the neophyte into deep water. References to a small sample of this



material have been assembled in the accompanying bibliography: in particular, a good survey of the available scholarship is given in the Introduction to Neaman's book.<sup>1</sup> Fully to comprehend the significance of Jünger's thought, it seems, one would need to be able to place it within the context of German and broader European culture in, at the least, the Wilhelmine, Weimar Republic, Third Reich and post-WW2 periods.<sup>2</sup> My present objective, however, is confined to an attempt to draw, from a study of Jünger's writings (in their English translations) and from commentators on them, some conclusions about the nature of his experiences in WW1, and his attitudes and reactions to these. Then, using the concepts of 'remembered *communitas*' and 'retrospective transfiguration of the sacrificial crisis', I consider the way in which Jünger's writings have contributed to the RTS myth of the Western Front.

**2. Biography.** Sassoon lived a life in which, apart from the adventure and turmoil of his WW1 years, he played for the most part the limited role of a country gentleman, becoming almost a recluse in his later years. His foray into political activism after the war did not last very long. By contrast, Jünger's long life was very rich, full of changes of pace, of scene, and of fields of interest.<sup>3</sup> By the time of his death at the great age of 102 Jünger could be said to have become established, perhaps mythologised, as 'The great German writer', the master stylist who was paraded by Chancellor Helmut Kohl of Germany and President François Mitterand of France as "a totem of the German-French alliance".<sup>4</sup> On Jünger's 100th birthday in 1995 Chancellor Kohl and Roman Herzog, his President, travelled through a snowstorm to bring him their best wishes.<sup>5</sup> Mitterand gave a 100<sup>th</sup> "Birthday address for Ernst Jünger" describing him as " ... a man who is free ... a Roman, haughty and simple, unalterable ... he and peace have long belonged together".<sup>6</sup>

Like Sassoon, Ernst Jünger was born into comfortable upper-middle-class circumstances in the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In his early years he became

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<sup>1</sup> Elliot Yale Neaman, *A Dubious Past: Ernst Jünger and the Politics of Literature after Nazism*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1999), pp 1-21.

<sup>2</sup> Neaman's book provides this context, for the post-WW2 period in Germany.

<sup>3</sup> According to Neaman he was only the second major European writer so far to have passed the age of 100, the other being Bernard de Fontenelle (1656-1757). (Neaman, *Jünger*, P1).

<sup>4</sup> Obituary of Ernst Jünger, *Daily Telegraph* (London), February 21 1998.

<sup>5</sup> *Daily Telegraph* obituary.

<sup>6</sup> François Mitterand, *Birthday Address for Ernst Jünger, 29 March 1995*. Tr. Liz Heron for the Curfew Press.



dissatisfied with the institutionalised education provided by the various Gymnasien he attended. As a means of escape he took to day-dreaming and reading literature, and participated in the activities of the Wandervogel branch of the youth movement. Linder observes that “... the ramblings of the pre-war Wandervogel ... reinforced the paradigm of a collective journey devoted to ideas of national community”.<sup>7</sup> This ‘paradigm’ of German community and collective journeying clearly colours Jünger’s WW1 writings, as I hope later to demonstrate.

In 1913, in a youthful protest, Jünger left home and joined the French Foreign Legion. Brought back by his father, the outbreak of war in 1914 provided him with an even better opportunity to make a break with the bourgeois life that he found so stifling. Jünger enlisted in the army as soon as possible and quickly established himself as an outstanding infantry officer. Apart from periods of training, hospitalisation and leave, he spent the whole war on the Western Front, principally on fronts facing the British in Northern France and Flanders (including taking part in the Battle of the Somme), but also on assignment for a period facing the French in Lorraine, near Metz. His reputation grew largely from his involvement in the *Stoßtruppen*, the élite troops whose rôle was, through tactical innovation, to attempt to break the deadlock of ‘positional’ (i.e. trench) warfare. At the end of the war Jünger had accumulated 14 wounds, and had been awarded the Iron Cross First Class and the Pour le Mérite, Germany’s highest military honour.

After the war he remained in the army until 1923 and then, after publishing books on his wartime experiences, went to study biology at the universities of Leipzig and Naples, later in his life becoming a noted entomologist and collector. In a survey of Jünger’s career, Steiner refers to these different aspects of his life and work, and suggests that the “two mainsprings of Jünger’s art” are language, “as the locus of ultimate reality and survival” and the “study of the biological sciences”.<sup>8</sup>

In the mid-1920s Jünger began a period of political activism, editing and contributing to a number of right-wing journals. (Pursuing the comparison with Sassoon, one notes that during this period Sassoon was occupying himself with left-wing activism and journalism). Jünger’s ideas proved attractive to the Nazis, and Goebbels made an unsuccessful attempt in 1931 to recruit him into the ranks of the

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<sup>7</sup> Ann P. Linder, *Princes of the Trenches*, (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1996), p131.

<sup>8</sup> George Steiner, in his introduction to the 1970 English edition of Jünger’s *On the Marble Cliffs*, (London: Penguin Books), p8.



Nazi hierarchy. But Jünger was too fastidious to associate himself with a movement of such vulgarity, and “ ... from a brief period of enthusiasm for the Nazis in 1923, Jünger's attitude to Hitler and Goebbels rapidly shifted from one of ambivalence to outright hostility ... ”.<sup>9</sup>

During the 1930s Jünger devoted himself to his studies of entomology, travelling widely in search of beetles and other insects. Nevin and others term this period his ‘internal emigration’, in which he “withdrew to his garden”, away from the distasteful political atmosphere of Nazi Germany.<sup>10</sup> When WW2 began, he continued to maintain his distance from the Nazis, but was now once again a member of the German army's officer corps. He took part in the conquest of France, won another Iron Cross for rescuing a wounded man under fire, and ended as a captain in the Wehrmacht on the staff of the German headquarters in occupied Paris. In Paris, with modest military responsibilities to discharge, Jünger lived in comfort in grand hotels, meeting and fraternising with artists and luxuriating in the cultural heritage of the city. Coker describes how, although Jünger did not directly experience or take part in the worst excesses of WW2, “He certainly knew of it ... To his eternal discredit, he preferred to look the other way ... ”.<sup>11</sup> In 1944, he was dismissed from the army due to his closeness to some of those who took an active part in the plot to assassinate Hitler, and returned to Germany. Later evidence shows that this episode was a narrow escape for him.<sup>12</sup> His son Ernst, more directly involved in anti-Nazi activities, was sent by a military tribunal to serve in a suicide squad in Italy, where he was killed near Carrara in November 1944. It seems very likely that he was in fact executed by the SS.<sup>13</sup>

After the war, although he refused to submit to the process of ‘denazification’ and his books were banned by the Allied authorities, Jünger continued to travel and write. Always interested in new experiences, he even experimented with drugs, going

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<sup>9</sup> John King, *Writing and Rewriting the First World War: Ernst Jünger and the Crisis of the Conservative Imagination, 1914-25*, (thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Oxford University, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Nevin, *Ernst Jünger and Germany: into the Abyss 1914-1945*, (London: Constable, 1997), p141ff.

<sup>11</sup> Coker, *War and the Twentieth Century*, p188.

<sup>12</sup> “ ... in 1992, there was extraordinary confirmation of Jünger's anti-Nazi stance with the discovery of a top secret document proving that his fate was in the balance just before the Third Reich's capitulation ... ” From obituary of Ernst Jünger, *The Independent* (London), February 18, 1998.

<sup>13</sup> Neaman, *Jünger*, p47.



as far as taking LSD with Albert Hofmann, the Swiss scientist generally credited with its invention.<sup>14</sup>

Jünger travelled widely throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In 1979, he was awarded the Peace Medal of the city of Verdun, and in 1982 he received the Goethe Prize of the City of Frankfurt, a recognition of his high status in German literary culture which proved highly controversial in view of his perceived earlier Nazi connections. In 1984, he made a further pilgrimage to Verdun, together with Chancellor Helmut Kohl and President Francois Mitterrand, to take part in Franco-German reconciliation celebrations and to pay homage to the victims of two world wars. In his speech on this occasion he recalled how it was in Verdun that he had signed up in the French Foreign Legion, and how he had approached the town, but without reaching the front, in 1915. He concluded: “... the time of enmity between our two peoples, an enmity to which we were brought up, is over. I have never accepted it ... Mankind learns little from history, otherwise we would have been spared the Second World War and much else.”<sup>15</sup>

Ernst Jünger was a man of extraordinary courage, vitality, energy and range of interests, which lasted until his very last years. He was a scientist and an aesthete. Loose sees him as ‘homo ludens’, a man for whom life was a game and risk an element of it to be accepted, perhaps purposefully sought out, and faced up to. He was full of contradictions - both man of action and contemplative, radical nationalist and cosmopolitan, revolutionary and conservative.<sup>16</sup> As late as the year of his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday he began to write an erotic thriller (having also written science fiction, some of which is still in print), and he reminisced on television about his hallucinogenic experiences.<sup>17</sup> He was also a nationalist, never really accepting the post-war Federal Republic, and believing to the end that “For us the reality is the German Reich.”<sup>18</sup> In the post-WW2 years he was vilified by communists and other left-wingers in view of his supposed approval of Nazism. Though seen by political leaders such as Chancellor Kohl and President Mitterand as a key figure in the post-war reconciliation

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<sup>14</sup> *Daily Telegraph* obituary.

<sup>15</sup> Ernst Jünger, “Ansprache zu Verdun, am 24 Juni 1979”, from *Sämtliche Werke, Zweite Abteilung, Band 7, Essays 1*, (Klett-Cotta, 1980). Translated by Christine Wales.

<sup>16</sup> Gerhard Loose, *Ernst Jünger*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1974), Preface.

<sup>17</sup> *Daily Telegraph* obituary.

<sup>18</sup> *Daily Telegraph* obituary.



of France and Germany, and hence as a significant contributor to peace in Europe, his view of society was autocratic, technocratic and German-centred.<sup>19</sup>

**3. Jünger's WW1-related writings: *In Stahlgewittern (Storm of Steel)* and successive works.** Although Jünger wrote prolifically throughout his adult life, his work does not fall neatly into the Wave 1/2/3 pattern identified in Chapter 1; nor, unlike the greatest of the First Wave writers in English, was he a poet. He was a major participant in the First Wave, and indeed Nevin asserts that, in spite of the wider fame he enjoyed in his later life, he was always best known for his WW1 writings.<sup>20</sup> These writings began with his first and perhaps still most widely-read book *Storm of Steel*, a Western Front diary written in novelistic style, published in 1920 and followed, up until 1925, by a series of other reflections on his wartime experiences.<sup>21</sup> The English translation of *Storm of Steel*, published in 1929,<sup>22</sup> certainly formed part of the Second Wave as far as English-speaking readers were concerned. But Jünger himself had by this time moved on, working on his entomology and, as far as politics and war were concerned, looking forward rather than back.

I propose to focus on Jünger's *Storm of Steel* and some related writings, using the English texts. These are the only works of Jünger which arise directly from his WW1 experience. But I will also briefly discuss two later works, which appear to link Jünger's beliefs based on his war experience with his later views on European reconciliation and integration. These are *Auf den Marmorklippen (On the Marble*

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<sup>19</sup> This brief sketch was assembled with biographical information from the following sources: obituaries (cited) in the *Daily Telegraph* and *The Independent*; also in *The Guardian* (London), (February 18 1998); *The Times* (London), (February 19 1998); *The Economist*, (February 28 1998); Bruce Chatwin, "Ernst Jünger, an aesthete at war", in *What am I Doing Here*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1989); Gerhard Loose, *Jünger*; Thomas Nevin, *Jünger: Robert Wohl, The generation of 1914*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1980); Web pages on Jünger maintained by John King, at [www.sjc.ox.ac.uk/users/king/ju](http://www.sjc.ox.ac.uk/users/king/ju) (1999),

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Nevin, *Jünger*, p39.

<sup>21</sup> Gerhard Loose, in his *Jünger*, describes these works in a Chronology as "1922, *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis* (essay on the psychology of combat) ... 1923, *Sturm* (short novel about an attack on the Western Front); 1924, *Feuer und Blut* (narrative about the offensive on the Somme river in March 1917) ... 1925, *Das Waldchen 125* (narrative on positional warfare)".

<sup>22</sup> Ernst Jünger, tr. Basil Creighton, *The Storm of Steel: from the Diary of a German Storm-trooper Officer on the Western Front*, (London: Chatto and Windus 1929).



*Cliffs*), his 'anti-Nazi' allegory of 1939 and *Der Friede* (*The Peace*), an essay begun in 1941 and circulated in 1944 soon after the death in Italy of his son Ernst.<sup>23</sup>

Eksteins opines that the literature of WW1 is " ... lacking in balance. It concentrates for the most part on the negative repercussions of the war, not on the positive instincts that fired it for over four years"<sup>24</sup> By no means can this be said of *Storm of Steel*, which is an account, presented mainly in the chronological sequence of a diary but written in narrative style, of Jünger's experiences while serving in the German army between 1914 and the end of the war in 1918. Jünger himself saw *Storm of Steel* as a "monumental history" which he based on his *Kriegstagebuch* (War Diary).<sup>25</sup> Most of the chapter headings in *Storm of Steel* plot his movements around the Western Front - "From Bazancourt to Hattonchatel", "At St. Pierre Vaast", "In the village of Fresnoy" etc. - and these chapters are interspersed with accounts of events, such as "The Somme retreat", "The battle of Cambrai" and "The great offensive", the latter referring to the major German offensives of March 1918. The book has been described as one of the most "honest accounts of the soldier's life" which came out of WW1.<sup>26</sup>

Jünger's style of writing is spare, with precise, rather impersonal observation and no superfluous words. Here is a typical example, written at the time of the Somme retreat in 1917:

" ... I saw an Englishman walking along over the top behind the third line of the enemy trenches. His khaki uniform showed up distinctly on the horizon. I seized the nearest rifle, sighted it at 600, got the man in the tip of the foresight, and then, aiming a bit in front of his head, I pulled the trigger. He went three steps, and then fell on his back as though his legs had been knocked from under him. After a few movements of his arms he rolled into a shell-hole, where, with the glass, we could see his brown sleeves showing up for a long while after."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ernst Jünger, tr. Stuart Hood, *On the Marble Cliffs* (*Auf den Marmorklippen*). (1947; reprint, London: Penguin Books, 1970); Ernst Jünger tr. Stuart Hood, with a preface by Louis Clair, *The Peace* (*Der Friede*), (Hinsdale, Illinois: Henry Regnery, 1948).

<sup>24</sup> Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, p184.

<sup>25</sup> The process of writing the book is described and analysed in John King, *Writing and Rewriting the First World War: Ernst Jünger and the Crisis of the Conservative Imagination, 1914-25*, (Oxford, Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Oxford University, 1999).

<sup>26</sup> Charles Carrington, *Soldier from the Wars Returning*, (London: Hutchinson, 1965), p265.

<sup>27</sup> *Storm of Steel*, p123.



This is the detached writing of a scientist (which of course Jünger later became), perhaps of an aesthete, characterised by accurate observation without any intrusion of emotion. The style is quite different from that of Remarque, who had formerly worked as a journalist, thereby acquiring the ability to evoke in the reader feelings of identification with the experiences of his characters. Jünger “...offered a surgically precise view of battle. He looked at death on the battlefield with the same detachment that he gave to his collection of beetles”.<sup>28</sup> Linder writes of Jünger’s “transformation of trench warfare into aesthetic experience”<sup>29</sup>, Burleigh sees him as a “warrior-writer” who “aestheticised carnage”<sup>30</sup>, Chatwin refers to his “acute powers of observation with an anaesthetised sensibility”<sup>31</sup> and many other commentators remark on his apparent lack of human feeling. A strange and cruel anecdote retailed in *Storm of Steel* with every appearance of enjoyment reinforces this impression.<sup>32</sup>

But underlying the coldness lay deeply held values of duty, honour, bravery and community. Asking himself why anyone should submit to the stress and humiliation of life in the trenches, Jünger observed:

“There are no superior officers to see you ... Yet some one watches you. Unknown perhaps to yourself, there is some one within you who keeps you to your post by the power of two mighty spells: Duty and Honour. You know that this is your place in the battle, and that a whole people relies on you to do your job. You feel, ‘If I leave my post, I am a coward in my own eyes ...’”<sup>33</sup>

Jünger sees his fellow combatants as “princes of the trenches”, describing “their hard, set faces, brave to madness, tough and agile to leap forward or back, with keen bloodthirsty nerves ... Trench warfare is the bloodiest, wildest, and most brutal form of warfare, yet it too has had its men, men whom the call of the hour has raised up, unknown foolhardy fighters”.<sup>34</sup> Elsewhere he adds: “Time only strengthens my conviction that it was a good and strenuous life, and that the war, for all its

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<sup>28</sup> Obituary in *The Economist*.

<sup>29</sup> Linder, *Princes of the Trenches*, p140.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich: a New History*, (London, Pan Books, 2001), p36.

<sup>31</sup> Bruce Chatwin, “Ernst Jünger, an aesthete at war”, p300.

<sup>32</sup> “A wicked fellow once sent to all the hunchbacks of the district requesting them to call on a certain solicitor with reference to an important inheritance. At the appointed hour he and some of his friends watched from the window of the opposite house and enjoyed the delightful comedy - seventeen outraged and weeping hobgoblins storming the office of the unfortunate lawyer.” *Storm of Steel*, p162.

<sup>33</sup> *Storm of Steel*, p180.

<sup>34</sup> *Storm of Steel*, p235: Linder takes the evocative phrase “Princes of the trenches” as the title for her book on the narration of the German experience of WW1.



destructiveness, was an incomparable schooling of the heart.”<sup>35</sup> In the broader context, “... every man felt his personality fall away in the face of a crisis in which he had his part to play and by which history would be made. No one who has lived through moments like these can doubt that the course of nations in the last resort rises and falls with the destiny of war”.<sup>36</sup> This sense of ‘personality falling away’ is surely an expression of the movement into liminality which soldiers experience.

Two further short works published in the 1920s shed some further light on Jünger’s experiences on the Western Front.

*Das Wäldchen 125*, which Loose describes as “a narrative on positional warfare”<sup>37</sup> appeared in Germany in 1925 and was published in an English version as *Copse 125* in 1930.<sup>38</sup> The book contains excellent stories of individual actions, plus reflections (e.g., on man as hunter) and military speculations (e.g. on war as fought by machines). *Storm of Steel* had been purely an account of direct experience and contained very little discussion of the meaning of the war for those who fought in it. By contrast, Jünger’s purpose in *Copse 125* was, by taking one single episode from his experiences, to present to the reader “... over and beyond the narrative of external events the sum of those forces and influences that clothed the men of our day as they faced each other in battle”.<sup>39</sup> While the German forces had failed in military terms to defeat their enemies, he saw in German soldiers a spiritual force which would ultimately prevail in the crude *Materialschlacht*. He saw a bright future, and “... that future lies, for Jünger, as for so many others, in the strength of the German spirit and the German willingness to serve an ideal”.<sup>40</sup> Jünger’s own words say this vividly (Nevin comments that “... *Copse 125* has a peculiar fervor”)<sup>41</sup> and help to explain the attraction his thinking later held for the National Socialists: “Even if we are defeated, the conviction that no world can thrive in which we have not the first place will never be eradicated from the real core of our people. ... Our hour will come; and then at last

<sup>35</sup> From the author’s preface to the 1929 English edition, p xv.

<sup>36</sup> *Storm of Steel*, p254.

<sup>37</sup> Loose, *Jünger*. Chronology (page has no number).

<sup>38</sup> Ernst Jünger, tr. Basil Creighton, *Copse 125*, (London, Chatto and Windus, 1930). A translator’s note in the English version (p.xi) indicates that *Copse 125* was known to the English as *Rossignol Wood*, and was located south of Arras and north of the River Ancre, 1-2 miles east of Hébuterne.

<sup>39</sup> *Copse 125*, px.

<sup>40</sup> Linder, *Princes of the Trenches*, p107.

<sup>41</sup> Nevin, *Jünger*, p64.



we shall see that the loss of this war brought us to our full height. Hard timber is of slow growth.”<sup>42</sup>

Three years earlier, in 1922, profiting from a period of greater free time in the army from the end of the war until his discharge in 1923, Jünger had written a book-length essay, *Battle as Inner Experience*,<sup>43</sup> described by Nevin as “... an indispensable ancilla to his war memoirs”.<sup>44</sup> According to Nevin, Jünger argues in this essay that “... the war was a massive compensation for all that European society had covered over or held down: the impulsion of profoundly instinctive drives. Whatever the achievements of civilization, the animal still dwells within the human ...”.<sup>45</sup> Jünger seems here to be searching for some kind of meaning in all the horror he had experienced: as King puts it:

“It is a book which bears all the trauma of the First World War in a polyphony of styles, ideologies and voices, a fragmented, tortured attempt to make sense in a world where the experience of the radical modernity of the War has dislocated all previous meta-historical systems from that experience. It is a book full of unresolved tensions, whose very form of reflective essays, fragments of narrative, ecstatic epiphany and confessions of utter despair, undermines all claims to unitary meaning. Of Jünger's texts it is the most incoherent, the most decentred and the most honest.”<sup>46</sup>

As already stated, Jünger went on during the 1920s to write for military and right-wing journals. He also began to develop, and promulgate through his writings, views on political organisation and governance.<sup>47</sup> Although it is not my intention to review these here, it is apparently possible to see in these writings continuing echoes of the Western Front - Huyssen notes: “... the lack of *Gestaltwandel* in Jünger's earlier work, the obsessive return to the same experiential material from world War 1 which is rewritten time and again, seamlessly coded and frozen in rhetorical armor ...”.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> *Copse* 125, p184.

<sup>43</sup> “Der Krieg als inneres Erlebnis”, *Werke*, Stuttgart, Klett, 1960-75; 7:13. Partially available in English, in Martin Chalmers, tr., “Pacifism”, a chapter from *Battle as Inner Experience*. Originally published 1922, this text taken from revision of 1980. From forthcoming (as at September 2001) anthology of writings by Jünger, edited Richard Brem, to be published by The Penkiln Burn.

<sup>44</sup> Nevin, *Jünger*, p64.

<sup>45</sup> Nevin, *Jünger*, p64-5.

<sup>46</sup> King, *Thesis on Jünger*, p196.

<sup>47</sup> E.g. in *Totale Mobilmachung* (1930) and *Der Arbeiter* (1932).

<sup>48</sup> Andreas Huyssen, “Fortifying the heart - totally: Ernst Jünger's armored texts”, *New German Critique*, 59 (1993), p4.



**4. Some other relevant writings by Jünger.** Two other works from Jünger's large output merit a brief mention in this context. Although they are not directly related to, and do not deal with, his experiences on the Western Front, they have implications for the evolution of the myths of the Western Front later in the twentieth century, towards the myth of 'Reconciliation and Regeneration' ('RR').

*Auf den Marmorklippen (On the Marble Cliffs)*. Jünger began drafting *Auf den Marmorklippen* in February 1939, and it was published in September, the month war was declared. It has been called the "only anti-Nazi novel published during the Third Reich"<sup>49</sup> and a considerable stir was caused in England when the book was published by John Lehmann just after WW2. It was later published in England as a Penguin Classic, the only one of Jünger's works to be so treated. In Germany, 35,000 copies had been sold before printing was stopped by the authorities in the spring of 1940, and by 1959, after its post-war reissue, sales exceeded 100,000.<sup>50</sup>

It is a strange, cold, allegorical tale. After a long war two brothers, one of them the narrator, come to live in a hermitage set on marble cliffs, intending to spend the rest of their lives living quietly and studying botany. Below the cliffs lies a beautiful lake, the Marina, bordered by ancient cities. In the surrounding dark forests rules a fierce tyrant, the Head Ranger, using as his instruments of terror gangs of thugs from a region known as Mauretania. Between Marina and Mauretania lies the Campagna, inhabited by hospitable peoples with, at their head, the patriarch, Belovar. *On the Marble Cliffs* "recounts the doom of this unstable triad".<sup>51</sup> In one hauntingly unpleasant episode, which could be interpreted as a foretelling of Nazi horrors, the brothers come across the "Flayers Copse", a scene of death and corruption in the Mauretanian forest. Eventually violent warfare breaks out and, at the end, Marina comes to an end in "... an apocalypse of fire, blood and crashing masonry".<sup>52</sup> It is a truly Wagnerian scene. But the brothers escape, finding sanctuary in the mountains of Alta Plana.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> *Daily Telegraph* obituary.

<sup>50</sup> Steiner, Introduction to *On the Marble Cliffs*, p9.

<sup>51</sup> Steiner, Introduction to *On the Marble Cliffs*, p10.

<sup>52</sup> Steiner, Introduction to *On the Marble Cliffs*, p10.

<sup>53</sup> This is an extremely abbreviated account of the book. Nevin provides a detailed and interesting exegesis in his *Jünger*, pp157-171, and a shorter account is given in J.P. Stern, *Ernst Jünger*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), pp13,14.



Both Steiner and Nevin play down the interpretation of the book as 'anti-Nazi'. Nevin believes that Jünger was creating 'types' rather than characters intended to correspond to specific members of the Nazi regime: the Ranger (= Hitler?), he asserts, "could be found in the Kremlin ...".<sup>54</sup> Steiner agrees, noting that Jünger himself "... has been more circumspect, and rightly so". Steiner believes that, while the book can certainly bear some interpretation as anti-Nazi, it is essentially Teutonic in nature, "... deep-rooted in the ideal of *Blut und Boden*".<sup>55</sup>

Steiner in the end finds *On the Marble Cliffs* to be a parable of despair, in which Jünger sees the only route of escape from the contemporary world as lying in a personal, aristocratic, aesthetic detachment. This form of escape is available to the élite - the artists and intellectuals - if not to the ordinary people. In so far as the roots of this despair lie, at least in part, in the writer's experiences on the Western Front, one can see some correspondences between Jünger and the upper-class Englishman Sassoon who also in his later life, though in quite different ways, sought distance from the real world. It perhaps marks a step on the way of Jünger's journey from the RTS myth of *Storm of Steel* to the 'RR' myth which suffuses *The Peace*.

*Der Friede (The Peace)*. This is an essay first written in 1941, largely rewritten in 1943 and sent to the publisher in 1944, this move possibly accelerated by the news of his son's death in Italy. It was not published then however, and after the end of the war Jünger was not permitted to publish for some years due to his perceived Nazi connections. Although some illegal copies circulated, the book was not legally published in Germany until 1949.<sup>56</sup> An English-language version was published in the USA in 1948, although a publisher could not be found in England so soon after WW2.<sup>57</sup> Since it was essentially a post-WW2 work, discussion of it is included in Chapter 7, together with the work of other post-WW2 writers.

**5. Some other literary contributors to the RTS myth.** The '*communitas*' novels which were discussed in Chapter 5 and which were based on values of comradeship could be seen as associated with the RTS myth, perhaps in the interpretation given by Eksteins who, seeing attacking soldiers as sacrificial victims, writes of the

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<sup>54</sup> Nevin, *Jünger*, p162.

<sup>55</sup> Steiner, Introduction to *On the Marble Cliffs*, p11.

<sup>56</sup> *Kindler's Literatur Lexicon*, (Zurich: Kindler, 1982), Vol. III, p3698.

<sup>57</sup> Ernst Jünger tr. Stuart Hood, with a preface by Louis Clair, *The Peace (Der Friede)*, (Hinsdale, Illinois: Henry Regnery, 1948).



‘victimization of attackers’. In this version of the Girardian sacrifice, the soldiers became sacrificial scapegoats in order, not to preserve a pre-existing hierarchical social order (which would give rise to LAF) but to restore, establish or defend (depending upon which nation was perceived as making the sacrifice of its soldiers) a desired national sense of superiority. But, in common I believe with most commentators, I would prefer to concentrate on the *communitas* which dominates these novels and to see it as the *communitas* of the victims in the trenches and hospitals. Seen in this way, these novels are in my view overwhelmingly associated with the LAF, rather than the RTS, myth.

The LAF myth, deriving principally from Sassoon and the war poets, together with some of the Second Wave writings, was, and is, by no means universally subscribed to, even in the UK. The minor satirical classic *‘England their England’*, published in 1934, offered a counterpoint, assuring readers that in the book: “...there will be no terrific descriptions of the effect of a chlorine-gas cloud upon a party of nuns in a bombarded nunnery ...no streams of consciousness, chapters long, in the best style of Bloomsbury, describing minutely the sensations of a man who has been caught in a heavy-howitzer barrage while taking a nap in the local mortuary”.<sup>58</sup>

The LAF myth has also been the object of academic criticism by historians, as was briefly sketched in Chapter 2, and war veterans’ organisations have always, naturally enough, found it difficult to associate themselves with a view of the war which sees it as a futile waste of lives. Many memoirs and diaries of serving soldiers tell a different tale than that of the war poets, and there exists a substantial body of published writing in English which explicitly sets out to counter the LAF myth.

A good example of this is Greenwell’s *An Infant in Arms*, first published in 1935 (after most of the Second Wave writing), the author writing in his Introduction that: “The horrors of the Great War and the miseries of those who were called up on to take part in it have been described by innumerable writers. For my own part I have to confess that I look back on the years 1914-1918 as among the happiest I have ever spent.”<sup>59</sup> Greenwell has been called “the British version of Jünger”<sup>60</sup> and John Terraine, one of the historians, mentioned in chapter 2, who have written countering

<sup>58</sup> A.G. Macdonell, *England, their England*, (London: Macmillan, 1934, republished Picador 1983), p7.

<sup>59</sup> Graham H. Greenwell, *An Infant in Arms: War Letters of a Company Officer 1914-1918*, (1935. London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1972), pxxi.

<sup>60</sup> Private communication: letter to the author from Colonel Terry Cave, Honorary Vice-President, The Western Front Association, January 21 2002.



the LAF myth, provides an introduction to the 1972 republication of Greenwell's book in which he welcomes its timely reappearance (not long after the success of the LAF-suffused *Oh! What a Lovely War*) and salutes the "brave, steadfast generation" to which Greenwell belonged, to whose "endurance and resolution, fortified by cheerfulness and good humour in the most daunting conditions" the final victories of the Allies on the Western Front in 1918 were largely due.<sup>61</sup> Some other books published or republished in the 1960s, while not necessarily sharing Greenwell's experience of the war as a time of happiness, strongly support the view that the war had to be fought, and that, for the soldiers fighting it, the accompanying horrors were justified.<sup>62</sup>

However, I have found no literary text in English which might be said to build on or even support the opposing RTS myth. The English-language literature of the Western Front published in the 1920s and 1930s is suffused with the myth of LAF, as indeed has often been noted. It is true that some of the earlier work of Robert Graves conveys the sentiment that "... something positive will come to fill the void of loss of faith and childhood innocence",<sup>63</sup> and that Rupert Brooke's poems can express a patriotism supremely confident of English superiority. But these notions, articulated in the early days of the war, before disillusionment had set in, are a world away from the positive view of war that RTS embodies.

In fact, other than Jünger, there appears to be no European writer of high literary quality, of any nationality, whose work can unambiguously be associated with the RTS myth of the Western Front. One possible exception is the poet Rainer Maria Rilke who, in his *Five Hymns (Fünf Gesänge)* "...celebrated the resurrection of the god of war rather than a symbol of weak-minded peace",<sup>64</sup> in words such as the following:

*"For the first time I see you rising,  
hearsaid, remote, incredible War God.*

*...  
Before we know it, he's there,*

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<sup>61</sup> Greenwell, *An Infant in Arms*, pxviii, xix.

<sup>62</sup> E.g. Charles Carrington, *Soldier from the Wars Returning*, (London: Hutchinson, 1965), Frank Richards, *Old Soldiers Never Die*, (1933. London: Faber and Faber, 1964).

<sup>63</sup> Patrick J. Quinn, *the Great War and the Missing Muse: the Early Writings of Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon*, (London and Toronto, Associated University Presses, 1994), p34.

<sup>64</sup> Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night; The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), pp4, 5.



*The glowing god himself, tearing his crop  
Out of the nation's roots, and harvest begins.*

...  
*In the field  
Life in millions mounts to its height, and in each  
A coronational death steps to its princeliest square*<sup>65</sup>

However, the *Five Hymns* were written in August 1914, at the very beginning of the war or even just before it broke out, and while they may reflect some of the pre-existing myths of German superiority which underlay Jünger's attitudes, could not therefore contribute to myths of the experience of the Western Front. The significance of Jünger's contribution in this respect is recognised by another major German writer, Günter Grass, who in his *My Century* (in which he writes a short essay for every year of the twentieth century) devotes every one of the years 1914 to 1918 to an imagined present-day encounter between Jünger and Remarque, strongly contrasting their attitudes to the conflict.<sup>66</sup> There are many respected novels of WW1 which do not strongly reflect the LAF myth, for example Ludwig Renn's *War* and Lussu's *Sardinian Brigade*. These are novels (actually 'fictionalised autobiography') which, although they give a convincing and sympathetic account of the lives of front soldiers, do not convey the strength of feeling of writers like Sassoon, Owen, Barbusse or Remarque.<sup>67</sup> But neither do they possess the enthusiasm for battle which Jünger's Western Front-related writings portray. Indeed, Denham asserts, following Müller, that Jünger, because of the way that he turns the narrator of *Storm of Steel* into a hero, "creates a modern version of war literature, different from that of his predecessors".<sup>68</sup>

Two other writers may be mentioned briefly as having a less direct connection with the RTS myth. Of the "more than 1.5 million war poems ... written in Germany in August 1914 alone ... most ... even those by established authors, have been

<sup>65</sup> Words taken from Hymns I and IV, in Rainer Maria, Rilke, tr. and with Introduction by J.B. Leishman, *Poems 1906 to 1926*, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), pp187, 190..

<sup>66</sup> Günter Grass, trans. Michael Henry Heim, *My Century*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), pp 32-45.

<sup>67</sup> Ludwig Renn, tr. Willa and Edwin Muir, *War (Krieg)*, (London: Martin Secker, 1929); Emilio Lussu, tr. Marion Rawson, *Sardinian Brigade*, (London: Prion Books, 2000). Renn has been described as 'The German Hemingway' (Private email communication: Juenger-list/Umberto Rossi, March 29, 2001). Although *Sardinian Brigade* relates to events on the Austrian/Italian front, not the Western Front, the experiences of soldiers in the two theatres of war had a great deal in common.

<sup>68</sup> Scott D. Denham, *Visions of War: Ideologies and Images of war in German Literature Before and After the Great War*, (Berne: Peter Lang, 1992), p117.



forgotten”.<sup>69</sup> One poet whose work is widely cited, and who also wrote prose, is Walter Flex,<sup>70</sup> one of a group of German ‘combatant poets’ among whom Denham also includes Detlev von Liliencron<sup>71</sup> and August Stramm.<sup>72</sup> Flex was a literary exponent of the *Wandervögel* movement<sup>73</sup> (to which, as already noted, Jünger was also attracted in his younger days), who tended to use inflated, romantic language. A couplet which appears at the end of his best-known work, *Der Wanderer zwischen beiden Welten* (The Wanderer Between the Two Worlds) gives the flavour:

“Blüh, Deutschland, überm Grabe mein  
Jung, stark und schön als Heldenhain!”<sup>74</sup>

‘Heroes’ groves’, in the German culture of the time, were symbols both of those who had fallen in war, and of “Germany’s eternal youth”.<sup>75</sup> The sentiments expressed in these florid lines seem rather similar to those conveyed by words seen inscribed on a gravestone in a WW1 Austro-Hungarian cemetery in Folgaria, Italy: “DIE DA SANKEN, DIE BRAVEN, IM KAMPFGEWUEHL ... KAISER, SIE GRUSSEN DICH!”.<sup>76</sup>

Flex’s short work was “destined to become one of the most important books published in Germany about the war experience”, and, indeed, its title conveys a sense of liminality.<sup>77</sup> But, rather than containing detailed accounts of experiences of the trenches, as does *Storm of Steel*, it contains only romantic images of landscape and

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<sup>69</sup> Denham, *Visions of War*, p45.

<sup>70</sup> 1883-1917. Flex actually died on the Russian front, but some of his writings clearly relate to the Western Front.

<sup>71</sup> Author of the *Kriegsnovellen* of which “nearly half a million copies were in print by 1914”

(Denham, *Visions of War*, p53).

<sup>72</sup> Whom Denham (p53) categorises as an Expressionist writer.

<sup>73</sup> Private communication; email from Andrea Santi, October 11 1999: “Nato nel 1887 ad Eisenach e caduto nel 1917 sul fronte russo, Walter Flex fu, oltre che recettore in casa Bismarck, esponente letterario dei Wandervögel, movimento rivoluzionario-conservatore della gioventù tedesca che si propose la riscoperta della tradizione germanica attraverso una rinnovata esperienza del paesaggio e della natura.” (“Born 1887 at Eisenach and having fallen in 1917 on the Russian front, Walter Flex was, as well as ‘recettore’ in Bismarck’s household, a literary exponent of the Wandervögel, a revolutionary-conservative German youth movement which had as its objective the rediscovery of German tradition through a renewed experience of the countryside and nature”. Author’s translation).

<sup>74</sup> “Blossom, Germany, above my grave/young, strong and beautiful as a heroes’ grove!” (Tr. Stephen Galer). From Walter Flex, *Der Wanderer zwischen beiden Welten*, (München: Verlag C.H. Beck, 1966), p110.

<sup>75</sup> Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, p.73.

<sup>76</sup> “Those that fell, the brave, in the turmoil of battle ... Kaiser, they greet you!” (Tr. Stephen Galer).

Observed by the author in the course of a visit in June 2001.

<sup>77</sup> Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, p59.



men. Mosse recounts how Flex's character Lieutenant Ernst Wurche, a symbol of ideal German youth, " ... wants to become a storm trooper in order to experience what he calls the beauty of battle. As he admires his sword this pure and chaste youth has 'war in his blood'". Through this and other passages, Mosse asserts, Flex provides an image of the warrior " ... which was an integral part of the Myth of the War Experience".<sup>78</sup> Flex certainly saw the war in sacrificial terms, in some of his writings comparing the war to the Last Supper and the sacrificial death of so many young men as " ... only a repetition of the Passion of Christ",<sup>79</sup> but he did not write of the experience of liminality and *communitas* which principally concerned Jünger.

Pierre Drieu la Rochelle (1893-1945) moved much further than Jünger towards adherence to Fascism, ending WW2 as a collaborator with the Germans and eventually taking his own life just before the war's end. Before WW1, he was one of those Frenchmen who felt that their country was in a situation of terminal decline, and in his case the war was an experience through which his life gained meaning, at least for a time. According to Field, this view is most clearly expressed in Drieu la Rochelle's autobiographical short story *La Comédie de Charleroi*, which includes an account of a bayonet charge at the battle of Charleroi in 1914 in which the author took part. Of this charge he wrote: "Suddenly I knew about myself, I knew about life. This strong free hero was me ... Who was it who suddenly came forth? A leader. Not merely a man, a leader ... In my hands I held victory and liberty".<sup>80</sup>

In a wartime poem, Drieu la Rochelle wrote:

*"Avant cette guerre on respirait un air impur ...  
...  
Nous engendrons dans la douleur de cette guerre notre joie.  
La joie de notre force, la joie de notre triomphe ..."*<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, p166. Mosse's version of the 'Myth of the War Experience' and its relation to the RTS myth under consideration here was mentioned in Chapter 2.

<sup>79</sup> Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, p75.

<sup>80</sup> Drieu la Rochelle, *La Comédie de Charleroi*, (Paris: 1934), pp57-58. Quoted in Field, *Three French Writers and the Great War*, pp84-85.

<sup>81</sup> "Before this war we breathed impure air ... In the pain of this war we give birth to our joy, the joy of our strength, the joy of our triumph". From Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, 'Chante de guerre des hommes d'aujourd'hui' in *Interrogation: poèmes* (Paris, 1917), pp169-71. Quoted, with English translation, in A.D. Harvey, *A Muse of Fire*, (London and Rio Grande: Hambledon Press, 1998), p246.



This sounds rather like early Rupert Brooke, though coming much later in the war, and reflecting not so much an outburst of patriotism as a febrile attempt to grasp meaning from desperate circumstances.

These two writers - Flex and Drieu la Rochelle - appear to me to have some association with the RTS myth, but it is an association which is much less strong than that of Jünger, on whose writings I therefore propose to concentrate exclusively in the following section.

**6. The nature of Jünger's contribution to the RTS myth.** In the present section I propose to explore the ways in which Jünger's Western Front-related writings may have helped to disseminate the RTS myth, and to have contributed to it. I shall employ the same analytical framework - mythic discourse, liminality and *communitas*, and sacrifice - as that used in respect of the LAF myth in chapter 5.

Mythic discourse. Leed and Linder's identification of a 'conservative experience' of WW1, discussed in Chapter 1 and proposed here as the basis for the 'RTS' myth, centres upon the experience of comradeship and community. The values of comradeship and community are reflected strongly in Jünger's writing, and are spoken of as though they represent characteristic features of the German culture of the time. One might therefore reasonably place Jünger as a 'conservative' writer. In fact, according to Linder, values of comradeship and community pervade the work of both 'liberal' and 'conservative' writers, but it is only the 'conservative' writers who have mythologised them.<sup>82</sup> This seems a dubious judgement, however, since the 'novels of *communitas*' discussed in Chapter 5, suffused as they also are with values of comradeship and community, have made a substantial contribution to the 'liberal' LAF myth.

Although Jünger was a scientist and collector, and a man whose habits of observation were precise, much of his discourse is mythic in style. He sees his soldiers as 'princes of the trenches' and the Germans at the time of WW1 as engaged in a titanic struggle for survival. German society after WW1 must have needed stories which embraced the values of inherent national strength and resentment at defeat: Jünger was pre-eminently one of those who provided such stories, with his romantic view of Germany's historic place in the world and his dismissal of defeat as due

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<sup>82</sup> Linder, *Princes of the Trenches*, p75.



merely to the superiority of the enemy in the *Materialschlacht*. Indeed, while Jünger would certainly have subscribed to the RTS myth in the form presented in Chapter 1, he would probably have added a paragraph specifically aligned with German needs, perhaps along the following lines:

*“Even though Germany has been defeated, the conviction that no world can thrive in which we have not the first place will never be eradicated from the real core of our people. We were well prepared, but still not well enough. Our hour will come again, for no one is so strong that he can hold the reins of destiny for ever. In every imaginable direction we have severe and grievous experiences to go through, and we shall turn them to good account. Germany lives and Germany shall never go under!”*<sup>83</sup>

As Goodman asserts: “Myths are stories told to answer some human need, so we should not feel overly surprised if they respond more faithfully to such needs than to the demands of abstract logic, of science, or even of morality.”<sup>84</sup> Goodman argues further that modern mythology consists of “...stories sustained by the values they express - by hope and fear, love, hate, anger and resentment, joy and contentment”.<sup>85</sup> Linder sees the combat narratives of WW1, including pre-eminently those of Jünger, as “privileged transmitters of the war myth”, through their status both as commemorative works and as stories of “authentic war experience”.<sup>86</sup>

Seeing the war as an enterprise in which technology had played a determining part, Jünger’s concept of the worker-soldier, “a “technological man”, who was as ‘hard’, ‘callous’ and ‘unfeeling’ as the machinery of war itself”<sup>87</sup> was a further development in mythical thinking. As Leed writes, “Jünger’s myth of the new Gestalt fashioned in war is an extremely important fiction ... important for those ... who wished to retain some belief that the war had not been merely a meaningless orgy of destruction but an event creative of personality, a rebirth and a regeneration of the nation”. This myth of the ‘new Gestalt’, a development of the RTS myth, was part of the process of brutalisation of life and politics which led to the Nazi regime and to

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<sup>83</sup> This formulation employs some words written by Jünger, including the concluding words of the 1929 English edition of *Storm of Steel*.

<sup>84</sup> Lenn E. Goodman, “Mythic discourse”, in *Myths and Fictions*, edited by Shlomo Biderman and Ben-Ami Scharfstein (Leiden, New York, Köln: E.J. Brill, 1993), p107.

<sup>85</sup> Goodman, op.cit., p109.

<sup>86</sup> Linder, *Princes of the Trenches*, p182.

<sup>87</sup> Leed, *No Man’s Land*, p.153.



WW2.<sup>88</sup> Nevin judges Jünger's book developing these ideas<sup>89</sup> as " ... after *Stahlgewittern*, unquestionably the most important of Jünger's works in the crystallization of his reputation as a fascist".<sup>90</sup>

Jünger himself, however, repelled by the vulgarity of the Nazis though always a German nationalist, moved towards notions of reconciliation, as he shifted from the despair of *Auf den Marmorklippen* to the relative hope of *The Peace*. In this way, and of course through his connections with French life and culture, his writings and actions came in his later life to reflect the RR myth, rather than RTS.

In *Storm of Steel* and related writings Jünger presents " ... a theory of war as the natural element of modern man", " ... the antithesis of the pacifism implied in Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*".<sup>91</sup> In a typical passage one of Remarque's characters can say:

"I am young, I am twenty years old; yet I know nothing of life but despair, death, fear, and fatuous superficiality cast over an abyss of sorrow. I see how people are set against one another, and in silence, unknowingly, foolishly, obediently, innocently slay one another. ... And all men of my age, here and over there, throughout the whole world see these things; all my generation is experiencing these things with me."<sup>92</sup>

These sentiments are quite different from those typically expressed by Jünger. As demonstrated in Chapter 5, Remarque's view of the war was very similar to that of English writers such as Sassoon and Owen: as a disastrous episode of futility and waste evoking feelings of anger and pity. By contrast Jünger's writing has been called "A hymn of praise to the old Prussian officer class".<sup>93</sup> To this class "Battle was glorious and those who survived were an elite"<sup>94</sup> - a view which Nevin terms "Homeric".<sup>95</sup>

Jünger never accepted the end of WW1 as a defeat for the German nation. In common with many of his compatriots of the time, he believed that German culture

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<sup>88</sup> E.g., see Chapter 8, "The Brutalization of German Politics", in Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*.

<sup>89</sup> *Der Arbeiter: Herrschaft und Gestalt*. Hamburg: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1936. (*The Worker: Mastery and Form*).

<sup>90</sup> Nevin, *Jünger*, p115.

<sup>91</sup> *The Guardian* obituary.

<sup>92</sup> Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, p263

<sup>93</sup> Verna Coleman, *The Last Exquisite: a Portrait of Frederic Manning*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1990), p159.

<sup>94</sup> Obituary in *The Economist*.

<sup>95</sup> Nevin, *Jünger*, p40.



possessed a spiritual quality superior to that of its adversaries, who had only prevailed because of their overwhelming weight in the *Materialschlacht*. This view had been vigorously expressed before the war by General Friedrich von Bernhardi in a book, which went through six German editions in two years, in which he additionally claimed that to make war was an integral feature of humanity and a great civilising influence on the world.<sup>96</sup> Eksteins quotes a contemporary of Bernhardi's who wrote that war was "... the price one must pay for culture".<sup>97</sup>

Jünger revised *Storm of Steel* a number of times, refining the writing and adding "exfoliating metaphors, softening a once sinewy terseness by impressions and asides".<sup>98</sup> According to Neaman there were eight versions in all,<sup>99</sup> the last coming as late as 1952, and by 1999 *Storm of Steel* was still the best-selling of Jünger's works, after no less than 69 (German) printings.<sup>100</sup> It has been suggested that this multiple redrafting of the book can be seen as the reduction of its contents towards a mythological core<sup>101</sup> by an author who was "constantly writing and re-writing his own myth".<sup>102</sup> Perhaps another way of interpreting this is that, as Anthony Powell observed after visiting Siegfried Sassoon in the 1960s, for Jünger, "... though no longer himself involved in it ... the first war was still in progress."<sup>103</sup>

At the very end of *Storm of Steel* Jünger writes, in words some of which, as suggested on p161, might form part of a further extension to the RTS myth:

"We stand in the memory of the dead who are holy to us, and we believe ourselves entrusted with the true and spiritual welfare of our people ... Though force without and barbarity within conglomerate in sombre clouds, yet so long

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<sup>96</sup> General Friedrich Von Bernhardi, tr. Allen H. Powles, *Germany and the Next War*, (London: Edward Arnold, 1914). First German publication of this book was in 1911.

<sup>97</sup> Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, p90; quoting Wolfgang Rothe, *Schriftsteller und totalitäre Welt* (Bern 1966), p19.

<sup>98</sup> Nevin, *Jünger*, endnote 18, p247.

<sup>99</sup> Other accounts differ in their estimate of the number of revisions.

<sup>100</sup> Neaman, *Jünger*, p38.

<sup>101</sup> "The final revision of the text was done by Juenger in 1961 on the occasion of the publication of his first Gesamtausgabe' (Collected Works). It is the most metahistorical (or 'mythical') version of *Storm of Steel*, containing none of the nationalistic undertones of the 1927 version (on which the only available English translation is based)." (Private communication: email to the author from Richard Brem, ORF Vienna, December 23 2000).

<sup>102</sup> "It has to be said, though, that Juenger is a special case, because he was constantly writing and re-writing his own myth." (Private communication: email to the author from Richard Brem, ORF Vienna, August 10 2000).

<sup>103</sup> Anthony Powell, *To Keep the Ball Rolling: The Memoirs of Anthony Powell*, (London: Penguin Books, 1083), p351.



as the blade of a sword will strike a spark in the night may it be said: Germany lives and Germany shall never go under!”<sup>104</sup>

These words come, of course, from the English translation, first published in 1929 and never revised.<sup>105</sup> Derived from the 1924 version of the German text, it contains expressions of nationalism that Jünger toned down or removed from the later German versions. Jünger himself was aware of the difficulties this might cause for his English-speaking readers. In a discussion with a British journalist in the mid-1980s he expressed concern that “the only English translation of *Storm of Steel* currently available is based on the most nationalistic version of the original text ... (in) the final version of the book ... Jünger tried to delete all political or contemporary connotations and reduce it to its ahistorical core, which makes this version the most ‘mythical’”.<sup>106</sup> Clearly, the English-speaking reader will need to be cautious in attempting to draw from the 1929 or 1994 English versions conclusions which relate to the historical or political circumstances of the time. The “ahistorical core” to which Jünger finally reduced the book is “mythical” in the sense that it deals with the fundamental experiences of men fighting and dying and with the *communitas* which they construct and experience. His rewriting the book can be seen as revisiting the memory of the *communitas* with which it deals, and hence strengthening the myth which grows from it.

*Liminality and communitas.* Rossbach states: “... during periods of upheaval and change when hierarchies are reversed and the whole of society turned upside down, the claim that liminal existence is the ‘true’ existence appears far more plausible ... As societies are passing from one cultural ‘state’ to another, the

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<sup>104</sup> *Storm of Steel*, pp318-319.

<sup>105</sup> Constable (London) published another edition in 1994, with a new introduction by Paddy Griffith, but using the same translation by Basil Creighton as the 1929 edition.

<sup>106</sup> Private communication (email of Nov 9 2000) from Richard Brem of ORF Vienna. The journalist in question was Nigel Jones, freelance at the time though later with the BBC. Brem adds that an English translation of the final German version of *Storm of Steel* was found in the early 1990s in the posthumous papers of Hermann Broch de Rothermann (whose assistance is fulsomely acknowledged in Nevin’s book on Jünger). In a further email (Dec 23 2000) Brem adds “The final revision of the text was done by Jünger in 1961 on the occasion of the publication of his first ‘Gesamtausgabe’ (Collected Works) ... Jünger was very keen on having this final version translated into English for the first time and so was and is his publisher. However, the Hermann Broch de Rothermann translation didn’t go over too well with the US publishers to whom it was offered. They all refused to use it, obviously objecting to the ‘too old-fashioned English’ of the translation.” It seems that an entirely new translation may be commissioned by an American publisher, but that the possible publication of this is most unlikely before 2002/2003”.



*communitas* may appear closer than ever.”<sup>107</sup> Jünger certainly saw the life and activities of the soldier as ‘true’ existence, as we may deduce from his early escapade in the French Foreign Legion as well as his haste to volunteer for the army at the beginning of WW1. Some passages in *Battle as Inner Experience* convey vividly the liminal feeling of separation from ordinary life and the close *communitas* which consequently arose. For example, Jünger writes:

“A whole summer long we had been in position on the same bare hills of Artois, a front-line regiment, a forlorn band, long since estranged from city life ... we had already known each other for so long that we had nothing more to say to one another. Chained together like galley slaves ... we could hardly bear still to see one another. ... the mood of the front bound us together, that mood of animal solidarity come life or death ... Our former lives were no more than a distant dream with which we had less and less connection”.<sup>108</sup>

It has been suggested that in *Battle as Inner Experience* Jünger essentially rewrote the individual experiences he had so graphically described in *Storm of Steel* into a form which emphasised the experience of the communal group over that of the individual.<sup>109</sup> If this is so, one might expect to gain further insight into the liminal nature of his experiences from the later book. However, Jünger himself saw *Battle as Inner Experience* principally as an attempt to deal with the psychological aspects of his experiences<sup>110</sup> and this rather different orientation, together with his multiple redrafting of the text of *Storm of Steel*, give one some confidence in taking the view that Jünger regarded *Storm of Steel* as the principal record of his experiences. I therefore intend to treat *Storm of Steel* as my principal source for the interpretation of his work in mythical terms.

In the military context, comradeship has been defined as “an affective sense of community between front soldiers, based on shared experience and suffering”.<sup>111</sup> But Jünger’s view of the nature of ‘community’ was of a rather special kind. While he shared with military officers of most nationalities respect for the duty of officers to

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<sup>107</sup> Stefan Rossbach, *Gnostic Wars: The Cold War in the Context of a History of Western Spirituality*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p27.

<sup>108</sup> Jünger tr. Martin Chalmers, “Pacifism”, a chapter from *Battle as Inner Experience*. From a forthcoming (as at 2001) anthology of writings by Jünger, edited by Richard Brem, to be published by The Penkiln Burn.

<sup>109</sup> Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, p80.

<sup>110</sup> *Storm of Steel*, p22 (footnote).

<sup>111</sup> Linder, *Princes of the Trenches*, p75.



take full responsibility for their men, he seems to have experienced no human emotions of sympathy or pity, but - as discussed above - saw in the war “... the shaping of a new kind of man, the worker-soldier who was prepared to sacrifice himself if necessary for his own *Gestalt*.”<sup>112</sup>

Jünger's experiences on the Western Front were every bit as intense as those of Sassoon and, although his responses were different, the processes by which the myths of their respective national societies were 'enacted' were very similar. Sassoon believed that he and his comrades were defending the British Empire and its values of decency and fair play; Jünger that German society was based on 'spiritual' values superior to those of its 'materialistic' enemies. Both societies valued comradeship and group solidarity, and the soldiers of both sides developed a similar *communitas* in the course of their experiences.

In order to demonstrate the ways in which the nature of the *communitas* of the Western Front emerges through Jünger's accounts, I will take two chapters from *Storm of Steel*, briefly reviewing the texts and drawing some conclusions from them.

The first chapter for consideration is the one entitled 'Regniéville'.<sup>113</sup> Regniéville was a small village to the south-west of Metz, at the present time no longer recognisable as such, and therefore categorised by the French authorities as one of the many French 'villages détruites' from the First World War. The intensity of the fighting in this zone may be judged from the fact that 11,685 soldiers lie in the nearby German military cemetery of Thiaucourt.<sup>114</sup> Jünger arrived in the area on July 4 1917, moving into the line near Thiaucourt, opposite the French. The regiment was in trenches which had chalk floors covered with concrete, and Jünger found himself a dugout built into a bank, 100 metres back, for use while in reserve. He notes that, although the physical conditions were not bad, since the chalk of the trenches withstood the weather much better than the clay he and his men were accustomed to, the rations provided were very poor.

Bored with routine duties in the trenches, on August 24 Jünger, taking with him the NCO Kloppmann “the stoutest fellow of the 7<sup>th</sup> company, ... paid a visit to the enemy's lines”,<sup>115</sup> creeping up to the wire, cutting it and reconnoitring the nearby

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<sup>112</sup> Coker, *War and the Twentieth Century* p100.

<sup>113</sup> *Storm of Steel*, pp190-204.

<sup>114</sup> The author visited this cemetery and the surrounding area on October 8 2001.

<sup>115</sup> *Storm of Steel*, p193;.



trenches. They went back on each of the succeeding three nights, and in the course of these forays located four enemy posts.

On September 10 he was asked to lead a raid. It was to be a three-party patrol, Jünger's party having 14 men, including Kloppmann. They trained in bomb-throwing for 10 days, following which Jünger was invited to a 'farewell' dinner at the regimental HQ. The following day he was awakened at 3.00am, had poached eggs for breakfast, later sharing cherry brandies and jokes with his men. At 4.40am they went to 'jumping-off' places in the front line and at 5.05am left the dugouts, got over the wire and into an enemy trench, then across shell-holes into the next trench. As they followed a communication trench a bomb was thrown at them which wounded Jünger's left hand, tearing off the top of his little finger. Going on through deserted trenches, they got lost, "got the wind up",<sup>116</sup> captured a machine-gun, were challenged, and ran. Recognising a saucepan with a spoon lying beside it, they realised they were at a spot they had passed earlier, hence got their bearings, and returned to their own lines. From this desperate adventure 10 of Jünger's patrol of 14, including the faithful N.C.O. Kloppmann, failed to return. Jünger then reported to regimental and divisional HQ, noting the contrast between the safety and relative luxury of this and his own recent circumstances. He reports, in characteristic language, the terms of a French communiqué concerning the raid:

"‘A German raid near Regniéville failed. We made prisoners’. It was not stated that the prisoners were taken only because we lost our way in seeking an enemy who had fled before us. Had the French defended their trenches as soldiers of courage do, it would have been a different story”.<sup>117</sup>

The case of a small group of soldiers venturing into No Man's Land and on into the unknown area of the enemy's trenches - Jünger and Kloppmann 'paying a visit' and Jünger and his 14 men making a raid - is a classic example of liminality, involving the separation of the neophyte from normal life and moving into a phase where 'anything is possible'. Jünger conveys powerfully not only the liminal phase itself, but also the earlier and later stages of 'separation' (training, preparation, the farewell dinner) and 'reaggregation' (the return, reporting back). The particular aspect of the *communitas* engendered among his men which comes across strongly in

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<sup>116</sup> *Storm of Steel*, p199.

<sup>117</sup> *Storm of Steel*, p203.



this case is the sense of comradeship in adversity which emerges as they become lost and begin to feel panic while in the enemy trenches. Jünger also further strengthens his and the reader's sense of *communitas* among the German troops by his unfavourable comments on the defence put up by the French who opposed his section of the front.

The second chapter I propose briefly to analyse is entitled 'The Great Offensive'.<sup>118</sup> This refers to the German offensive of spring 1918, during which substantial gains were made before, in the following September, Allied forces mounted the massive attacks which brought the war to an end. At this time Jünger was again in Artois, and the experiences he relates took place principally in an area to the south-west of the Cambrai-Arras road.<sup>119</sup>

The chapter preceding this one gives a sense of the feeling among the troops about the impending offensive. During an address to the division by a general: "The brazen spirit of the attack, the spirit of the Prussian infantry, swept through the massed troops assembled here in the opening spring on the soil of France to go through the ordeal of battle ... The men ... were in good form. It was enough to hear them talk of the coming event as the 'Hindenburg flat-race', in their dry Lower Saxon way, to know that they would take hold as they always did, with an absolute reliability ... The gleam of many an ideal that shimmered for me over our war aims has been dashed to earth by war. One remains for ever: this fidelity that cannot be shaken".<sup>120</sup>

The division was quartered in the château of Brunémont, with orders to march up the line to occupy dugouts near Cagnicourt,<sup>121</sup> its task being to break through between the villages of Ecoust-St.-Mein and Noreuil. On the march Jünger's party suffered a direct hit from a shell. Jünger graphically describes this event and its consequences: in the shell-burst "there writhed a heap of black bodies", and on return to the site next day he and his men found "over twenty charred corpses"<sup>122</sup> - a further good example of the sense of almost scientific detachment that characterises so much of his writing.

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<sup>118</sup> *Storm of Steel*, pp244-280.

<sup>119</sup> The author visited this area on October 9 2001 and was able to confirm the location of most of the places mentioned in Jünger's account.

<sup>120</sup> *Storm of Steel*, pp242-3.

<sup>121</sup> Now the location of a British military cemetery.

<sup>122</sup> *Storm of Steel*, pp 245 and 247.



As they moved into the line Jünger comments: “A wild beast dragged from its lair, or a sailor who sees the last plank swept from his grasp, may, perhaps, have feelings comparable to ours when we were compelled to leave the warmth and safety of the dugout. Yet not one of them was tempted to stay behind unobserved”.<sup>123</sup> An artillery barrage started on time at 5.05am and Jünger gives a dramatic description of this, noting: “Men were running along the trench and shouting delightedly into each other’s ears” at this “... elemental expression of German power”.<sup>124</sup> The attack started at 9.40am, and:

“... the break-through seemed to me a certainty. But was there strength in us to smash the enemy’s reserves and hurl them to destruction? I was confident of it. The decisive battle, the final advance, had begun. The destiny of nations drew to its iron conclusion and the stake was the possession of the world. I was conscious, if only in feeling, of the significance of that hour; and I believe that on this occasion every man felt his personality fall away in the face of a crisis in which he had his part to play and by which history would be made. No one who has lived through moments like these can doubt that the course of nations in the last resort rises and falls with the destiny of war”.<sup>125</sup>

As they moved towards the enemy: “The turmoil of our feelings was called forth by rage, alcohol, and the thirst for blood as we stepped out, heavily and yet irresistibly, for the enemy’s lines. And therewith beat the pulse of heroism - the godlike and the bestial inextricably mixed”.<sup>126</sup>

Machine guns shot at them from the Ecoust-Croisilles railway embankment, which they had to cross. Jünger followed a sunken road, saw the enemy for the first time, and there ensued a vicious battle in shell-holes and trenches, following which the English “fled by battalions across the open”.<sup>127</sup> Jünger jumped into an enemy trench raked by machine-gun fire, then went ‘over the top’ towards the enemy, attempting to eliminate the machine-gun. He comments:

“When I look back now to that blind dash across the open against a choice and well-furnished position, I see that we must have been inspired by a quite improbable degree of recklessness. And yet, where would be the success

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<sup>123</sup> *Storm of Steel*, p249.

<sup>124</sup> *Storm of Steel*, p251.

<sup>125</sup> *Storm of Steel*, p254.

<sup>126</sup> *Storm of Steel*, p255.

<sup>127</sup> *Storm of Steel*, p258.



of war if it were not for individuals whom the thrill of action intoxicates and hurls forward with an impetus not to be resisted?"<sup>128</sup>

After a further assault, the defenders surrendered, and no quarter was given by the Germans. Quite a few of those who surrendered were shot. Jünger does not condone this, but asserts: "A man cannot change his feelings again during the last rush with a veil of blood before his eyes. He does not want to take prisoners, but to kill".<sup>129</sup>

Later, Jünger went back to the sunken road, and decided to attempt to storm the village of Vraucourt. He and his men had a hard time. At darkness he went with 12 men to an abandoned English dugout,

"... furnished with extreme comfort ... Merry old England! ... A neighbouring room served as the kitchen, whose array of provisions filled us with respectful admiration ... fresh eggs ... stacks of tinned meat, cases of priceless thick jam, bottles of coffee-essence as well, and quantities of tomatoes and onions ... this sight I often remembered later when we spent weeks together in the trenches on a rigid allowance of bread, washy soup, and thin jam."<sup>130</sup>

Jünger believes the enemy is superior in numbers, well equipped and well fed, in contrast to the Germans, who have only their will to fight.

Next morning, orders came to storm the Vraucourt line further to the right. This was a desperate period of storming through frontal assault, and: "... these short stretches of ground were soon heaped with corpses".<sup>131</sup> Later in the evening there came a renewed outbreak of bombing and a furious battle with Highlanders, who were massacred. During this affair Jünger, who was wearing a captured English great-coat, was shot, almost certainly by his own side.<sup>132</sup> This injury ended his participation in the 'Great Offensive', and he went back via Noreuil, noting the amazing intensity of the traffic on the Noreuil-Quéant road. Jünger was sent to hospital in Douai and thence to Berlin, although he was back in the front line by the following June.

This chapter is a powerful piece of writing, conveying with great intensity the nature of the extreme experiences which Jünger and his men underwent. It brings out

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<sup>128</sup> *Storm of Steel*, p260.

<sup>129</sup> *Storm of Steel*, p262.

<sup>130</sup> *Storm of Steel*, pp267, 268.

<sup>131</sup> *Storm of Steel*, p272.

<sup>132</sup> This is another point of contact with Sassoon, who was also shot by his own side towards the end of the war.



some rather different aspects of *communitas* than the 'Regniéville' chapter. One of these is the shared experience of those who have killed, including those who, understandably though not justifiably in Jünger's view, were involved in the shooting of prisoners. More generally, in many episodes during this period of brutal fighting, Jünger evokes the *communitas* of those who have spent time in the immediate presence of death. He also writes convincingly of the experience of rest after battle, for example in these words:

"The sun was far down in the sky ... A cool evening breeze promised a sharp night ... I landed against the side of the trench and talked to little Schultz ... who, like a good friend, had turned up with four heavy machine-guns just where there was most need for them. Men of all companies sat on the fire-steps. Their features were youthful and clear-cut beneath their steel helmets. Their leaders had fallen and it was of their own impulse that they were here and in their right place. We set about putting ourselves in a state of defence for the night. I put my revolver and a dozen English bombs beside me and felt ready for all comers ...".<sup>133</sup>

A good deal of the content of *Storm of Steel* consists of graphic descriptions of the experience of battle, preceded by preparation and followed by periods of rest and reflection. Since he is known above all - as previously discussed - for the quality of his writing, I suggest that the examples given above demonstrate that Jünger's substantial contribution to the RTS myth derives from the immediacy with which he is able to recall the *communitas* forged among those who shared with him the - to him - glory and savagery of life on the Western Front.

*Sacrifice.* In Girard's scheme myths are "the *retrospective* transfiguration of sacrificial crises, the reinterpretation of these crises in the light of the cultural order that has arisen from them"<sup>134</sup>. It follows from this that some time will normally elapse between the identification of a 'sacrificial crisis' and its 'retrospective transfiguration'. So, as argued in Chapter 2, we might not expect the 'First Wave' of WW1 writers to give rise to a myth through a process of this nature, although they might help to identify the sacrifice, as indeed Wilfred Owen did in one outstanding

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<sup>133</sup> *Storm of Steel*, pp275, 276.

<sup>134</sup> René Girard, *Violence*, p64.



poem.<sup>135</sup> If Jünger were to contribute to the RTS myth through a Girardian process, one would expect this to come through his later writings.

However, one would also not really expect a writer like Jünger at any stage to see the war as the kind of 'sacrificial crisis', in which a society sacrifices a generation of young men in order to maintain a social order, and indeed in his early work he clearly does not do so. It is true that in *Storm of Steel* he was able to refer to front-line troops as 'martyrs', observing, for example: "Today we cannot understand the martyrs who threw themselves into the arena in a transport that lifted them even before their deaths beyond humanity, beyond every phase of pain and fear".<sup>136</sup> But in his view these martyrs, as this text conveys, sacrificed themselves in the interest of their country and society: they were not unwilling victims. Even in the later *The Peace*, when Jünger does speak of 'sacrifice', he is referring only to the 'self-sacrifice' of front soldiers.<sup>137</sup>

In his early writing Jünger also saw the context of sacrifice quite differently from Sassoon and those who thought like him. Sassoon saw the sacrifice as a ritual killing inflicted by society on its young men in an attempt to preserve the social order. For Jünger, by contrast, the sacrifice was, and should be, willingly accepted in the interest of the long-term survival and predominance of the German people and their culture: it enabled those who sacrificed themselves to be like Christ, sacrificing themselves for the benefit of others. The cultural order which had arisen from the war - a nation defeated by superior material force but, in Jünger's view, undefeated in spirit - required a myth which would assert its eventual revival, and it was this need which the RTS myth satisfied. To Jünger, if sacrifice could be said to have been made on the Western Front, it had value and purpose, in that it served the long-term survival of the German nation and its ability eventually to prevail over its enemies. This was his 'reinterpretation' of the crisis, and the force behind his endorsement of the RTS myth. While Sassoon's interpretation of the 'sacrifice' was as a secondary Girardian sacrifice, aimed at preservation of an existing social order, Jünger saw it as primary in Girardian terms, having the object of bringing about a new order, in which the German nation would take its rightful place.

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<sup>135</sup> 'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young', quoted on p69.

<sup>136</sup> *Storm of Steel*, p317.

<sup>137</sup> See, e.g., *The Peace*, pp20,21.



However, by 1979, in his speech accepting the Peace Medal at Verdun, his views had changed, as he himself recognised: “Today we see the battle of Verdun differently than we were able to see it in 1916 ... The Douaumont is first and foremost a symbol of suffering, a Calvary rather than a place where a decision was taken”.<sup>138</sup> This shift over the years in Jünger’s retrospective view of the sacrifice of the Western Front marks, I suggest, a shift in the myth with which he would be associated, away from RTS and towards RR. I develop this notion further in chapter 7.

**7. The diffusion of the myth.** How did the RTS myth develop and become promulgated? Maintaining the association of the myth with Ernst Jünger, I approach this question by reviewing the ways in which Jünger’s work was seen in the 1920s and 1930s, and how his reputation developed in later years.

*The reception of ‘Storm of Steel’.* Interestingly, *Storm of Steel* received more notice when it was published in England in 1929 than during the earlier 1920s in Germany. Published first in 1921 at Jünger’s own expense, and later taken up by a publisher of militaria, sales of the book in Germany by 1929 had only reached 39,000.<sup>139</sup> In England, by contrast, five editions were published in the first year, and in 4 months more reviews appeared than the book had received in Germany throughout the entire duration of the Weimar Republic.<sup>140</sup> Müller describes how, early in the Weimar Republic, Jünger’s work was seen not as literature, but as forming part of a “veritable torrent” of self-justifying memoirs written by officers, “whose function ... was to deny German war guilt, to highlight the author’s professional credentials as a soldier, and to absolve the officer corps of blame for Germany’s defeat by showing that the army had been ‘stabbed in the back’ by the politicians”.<sup>141</sup> Denham speaks of “... two now-famous arguments found in nearly all books of this type: the war-guilt lie and the stab-in-the-back legend ...”.<sup>142</sup> In England however, *Storm of Steel* was seen as ‘literary’ from the beginning, and

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<sup>138</sup> Ernst Jünger, “Ansprache zu Verdun, am 24 Juni 1979”, from *Sämtliche Werke, Zweite Abteilung, Band 7, Essays I*, (Klett-Cotta, 1980). Translated by Christine Wales.

<sup>139</sup> Hans-Harald Müller, “Herr Jünger thinks war a lovely business”, in *Intimate Enemies: English and German literary reactions to the Great War 1914-1918*, ed. Franz Karl Stanzel and Martin Löschnigg, (Heidelberg, Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1994), p328.

<sup>140</sup> Müller, *Intimate Enemies*, p328.

<sup>141</sup> Müller, *Intimate Enemies*, pp328, 329.

<sup>142</sup> Denham, *Visions of War.*, p102.



among English readers there was none of the prejudice against memoirs written by officers which was commonly found in Germany. Further, the 1929 publication of *All Quiet on the Western Front* not only sparked off the Second Wave of WW1 writings already identified, but also generated a demand specifically for German literature on the war. The reception of *Storm of Steel* in England was apolitical, and according to Müller its attraction to reviewers derived from “... the distinctive personality of the author, the realistic description of the war on the Western Front, and the depiction of the enemy as chivalrous and honourable”.<sup>143</sup> (Jünger contributed an author’s preface to the English edition of 1929 in which he said: “Of all the troops who were opposed to the Germans on the great battlefields the English were not only the most formidable but the manliest and the most chivalrous”).<sup>144</sup>

In Germany, *Storm of Steel* sold steadily throughout the 1920s; in fact, Harvey describes it as a “best-seller”, in spite of the modest figures reported above. However, it was greatly outsold by other, more popular, books - Harvey quotes the example of Plüschow’s *Die Abenteuer des Fliegers von Tsingtau* (*The adventures of the Airman of Tsingtau*), which sold over 600,000 copies in the mid-1920s, and adds that “...even Barbusse’s *Le Feu*, published in German translation in 1918 ... seems to have also kept ahead of the sales of *Storm of Steel* till the time of Hitler’s coming to power in 1933”.<sup>145</sup>

Harvey suggests that the book may have had more influence on other writers and intellectuals than that exerted by other, more popular, books. This was probably true also of the First and Second Wave books by (mainly) British writers which helped to establish and propagate the LAF myth of the Western Front: Bracco, surveying British writers, identifies a large number of “middlebrow” books which were popular but which are not normally seen as figuring in the WW1 literature.<sup>146</sup> Perhaps, as proposed in Chapter 2, it is mainly through ‘literary’ writings, which have their main influence on society through their impact on the intelligentsia, that the mythology of WW1 has become developed and rooted in the culture.

*Jünger as literary stylist.* *Storm of Steel* is undoubtedly a superb account of experience on the Western Front, whatever reservations one may have about its

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<sup>143</sup> Müller, *Intimate Enemies*, pp328, 337.

<sup>144</sup> *Storm of Steel*, pxiii.

<sup>145</sup> Harvey, *A Muse of Fire*, p221.

<sup>146</sup> Rosa Maria Bracco, *Merchants of Hope: British Middlebrow Writers and the First World War*, (Oxford and Providence: Berg Publishers, 1992).



alienation from human feeling. An anonymous obituary writer rated *Storm of Steel* one of the greatest works about WW1, ranking alongside those by Remarque, Barbusse, ee cummings, David Jones and Lucien Descaves<sup>147</sup>, while Paddy Griffith, in an introduction to the 1994 British edition, described it as “... a classic not only of military studies but also of general literature.”<sup>148</sup> Another obituarist quoted André Gide as having called it “the best book about war which I know”<sup>149</sup>, while George Steiner wrote that “It remains the most remarkable piece of writing to come out of the First World War.”<sup>150</sup>

But Steiner adds; “I emphasize ‘writing’. ... Ernst Jünger came nearer than any other writer, nearer even than the poets, to forcing language into the mould of total war.” Nearly all the commentators on and obituarists of Jünger speak of him as above all a stylist, and of style as representing his principal merit as a writer. Even in translation, as shown in examples reproduced above, it is remarkable. It has a “frightening precision”<sup>151</sup>, although another commentator qualifies this by adding that “The hard, smooth enamelling that seems to armour his prose against the touch of too great a familiarity would seem to us perhaps a little frigid if we did not know, and if we never lost consciousness of the fact while reading, that it has been tempered in an ordeal of fire.”<sup>152</sup> It seems that Jünger’s experience of loss of meaning in the world after the ordeal of the Western Front implied that the only true reality remaining for him was language: as he said himself; “When all buildings shall be destroyed, language will none the less persist. ... Today that thought consoles me”.<sup>153</sup>

Huyssens, writing in 1993, noted that in Germany Jünger continued to be seen as “master stylist and representative of 20<sup>th</sup>-century German literature”<sup>154</sup>. But the Nobel Laureate Heinrich Böll, describing his first reading of *On the Marble Cliffs* states that “... his mysticism and symbolism seemed far-fetched to me, and his style too refined and artificial”<sup>155</sup>. Stern, writing in the years after WW2, after lengthy

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<sup>147</sup> *Independent* obituary.

<sup>148</sup> *Storm of Steel*, pv. The introduction to the 1929 edition was provided by R.H.Mottram, a writer whose well-known pacifism contributed, according to Müller, to the book’s initial acceptance in England.

<sup>149</sup> *Daily Telegraph* obituary.

<sup>150</sup> Introduction by George Steiner to *On the Marble Cliffs* (page unnumbered).

<sup>151</sup> *Guardian* obituary

<sup>152</sup> Julien Gracq, quoted in the *Independent* obituary.

<sup>153</sup> Quoted in Steiner, op. cit., p8.

<sup>154</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *New German Critique*, 59 (1993), p4.

<sup>155</sup> Heinrich Böll, *New German Critique* 59 (1993). p152.



consideration finally deems Jünger “second-rate”.<sup>156</sup> Stern’s judgement seems especially worthy of respect, based as it is on a detailed analysis of the German texts (by a scholar with German mother-tongue) which relates Jünger’s writing to the tendency he observes in twentieth-century German literature to be “invaded by abstraction”.<sup>157</sup> Reviewing the metaphors Jünger employs, many of them derived from the nomenclature of the battlefield, Stern speaks of his “embattled” style, concluding that he “... asserts in the voice of military command a lifeless order and rigid discipline where there ought to be living experience”.<sup>158</sup>

Whatever Jünger’s value as a literary figure may be judged to be, therefore, the RTS myth gained a great deal of visibility partly through the substantial readership of *Storm of Steel*, especially in the English edition, and partly through the critical attention paid to him as a writer of high stylistic quality whose best-known work remains the account of his liminal experience on the Western Front.

Jünger’s relationship to Nazism. The attraction of Jünger’s views for the Nazis has already been mentioned. Mazower notes that:

“Reared on war, extremist ideologues preferred violence to reason, action to rhetoric: from Marinetti to Ernst Jünger, many young European males in the 1920s seemed ready to justify and even advocate the politics of confrontation”. Jünger and others “... assailed democracy for being ‘bourgeois’: sluggish, materialistic, unexciting and incapable of arousing the sympathy of the masses, reflecting the aspirations of an older generation ...”.<sup>159</sup>

Jünger certainly distanced himself from direct involvement in Nazi politics, but he was no democrat and, although he undoubtedly found the Nazis distasteful to his refined sensibility, his attitudes to them were ambivalent. This caused considerable problems for him in his later years, especially when controversy over his ‘Nazi past’ flared up when he was awarded the Goethe prize in 1982.

As for the Nazis themselves, it seems that to the members of the Hitler Youth the experience of WW1 was presented as a major source of German strength and that Jünger’s books were “mandatory reading”.<sup>160</sup> Linder writes, of Jünger and other

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<sup>156</sup> Stern, *Jünger*, p7.

<sup>157</sup> Stern, *Jünger*, p21.

<sup>158</sup> Stern, *Jünger*, p27.

<sup>159</sup> Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe’s Twentieth Century*, (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1998), p21.

<sup>160</sup> Linder, *Princes of the Trenches*, p178.



contemporary 'conservative' writers, that " ... the books they created glorified the spiritual unity and community of the front, and correspondingly denigrated its opposite - a post-war Germany that they could not comprehend and which they felt had betrayed them and their dead comrades. In doing so, they created a literature that, if not itself National Socialist, was acceptable to the Nazis and could be easily appropriated by them after 1933".<sup>161</sup>

*Jünger in England and France.* Jünger now seems little-known in the UK. Although at the time of his death in 1998 full-page obituaries were published in all the British broadsheet newspapers and some magazines, few educated British people have ever heard of him, let alone know anything about him or his writings.<sup>162</sup> The initial popularity of *Storm of Steel* has evidently faded and his later writings are little known, except in some cases to enthusiasts for science fiction: Keegan asserts that in Britain Jünger is now "known only to specialists".<sup>163</sup> Nothing by Jünger is included in Glover and Silkin's collection of WW1 prose, although many non-British nationalities are represented among the authors; nor does Faulks and Hensgen's recent collection mention him.<sup>164</sup> This situation both helps to explain, and is also partially explained by, British concentration on the 'war poets' and the LAF myth.

The perception of Jünger's later political views as pro-Nazi must affect the way he is viewed in the UK; for example, Faulks suggests that "the trouble is that Jünger, while not anti-Semitic, was never convincingly anti-Nazi".<sup>165</sup> Further, the view of his work as of literary value is not universally accepted by English-language commentators including, as mentioned above, the German-born Stern. Keegan is not very impressed: speaking of *Storm of Steel* he thinks Jünger "no better" than Sassoon and several other English writers, adding dismissively, "All that he adds is a typical German floundering about in Will and Form and other standbys of continental

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<sup>161</sup> Linder, op.cit., p171.

<sup>162</sup> Anecdotal evidence, from informal questioning by the author. One exception to this rule was Michael Wharton, the well-known right-wing satirical writer on the London *Daily Telegraph*, who wrote: "Ernst Jünger ... is among the tutelary heroes of my Peter Simple column ... scholar, entomologist, philosopher, writer of genius, he is for me a benign, fabulous monster." (Obituary in *Daily Telegraph*).

<sup>163</sup> Review by John Keegan of Nevin's *Jünger*, *Daily Telegraph*, January 11 1997.

<sup>164</sup> Jon Glover and Jon Silkin, eds, *Penguin Book of First World War Prose*, (London: Penguin Books, 1990); Sebastian Faulks and Jörg Hensgen, *The Vintage Book of War Stories*, (London: Vintage Books, 1999). Hensgen, in an email to the author of Dec 2 1999, states the reason for the omission of any reference to *Storm of Steel* is that it is a memoir, while the anthology in question is a selection of fiction. This seems rather inconsistent, in view of the inclusion in the book of pieces by Sassoon, which are also essentially memoirs.

<sup>165</sup> Review by Sebastian Faulks of Nevin's *Jünger*, *Sunday Times* Jan 19 1997.



idealism, so much more impressive to international intellectuals than English-speaking pragmatism”.<sup>166</sup> These present-day images of Jünger in the UK, alongside the ubiquity of the LAF myth in British culture, no doubt helps to account for the weak acceptance of the RTS myth in that country.

However, Jünger has been much admired in France, especially during the post-WW2 years, when not only was he fêted by politicians but, according to Chatwin, “... the translation of Jünger’s works is a minor literary industry”.<sup>167</sup> Neaman gives some reasons for this popularity:<sup>168</sup> firstly, that Jünger loved French literature since first encountering it soon after the end of WW1. In his own work he drew on the post-symbolists and decadents, and in this sense “The inspirers of Jünger’s sensibility are French rather than German”.<sup>169</sup> Many French intellectuals and artists thus saw in him a kindred spirit. And secondly, Neaman asserts, because of his conduct in France during WW2, when among other things he “protected valuable manuscripts of the *Bibliothèque Nationale* from plunder and (rescued) a church in Laon from destruction by refusing to carry out orders to use dynamite”, Jünger was seen in the post-war years as a ‘good German’, who appreciated French culture and had been opposed to the Nazis. At the end of WW2 his circle of admirers in France evaluated him as much more than a writer of WW1 memoirs and right-wing social analysis. They began to propagate the “image of a ‘great’ European writer of the modernist tradition”, and this is how Jünger came more generally to be seen in that country.<sup>170</sup>

It was presumably in his roles as ‘good German’ and ‘great European modernist writer’ that Jünger became accepted over the years as a symbol and icon of Franco-German reconciliation. No doubt his extreme longevity was also a factor in this evolution. I would assert, additionally, that this period of admiration in France was coincident with the evolution of his views, and his writings, towards the RR myth.

*Jünger and Sassoon.* Superficially, Jünger and Sassoon seem to have come from rather similar (i.e. comfortable upper middle-class) worlds but to have lived lives which took very different paths, although they were both men who shared the

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<sup>166</sup> Review by John Keegan of Nevin’s *Jünger*, *Daily Telegraph*, January 11 1997.

<sup>167</sup> Chatwin, “Ernst Jünger, an aesthete at war”, p299.

<sup>168</sup> Elliot Yale Neaman, “Warrior or Esthete? Reflections on the Jünger reception in France and Germany”, *New German Critique* 59 (1993): pp118-122.

<sup>169</sup> Steiner, Introduction to *On the Marble Cliffs*, p14.

<sup>170</sup> Neaman, *Jünger*, p121. Jünger was made an honorary citizen of Laon in 1972.



military experience of WW1 and became well-known for writing about it. Even during WW1, although they were both very much men of action, and were both decorated for valour by their respective countries, their attitudes to conflict were different, Jünger glorifying war as a fundamental human activity while Sassoon “... courted death ... craved annihilation ... (and) derived a drug-like satisfaction from facing danger unafraid”.<sup>171</sup> But there are two interesting similarities between them; first, that Sassoon is valued as a writer almost entirely for his Western Front-related work. Little that he wrote on other topics has lasted well, and in his later life he lapsed almost into literary obscurity, relatively little honoured in his own country or elsewhere. By contrast, Jünger produced a much larger and more varied output, and became a fêted (though always controversial) international figure in his later years. But even he remains best-known for the work he produced out of the heat of WW1. It seems that the liminal experiences they both underwent were so powerful that they had the effect of drawing from them the best writing of which they were capable. It was the intensity of the experience that produced the creative power that went into their literary work, and the consequent quality of this work which gave such an impetus to the myths with which they are associated.

The second similarity between Jünger and Sassoon arises from the way in which both of them, during the 1930s, partially withdrew from public view. According to Nevin, Jünger returned in the 1930s to the “dream world of a very private bourgeois sensibility” in which his Nazi-period writings “might be read as a self-satiric programme of escape-hatching” and his WW2 Paris journals “epitomize this withdrawal to the point of caricature”.<sup>172</sup> This “internal emigration” bears some similarity with Sassoon’s withdrawal from the world, superficially accentuated by the fact that both went to live on remote country estates, Sassoon at Heytesbury, Wiltshire and Jünger at Wilfingen, his home between the Danube and the Black Forest. Their withdrawal could be seen as reaction to the intensity of their liminal experiences, although other factors were of course at work as well. In Sassoon’s case these were largely personal, while for Jünger, as for many Germans during those years, the principal reason for ‘internal emigration’ was the increasing political predominance of the Nazi movement.

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<sup>171</sup> Robert Wohl, *The generation of 1914*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1980), p100.

<sup>172</sup> Nevin, *Jünger*, p237.



**8. Conclusion: Jünger and the RTS myth.** Loose's characterisation of Jünger as 'homo ludens' (see Section 2 above) places him in a liminal role on his own, somewhat outside mainstream society, more capable than most of taking risks and of producing surprises, as indeed he did in the way in which he evolved over the years. He remains a most striking figure, almost Ovidian in his facility for metamorphosis as the century proceeded.

The mimesis, which in the Girardian scheme leads to sacrifice, is seen much more clearly in Jünger's WW1-related writings than in those of Sassoon. Jünger's version of the RTS myth is clearly driven by German nationalism and by his perception of the superiority of German culture to that of other European nations. His writings lend themselves well to an approach to myth through the *communitas* of front soldiers which he so powerfully describes. However, he clearly saw the Western Front as a place of self-sacrifice by German forces, and thus as a primary Girardian sacrifice. This is the way in which Jünger's 'retrospective transfiguration' of the sacrifice relates to the RTS myth.

Jünger distanced himself, to some extent, from the social order - Nazism - which resulted from the working out of the RTS myth in the German context of the 1930s and 1940s. Through his redrafting of *Storm of Steel* and his later writings and speeches, such as *The Peace* and the 1979 speech at Verdun, in his later years he became an exponent of the RR myth, especially as regards the relationship between Germany and France.



**Chapter 7**  
**Literature and myth III: The RR myth and the work of some writers of the Third Wave**

**Contents**

1. *Introduction*
2. *The RR myth and the writers of the Third Wave*
3. *Jünger and 'The Peace'*
4. *Pat Barker: the 'Regeneration' trilogy and 'Another World'*
5. *Sebastian Faulks' 'Birdsong'*
6. *Susan Hill's 'Strange Meeting', Jean Rouaud's 'Fields of Glory', and the work of other writers*
7. *Conclusions*

1. **Introduction.** In this chapter I consider the RR myth, in the context of the work of some writers of the Third Wave. I see these Third Wave writers as performing an act of remembrance of the *communitas* of those who experienced WW1, and as retrospectively transfiguring and reinterpreting the sacrificial crisis of the war in the light of the social and cultural order that arose from it and from WW2, after which the Third Wave writers emerged. While RR is being considered here in the context of the Third Wave, it is important to recognise that it had literary forebears in earlier writing, among those writers (Owen, for instance) who saw *communitas* as arising, not only within national groupings of front soldiers, but also across enemy lines.

Because of the diversity of the perspectives adopted by Third Wave writers, this chapter is less focused on the relationship of a single writer with a particular myth than were chapters 5 (Sassoon and LAF) and 6 (Jünger and RTS). There are many writers in the Third Wave, and it is difficult to generalise about them, beyond saying that in all cases their work was inspired in some way by the Western Front. The approach I have adopted is to concentrate on a small number of writers who have been especially successful in the 1990s, and in particular on the work of the novelists Pat Barker, Sebastian Faulks, Susan Hill and Jean Rouaud. I seek in the work of these and other writers to identify relationships with the myths, but on reading them recognise that, at such a distance in time, their writings are 'about' more than the war itself.



**2. The RR myth and the writers of the Third Wave.** The idea of ‘European unity’ has a very long history.<sup>1</sup> It has been asserted that in modern times the aspiration for unity has become the “main European myth”, a myth based on shared community, responding to the need for Europe to redefine itself in the post-colonial period.<sup>2</sup> An important part of its contemporary inspiration is the ‘Reconciliation and Regeneration’ myth (‘RR’) of the Western Front, long established, but gaining immensely in weight and practical significance in the years following WW2. This myth was articulated in Chapter 2 as follows:

*“West European countries have been ravaged by invasion and war for centuries. The fighting on the Western Front in 1914-1918 brought with it for the first time in the history of war killing on an industrial scale. No-one was the victor: all sides lost in the fighting. The whole war was an episode of social and political madness. The peoples of Western Europe must learn from this experience, and that of WW2, so as to ensure that nothing like it ever happens again. Our differing national cultures form part of a greater Christian civilisation and we share the same classical roots. German, French, British, Italian ...we must become reconciled to each other and cooperate in the regeneration of a society and economy in which we are all partners”.*

This myth clearly shares some elements with both LAF and RTS. With LAF it shares a view of the futility of the war on the Western Front, while with RTS it shares a desire to find something positive in the experience. RTS is a myth which is concerned with finding meaning in the struggle itself, which RR looks for meaning after the struggle is over. While, as argued in Chapter 1, LAF clearly persists in the European imagination, as does RTS (since myths rarely die), RR has evolved with them, gaining strength as the movement towards European integration developed from the 1920s onwards. RR, fulfilling the need to assign meaning to the suffering and sacrifice of two wars in which large parts of Europe were devastated, is to a degree constitutive of the social and political order of modern Europe, and supports a view of WW1 as its ‘founding murder’. It synthesises LAF and RTS, recognising that in the

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Kevin Wilson and Jan van der Dussen, *The History of the Idea of Europe*, (London, Routledge, 1993); Richard Vaughan, *Twentieth Century Europe: Paths to Unity*, (London, Croom Helm, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> Sonja Puntser Riekmann, “The Myth of European Unity”, in Geoffrey Hosking and George Schöpfunglin (eds.), *Myths and Nationhood*, (London: Hurst and Company (in association with the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University of London), 1997), pp60-71.



end no-one could be said to have ‘won’, but celebrating the value of the distinct national cultures of all the nations involved.

The myth is certainly well known and accepted in modern Europe, and is frequently referred to in speeches by European politicians. One of the first of these references was made by Winston Churchill, who in his famous speech in Zurich on 19 September 1946 stated: “We must all turn our backs on the horrors of the past ... We cannot afford to drag forward across the years that are to come the hatreds and revenges which have sprung from the injuries of the past.”<sup>3</sup> Two years later, at the Hague conference of 1948, Salvador de Madariaga made an inspiring speech, ending with the cry ‘FIAT EUROPA’, in which he evoked Rabelais, Voltaire, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, Dostoevsky, Michelangelo, Bach, Newton and Leibniz as icons of a shared European cultural heritage, from which all Europeans will “...step back horror-stricken at the idea of laying a murderous hand on it”.<sup>4</sup> In his Zurich speech Churchill went on to say: “the first step in the re-creation of the European family must be a partnership between France and Germany.” And indeed, a memorial stone in front of the main door of the historic cathedral of Reims records the occasion when German Chancellor Adenauer and French President de Gaulle met in 1962 to mark the ‘reconciliation’ of their two countries.<sup>5</sup> Later, Ernst Jünger, earlier the prime exponent of the RTS myth, spoke at Verdun, as already mentioned in chapter 6, of the end of Franco-German enmity. In the Girardian scheme, along with myth go ritual and prohibition, and the RR myth clearly provides the prohibition which is needed to prevent future war, especially between France and Germany. But the cautious and sometimes ‘Euro-sceptic’ British are not excluded from the myth and the prohibition, as all political parties proclaim their commitment to European friendship and cooperation (if not always to European ‘integration’), and British schoolchildren, on field trips in France, can leave in German WW1 military cemeteries messages such as “From the conflict of the past comes the friendship of today”.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> From *The Cause of a United Europe, Speeches by Winston Churchill on European Unity 1946-48*, (London, The Conservative Group for Europe, 1996), pp. 18-21.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Sonja Puntser Riekmann, “The Myth of European Unity”, pp65, 66.

<sup>5</sup> The inscription reads, “À Monsieur Marty, Archevêque de Reims / “Excellence, le Chancelier Adenauer et moi-même venons dans votre cathédrale sceller la réconciliation de la France et de l’Allemagne”/ Charles de Gaulle/ Dimanche 8 Juillet 1962 11h02”. Noted by the author when visiting Reims, July 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Message on wreath laid by schoolchildren from Maidstone, England, in Langemarck German cemetery, Belgium. Observed by the author July 26, 2000.



In the Girardian scheme, the myth that has arisen from the death of the sacrificial victim becomes part of a new order. The myth has social functions, one of which in the case of the RR myth is clearly to support and validate the modern integration of Europe. The myth, like all myths, is a way of helping people to make sense of the present, and the RR myth is regularly invoked when questions are raised about the wisdom of this or that further step in the development of the European Union. In this way, RR has become constitutive of the social order of modern Europe.

In this context, an interesting present-day phenomenon is the frequency with which references appear to the famous ‘truce’ of Christmas 1914, which involved soldiers of the German, French, British and other armies in many episodes of fraternisation. Knowledge of, and interest in, the ‘Christmas truce’ may be seen as a demonstration of one kind of ‘retrospective transfiguration of the sacrificial crisis’ of WW1 which has taken place in modern European society, and surely provides an indication of the extent to which the RR myth has come to underlie the present-day social order. First reported soon after the time of its occurrence<sup>7</sup>, the story of the truce went underground for many years, resurfacing in the 1960s, as far as the UK was concerned, in the play and film *Oh! What a Lovely War*.<sup>8</sup> Histories and fictional accounts of the truce continue to be written or re-published,<sup>9</sup> and its occurrence has been set against the general principle of ‘live and let live’ referred to in Chapter 3. One recent (American) historian of the truce stated; “Although it clearly happened ... the event had taken on the quality of myth ...”<sup>10</sup> Of another writer, later involved in anti-war activities in the 1930s, it has been said that the truce was “... the central event in his life. He discovered that the Germans think they are fighting for exactly

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<sup>7</sup> The first published account of the truce (beyond newspaper reports) was probably that given in Arthur Conan Doyle, *The British Campaign in France and Flanders, 1914*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1916), p.334.

<sup>8</sup> An account of the revival of this legend appeared in an article by Malcolm Brown in the *Guardian*, December 24, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> E.g. Malcolm Brown and Shirley Seaton, *Christmas Truce* (London: Pan Books, 2001); Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night; The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001). Weintraub also refers to Robert Graves’ *Christmas Truce*, a short story first published as late as 1962, and republished in 1995 (p.108); to William Douglas Home’s play *A Christmas Truce*, first performed in 1989 (p.190); and to *War Game* by Michael Foreman, a children’s story published in 1987 (illustration opposite p.111). Additionally, the popular BBC TV comedy series, *Blackadder*, concluded in 1989 with an episode located in the trenches in 1917, in which the ‘football match’ is recalled (see Weintraub, pp. 109-110).

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Stanley Weintraub, National Review Online (<http://www.nationalreview.com/weekend/history/history-weintraub122201.shtml>), Jan 13/14 2002.



the same things as the British. So the war was a misunderstanding, or a failure to understand”<sup>11</sup> In January 2001 a cartoon appeared in the British *Prospect* magazine in which, against background singing of ‘Silent night, Holy night’ a British soldier is saying to a German: “Sorry, Fritz, the football’s off - we can’t agree on a manager”. The cartoonist was able to assume that the cultural reference would be so widely recognised that he could use it as the basis for a joke.<sup>12</sup> And finally, the death in 2001 of the “last survivor” of a similar truce at Christmas 1915 was recorded on the obituary page of a national newspaper.<sup>13</sup> As discussed in Chapter 2, the story of the Christmas truce is a folk tale or legend rather than a myth, but its reappearance in public discourse is an indication of the strength of the myth – RR - with which it is associated.

For the writers of the Third Wave, who were identified in Chapter 4, the early myths of the Western Front - LAF and RTS - already existed, and formed a background to the social order of their times. Being (apart from Jünger) members of a generation which had not lived through WW1, their memory of the *communitas* of the Western Front was a second-hand memory, obtained from earlier writers and other artists and, in many cases, from the war-time experiences, related to them over the years, of relatives. All their notions about the Western Front were mediated through the ideas of others, and even the first-hand recollections of veteran survivors, recounted 60 or more years later, may have been mediated in this way: as Dyer comments; (for such veterans) “... the linguistic and thematic conventions of the genre are more powerful than the original experience”.<sup>14</sup> To the extent, therefore, that their writings concerned the liminal experience of front soldiers, the ‘remembered *communitas*’ (which may of course involve some reinterpretation of the *communitas*) which might form the basis of new or modified myth could be expected to tend to reinforce existing myths.

However, those lost on the Western Front are often thought of as victims of the stubbornness and lack of imagination of their military and political leaders, and this

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<sup>11</sup> Said of Roger Mortimore, central figure in Henry Williamson’s 15-volume autobiographical novel sequence *Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*. Quoted in Hugh Cecil, “Henry Williamson: Witness of the Great War”, in Brocard Sewell, ed., *Henry Williamson, the Man, the Writings: a Symposium*, (Padstow, Cornwall: Tabb House, 1980), p120.

<sup>12</sup> The contemporary reference was to the inability of the English national football team to find a new manager.

<sup>13</sup> Obituary of Bertie Felstead, *The Guardian*, August 3 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Geoff Dyer, *The Missing of the Somme*, p.81.



perception leads to a kind of ‘projected *communitas*’ of these victims which suffuses much of the Third Wave writing on the subject. This provides another route to the creation of myth, through the *communitas* of victimhood, and indeed might be expected to produce new or substantially modified myths than those which came directly out of the war. Reconciliation can begin when both victims and victimisers can see themselves as victims,<sup>15</sup> and one might attempt to see whether the emergence of the RR myth is accompanied, in literature, by a retrospective recognition of this kind, whereby readers are brought to see all those who were involved in any way in the struggles of Western Front, on either side, as victims of some deeper causation, such as the consequences of technological advance or of societal forces.

The Third Wave writers all have something new to say, and it is to these new perspectives that one might look for a Girardian ‘retrospective transfiguration of the sacrificial crisis’ of the experience of the Western Front and, consequently, the emergence of new myth. What is of interest in studying the Third Wave writers is the way in which they bring about their own particular and personal ‘transfiguration’. This will be the principal focus of the analysis undertaken in this chapter.

The Third Wave writers retell the story of the Western Front from the vantage point of at least 50 years of further history. The LAF myth suffuses their work, perhaps largely due to the phenomenon of ‘mediation’ referred to above and discussed in Chapter 4, but they express the myth differently from the writers of the First and Second Waves, who had all had direct experience of the war. Various aspects of the Third Wave novels illuminate aspects of the myth-making process, and both modify and extend the earlier myths. One can in some cases perceive, behind the continued preoccupation with LAF, and occasional reference to RTS, elements of RR beginning to emerge.

**3. Jünger and *The Peace*.** Jünger was not, chronologically speaking, a writer of the Third Wave. Most of his relevant writings form part of the First and Second Waves, and most of the work of his later life, though partly contemporaneous with that of the Third Wave writers, was not relevant to the subject of this thesis. But he can be seen as providing a literary ‘bridge’ between the First and Second Wave writers, and those

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<sup>15</sup> Comment made by Dr Stefan Rossbach, Research Training Seminar, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Kent, March 13 2002.



of the Third Wave, in that in *The Peace* he introduces thinking which both reflects and promotes the RR myth.

*The Peace* does not relate directly to Jünger's WW1 experience, nor is it a novel, nor overtly autobiographical, but it derives force from Jünger's reflections on the consequences for Europe and the world of two world wars, in both of which he had fought. It is a brief (68 pages) polemical essay which sets out Jünger's views on the post-WW2 order in Europe. The work has two parts, "The Seed" and "The Fruit", the seed being the war and the fruit the peace which must inevitably follow it. The soil in which the seed grows is the sacrifice which WW2 has demanded from everyone involved, while the fruit must also involve everyone, in a new order of which Europe, free of nationalism, will be the centre.

*The Peace* was (and remains) a source of controversy in Germany, but it represents a shift in Jünger's own thinking away from RTS and towards the RR myth. It has been seen as " ... Jünger's definite break with the values of his past, a balance sheet and a farewell, as well as a vision of things to come".<sup>16</sup> In this sense it is a key text for the study of the evolution of the myths.

By the end of WW2, Jünger's feelings about European war had changed. "Jünger, once he realised the fruits of that nihilistic spirit which he himself was not innocent of having brought into being, revolted and turned away in disgust and shame".<sup>17</sup> In *The Peace* he writes, concerning the great battles such as those of Douaumont or Langemarck, that while in their memory of these events people " ... could mingle pride with suffering; here only sorrow and humiliation remain, for the desecration was such that it touched the whole human race and no man can free himself from complicity".<sup>18</sup> This is a formulation of *communitas* in which all involved are seen as victims, in this case embracing the whole of humanity. As a means of avoiding such disasters in future, he goes on to propose a form of European integration, an 'empire of states' in which diversity is preserved but unity achieved in a way cognate with the unity of the 'synthetic empires'<sup>19</sup> of the USA and the USSR. His European state would have a Christian foundation and be democratic, although

<sup>16</sup> Louis Clair, Introduction to Jünger, *The Peace*, p12.

<sup>17</sup> Introduction to Jünger, *The Peace*, p11.

<sup>18</sup> *The Peace*, pp29-30. Jünger is at this point referring to the "great seats of murder where in a last frenzy they attempted to root out whole peoples, whole races, whole classes ...": a reference, presumably, to the 'death camps' of the Nazis. The stated 'complicity' of the 'whole human race' in this has, of course, been one of the sources of controversy surrounding his work.

<sup>19</sup> *The Peace*, pp58-66, 69-73).



the precise meaning of 'democratic' in this context is left somewhat vague: Jünger's views on governance being much more authoritarian than libertarian.

Jünger's motives for producing this blueprint, with its apparent attempt to share out 'guilt' for WW2, at the particular stage in the war that he did, seemed questionable to many both inside and outside Germany.<sup>20</sup> It has been suggested that, because it was drafted so early, at the height of Nazi power, the radical change of position it represents cannot have been motivated by the prospect of Germany's defeat. In fact, it was originally intended for publication and mass circulation among German youth in the event that the assassination attempt on Hitler had succeeded.<sup>21</sup> But Stuart Hood, the translator of the English version, which was published in the USA, found it "... a somewhat disturbing book which seemed to me not so much to apologise for the past as to sweep much of it under the carpet". Hood adds: "... in the post-war climate the book was not one that a British publisher would have been inclined to take on. It would have been seen as too apologetic in tone and too exalted in style - it has that somewhat pompous note which is one of his weaknesses as a writer".<sup>22</sup> Jünger subtitled the German original, indeed rather pompously to English ears, *Ein Wort an die Jugend Europas und an die Jugend der Welt* (*A Word to the Youth of Europe and to the Youth of the World*). It is interesting to note that the author of the introduction to the English-language edition, 'Louis Clair', was in fact Lewis Coser, a German exile in the USA whose motive for associating himself with this work was to help to ameliorate the (inevitably) poor image of the German people in the USA at that time.<sup>23</sup>

Jünger's "retrospective transfiguration" of the sacrificial crises of both the Western Front and WW2 is to see "... all of mankind as equal subjects of suffering - the line between victim and victimizer being erased in the process".<sup>24</sup> This is a primary Girardian sacrifice, from which a new order must emerge. Nationalism, revenge and hatred must be overcome, and only a peace inspired by the need for repentance can give meaning to the war. The book is introduced with Spinoza's dictum that "The hatred, which is completely conquered by love, becomes love; and

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<sup>20</sup> See Nevin, *Jünger*, pp229-236.

<sup>21</sup> *Kindler's Literatur Lexikon*, (Zurich: Kindler, 1982), Vol.III, p.3698.

<sup>22</sup> Private communication: letter to the author from Stuart Hood, June 23 2000.

<sup>23</sup> Neaman, *Jünger*, p137.

<sup>24</sup> Neaman, *Jünger*, p131.



such love is then stronger than if hatred had not preceded it”.<sup>25</sup> This is a remarkable assertion coming from Jünger, whose previous writings had emphatically embodied the warrior spirit, and Nevin briskly comments: “Jünger, in whose diction ‘love’ seldom appears, does not indicate whose hatred is to be transformed nor how”.<sup>26</sup> However, whatever one may think of Jünger’s autocratic, ‘Christian’ view of a desirable post-war social order for Europe, or of his motives for seeking to share out both guilt and victimhood for WW2, he does appear in *The Peace* to leap seamlessly from the RTS myth with which he was principally associated to espousal of the RR myth.

**4. Pat Barker: the *Regeneration* trilogy and *Another World*.** Pat Barker’s *Regeneration* trilogy<sup>27</sup> is a complex narrative which combines fiction with historical events and characters. The trilogy may be seen as a reflection on the way in which WWI damaged the lives of individuals who were caught up in it, and how, in various ways, attempts were made to heal them. The whole trilogy is an act of reconstruction on the part of the author, revisiting and reinterpreting a period of time and a set of experiences which, though now many years behind us, have deeply affected many people alive in Europe in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.<sup>28</sup> In this sense Barker sets out for her readers an account which represents her personal ‘retrospective transfiguration of the sacrificial crisis’ of the war.

Post-WW2 writers have to live with the fact that their views of WW1 are inevitably coloured by the writings of earlier authors and the myths with which they are associated. Dyer comments: “Given the near impossibility of remaining beyond the reach of Sassoon and Owen, one solution is to include them in the fictive world of a novel. Pat Barker has done exactly this ...”.<sup>29</sup> The historical characters who play a principal role in Barker’s trilogy are in fact Siegfried Sassoon and the anthropologist and Freudian psychologist W.H.R.Rivers FRS (1864-1922).<sup>30</sup> Among the many

<sup>25</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, 44<sup>th</sup> Theorem, quoted in *The Peace*, p.17.

<sup>26</sup> Nevin, *Jünger*, p.229.

<sup>27</sup> Pat Barker, *Regeneration*, *The Eye in the Door*, *The Ghost Road*, (London:Penguin Books, 1991, 1993, 1995 respectively). The three novels of the trilogy will be referred to for brevity as RG (*Regeneration*), ED (*The Eye in the Door*) and GR (*The Ghost Road*).

<sup>28</sup> Barker’s trilogy has been translated into German, but not into French. Interestingly, *Regeneration* is given in German the title *Niemansland*.

<sup>29</sup> Geoff Dyer, *The Missing of the Somme*, p.80.

<sup>30</sup> Wilfred Owen plays a less important role than Sassoon for most of the trilogy. Several other historical characters also appear.



historical episodes described are the publication of Sassoon's "Soldier's Declaration",<sup>31</sup> which comes very early in the trilogy, and the death of Wilfred Owen in action at the Sambre-Oise Canal on November 4 1918, which comes virtually at its end. The interacting experiences and reflections of three main characters provide the essence of the novels. These characters are Rivers, Sassoon and the (fictitious) working-class, bisexual officer Billy Prior - the latter a creation of the novelist which is outstanding in its ambiguity and complexity.

Rivers was a distinguished scientist, who published many papers based on his early anthropological work in Melanesia as well as on his pioneering work in the treatment of 'shell shocked' patients.<sup>32</sup> He is presented sympathetically in the trilogy, as an early Freudian who helped his patients to rediscover and face up to the memories they had repressed, believing that in this way they would be able to regain their functionality as human beings. The inherent conflict in his task becomes clear early on: what he is doing is to 'cure' his patients, only so that they can return to the source of their affliction in the trenches.

Sassoon appears only in RG and ED: by the end of ED he has suffered the injury to his head which (historically) kept him in England during the final period of the war. He exhibits duality of character; he "... coped with the war by being two people: the anti-war poet and pacifist; the bloodthirsty, efficient company commander".<sup>33</sup> In addition, Sassoon is homosexual, though the force of his sexuality is portrayed as much less strong than that of Prior.

The character of Prior is full of contradictions. He is a working-class officer, a 'temporary gentleman' who before the war had worked as a clerk in a shipping office, is bisexual, a ministry spy (in ED) and also the friend of pacifists whom he has known since childhood days. His 'dissociation' of character seems to have developed in childhood as defence against his aggressively macho, working-class father, and comes into effect in ED when Prior exercises his ability to induce a form of self-hypnosis. Prior is portrayed as incapable of love: his early treatment of a homosexual partner verges on the sadistic and, although he professes love for his girlfriend Sarah Lumb, and perhaps

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<sup>31</sup> See Chapter 4 for the text of this declaration.

<sup>32</sup> Barker refers in an Author's Note to Rivers' publications on his methods of treating his patients, in "The repression of War Experience" (Lancet, 2 Feb 1918) and in his posthumously published book *Conflict and Dream*, (London, Kegan Paul, 1923). One of the papers describing his Melanesian work is: Rivers, W.H.R. (1917-18), *Dreams and Primitive Culture*, Manchester University Press.

<sup>33</sup> ED, p233.



begins to feel it, he appears to wish to avoid it. In one love-making scene (ED, p180) he sees in Sarah's face "... other faces. The dying looked like that". In an encounter with a prostitute in Scarborough (GR, Ch3), he sees the face of the woman as like that of the "boche" faces pictured on practice shooting targets. He is seen by Rivers, in a flash of insight, as "cold, observant, detached, manipulative and ruthless" (ED, Ch5).

Alongside these dualities (or, in the case of Prior multidimensionality) of character is the more general paradox, several times observed in the course of the narrative, that during this war it is those who, like Sassoon, are most profoundly sane who are treated as 'mad'.

The first novel of the trilogy, *Regeneration*, is set principally in the Craiglockart psychiatric hospital in Edinburgh, and introduces the principal characters. It deals with the issues raised by Rivers' approach to the treatment of soldiers suffering from what became known as 'shell-shock', exploring themes of class, sexuality, guilt and the nature and treatment of neurosis. Early in the novel Sassoon sends to Rivers, via Graves, three of his poems, which Rivers realises represent Sassoon's determination to remember the horror of his experiences, in contrast to most patients at Craiglockart, who wanted only to forget.<sup>34</sup> The second novel, *The Eye in the Door*, concentrates on the activities of Prior and Rivers. Both are now in London, Prior working in an intelligence section in the Ministry of Munitions and Rivers at the RFC Hospital. Prior seeks meetings with childhood friends who are involved in protecting pacifists, and eventually returns to the front in France. Sassoon comes back to London from France, having been injured by one of his own men, and feeling full of guilt at having 'escaped' from the war. The novel contains many discussions and interior monologues in which Rivers is a protagonist, concerning his relationships with his patients, the nature of their conditions and the evolution of his own feelings about the war. The last novel of the trilogy, *The Ghost Road* begins with Prior at Scarborough awaiting, together with Owen, departure for the front in France, and ends poignantly with the death of both of them at the Sambre-Oise Canal. A short coda follows in which Rivers, somnolent and unwell, hears

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<sup>34</sup> RG, pp23-25. The poems are "The Rear-Guard" (*Collected Poems 1908-1956*, pp 69-70), "The General" (p75) and "To the Warmongers" (not included in *Collected Poems*), the first 2 lines of which are "I'm back again from hell/With loathsome thoughts to sell".



the voice of Njiru, the Melanesian witch-doctor of his earlier life, speaking the exorcism of Ave, the spirit of the dead.<sup>35</sup>

The *communitas* ‘remembered’ in the Regeneration trilogy is overwhelmingly the *communitas* of victims of the fighting on the Western Front, and specifically those victims, including Sassoon, Owen and Prior, who spent time at Craiglockart under the sympathetic treatment of Rivers. Other liminal groups, such as pacifists and homosexuals, to whom the term ‘*communitas*’ might be applied, appear in the novels. But the author concentrates to a greater extent on the suffering directly brought about by exposure to battle, and on the way in which these men, and their doctors and nurses, coped with their problems.

Early episodes of the novel describe the symptoms, some of them grotesque, of the Craiglockart patients and the experiences which appear to have caused them. Typically, patients have lost their memory and/or are experiencing hallucinations or frequent nightmares. In many cases they also, or in some cases instead, have physical symptoms such as paralysis or loss of feeling in the limbs.

Some examples: Captain Campbell is “bent double and walking backwards”.<sup>36</sup> Anderson is a RAMC doctor who vomited at the sight of blood, the consequence not so much of all the amputations he had carried out in the field, but of an occasion when a young French soldier he was treating bled to death because Anderson had failed to spot the concealed injury which was the chief cause of the bleeding.<sup>37</sup> Burns could not eat and had become skeletal from loss of weight. In France, he had been “... thrown into the air by the explosion of a shell and had landed, head-first, on German corpse, whose gas-filled belly had ruptured on impact. Before Burns lost consciousness, he’d had time to realize that what filled his nose and mouth was decomposing human flesh. Now, whenever he tried to eat, that taste and smell recurred. Nightly, he relived the experience”.<sup>38</sup> Broadbent made up fantastic stories about the honours he had supposedly received from foreign governments and the academic distinction he said he had achieved.<sup>39</sup> Owen stammered badly.<sup>40</sup> Arriving at Craiglockart, Billy Prior was initially

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<sup>35</sup> A more detailed exegesis of the novels is given in Graham Galer, *The Writer as Interpreter and Prophet: late Twentieth Century Images of the First World War* (MA dissertation collection, University of Kent at Canterbury, 1997).

<sup>36</sup> RG, p.26.

<sup>37</sup> RG, p.30.

<sup>38</sup> RG, p.19.

<sup>39</sup> RG, pp. 61-62.

<sup>40</sup> RG, p.80.



unable to speak, and had partially lost his memory.<sup>41</sup> In his initial interviews with Rivers the only way he can articulate his responses to Rivers' questions is to write them down. Later in the novel, under hypnosis (which he persuades a reluctant Rivers to give him), he recalls an occasion when, after a shell burst, he found in the floor of the trench the eye of one of his men who had just been killed: he picked it up and said "What am I supposed to do with this gobstopper?". Soon after this he lost his speech and was taken out of active service. Coming round from the hypnosis he begins to cry, saying how guilty he felt that his men had been killed. Out of hypnosis, the memory of the 'eye' episode has been completely lost to him. Sassoon is at Craiglockart only because of Graves' (historical) intervention after the affair of his 'Soldier's Declaration'. Only by having Sassoon declared 'mad', Graves believed, could a court martial be avoided. However, Sassoon was in fact troubled with hallucinations, having seen corpses on the pavement as he walked along Piccadilly, and at Craiglockart seeing an apparition in his bedroom of a dead companion from the trenches.<sup>42</sup>

What is the nature of the *communitas* among these men, as Barker describes it? Although 'in hospital', they were in many ways able to function normally, eating together, playing cards, sharing rounds of golf and going unaccompanied into Edinburgh. But all are suffering, and they share their suffering in many ways: through the knowledge that each has of the kind of front experience that has brought the others to this place, through observation of the symptoms of others and of the medical crises that regularly occur and, perhaps most potently, through the knowledge that all are at Craiglockart only to be 'cured' so that they can be sent back to the war. With the separation of these men from outside society, the variety of their symptoms, and the range of possible outcomes for each one of them, this situation is a good example of Turner's "subjunctive mood", a society in which many norms of conventional society are suspended and anything becomes possible. Indeed, there is a second liminality here, as the men of Craiglockart have been first separated from society as soldiers, and then from the army as patients. This situation gives rise to a 'double subjunctive' in which the soldiers have the chance, denied them for most of the time in the activity of ordinary wartime army life, to spend time reflecting on their predicament, and on the relationship of the war they have been fighting to the society to which they used to

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<sup>41</sup> RG, pp.41, 51-53.

<sup>42</sup> RG, pp13, 128.



belong. In Sassoon's case, he used the time to reach the conclusion that the only course for him to follow was to return to the war. (The 'manifesto' which resulted in his being sent to Craiglockart was conceived and composed in an earlier, historical, period of 'double liminality' for Sassoon, when, after being wounded on April 16 1917, he spent time in England, in hospital and convalescing ).

Within the generality of the inhabitants of Craiglockart is, in Barker's presentation, an 'inner' group of some of her principal characters, consisting of Sassoon, Prior and Rivers. Rivers may be seen as a member of the *communitas*, although he is not a patient at the hospital, through his close involvement with those he is treating and also through the fact that he shares with some of them a common symptom, that of stammering. Rivers' stammering has a quite different, though also traumatic, origin,<sup>43</sup> and its introduction is one of the ways by which the author binds him into the *communitas* of the other characters. It is through this inner group that Barker explores the ways in which 'anything becomes possible', conducting the exploration through accounts of Rivers' interviews with his patients, their mutual discussions and passages of internal reflection in which they all engage in the course of the novel.

If myth is seen as 'remembered *communitas*', the author is here performing an act of reconstruction which both reinforces and perhaps modifies the reader's own memories, themselves in most cases at least second-hand, since few of Barker's readers will have had direct experience of events which took place over 80 years ago (the trilogy was published between 1991 and 1995). Barker's presentation evokes in the reader feelings of sympathy and sadness at the waste of her characters' capacity to live normal lives and in this way, in terms of the three myths of the Western Front, tends to reinforce LAF. Her own feelings on the matter become clearer at the end of GR, when she puts into the mouth of Hallett, a young officer who had been grossly injured about the head, rescued by Prior<sup>44</sup> and then treated in London by Rivers, the dying word "Shotvarfet". Unable to speak clearly because of his injuries, Hallett, who earlier in the novel has been strongly defending the conduct of the war against Prior's cynical attack on it, is saying "it's not worth it".<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Explained in GR, p.94.

<sup>44</sup> GR, pp. 195-197.

<sup>45</sup> GR, pp. 266, 274.



Two passages - Rivers' musings on a stained glass window in RG, and Parts Two and Three of GR - are the keys to an interpretation of the *Regeneration* trilogy as an account of WW1 as 'sacrificial crisis'. In both these passages the author invokes, through her characters and situations, the notion of 'sacrifice'.

In RG, Rivers is visiting his brother Charles, a farmer, and goes to church on Sunday. In the east window of the church he observes a representation of the crucifixion with, below it, Abraham and Isaac, and the ram caught in a thicket. He reflects - "Obvious choices for the east window: the two bloody bargains on which a civilisation claims to be based. *The* bargain, Rivers thought, looking at Abraham and Isaac. The one on which all patriarchal societies are founded. If you, who are young and strong, will obey me, who am old and weak, even to the extent of being prepared to sacrifice your life, then in the course of time you will peacefully inherit, and be able to extract the same obedience from your sons. Only we're breaking the bargain ... All over northern France ... the inheritors were dying ... while old men, and women of all ages, gathered together and sang hymns."<sup>46</sup>

No doubt one could argue with Rivers' theology, as conveyed by the author, in this passage. But he states to himself the familiar view of WW1, as a war in which an older generation sacrificed its young in order to preserve an existing social order, a view immortalised in the concluding lines of Owen's famous poem: "*But the old man would not so, but slew his son/And half the seed of Europe, one by one.*"<sup>47</sup> This view of the war is sufficiently widely known and subscribed to in modern culture (although by no means universally accepted, as discussed in Chapter 4 in connection with the LAF myth) that Barker could take it as understood, and use it as the basis for her own 'transfiguration of the sacrificial crisis'.

Parts Two and Three of GR<sup>48</sup> reinforce this 'sacrificial' perception of the war in an interesting way. They consist principally of diary entries by Prior, interspersed with Rivers' memories of his earlier times in Melanesia. On the one hand Prior is moving towards his eventual death alongside the (historic) death of Owen at the Sambre-Oise

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<sup>46</sup> RG, p149.

<sup>47</sup> From "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young", in Owen's *Collected Poems*, p42. This was earlier discussed in Chapter 5.

<sup>48</sup> GR, pp. 107-275.



Canal while, on the other, Rivers is reflecting on the meaning of death, sacrifice and healing for the Pacific islanders.<sup>49</sup> They merit further exposition and analysis.

-Prior's diary begins in London on August 29 1918 and proceeds via brief stays in Folkestone and Étapes to the arrival, on September 7, of his posting to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Manchesters regiment.

-In the following chapter Rivers, in London and feeling unwell, recalls his first visit to Eddystone Island in Melanesia and his meeting with Njiru, the healer and custodian of the local cult of the skull. Njiru, speaking of a desperately ill man, says that he is Mate: mate is not death, but: "... a state of which death is the appropriate outcome".<sup>50</sup>

-Returning to Prior, a brief narrative passage is followed by the resumption of the diary (September 11), as the sound of guns is heard for the first time and, on joining the battalion, Prior encounters the Adjutant, "Marshall-of-the-Ten-Wounds", a Jünger-like figure; "Bold, cunning, ruthless, resolute, quick of decision, amazingly brave ... He's spent his entire adult life gravitating towards fighting ...".<sup>51</sup>

-There follows a return to Rivers' time on Eddystone Island, with a description of the death of a powerful chief, Ngea, and the rites surrounding it, including that of *tongo polo*, the vigil of the widow, which can only be ended by the taking of a head.<sup>52</sup>

-Prior's diary then continues (September 16) with the march up towards the front under continuous bombardment, the men at one stage singing 'Onward Christian soldiers' with one dissenter singing the 'alternative' version: "Forward Joe Soap's army/Marching without fear/With your brave commander/Safely in the rear".<sup>53</sup>

-In the next section Rivers learns of the present-day difficulty, for the native people, of obtaining the skull which would release Ngea's widow from *tongo polo*, due to the introduction and enforcement of British law which forbids head-hunting. The release comes, however, when they capture and bring to the island a four-year-old boy.

-On October 4 Prior is looking back on front-line action in which his men had been affected by gas from their own side and his batman, Longstaffe (the 'dissenter' of the march to the front) had been killed. He reflects that this situation was "... breakdown territory, as defined by Rivers. Confined space, immobility, helplessness, passivity, constant danger that you can nothing to avert".<sup>54</sup> He rescues the injured Hallett from a shell hole and reflects on his comrade Owen, whom he had seen in the attack they had taken part in "... caped and masked in blood, seize a machine-gun and turn it on its previous owners at point-blank range".<sup>55</sup> He concludes (in an internal monologue): "We are Craiglockart's success stories. ... We don't remember, we don't feel, we don't think. ...But our nerves are completely steady. And we are still alive".<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> GR, p.107ff.

<sup>50</sup> GR, p.134

<sup>51</sup> GR, p.153.

<sup>52</sup> GR, pp. 155-170.

<sup>53</sup> GR, pp. 171-182.

<sup>54</sup> GR, p.194.

<sup>55</sup> GR, p.199.

<sup>56</sup> GR, p.200.



-Two key notions are presented in the succeeding section, in which Rivers, reading in London newspaper accounts of the fighting in which Prior is engaged, recalls the placing of Ngea's skull in the village skull house and disappearance of the small boy, presumed to have been ritually killed (although this was not the case, as we later learn).<sup>57</sup> First, the British administration's ban on headhunting has led to a situation where "This was a people perishing from the absence of war. It showed in the genealogies, the decline in the birth rate from one generation to the next - the island's population was half what it had been ...".<sup>58</sup> And secondly, we hear the talk *blong tomate*, the language of ghosts, in which ghosts, interpreted by one of the native people, ask questions about why the white men want to know so much about the affairs of the island. Rivers reflects: "At Craiglockart, Sassoon, trying to decide whether he should abandon his protest and go back to France, had woken to find the ghost of a dead comrade standing by his bed ... asking him, Why was he not in the line? Why had he deserted his men? .. the questions became more insistent, more powerful, for being projected into the mouths of the dead".<sup>59</sup>

-We return to Prior on October 10, dealing with the arrival of a new draft from England, thinking to himself about some of his fellow-officers and their men, some alive, some dead, and reflecting ironically (to the reader) that, a month before the end of the war, the Central Powers appear to be collapsing and yet British politicians and generals are insisting on a fight to the end. "Whose end?", Prior asks himself.<sup>60</sup>

-Back in London, Rivers discusses with Wansbeck, one of his patients, the dreams and apparitions the latter has seen, which he (Wansbeck) believes are a projection of his mind which reflect, not the guilt he feels at having killed but, as Rivers puts it: a " ... representation to yourself of external standards which you believe to be valid".<sup>61</sup> Then reviewing to himself other cases (including that of Sassoon) where patients had experienced apparitions, he concludes that there each man was an individual and that there was a danger that " ... in the end the stories would become one story, the voices blend into a single cry of pain".<sup>62</sup> The badly injured Hallett arrives for treatment, his skull visible through his injury, and Rivers recalls a visit to a skull house which had been repaired, where Njiru says a ritual prayer of purification over the priest and is given a skull to handle, " ... the object of highest value in the world".<sup>63</sup>

-From October 19 Prior is marching with his men towards the front, " ... through utter devastation. Dead horses, unburied men, stench of corruption ... Fifty years from now a farmer'll be ploughing these fields and turn up skulls".<sup>64</sup> They march for days, through the battlefields into what had previously been German-held territory, and arrive at the banks of the Sambre-Oise Canal, with orders to cross it, which his fellow-officer 'Marshall-of-the-ten-Wounds' declares is "insane".<sup>65</sup>

-GR, and the trilogy, end with the death of Hallett in London and of Prior and Owen at the canal, referred to above, followed by a short coda as Rivers, somnolent and unwell, is confronted by an apparition of Njiru, speaking the exorcism of Ave, the spirit of the dead: "*There is an end of men*

<sup>57</sup> The small boy reappears on p.237, healthy, and seen as a future assistant priest.

<sup>58</sup> GR, p.207.

<sup>59</sup> GR, pp.211-212.

<sup>60</sup> GR, pp.214-222.

<sup>61</sup> GR, p.226.

<sup>62</sup> GR, p.229.

<sup>63</sup> GR, p.239.

<sup>64</sup> GR, p.240.

<sup>65</sup> GR, p.252.



*... go down and depart. Do not yearn for us, the fingerless, the crippled, the broken. Go down and depart ...".*

These passages resemble, to the present author, an account of a procession to the Christian Calvary, in which the participants are moving towards an inevitable fate, which we, the readers, know will be met by (the historic) Owen, and suspect may also be suffered by (the fictional) Prior. The association of the journey to the Western Front with a journey to Calvary was often made in WW1, for example, as mentioned in Chapter 3, in the name – Voie Sacrée – given to the road up from Bar-le-Duc which was used to supply the armies on the Verdun battlefield. In the above moving and imaginative sequence, which concludes GR, the sacrificial victims (Prior, Owen and others) pause at each ‘Station of the Cross’ as Rivers’ reflections provide a counterpoint to their ordeal, and then finally meet their sacrificial fate as they die at the Sambre-Oise Canal. The fact that this action took place (historically) in the last days of the war adds a pathetic irony to the story.

In the Stations of the Cross (or Via Crucis, or Via Dolorosa), found in nearly all Catholic churches, a series of fourteen paintings, sculptures or other representations depicts events – including the points at which he fell, his meetings with his mother and other women, and his crucifixion - which are said to have taken place during the journey of Christ between his condemnation to death and the placing of his body in the tomb. Believers are encouraged to make an act of contrition, pausing to pray at each Station of the Cross as they follow them in sequence, in this way making a kind of miniature pilgrimage to the holy places in Jerusalem.<sup>66</sup> Barker implicitly invites us to reflect in a similar way – the Stations of the Cross are probably familiar to most Europeans, whether or not they are Christian believers - as we follow the journey of Prior and Owen. The precise nature of the sacrifice in Girardian terms - whether it is ‘primary’ or ‘secondary’ - is left unclear, but this is probably unimportant in a situation where it is the image of sacrifice which is being communicated.

The comparison of Christ’s Passion with the final section of GR can be taken too far, of course. Quite apart from the detail that there are fourteen Stations of the Cross, whereas Barker provides only six pauses in the journey of Prior and Owen, Rivers’ musings on the meaning of death and sacrifice to the islanders have little in common

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<sup>66</sup> Information from the Catholic Encyclopaedia, at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/155699.htm>, February 26 2002.



with Christian perceptions. Also, the events described during the journey to the front of Prior and Owen cannot be compared with those of the Via Crucis. But the pattern of the writing – each step on the road to inevitable death being accompanied by a short passage of reflection – is striking, and invites the mental connection. Finally, and historically, we know that Owen was later ‘mythologised’ as one of the supreme examples of the ‘War Poets’, a form of recognition which invites comparison with the deification or sanctification of a Girardian victim.

There is no evidence that Barker herself saw the war in mythical terms. She had always wanted to write about WWI, a desire based on her childhood relationship with her step-grandfather, who lived in the same household and had been wounded in the war, having a bayonet wound across his abdomen which as a child Barker sometimes used to see. Her opportunity to write came when she discovered the notebooks of the psychologist W.H.R. Rivers in a university library.<sup>67</sup>

Barker’s ‘transfiguration’ of the sacrificial crisis of WW1 concentrates largely on the damage done to the lives of those caught up in it and could be summed up in the dying words of her character Hallett, mentioned above (“Shotvarfet”). From this point of view, it is consistent with, and reinforces, the LAF myth. Even the Jünger-like “Marshall-of-the-Ten-Wounds” describes the planned attack on the Sambre-Oise canal as “insane”.

However, the trilogy is a complex work and will support more than one interpretation. Rivers’ account of how the people of Eddystone Island were “perishing from the absence of war” suggests the RTS-related sentiment that “war is an activity fundamental to the human spirit”, as does the fairly sympathetic depiction of Marshall.

If the trilogy could be said to have an overall theme, it is that of its title, *Regeneration*, a concept which implies both curing and healing. This theme is explored throughout all three novels, principally through Rivers’ reflections on his patients and the options that exist for treating them, and in his recollections of his experiences in Melanesia. What is meant by ‘healing’? What distinguishes it from ‘mate’, the state of a patient of which ‘death is the most appropriate outcome’? Could

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<sup>67</sup> Reply by Pat Barker to a question from the author at a reading of her work at Kensington Public Library, March 3 1997. However, in an interview article by Blake Morrison in the *New Yorker*, January 22 1996, she herself expresses scepticism about the authenticity of this “anecdote”. It does seem undeniable, though, that physical access to her step-grandfather was highly significant in arousing her imaginative interest in the war.



a man who has managed to suppress his feelings sufficiently to enable him to return to the trenches be said to be 'cured'? What distinguishes psychiatry from 'magic'? These questions, like those posed by the apparitions which appeared to Sassoon, or by the ghosts on Eddystone Island, acquire greater power by being put into the mouths of the dead, in this case those actually killed on the Western Front or those whose lives were irreversibly damaged or at least changed by their experiences.

To the extent, then, that the questions in which Barker is interested are related to healing and regeneration, the reader might be led on reading her work from notions of LAF to RR. However, this would be a personal reaction, and is by no means an inevitable conclusion to be drawn from the text. The action of the novels takes place entirely during the period of WW1, and we learn from them nothing of the fate of the 'sacrificial victims' beyond their death in action. The only myth which is explicitly developed in the trilogy is LAF, the other two myths being either peripheral (RTS) or possibly resulting from the response of the reader (RR).

However, Barker does take the process of 'reinterpretation' further in a later novel, *Another World*, which is, unlike the *Regeneration* trilogy, set in modern times.<sup>68</sup> It revolves around the way in which a veteran of the Western Front, Geordie, now aged 101, deals with his memories, and how the large family within which he lives respond to this, in the context of their own individual lives and memories. Geordie (like Barker's own grandfather) has had to live with the scars of a bayonet wound in his side, and with the 'guilty' memory of the fact that he survived the war while his brother, Harry, was killed (and killed, it turns out, by Geordie himself, who stabbed his brother to death in an act of mercy after Harry had suffered desperate injuries). References to the 'sacrificial victim' in Christian terms appear in several places in the novel, for example in Geordie's (Christlike?) wound in his side and in a description of the British monument to the missing of the Somme at Thiepval as "Golgotha, the place of a skull".<sup>69</sup> Geordie, suffering from 'shell-shock', was one of those who were unable to speak about their own feelings about the horror of the Western Front. It was not until changing public perceptions of the war in the 1960s made this possible that he was at last able to say openly what he felt, including his

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<sup>68</sup> Pat Barker, *Another World*, (London: Penguin Books, 1999).

<sup>69</sup> *Another World*, p.73.



“belief in the power of old wounds to leak into the present”.<sup>70</sup> At the end of the novel Geordie dies of cancer, and soon after the funeral his grandson Nick, visiting the churchyard: “... remembers the trip to France with Geordie, the rows upon rows of white headstones, ageless graves for those who were never permitted to grow old. He’d walked round them with Geordie, marvelling at the carefully tended grass, the devotion that kept the graves young. But now, looking round this churchyard ... he sees that there’s wisdom too in this: to let the innocent and the guilty, the murderers and the victims, lie together beneath their half-erased names, side by side ...”.<sup>71</sup>

Barker comments that, in persuading his grandson to make a visit to Thiepval with him, “Geordie was attempting to graft his memories on to Nick” and that through his regular attendance in his later years at veterans’ gatherings marking anniversaries of the Somme, he was sending the message: “*It happened once, therefore it can happen again. Take care.*”<sup>72</sup>

We are dealing here both with the *communitas* of veterans of the Western Front and with a modern ‘reinterpretation’ of the sacrifice made by, in this case, Harry and Geordie – the former through his death, the latter through the damage done to him through the war, both physically and mentally. These two ‘routes’ to the creation of myth lead, in this case, in the same direction, towards RR. The myth is not stated in any detail, but the sentiment (“... *it can happen again. Take care.*”) is quite explicit and unequivocal in its implications.

**5. Sebastian Faulks’ *Birdsong*.** Faulks’ *Birdsong*,<sup>73</sup> which has been translated into both German and French<sup>74</sup> and has been a noted best-seller in England, is, according to Bergonzi, “... perhaps the most thorough and ambitious recreation of the Great War so far made in latter-day English fiction.” However, he goes on to say that “... it has more power than art, and does not properly fulfil its formal ambitions. ... *Birdsong* is a strong but flawed novel.”<sup>75</sup> In spite of these literary limitations, *Birdsong* is of particular interest in the present context because of the way in which the central character, Stephen Wraysford, emerges as a ‘sacrificial victim’ of the war, and because, unlike the

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<sup>70</sup> *Another World*, p.75.

<sup>71</sup> *Another World*, p.278.

<sup>72</sup> *Another World*, pp.74, 82.

<sup>73</sup> Sebastian Faulks, *Birdsong*, (London: Vintage Books, 1994).

<sup>74</sup> Respectively as *Gesang vom großen Feuer* and *Les Chemins de Feu*.

<sup>75</sup> Bernard Bergonzi, *Heroes' Twilight: a Study of the Literature of the Great War*, (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996 (third edition)), p208.



*Regeneration* trilogy, it links events and characters in France, England and Germany, and across four generations. For these reasons, Faulk's 'reinterpretation of the sacrificial crisis' of the Western Front is the one which comes closest among the Third Wave writers to suggesting to the reader, as a natural consequence of the account it gives of the war, a grounding in the RR myth.

The principal character in *Birdsong* is Stephen Wraysford, who goes to France in 1910 for a period of industrial training in a factory in Amiens and has a highly charged love affair with Isabelle, the young wife of his host. Having returned reluctantly to her husband on the outbreak of war, Isabelle later has a further affair with a German, Max, whom she eventually marries, her first husband René having died following a period as a hostage of the Germans. In the influenza epidemic after the war Isabelle dies, Max having also died, in his case of wounds suffered at the battle of the Somme, at which he may well have been fighting opposite Stephen. After her death, Isabelle's child is sent from Germany to her sister Jeanne in France to be brought up. Stephen is the father of the child, although he does not know of her existence until he hears of Isabelle's death. The child emerges later in the novel as Françoise, mother of the Anglo-French Elizabeth Benson, who in England in the late 1970s discovers from Stephen's old diaries the 'secret' of her mother's origins.<sup>76</sup>

Stephen's wartime experiences take up much of the novel, and are powerfully described. An especially cogent passage is the evocation of the eve of the Battle of the Somme, in which, as Stephen's men march up to Auchonvillers, he remembers a pre-war lunch outing there with Isabelle and her family. Faulks here introduces a Jünger-like figure in the form of the swashbuckling Colonel Barclay, who addresses the troops on the strategy to be adopted at the Somme - reliance on an artillery barrage, which would cut the enemy wire and destroy or demoralise the defenders, leaving the way clear, so the theory ran, for the attackers to walk unmolested into the enemy positions. Like many others in actuality, Stephen's battalion was subsequently cut to pieces, 155 men returning from the 800 who went 'over the top'.

At a later stage in the war Stephen is assigned to defend the tunnels which are being constructed so as to undermine the German defences, and to provide the facility for placing mines under them. In a final climactic episode he sustains Jack Firebrace,

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<sup>76</sup> A more detailed account is given in Graham Galer, *The Writer as Interpreter and Prophet: Late Twentieth Century Images of the First World War* (MA dissertation collection, University of Kent at Canterbury, 1997).



a comrade injured in an underground explosion, and in the process of attempting to get both of them out of the tunnel inadvertently breaks through into the German tunnel system. Here he is rescued by Levi, a German officer who at the same time finds his own dead brother, trapped in an explosion which Stephen himself had set off. Levi gives Stephen his belt buckle with ‘*Gott mit uns*’ inscribed on it: this was later found by Elizabeth in her mother’s attic.

Stephen marries Jeanne in 1919 and is unable to speak for two years after the war, having never recovered from the psychic damage he had suffered. He dies at the early age of 48, having fathered no more children. At the end of the novel comes a graphic portrayal of the birth of Elizabeth’s child by her married lover Robert: she calls the boy John, after the lost son of Jack Firebrace, the companion of Stephen in the trenches whom Elizabeth knows about only through Stephen’s records.<sup>77</sup>

As in the *Regeneration* trilogy, the *communitas* conveyed in *Birdsong* is that of victims of the war, military and civilian, although in this case the suffering of the identified group of victims, centred on Stephen, and including women and children, is different from that of the ‘shell-shock’ cases who are a central concern of *Regeneration*. There is perhaps a greater mythical ambiguity in *Birdsong*, in that while, as in *Regeneration*, much of the earlier part of the narrative conveys a powerful sense of futility and loss (hence LAF), it also describes the comradeship shared by the troops, especially those assigned as tunnellers, working in dangerous conditions in confined spaces, who are fighting together for a cause which they believe to be right (hence RTS). The cogent sequence mentioned above, in which Faulks describes the tense evening of preparations for the scheduled attack at the Somme, combines these two mythical stances. One reviewer of the book even compared the quality of the writing in this passage with the evocation by Shakespeare of the eve of Agincourt in his *Henry V*.<sup>78</sup> And then, as argued below, later passages in the novel evoke RR.

Two features of the *communitas* represented in *Birdsong* are particularly distinctive and merit some analysis. The first is the intergenerational and ‘virtual’ *communitas* which links Stephen and his tunnelling companion Jack Firebrace with

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<sup>77</sup> Faulks’ later novel *Charlotte Gray*, which is set in WW2, contains some links with *Birdsong* and WW1. It contains a reference to Stephen Wraysford (p337), and it seems likely that the concentration camp doctor, Dr Levi (p416ff) is the same Levi who saved Wraysford’s life, while Charlotte Gray’s father, referred to as having fought in WW1, bears the same name as Wraysford’s early company commander, later his battalion commander in 1917.

<sup>78</sup> Valentine Cunningham in *Country Life*, quoted on the book jacket.



Elizabeth's child, John. 'Virtual' because three generations separate John from his great-grandfather Stephen and from Jack Firebrace, both of whom died many years before he was born. The only son of Firebrace and his wife died of diphtheria in England during the war, and when he speaks to Stephen of the impossibility that he and his wife could have more children to replace their loss (his wife would be too old), Stephen says "I will have them for you". Jack dies, trapped underground with Stephen following an explosion, and Elizabeth, on uncovering the story of these events years afterwards, determines, through naming her own child after Jack Firebrace, to keep Stephen's promise for him. This is *communitas* formed across a long period of years, bringing together in Elizabeth's mind, and in the mind of the reader, a group of people of different ages, for whose youngest member, John, 'anything will be possible' (to use Turner's words) in a world very different from that of his great-grandfather Stephen. Interestingly, this 'virtual' *communitas* can put the reader into the 'subjunctive mood' of liminality, as it inspires historical reflection on the many different ways in which life could have turned out for Jack, Elizabeth and others. The 'remembered *communitas*' here, remembered as it is by a character living the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, very much evokes sentiments of regeneration and the RR myth.

The second distinctive feature of the *communitas* in *Birdsong* is that which emerges through Stephen's rescue by the German officer Levi. At this point in the narrative Stephen and the Germans realise that the war is about to come to an end (the final attack had taken place while Stephen was trapped in the tunnel), and it is this which prompts Levi's<sup>79</sup> gift to Stephen of his belt buckle, an unsolicited and unreciprocated offering which joins the two men in an international *communitas* of front soldiers. The revived memory of this human gesture, which Elizabeth's discovery of the buckle many years later brings to her, again evokes in the reader, like the memory of the 'Christmas truce' of 1914, the sense of the unity of European humanity which underlies the RR myth.

Stephen is presented in *Birdsong* as a sacrificial figure, one of those men who, full of life and vigour before the war (as exemplified by his amorous exploits), was destroyed by the experiences he undergoes in the trenches. For two years after the war he was unable to speak at all, a syndrome common to many victims of 'shell shock',

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<sup>79</sup> The author gives no clue as to whether he intends any significance to be attached to the fact that the German officer in this episode is evidently Jewish.



including some of the patients at Craiglockart in the *Regeneration* trilogy. Even after he had recovered his speech he was no more than a shadow of his former self. Like so many other WW1 veterans, in both fact and fiction, he was unable to speak to others about his wartime experiences: what he had gone through was “... not just *inénarrable*, in the sense that it was too revolting to describe, but in a large sense *indescriptible*: beyond description.”<sup>80</sup> This feeling of separation from ‘normal’ society is another example of the liminality which accompanied so much of the experience of WW1. Jeanne is the Mary Magdalen-like figure who succours Stephen, caring for him in his agony, and bringing up his child – in fact, Françoise in her later conversations with her daughter Elizabeth asserts that ‘Grand’mère’ Jeanne is the heroine of the whole story.<sup>81</sup> The story of Stephen (and Isabelle, Jeanne and the peripheral Max) which forms the central narrative of *Birdsong* is the story of lives largely unfulfilled, all of them effectively sacrificial victims of the war.

Just as, in the Girardian scheme, the sacrificial victim may become sanctified, perhaps deified, through a later reinterpretation of the crisis, so Stephen is ‘reborn’ in the memory and imagination of his granddaughter Elizabeth, following her discovery of his long-lost diaries, and their deciphering by a friend. By naming her child after Stephen’s wartime comrade (and also, in another episode in the novel, driving through the battlefields of Flanders on the way to Brussels to visit her lover, and reflecting on what had happened there during WW1) Elizabeth ensures that the memory of Stephen persists across the generations, providing a continuity in time which the narrative of *Regeneration* does not attempt to give.

What myth could be said to emerge from this ‘retrospective transfiguration of the sacrificial crisis’? The sense of sadness the reader feels on reading the story of Stephen’s damaged life certainly tends to invoke notions of the LAF myth, which are strengthened due to the liminality of the past which suffused so much of the book. But in mythical terms the narrative is carrying the reader away from LAF because, although in a sense Stephen’s life is ‘wasted’, there are life-giving links across three countries and four generations which provide the prospect of longer-term healing. Although Max dies, he has given Isabelle and her child the chance of life; Levi, also a German, rescues Stephen even though Stephen has been responsible for the death of

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<sup>80</sup> Ousby, *The Road to Verdun*, p.204.

<sup>81</sup> Calculation based on some details given on p.200 of *Birdsong* indicates that Jeanne would have lived until 1944.



his brother; Jeanne keeps the flame of life alive as both her sister and Stephen die; Françoise, Stephen and Isabelle's child, marries an Englishman and gives birth to Elizabeth, who in the 1970s uncovers the whole story and links it with the birth of her own child. Stephen, then, is transmuted into a mythical figure representing not so much 'loss, anger and futility' but rather hope and new life. In this way, the author at the end places in the reader's mind notions of reconciliation: the RR myth, in fact. The social order (comprising in part a degree of European integration) which has developed by the 1970s, the time in which Elizabeth is living and working, and has further evolved by the 1990s, when Faulks is writing, provides a background against which Faulks' 'reinterpretation' of the sacrifice of Stephen convincingly evokes a myth of the present and future in which the life which Stephen was obliged to live no longer seems an outcome which could be envisaged for Elizabeth's child and his (and indeed her) generation.

**6. Susan Hill's *Strange Meeting*, Jean Rouaud's *Fields of Glory*, and the work of other Third Wave writers.**

The above analyses of some of the work of Pat Barker and Sebastian Faulks show that an approach employing the ideas of Turner and Girard can help to draw out mythical implications from the novels. The authors themselves did not appear to have this objective in mind when they wrote, Faulks (a former journalist) stating<sup>82</sup> only that he seeks to write novels about the impact of extraordinary events on the lives of ordinary people, as, indeed he has continued to do in his later writings. Barker came to *Regeneration* with a reputation for writing realistic novels about the lives of working women in the north-east of England and, as mentioned above, her interest in WW1 arose initially from curiosity about her grandfather.

Susan Hill's *Strange Meeting* is of more direct interest mythically, though not so much for its content, which could be said to be 'about' love as much as about the war, as for its provenance in the author's imagination.<sup>83</sup> The author herself states, "... I hope it is not thought of only as a novel whose 'subject' is war and the pity of war", for, more than anything else, it is about human love".<sup>84</sup> The title is of course a reference to

<sup>82</sup> In an interview on 'Start the Week', BBC Radio 4, February 4 1997.

<sup>83</sup> Susan Hill, *Strange Meeting*, (1971. Reprint, with afterword, London: Penguin Books, 1984). An account of the novel, and some analysis, is given in Graham Galer, *The Writer as Interpreter and Prophet: Late Twentieth Century Images of the First World War* (MA dissertation collection, University of Kent at Canterbury, 1997).

<sup>84</sup> *Strange Meeting*, p.184.



Wilfred Owen's famous poem, briefly referred to in Chapter 5, which describes an encounter in Hell, in a dream or waking reverie, between a British soldier and the German he had killed. The German having said "*I am the enemy you killed, my friend*", the Briton responds, at the end of the poem, "*Let us sleep now*". Although the poem speaks of waste, pity and hopelessness, the reader is left at the end with an image of togetherness and reconciliation, albeit in death.

The "strange meeting" of Hill's novel concerns the evolving relationship between two young British officers, Hilliard and Barton, the first from a tight-lipped family where feelings and emotions are kept strictly below the surface, the other from a family whose conversations and frequent letters speak openly of their feelings about each other and about the war. Like Barker's GR, this novel ends with an account of a military action in which a principal protagonist (protagonists, in the case of GR) is killed.

The psychological and social importance of expressing feelings and emotions was evidently one of the considerations that led the author to write *Strange Meeting*. Myths not only arise in response to a social need, but can also evoke strong emotions in those who learn about them and reflect on them. This is what appears to have happened in the present case, where the LAF myth which suffuses Britten's *War Requiem* (one of the inspirations for the novel, as discussed in Chapter 4) drove the author to construct her own retrospective transfiguration, or reinterpretation, of the sacrificial crisis, in the light of the cultural order that has arisen from it – in this case, the aftermath of WW2.

What is the nature of this reinterpretation? Hill gives a clue when she adds, in her Afterword: "... I am still sometimes troubled by thoughts of those two young men of whom I became so very fond while I was writing about them and who stand for thousands upon thousands of others, so full of youth, strength and bright promise, who were slaughtered in a war perhaps more futile and meaningless than any other in history".<sup>85</sup>

Hill in her novel is retelling a myth of the Western Front, looking back from over 50 years in the future (*Strange Meeting* was first published in 1971) and expressing the feelings of loss and futility she experiences when recalling in her imagination the young men whose lives were cut short by the war. Her reinterpretation reinforces in the reader's mind the LAF myth, but the particular slant she gives to her story, through the loving (though not overtly homoerotic) relationship of the two young men who are her

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<sup>85</sup> *Strange Meeting*, p.184.



principal characters, conveys a sense of the power of love to heal and transform in the most brutal circumstances. The novel in fact ends on a note of hope, as Hilliard, who lost a leg in an action in which his friend Barton was killed, decides to visit Barton's family, members of whom had befriended him through letters while he had been at the front. His arrival at the Barton's country house, never before seen but known to him through his lengthy talks with his friend, is presented like the return to a well-loved home, and the final words of the novel are; "Hilliard looked up, and ahead".

It is tempting, but misleading, to see in Hill's reinterpretation of the 'sacrificial crisis' undergone by her two young characters an exposition of the RR myth. The feeling of hope for the future which the author conveys at the end of the novel is purely hope for the future of Hilliard himself, and the novel is principally a memorial to the "thousands and thousands of others" for whom Hilliard and Barton are made to stand. The reader might indeed, on finishing the novel, come to feel that 'this should never happen again', as many people feel on reading any work of literature or history about WW1, thus evoking the RR myth. But RR does not clearly emerge from *Strange Meeting* as it does from *Regeneration* and *Birdsong*, and to the extent that the novel has any connection at all with RR, it is through the fact that the author, beset with deep feelings about the war, chose to write about human love.

Other Third Wave writers exhibit a similar complexity in their response to the Western Front, due no doubt in part to the phenomenon of 'mediation' referred to above, and in part to the fact that their works are not autobiographical in the way that most of those of the First and Second Waves are. They take different approaches in their 'reinterpretation' of the sacrifices of WW1.

For Jean Rouaud, for example, in *Fields of Glory* (*Les Champs d'Honneur*), his outstanding first novel, with which he won the *Prix Goncourt*, the 'sacrificial victims' are – rather as in Pat Barker's *Another World* – two brothers, in this case members of a family living on the French Atlantic coast.<sup>86</sup> The first brother is Joseph, who died in May 1916 in hospital at Tours, in the presence of his sister Marie, having been gassed at Ypres. The second brother was Emile, who was known to have been killed, but the whereabouts of whose body was unknown except that it was in the Hauts-de-Meuse sector (i.e. in the region of Verdun). Another brother, Pierre, goes in search of

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<sup>86</sup> Jean Rouaud, tr. Ralph Manheim, *Fields of Glory* (*Les Champs d'Honneur*), (London: Harvill, 1992). The novel has also been translated into German (*Die Felder der Ehre*).



Emile's body after the family receive, in 1929, a letter from Commercy<sup>87</sup> written by a comrade of Emile's who says he buried Emile's body under a eucalyptus tree, and indicates where this tree is. There is ambiguity about whether the remains found by Pierre are those of Emile or not.

The memory of these two men, and the sense of their loss, blights the lives of Marie, their sister, and Mathilde, Emile's wife, and hangs like a shadow over the whole family. But 99 pages of the novel (out of a total of 155) pass before the reader learns anything of the two men's existence. The anonymous narrator, evidently writing in post-WW2 times, spends much of the first part of the novel describing the lives of 'grandfather' and the religious 'Aunt Marie', and the lost Joseph appears only when Marie, elderly and confused, calls for 'Joseph' and the family eventually realise that she means not 'father', who had died before, but her own brother, who " ... was wounded, he needed her help, she must go to him, we must take her to Tours ... ".<sup>88</sup>

The full extent and nature of the suffering the loss of Joseph and Emile had caused to their survivors comes to light only when, like Elizabeth learning in *Birdsong* about her unknown grandfather, other members of the family later discover papers and photographs revealing details of the fates of the two 'uncles'. Three members of the narrator's family - 'grandfather', 'father' and 'Aunt Marie' die during the course of the novel, and "these sudden deaths are the echo of other bodies lost in the rain and mud a half-century ago".<sup>89</sup> They seem to join the *communitas* of those who were lost in the war, and to complete the sacrifice which the family had been obliged to make.

*Fields of Glory* contains a description of the first use of gas in warfare which is a cogent and brilliantly evocative piece of writing, excoriating the inhumanity with which the war is being conducted. The narrator comments:

"Entire divisions are being massacred, pawns moved about on general-staff maps by lunatic Nivelles, Schlieffen Plan versus Plan XVII, a tête-à-tête between stags immobilised by each other's antlers. In the present quarrel of surveyors, rules of warfare, so precious at Fontenoy under the last of the

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<sup>87</sup> A sub-prefecture of the Meuse department, some 50km SSE of Verdun.

<sup>88</sup> *Fields of Glory*, p.99.

<sup>89</sup> "La ciel a la couleur du deuil qui frappe le narrateur au cours de cet hiver-là. Son père, sa tante, son grand-père sont morts à quelques semaines d'intervalle. Ces morts soudaines sont l'écho d'autres corps perdus dans la pluie et la boue il y a un demi-siècle". From book review by Michèle Glazier on [www.amazon.fr](http://www.amazon.fr) February 16 2002.



condottieri, led to astronomical death tolls and total bestiality. The expense was staggering. The little chemist's suggestion looked like good business ... victory on the cheap".<sup>90</sup>

This passage is as angry as anything written by Sassoon or Remarque, and is clearly cognate with the LAF myth. On the other hand, the English title '*Fields of Glory*' has overtones of military glory and accomplishment which are more consistent with RTS: a Web search for the phrase produced 5090 references, most of them of a military nature.<sup>91</sup> But the title could also be taken as ironic, and it is worth noting that Ernest Hemingway wrote a powerfully ironic short poem with this same (French) title very soon after the end of WW1.<sup>92</sup> The novel's narrator relates how the lost Joseph's name "... appears on a pious, patriotic picture on sale at the Commercys ... presbytery, framed in a narrow black border, the very epitome of sorrow, bearing the title of a heroic novel '*Fields of Glory*' and a subtitle for a pulp edition: '*Where the blood of France flowed in rivers from 1914 to 1916*'. The narrator comments, surely sarcastically, "May this picture remind us all of the gratitude we owe to God for the prodigious battle of the Marne and for the solidity of our front since then".<sup>93</sup>

The *communitas* here is that of the extended family, sketched with great subtlety over three generations, whose lives are described in varying degrees of detail in the novel. This *communitas*, like that in *Birdsong*, is also 'virtual'. Rouaud's 'reinterpretation of the sacrificial crisis' is to affirm "... the underlying longing that links those 'who struggled in the slime' and the memorial arch on which they are commemorated"<sup>94</sup> and Rouaud could be said in his novel to be creating a kind of memorial, rescuing his characters from what he himself calls a "future without memory".<sup>95</sup> His 'sacrificial victims' live on in the personal memory of those close to them whom they left behind and their loss thus hangs like a shadow over the family as a whole. The memory is revived years later when the stories of Aunt Marie's grieving and Pierre's journey in search of his brother's remains comes to light and it lives in

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<sup>90</sup> *Fields of Glory*, p.129. Nivelle commanded an army at Verdun; Plan XVII was the French army plan of April 1914; at the battle of Fontenoy in 1745 chivalrous behaviour by the 'condottiere' Marshal de Saxe led to grievous losses for the French (from translator's *Glossary*, p.159).

<sup>91</sup> Search for 'fields of glory' made on Google.com, February 16 2002.

<sup>92</sup> "Soldiers never do die well ...". First published in *Poetry* 21.iv (January 1923): 193-95.

<sup>93</sup> The picture is reproduced as the frontispiece to the novel, headed "Les victoires de la Marne and de la Meuse: LES CHAMPS D'HONNEUR, ou coula à flots le sang de France en 1914-1916".

<sup>94</sup> Geoff Dyer, *The Missing of the Somme*, (London: Phoenix Press, 2001), p.86. Dyer is commenting here on a visit made to the Menin Gate at Ypres.

<sup>95</sup> *Fields of Glory*, p.141.



the mind of the narrator himself and in that of ‘grandfather’, whose death is actually the last of those recorded.

Although two short scenes in the novel take place during WW2 (in 1940 and 1941) that war as such has no part in *Fields of Glory*, the burden of which is the shadow cast over the present day by events which took place many years before. There is no reference here to the RR myth, except possibly in the indirect sense that the act of recall can bring about healing, and that of writing can, as for Susan Hill in *Strange Meeting*, exorcise feelings. But this is no more than speculation, and the words of Rouaud’s narrative in fact bring the reader back to LAF, and the feeling of sadness that so many lives were lost and blighted.

Among other novels of the Third Wave, Adam Thorpe’s *Nineteen Twenty-one*, published as late as 2001, is a work whose principal character is struggling, in 1921, to write a novel about WW1, in which he did not take part. One of his characters clearly sees the war as a ritual sacrifice, as he speaks of “... the wickedest war ever waged, a holocaustic rite against the young ...”.<sup>96</sup> The underlying concern of the writer here is to address the question; how can art be made from events of such horror? The Canadian novelist Timothy Findley, in *The Wars*, answers this question by writing (in 1977) a straightforward story of the war in which the “superb set pieces ... seem wholly authentic because Findley avails himself of the full range of narrative gambits which have become available in the years since the war”.<sup>97</sup> Robert Edric’s haunting *In Desolate Heaven* is set in a clinic in Switzerland soon after the war, where a group of English officers are individually striving to attain a degree of inner peace. William Rivière’s panoramic *Echoes of War* is a saga covering the lives of members of a family during both world wars and is as much ‘about’ the end of empire as about either of the wars themselves. William Boyd’s *An Ice-cream War* takes place during WW1 mainly in Africa, where the British are attempting to take over German East Africa. The same author’s *The New Confessions* (the reference being to the *Confessions* of Rousseau) has an autobiographical narrator who covers the period 1899-1972, including a substantial section on his Western Front experiences during WW1. But this novel is not so much ‘about’ the war and its effects as about the

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<sup>96</sup> Adam Thorpe, *Nineteen Twenty-one*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 2001), p253

<sup>97</sup> Geoff Dyer, *The Missing of the Somme*, p.82.



challenges faced by film-makers during a century in which “everything has changed”.<sup>98</sup>

All the works alluded to in this section can be described as providing a ‘reinterpretation of the sacrificial crisis’ of WW1 and the Western Front, in the light of the social and cultural order of modern times, and all are in various ways suffused with the myths of the war. Some of them, although not all, clearly identify a *communitas* the memory of which might be expected to generate myth. They do not all lend themselves to a Girardian analysis, however, because the Girardian scheme requires a sacrificial victim or victims whose sacrifice subsequently becomes enshrined in ‘myth, ritual or prohibition’. The ‘victims’ are quite clearly defined in the works of Barker, Faulks, Hill, and Rouaud, as discussed in the above analyses, but much less clearly in the other novels mentioned (although Findley is a possible exception to this assertion).

As for the myths, none of the novels express any myth with the clarity and directness which is seen in the work of the First and Second Wave writers. The position is rather that the myths, and especially LAF, appear to form a general background of sentiment to much of the writing. Only in *Regeneration* and *Birdsong* could the RR myth be said to emerge from the later stages of the novels. The ‘reinterpretation’ presented in both of these novels tends to lead the reader from the desperate sadness of their earlier pages (LAF) to the later feeling that the victims’ deaths are not the end, and that new life is possible, through healing in the case of Rivers in *Regeneration*, and through new birth in case of Elizabeth Benson in *Birdsong*. This development, from LAF to a myth of which RR is one specific expression, is analogous to that the Girardian progression of the ‘slain god’, whose death is followed by deification or sanctification as society sees in the death of the victim the means by which it has attained its contemporary harmony.

One Third Wave work which does address all three of the myths in an explicit way is Günter Grass’s *My Century*, a collection of semi-fictional stories, one for each year of the twentieth century, each recounted by an ordinary bystander to the events described and discussed.<sup>99</sup> The literary form is not that of a novel, and indeed does not fit easily into any standard literary category, but because of the credentials of the author

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<sup>98</sup> *The New Confessions*, p.459.

<sup>99</sup> Günter Grass, trans. Michael Henry Heim, *My Century*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2000).



can reasonably be classified as ‘literature’ for the present purposes.<sup>100</sup> For the years 1914-1918 the narrator, cast here in the role of a young Swiss woman, sets up a fictional encounter in Zurich between Remarque and Jünger - “witnesses of an era”<sup>101</sup> - in which, over a series of meals, they exchange views on their experience of the Western Front. Ranging over many military topics in the course of their encounter, they remain, though respectful of the validity of each other’s writing, locked and unchangeable in their own views of the war. Jünger asserts that “... the flame of the prolonged battle produced an increasingly pure and valiant warrior caste”, while Remarque sees the troops as “Cannon fodder quaking in oversized boots”.<sup>102</sup> Setting this fictional meeting in the mid-1960s, Grass in his ‘reinterpretation’ is asserting the unchanging nature of the LAF and RTS myths in the minds of Remarque and Jünger (who were both, in fact as well as in fiction, still alive in the mid-1960s) and, by implication, of those who think along similar lines.

In 1984, Grass writes as a groundsman whose task is to provide bilingual signs on the occasion of the (historical) meeting at Verdun of French President Mitterand and German Chancellor Kohl, at which, as noted in Chapter 4, Jünger was present and made a conciliatory speech. We are here in the realms of RR, which this meeting, with its symbolic handshake outside the ossuary, both represented and helped to entrench. But Grass’s (German) narrator, counselling quiet meditation at some of the places on the battlefield where the fighting had been fiercest and the losses greatest, has some reservations. He is uncomfortable about the way the cemetery has become a place of tourism (so that “... the ossuary ... is often perceived as a house of horrors, and the people peering in ... are often heard to laugh”<sup>103</sup>), the imbalance between the numbers of French and German graves, and about unfavourable local perceptions of the fact that German-French military manoeuvres are causing German planes to fly low over Verdun and German tanks to appear on French roads. Although the sacrificial crisis has now resulted in recognition of the RR myth at the highest level of the two nations who suffered such disastrous losses at Verdun, Grass’s narrator feels that “... the peacemaking process between our two nations ... is far from complete”.<sup>104</sup> In this view,

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<sup>100</sup> Grass won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1999.

<sup>101</sup> *My Century*, p.33.

<sup>102</sup> *My Century*, p.39.

<sup>103</sup> *My Century*, p.228.

<sup>104</sup> *My Century*, p.228



RR as a myth represents not only a way to make sense of the present, but an aspiration, so far only partially fulfilled, for the future.

**7. Conclusions** In the Introduction to this chapter I suggested that the ‘projected *communitas*’ seen in the work of some of the Third Wave writers, whose view of the *communitas* of the Western Front was mediated through the work of others, might provide “... another route to the creation of myth, and indeed might be expected to produce new or substantially modified myths than those which came directly out of the war”. In fact, the ‘new’ route to myth proves to be overwhelmingly a reassertion of the LAF myth, with perhaps the emphasis on ‘L’ (Loss) as several of these writers, and especially Faulks, Rouaud and Barker in *Another World*, dwell on the shadows which the lost and damaged lives of the Western Front cast on the lives of those living later in the century. This aspect of these novels has the consequence that the *communitas* they convey is more comprehensive than that presented in the work of First and Second Wave writers, since it includes civilians, including women and children, as well as front soldiers.

Not all the novels lend themselves to analysis in the terms required by the schemes of mythical origin proposed by Turner or Girard. When such an analysis is possible, however, an evolution from LAF towards RR can sometimes be observed. But, unlike LAF in the work of Sassoon or RTS in that of Jünger, RR is nowhere explicitly narrated, except briefly in Grass’s *My Century*. It can be seen as implicit in some of the other writings, but only as a general aspiration (e.g. ‘never again’) which follows logically from reflection on the origins and consequences of LAF. Since RR is undoubtedly firmly established in modern Europe, therefore, we must conclude that, to the extent that the content of Third Wave literature has played any part in its origins and expression, that part has been relatively minor, or at least indirect.

However, in the analysis of ‘remembered *communitas*’ and ‘reinterpretation’ set out above, the emphasis throughout has been on the text provided by the author, and hence on the responses made by the author to his or her material. This leaves undiscussed the response of the reader to the Third Wave writers. This is inevitably a personal response and has not to my knowledge been the subject of academic research. But clearly one personal response to a reading of these writers (and to continued reading of the writers of the First and Second Waves) could well be to strengthen the



sentiment 'never again'. Reading these works causes the reader to make his/her own 'reinterpretation of the sacrificial crisis' and perhaps to evince for him- or herself the RR myth. For this reason, it could be argued that the sheer coming into existence of the work of the Third Wave writers has had the effect of establishing the RR myth more securely in modern European consciousness.



## **Chapter 8** **Conclusions**

### **Contents**

1. *Recapitulation of the thesis*
2. *The authenticity of the myths and their relevance for International Relations.*
3. *The three myths and the three waves of literature*
4. *The analytical scheme: mythic discourse, liminality and communitas, the sacrificial crisis*
5. *Conclusion: the 'founding murder'.*

**1. Recapitulation of the thesis.** The three building blocks from which it has been constructed provide the structure for this thesis.

I have first identified three myths which arose from the experience of those who served on the Western Front, taking Leed and Linder as my principal authorities for the LAF and RTS myths and finding evidence of RR in the speeches of politicians. The articulation of the myths is in each case my own formulation, although incorporating the words of others.

Secondly, following McNeill and others, I have asserted the importance of myth as a necessary foundation of a well-functioning society. Reviewing some theories of myth formation, I have chosen to use for purposes of analysis the notions of 'mythical discourse', and of myth as 'remembered communitas', and as the 'retrospective transfiguration of a sacrificial crisis'. My authorities here are, respectively, Ernst Cassirer, Victor Turner and René Girard.

I have then, thirdly, identified three waves of writing inspired by the experience or memory of the Western Front, and defined within these a personal canon which, with the support of various authorities, I consider could be described as 'literature'. I have closely studied elements of this canon, using the above analytical scheme to describe how the authors concerned have expressed the three myths I have identified. Of the writers of the First or Second Wave, I have concentrated on the work of Siegfried Sassoon and Ernst Jünger and, in the Third Wave, on Jünger (as a precursor) and the novelists Pat Barker, Sebastian Faulks, Susan Hill and Jean Rouaud.

The present chapter presents the conclusions I have reached and indicates some areas where I believe further research would be worthwhile.



## **2. The authenticity of the myths, and their relevance for International Relations.**

The authenticity of the LAF and RTS myths, as they originally emerged in the aftermath of WW1, arises from their general nature and from the widespread readership of the books through which they, and especially LAF, were expressed. There is no doubt that these myths were, and still are, extant in European society, in forms in which they have been identified by historians and other writers. As for RR, it appears clearly in the speeches of European politicians and in the rhetoric of the discourse accompanying the development of the European Community, although it is expressed somewhat less clearly in the literature of the Third Wave writers. As discussed in Chapter 2, the three myths represent different scenarios of the experience of the Western Front, the differences arising both from the point of view of their sponsors, and from the different social needs which they met, and continue to meet.

Günter Grass' groundsman at Verdun, speaking in the year 1984, observes that people visiting the site are beginning to see the ossuary there as a "house of horrors", and to laugh at what they see inside it.<sup>1</sup> This raises the question: do myths lose meaning and die when people begin to laugh at them? My own view, asserted more than once in this thesis, is that myths rarely die, since in my favoured definition they represent underlying psychological truths, and these will tend to remain stable over long periods. Moreover, myths can resist laughter, as demonstrated by the large body of humour based on classical myth, which can satirise or find material for jokes in a myth without killing it.<sup>2</sup> However, there must be a point at which specifically historical myths, however general they may be, shade into 'history' and lose their power to give meaning to the particular experience which gave rise to them. This has certainly happened in past periods, as the myths which may have grown out of past wars have become subsumed into the general mythology of war and all that is left of their specificity are mythologised events or sequences of events, like 'The Battle of Hastings', 'The Retreat from Moscow' or 'The Hundred Years' War'. Anecdotally, one can observe evidence of this process of atrophy among visitors to the iconic sites and memorials of the Western Front, such as Verdun, Thiepval and Dixmuide. A few aged veterans are sometimes seen, and other visitors, often younger ex-service personnel, go there to pay their respects to the memories of individuals or military formations. But most of the visitors appear to be tourists or

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<sup>1</sup> Grass, *My Century*, p228; quoted in Chapter 7.

<sup>2</sup> A good example is the satirist Tom Lehrer's very funny song *Oedipus Rex*.



students, for whom these places are evidently beginning to resemble other, older, widely visited historical sites throughout Europe and elsewhere. It will be interesting to follow the development of the Third Wave of literary writers, many of whom were inspired by knowledge of the experiences of their grandparents: will there remain anything else to say, will the Western Front ever inspire a Fourth Wave and, if it does, will it express the same myths? Certainly, the later novels of the Third Wave writers Pat Barker, Susan Hill and Jean Rouaud cover quite different subjects than the Western Front.

Like all myths, the myths of the Western Front fulfilled social needs and, as discussed in Chapters 5, 6 and 7, these needs were evidently to express anger at the huge human loss which had been accompanied by so little apparent gain (LAF), to celebrate the values of comradeship, military valour and national pride (RTS) and to articulate the deeply felt need for a new beginning, repudiating the antagonism of the past (RR). The myths are intertwined in various ways, since, for example, the feelings of ‘loss’ which pervade LAF were occasioned in part by the loss of the company of valued comrades in the trenches (which relates to RTS), and the defiant words which end the ‘Jüngerian’ version of RTS undoubtedly contain a component of anger (which relates to LAF). RR is a kind of synthesis of both these myths, in that it builds on the emotions of LAF, but does not deny the values of RTS, while recognising that they must be subsumed into a wider European reconciliation.

The discipline of International Relations clearly has to take account of significant myths if it is true, as asserted in Chapter 2, that “in the absence of believable myths, coherent public action becomes very difficult to improvise or sustain.”<sup>3</sup> Some examples of efforts to define and classify myths relevant to IR were given in Chapter 2, but a serious practical problem exists in that there is no established methodology in IR for identifying the effect of myths on society in general or on specific political or other events.<sup>4</sup> Without some such methodology, it is difficult to see how the practical significance of any particular myth or group of myths could be assessed.

One possibility, in the present case, might be to research, through the study of speeches, other writings and interviews, the ways in which myths have affected the thinking and policies of individual statesmen such as those who have taken a lead in

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<sup>3</sup> McNeill, William H., “The Care and Repair of Public Myth”, *Foreign Affairs* 61, 1982-3, p1.

<sup>4</sup> Advice from Prof. C. Church, Prof. M. Frost and other faculty members, Research Training Seminar, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Kent, December 9, 1998.



the movement towards European integration. This would be a substantial, and different, research project or projects from the present one, however. Perhaps a start could be made by attempting to consider the extent to which the three Western Front myths are 'constitutive' of modern Europe. RR is clearly constitutive, since:

“ ... the prime motivation for European unification was, from the first, political, even military: the rejection of war as an instrument of state policy and a reading of recent European history as the futile carnage of civil wars unleashed by the blind forces of unbridled nationalism, culminating in the holocaust of Nazism”<sup>5</sup>

The sheer existence and popularity of the Third Wave of literature which, as demonstrated in Chapter 7, continues to convey so strongly the LAF myth, suggests that LAF remains well entrenched, and perhaps constitutive, at least in the UK, of a feeling of suspicion towards authority, one manifestation of which is the 'Euroscepticism' which continues to hold the UK back from whole-hearted engagement with the European Community.<sup>6</sup>

In the Girardian scheme myth is seen as the basis of social order, assigning meaning to the experience of the past and thereby changing present policies and actions. Some ways in which LAF, RTS and RR ascribe meaning have been identified in the course of this thesis, but no attempt, beyond some discussion of European integration, has been made to describe the European social order or how it has been influenced. As emphasised above, IR has not so far developed any methodology for doing this and I have used the notions of Girard and Turner only to identify and analyse the ways in which the myths can be seen in the literature. However, I would suggest that this in itself is a useful first step to take, and that the introduction of some of the tools of anthropology into IR might help to illuminate the practical ways in which myth affects the world of human affairs.

**3. The three myths and the three waves of literature.** The facts that I have identified three myths of the Western Front, and three waves of literary writing, invite a unique mental association of each myth with one of the waves of writing. Study of

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<sup>5</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity*, (London: Penguin Books, 1991), p151.

<sup>6</sup> Suggested by Professor C. Church, Research Training Seminar, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Kent, June 14 2000.



the literary canon makes it clear that to attempt to make this connection would be mistaken. Some of the elements of the LAF myth emerged from the First Wave in the writing of Sassoon and others, and Jünger's articulation of RTS also formed part of this wave. But it was not until the arrival of the Second Wave, in particular with the enormous popular success of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, that LAF became clearly established in popular mythology. LAF persists strongly in the writing of the Third Wave, which cannot be clearly associated with RR. Ironically (since it is in his *Storm of Steel* that RTS is so strongly represented), it is in Jünger's contribution of a precursor to the Third Wave in *The Peace* that RR finds its strongest literary manifestation.

Neither Sassoon nor Jünger are widely judged nowadays to be literary writers of the first rank, and, although both went on to write and publish prolifically for the rest of their lives, both are now remembered principally for those of their writings that were inspired by the experience of the Western Front. The intense liminal experiences which inspired both Sassoon's poems and Jünger's graphical descriptions drew from each of them a level of creativity and a quality of writing that neither was able subsequently to match. Jünger's obsession with WW1 during the period of his early writings was noted in Chapter 6, and although later in his life he was able to move on to other topics and fields of endeavour, becoming a respected scientist as well as a substantial literary figure, he was still revising *Storm of Steel* in 1961. Jünger never in his later writings matched (in the opinion of most critics) the power of *Storm of Steel* and its immediate successors. Sassoon, too, seems never fully to have escaped the war, seeming to Anthony Powell in 1963 "like a ghost haunting the fields of Passchendaele or Bapaume".<sup>7</sup> In his later autobiographical prose writing, following the Second Wave trilogy *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston*, he never covered any period of his life later than the year 1920.

It was the powerful effect of their Western Front-inspired work (including, in Sassoon's case, the prose of his popular *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*), together with the need throughout Europe for myths that would give meaning to the suffering of the war, which gave such an impetus to the myths with which Sassoon and Jünger are associated. Both, also, became mythologised as individuals, Sassoon soon after the war as 'England's angry young soldier-poet', an epithet that remained with him

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<sup>7</sup> Chapter 5 gives more details of Powell's visit to Sassoon.



for the rest of his life, and Jünger first as the dashing ‘prince of the trenches’ and, much later in his life, as the ‘icon of Franco-German reconciliation’.

For both Sassoon and Jünger, the process by which myth emerged from their work was essentially that of remembered *communitas*. Although both, in different ways, at times saw the war as the sacrifice of a generation of young men, neither could be said to have written a ‘retrospective transfiguration’ of the sacrificial crisis. And, indeed, Jünger’s view of the sacrifice was not of the sacrifice of a Girardian scapegoat, but of the self- sacrifice of men who willingly gave up their lives for their country. However, the mimesis which underlies the need for sacrifice was strongly present in Jünger’s WW1-related writings, inspired as they were by German nationalism and a perception of the superiority of German culture (which weakened later in his life as he became enamoured of the quality of French life and art). Sassoon, though unquestionably an English patriot, steeped in English culture, was much less strident in his views.

The Third Wave writers I have discussed in Chapter 7 are somewhat heterogeneous, in that, since they do not write from a shared direct experience of life on the Western Front as did the First and Second Wave writers, their diverse backgrounds and motives generate a corresponding diversity in their responses to the war. Also, to a greater extent than the writers of the First and Second Waves, they are British, which perhaps provides some evidence for the assertion that remembering WW1 has become a peculiarly British obsession. Many writers comment on this (sometimes seeing it as ‘Anglo-American’ rather than only British) and, anecdotally, it does seem that continental Europeans are more concerned with the memories and myths of WW2 than with those of WW1. A large proportion of the literature inspired by the Western Front comes largely from writers in English, and English-language writers certainly predominate in my literary canon. However, the high quality of some of the work of continental authors (e.g. Barbusse, Remarque, Renn, Romain, Rouaud, as well as Jünger) makes it, in my view, better to attempt to look at the literature from a ‘European’ perspective. In any case, the view of the literature as Anglo-centric is no more than impressionistic: I have found no studies to support this assertion,<sup>8</sup> and of course the fact of a book’s existence says nothing about its

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<sup>8</sup> Although Ann Linder’s *Princes of the Trenches* sets out to rectify the perceived imbalance by reviewing a substantial number of works in German which emerged from the war.



readership where, again, I have found very little concrete information beyond some evidence of translation into other European languages, and some limited sales figures.

My list of Third Wave writings includes two ‘outliers’ in Jünger’s *The Peace* (*Der Friede*), which I see as a precursor to the Third Wave, and Günter Grass’s *My Century*. It may well be that *The Peace* was not widely read in Europe – perhaps scarcely at all in the UK, since it was published in English only in the USA and is now out of print in that country (and apparently also in Germany).<sup>9</sup> *The Peace* is a precursor of the Third Wave, not in the sense that many of the Third Wave writers are likely to have read it or even heard of it, but due to the way in which it is one of the first books coming out of WW2 which clearly conveys a new ‘retrospective transfiguration of the sacrificial crisis’, thus helping to establish the cultural climate within which the Third Wave writers did their work. *My Century*, coming as it did late in the Third Wave, is not of course a book ‘about’ WW1, but is of interest because of the author’s imaginative evocation of the views of Remarque and Jünger, presenting them quite starkly as bearers of the LAF and RTS myths respectively.

If the writers of the First Wave were describing actual experience as it happened, the Second Wave writers, who were again nearly all veterans of the Western Front, reflected upon and internalised these experiences. I suggest that what the informed reader looks for from the Third Wave writers, most of them two generations younger than their earlier peers, is a conceptualisation of the experiences of the Western Front which sets them in a broader framework for a later generation. The most powerful of these from a mythical point of view are those writers who do not just retell a story, or create a new story, however cogently and well (such as Boyd, Edric, Findley, Hill and Rivière), but those whose work communicates a personal ‘transfiguration of the sacrificial crisis’. Most interesting in this regard are Barker, Rouaud and Faulks. Barker, using the device of combining historical and fictitious characters, powerfully conveys the agonising decisions faced by doctors whose task of healing is directed only at making sick men fit enough to return to the front: the ‘transfiguration’ here lies in her sympathetic portrayal of both the doctor (Rivers) and the range of often appalling symptoms displayed by the inmates of Craiglockart. She

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<sup>9</sup> Checked August 28 2002 on the Amazon websites in US and Germany: [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) and [www.amazon.de](http://www.amazon.de). A search on the same date on [www.abebooks.com](http://www.abebooks.com), a leading online resource for locating secondhand books worldwide, listed only 7 copies of *The Peace*, all of them in American bookshops.



also fuses western notions of illness and death with the mythology of the Melanesian islands, and in the final pages of the trilogy presents a powerful image of a Calvary, as Rivers muses on life and death in London while his former patients progress towards their deaths in France. The ‘transfiguration’ provided by Rouaud and Faulks is to convey the sense that the shadow of the Western Front continues to hang over those living in the late twentieth century, across generations and, in the case of Faulks’ *Birdsong*, also across national boundaries.

A notable feature of the work of the Third Wave writers is the degree to which their ‘transfigurations’ perpetuate the LAF myth. It is true that in some cases RR can be seen emerging as a response to LAF, but it is overwhelmingly LAF which the reader senses in these writings – and not only in the work of British authors, since both Rouaud and Grass reflect it or refer to it. It is difficult to discern literary followers of Jünger’s *The Peace*, perhaps because, although written by a recognised ‘literary’ author, its purpose was primarily educational, since it was originally intended to be used in this way once Hitler had been assassinated. Also, it loses force because the myth with which it associates itself is very close to the reality which many present-day Europeans perceive to be the case.

These assertions regarding the myths which emerge from Third Wave writings raise the question of ‘mediation’, which was discussed in Chapter 4. The question of mediation is indeed something which must be considered by anyone studying WW1, or thinking or writing about it, or indeed any other past event, in later years. The view of the war taken by any of the Third Wave writers is inevitably mediated through the work of First and Second Wave writers, as well as through communal and family memories of the war, and of course the Third Wave writers have each added their own personal contribution to these mediatory effects. One way in which mediation has worked has been to establish myths of the war which are “predominantly masculine”, reflecting as they do principally the experience of front soldiers.<sup>10</sup> The consequence of mediation in the present case appears from my research principally to have been reinforcement of the LAF myth, which is strongly represented in Third Wave writings.

However, mediation is also exercised through the reader him- or herself, whose contemporary reactions to contemporary (or any other) literature will be themselves

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<sup>10</sup> Agnès Cardinal, Dorothy Goldman and Judith Hattaway, *Women’s Writing on the First World War*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1999), p5.



mediated through the memories of past reading and past life experience. This observation introduces two qualifications to the highly simplified diagram concerning the sources and channels of transmission of myth which was presented in Chapter 4. First, the ‘makes-sense epistemology’ which I suggest affects myth will vary from person to person and group to group, as different people and groups ‘make sense’ in different ways and draw different conclusions. And secondly, different readers, with different memories and life experiences, may interpret differently the ‘remembered *communitas*’ and ‘retrospective transfiguration’ which writers present, and consequently see different myths in the material they read. While this effect may leave open to challenge some of the interpretations of the literature I have presented, it also presents the possibility, as I argued in Chapter 7, that although they appear mostly to be presenting again the LAF myth, “... the sheer coming into existence of the work of the Third Wave writers has had the effect of establishing the RR myth more securely in modern European consciousness”.

The personal literary canon I have employed in this thesis implies an underlying taxonomy of Western Front-inspired writings which would classify them as ‘highbrow’ ‘middlebrow’ and ‘amateur’. Most of the books I have designated as ‘literature’ might reasonably be called ‘highbrow’ and, as mentioned in Chapter 4, the ‘middlebrow’ category has been well documented by Bracco.<sup>11</sup> The ‘amateur’ category covers the enormous number of diaries and memoirs which have found publication, as well as some of the verse. There are of course grey areas at the boundaries between these categories, interesting examples being Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Faulks’ *Birdsong* which, although they have ‘literary’ aspirations, have also had an enormous popular success and huge sales. This observation raises the question as to relative importance of these different kinds of writing for the creation and transmission of myth. My contention is that the most influential vehicle in the long run is ‘literary’ or ‘highbrow’ writings, and all the evidence certainly points to the principal origin of the LAF myth as lying in literary writings of the First and Second Waves. However, as reported in Chapter 6, I could find few literary writers other than Jünger whose ‘remembered *communitas*’ or ‘retrospective transfiguration’ could be said to have evoked the RTS myth, and it may

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<sup>11</sup> Rosa Maria Bracco, *Merchants of Hope: British Middlebrow Writers and the First World War*, (Oxford and Providence: Berg Publishers, 1992).



be that the survival of this myth, or at least of opposition to the LAF myth, is mainly due to other cultural sources than that of literature.

**4. The analytical scheme: mythic discourse, liminality and *communitas*, the sacrificial crisis.** The authorities I have cited concerning the significance of myth for contemporary society (principally McNeill, Cassirer, Biderman and Scharfstein, Buffet and Heuser, Hosking and Schöpflin, and Smith) seem to me to provide convincing evidence that a functioning society is driven, not only by rationality, but also by an underlying mythology. Cassirer's notion of 'mythic discourse' helps us to understand the way in which this process works. I suggest that society's recognition of the literary value of the First, Second and Third Waves of Western Front-inspired writing, and the incorporation of these works into a literary canon, represents 'mythic discourse' in action.

The use of the notions of myth as 'remembered *communitas*' and/or the 'retrospective transfiguration of the sacrificial crisis in the light of the social order that has arisen from it' has proved fruitful. 'Liminality' and 'sacrifice' are two ways of interpreting the experience and memory of the Western Front, which are not mutually exclusive, and which are both the source of myth, severally and together, as mediated through literature. Turner's 'remembered *communitas*' gives a convincing explanation of one way in which myths can arise, Girard's 'retrospective transfiguration' then providing an explanation of the way in which myths contribute to the establishment or maintenance of the social order. There may be other ways in which myth is formed, but these two are especially relevant in the case of the Western Front, where so much experience was in circumstances of close *communitas* with comrades in arms, and where such great changes in the social order of European countries came about after the war. Analysis of Jünger's *Storm of Steel*, and of the 'novels of *communitas*' which I have associated with the LAF myth, is facilitated by the adoption of this approach but, interpreted to cover other liminal groups than those in the trenches (e.g. victims of war in general, or groups such as the pacifists who appear in Barker's *Regeneration*), it assists the interpretation of many of the Third wave writings also.

While Girard sees the sacrificial crisis as necessary to restore social order in the community, he has little to say in his writings about the details of the processes by



which this restoration of social order is brought about. These will be specific to the culture of different societies, presumably. Specific to the culture and politics of modern Europe are the processes which have led to the creation of the European Community and to its continuing development. Girard has nothing to say about these, except that, following his ideas, we may see in WW1 the ‘founding murder’ of the modern European polity, and the RR myth as one of the myths, arising from the sacrificial crisis of the Western Front, which constitute it. There is plenty of evidence in the writings of all three literary waves, from Sassoon and Owen to Barker, for the view that the war was, and continues to be, widely seen as the sacrifice of a generation, although in Jünger’s view this was willing self-sacrifice, not sacrifice inflicted by the community.

The tools of anthropology I have employed have proved useful in providing an analytical basis for studying the links between literary texts and myth. They are complementary to more conventional literary criticism, and I have frequently relied in the course of this work on the judgements of literary critics such as Bergonzi and Hynes. The boundary between literary criticism and the analytical study of myth is ill-defined, however, and it is interesting to note that Girard himself, a Professor (Emeritus) of French Language, Literature and Civilisation, has derived much of his thinking from the study of comparative literature.

Various questions which have been raised or implied in the course of this thesis have been left unanswered, and might be worthy of further research. Among these are:

Identifying myths. I noted in Chapter 2 some means by which, I suggested, myths extant in society might be identified. As a simplifying approach, I have used secondary authorities to select the myths I choose to study. Further work in this area, including the study of the various means by which myths may be expressed, could be profitable.

The sacrificial crisis. In the Conclusions to Chapter 2 I proposed that, in respect of the Girardian sacrificial crisis: “ ... one might wish to study the apprehensions which underlay society’s need for sacrifice, the way in which it contributed to the maintenance or restoration of social order, and the relationship between the pre-war and post-war social order.” No doubt historians have written



extensively on these issues, but it would be interesting to interpret their work in Girardian terms.

*Myth and literature.* I asserted in Chapter 1 that “... although myths have many sources, including elements in popular culture, the literary canon is an important means by which the myths of society are expressed, and remains one of the strongest influences in determining their survival and evolution”. This is an assumption which, I believe, would be supported by many literary critics and historians, and it is an underlying assumption of the thesis. However, it could be challenged, for example on the ground that popular culture, and indeed arts other than literature, are equally strong influences. Further research would clarify this issue.

*Myth and history.* The views of some historians on the ‘truth’ of, in particular, the LAF myth, were sketched in Chapter 2. Since truthfulness must be an essential value in a liberal society, many might take the view that a social order based on myths, which may not be ‘true’, will run into trouble (as it did in Nazi Germany, for example). This may well be the case, but myth is a part of reality – it exists, and actions are influenced by it – and so historians can hardly avoid taking account of it. Further, the present thesis is, from one point of view, a partial ‘history’ of some particular myths. This intertwining of myth and history seems unavoidable, but further study might be profitable of particular cases where the historical interpretation of events appears to conflict with myths which have grown up around them.

*Myth and IR.* The IR literature does not have a great deal to say about myth, and in view of its power, compared to ‘rational’ approaches, to influence practical politics, and its importance (according to McNeill et. al.) for society, this is perhaps a gap waiting to be filled. In a recent paper Williams argues for more historical perspective in IR, “to get back to the *longue durée*”, and perhaps such perspective might include more intensive study of the myths which have arisen from the historical past.<sup>12</sup>

**5. Conclusion: the ‘founding murder’.** Drawing on points made above, and others made elsewhere in the thesis, I return to the concept of WW1, and especially the Western Front, as the ‘founding murder’ of present-day Europe. All three myths

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<sup>12</sup> Andrew Williams, “Meaning and International Relations: Some Thoughts”. Paper presented to the Vienna Conference of the ECPR Standing Group on International Relations, September 16-19, 1998.



spring from this ‘murder’, and in much of the literature I have studied the war is seen as sacrifice, the literature providing a ‘retrospective transfiguration’ of the sacrificial crisis the war represented. In many cases the myth is reinforced by the ‘remembered *communitas*’ of the men whose sacrifice it principally was. The difference among the three myths then arises from the different ways in which the ‘transfiguration’ is executed, or the *communitas* remembered.

The LAF myth, remarkably persistent through all three waves of literature, and dominant in the Second Wave, sees the sacrifice which occurred as the sacrifice by society of a generation of young men, which had as its purpose the preservation of the earlier social order. This was the second kind of Girardian sacrifice, in which the scapegoat is ritually killed in order to maintain the status quo. The irony is that the earlier social order was not preserved – another war followed only 20 years later and social and political conditions throughout Europe changed drastically. Something new therefore did emerge from the war, meaning that, in Girardian terms, the war was actually the founding murder of a new order, in spite of the fact that LAF sees it as ‘futile’, and that the defeat of the Nazis in WW2 was necessary before the new order could come into being.

In the RTS myth, soldiers on both sides are seen to have sacrificed themselves in the interests of the future of their countries. The founding murder in this myth was a self-sacrifice which all thought worthwhile, so that (in German terms) the true value of the German culture might be recognised across Europe and Germany take its rightful place as the leading nation, or (in British or French terms) future domination of Europe by Germany could be avoided. In either case, the war was the founding murder of the new order which eventually emerged.

RR synthesises the LAF and RTS myths, recognising that, after the end of the fighting on the Western Front, no-one could truly be said to have ‘won’, but celebrating the value of the distinct national cultures of all the nations involved. Its beginning can be seen in the ‘international’ *communitas* which arose on the Western Front, under which soldiers who were notionally enemies felt themselves to be comrades in adversity. Accounts of this version of *communitas* appear in all three waves of the literature. Of all the myths, RR gives the clearest account of a ‘founding murder’ since, although it refers back to the centuries of past European wars, and also invokes the older myth of ‘European Unity’, it explicitly pinpoints the experience of



WW1, and especially the carnage of the Western Front, as the motivation for the establishment of a new social and political order.

The present-day European Union, imperfect though it may be, is a current manifestation of this new order, and the perspective adopted in this thesis suggests that the Western Front may indeed be seen as its ‘founding murder’.



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*The categories used in this bibliography:*

- 1a. *Novels, plays and poetry (including anthologies) by authors other than Sassoon and Jünger*
- 1b. *Biography, autobiography and letters (other than Sassoon and Jünger).*
- 1c. *Works by Siegfried Sassoon and commentary on them; biography of Sassoon.*
- 1d. *Works by Ernst Jünger and commentary on them; biography of Jünger.*
2. *Literary criticism; social, political and cultural analysis.*
3. *Mythology*
4. *History and historiography.*
5. *Management science.*
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<sup>1</sup> *Memoirs of a Fox-hunting Man*, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, and *Sherston's Progress* were published in a combined edition as *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston*, (London, Faber and Faber, 1937).



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