IV
Myth, Ritual, and Romance

A NEW WORLD OF MYTH

It was in December, 1916, that Second Lieutenant Francis Foster underwent what he later recognized as "the most momentous experience of my life." As a new and timid subaltern, he had just joined C Company of the East Lancashire Regiment on the line. His company commander sensed that his new young officer needed some steadying if he was to be of any use. Consequently, at sunset he took him on an outrageously risky impromptu stroll right out into No Man's Land, culminating in the swank of smoking cigarettes in a notoriously dangerous willow copse between the lines. Throughout, the captain is wholly phlegmatic, and Foster suddenly sloughs off his fear. "Because I was no longer fearful," he remembers, "elation filled me. But I could not understand what had caused the transformation. It was as though I had become another person altogether, or, rather as though I had entered another life." [1] A similar and equally portentous image is the resort of Max Plowman as he describes his feelings upon being relieved from a hazardous position: "It is marvellous to be out of the trenches: it is like being born again." [2] To Henry Williamson, those who "passed through the estranging remoteness of battle" were "not broken, but reborn," [3] and a similar rhetoric of Conversion dominates Ernest Parker's recall of moving up the line for the first time: "What effect this experience would have on our lives we could not imagine, but at least it was unlikely that we should survive without some sort of inner change. Towards this transmutation of our personalities we now marched." [4] The personal issues at stake in infantry warfare are so momentous that it is natural to speak of "baptism by fire." "We are still an initiate generation," says Charles Carrington, a generation possessing "a secret that can never be communicated." [5] And after the initiatory rite of baptism, there is the possibility of resurrection. Returning from an apparently hopeless patrol, Blunden says, "We were received as Lazarus was." [6] "I had been feeling much more cheerful lately," says Sassoon, "for my friend Cromlech had risen again from the dead." [7]

A world of such "secrets," conversions, metamorphoses, and rebirths is a world of reinvigorated myth. In many ways it will seem to imply a throwback way across the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries to Renaissance and medieval modes of thought and feeling. That such a myth-ridden world could take shape in the midst of a war representing a triumph of modern industrialism, materialism, and mechanism is an anomaly worth considering. The result of inexpressible terror long and inexplicably endured is not merely what Northrop Frye would call "displaced" Christianity. The result is also a plethora of very un-modern superstitions, talismans, wonders, miracles, relics, legends, and rumors.

RUMOR, FICTION, BELIEF

Rumor, "painted full of tongues," is in attendance, as Shakespeare knew, at every war. Yet the Great War seems especially fertile in rumor and legend. It was as if the general human impulse to make fictions had been dramatically unleashed by the novelty, immensity, and grotesqueness of the proceedings. The war itself was clearly a terrible invention, and any number, it seemed, could play. What Marc Bloch recalls about inverse skepticism is from his experience of the French trenches, but it is true of the British scene as well. "The prevailing opinion in the trenches," he notes, "was that anything might be true, except what was printed." From this skepticism about anything official there arose, he says, "a prodigious renewal of oral tradition, the ancient mother of myths and legends." Thus, ironically, "governments reduced the front-line soldier to the means of information and the mental state of olden times before journals, before news sheets, before books." The result was an approximation of the popular psychological atmosphere of the Middle Ages, where rumor was borne not as now by ration-parties but by itinerant "peddlars, jugglers, pilgrims, beggars." [8]

Two of the earliest and best-known legends have known originators. The Angels of Mons, reputed to have appeared in the sky during the British retreat from Mons in August, 1914, and to have safeguarded the

withdrawal, developed from a short story which mentioned no angels at all. On September 29, 1914, Arthur Machen published in the *Evening News* an openly fictional romantic story, "The Bowmen," in which the ghosts of the English bowmen dead at Agincourt came to the assistance of their hard-pressed countrymen by discharging arrows which killed Germans without leaving visible wounds. Machen described these bowmen, who appeared between the two armies, as "a long line of shapes, with a shining about them." It was the *shining* that did it: within a week Machen's fictional bowmen had been transformed into real angels, and what he had written as palpable fiction was soon credited as fact. He was embarrassed and distressed at the misapprehension, but he was assured, especially by the clergy, that he was wrong: the angels—in some versions, angel bowmen—were real and had appeared in the sky near Mons. It became unpatriotic, almost treasonable, to doubt it.

The second famous early legend also derives from the inventive power of one man; this *canard* also involves the Mons retreat. The Kaiser, it was said, had referred to the British troops as "a contemptible little army." It is now known that the phrase emanated not from the German side but from the closets of British propagandists, who needed something memorable and incisive to inspirit the troops. The phrase was actually devised at the War Office by Sir Frederick Maurice and fathered upon the Kaiser.

But the other main legends and rumors are quite anonymous. No one knows who it was who contrived the German Corpse-Rendering Works, or Tallow Factory. This legend held that fats were so scarce in Germany because of the naval blockade that battlefield corpses were customarily taken back by the Germans to be rendered at special installations. The fats produced from this operation were then utilized in the manufacture of nitroglycerine, as well as candles, industrial lubricants, and boot dubbing. The legend probably originated in an intentional British mistranslation of the phrase *Kadaver Anstalt* on a captured but routine German administrative order about sending all available *cadavers*—in German, animal remains—to an installation in the rear to be reduced to tallow. An analogous legend locates the sinister Reducer or Destructor on the British side. The notorious training center at Etaples was selected as the most appropriate site of this manifestation of rampant industrialism. The rumor, like most of those circulated by the troops, has high literary quality: it concentrates in the image of The Destructor—brilliant term!—the essence of the whole war. The version encountered by Alfred M. Hale is representative:

> O'Rorke . . . had said that [in Etaples] was the largest Destructor the British Army possessed. Everything that could come under the head of refuse was brought here from over a wide area, to be reduced to ashes—even, according to a sinister report, the arms and legs of human beings. It was also said that military executions took place here.[9]

What better place?

Like the Tallow Works, many other atrocity rumors were devised to blacken the enemy. One is the story that the Germans used bayonets with a saw-like edge, the better to rip open the British belly. Actually there were such bayonets—they are to be seen in museums today—but they were not supposed to be sadistic instruments: they were issued to German pioneer units for sawing tree-branches, and they were carried in addition to the regular "anti-personnel" bayonet. Such is the desire for these bayonets to bespeak nastiness in the German character that to this day the rumor persists that they were a specific instrument of Hun sadism.[10] Every war gives rise to rumors of dum-dum bullets, and in this one the Germans were said to have had recourse to such ammunition quite instinctively. But anyone who has seen the damage done by quite ordinary bullets fired from high-velocity military rifles—what happened to John F. Kennedy's head is a case in point—will realize that there's no need for special bullets. The same can be said of what ordinary bayonets do.

Another well-known rumor imputing unique vileness to the Germans is that of the Crucified Canadian. The usual version relates that the Germans captured a Canadian soldier and in full view of his mates exhibited him in the open spread-eagled on a cross, his hands and feet pierced by bayonets. He is said to have died slowly. Maple Copse, near Sanctuary Wood in the Ypres sector, was the favorite setting. The victim was not always a Canadian. Ian Hay, who places the incident as early as spring, 1915, maintains that the victim was British, that he was wounded when captured, and that he was crucified on a tree by German cavalrymen, who then "stood round him till he died."[11] A version popular in America retains the element of the Canadian victim but—typically, some will say—magnifies it twofold. Dalton Trumbo thus registers a moment in the American popular consciousness: "The Los Angeles newspapers carried a story of two young Canadian soldiers who had been crucified by the Germans in full view of their comrades across Nomansland. That made the Germans nothing better than animals and naturally you got interested and wanted Germany to get the tar kicked out of her."[12]

The Crucified Canadian is an especially interesting fiction both be-

cause of its original context in the insistent visual realities of the front and because of its special symbolic suggestiveness. The image of crucifixion was always accessible at the front because of the numerous real physical calvaries visible at French and Belgian crossroads, many of them named Crucifix Corner. One of the most familiar terrain features on the Somme was called Crucifix Valley after a large metal calvary that once stood there. Perhaps the best-known calvary was the large wooden one standing in the town cemetery at Ypres. It was famous—and to some, miraculous—because a dud shell had lodged between the wood of the cross and the figure of Christ (it stayed there until 1969, when the excessively weathered crucifix was replaced). Stephen Graham was one of many who wanted to behold miraculous power in the arrest of the dud in that place. Writing of the cemetery in 1921, he says,

> In this acre of death the high wooden crucifix still stands, with its riven agonized Lord looking down. Of the hundreds of thousands of shells which fell in Ypres all spared Him—all but one which came direct and actually hit the Cross. That one did not explode but instead half-buried itself in the wood and remains stuck in the upright to this day—an accidental symbol of the power of the Cross.[13]

Roadside calvaries were not likely to go unnoticed by British passersby, not least because there was nothing like them on the Protestant rural roads at home. Rupert Brooke reports one private saying, "What I don't like about this 'ere Bloody Europe is all these Bloody pictures of Jesus Christ an' 'is Relatives, be'ind Bloody bits of glawss." [14] But another reason the image of crucifixion came naturally to soldiers was that behind the lines almost daily they could see some Other Ranks undergoing "Field Punishment No. 1" for minor infractions. This consisted of being strapped or tied spread-eagled to some immobile object: a favorite was the large spoked wheel of a General Service Wagon. Max Plowman once inquires, "Wouldn't the army do well to avoid punishments which remind men of the Crucifixion?" [15]

Reminded of the Crucifixion all the time by the ubiquitous foreign calvaries and by the spectacle of uniformed miscreants immobilized and shamed with their arms extended, the troops readily embraced the image as quintessentially symbolic of their own suffering and "sacrifice." Forty years after the war Graves recalls the one-time popularity of George Moore's *The Brook Kerith* (1916), and observes:

> It is in wartime that books about Jesus have most appeal, and *The Brook Kerith* first appeared forty years ago during the Battle of the Somme, when Christ was being invoked alike by the Germans and the Allies for victory. . . . This paradox made most of the English soldiers serving in the purgatorial trenches lose all respect for organized Pauline religion, though still feeling a sympathetic reverence for Jesus as our fellow-sufferer. Cross-road Calvaries emphasized this relationship.[16]

The sacrificial theme, in which each soldier becomes a type of the crucified Christ, is at the heart of countless Great War poems like Robert Nichols's "Battery Moving Up to a New Position from Rest Camp: Dawn," in which the men passing a church congregation at Mass silently solicit their intercessory prayers:

> Entreat you for such hearts as break
> With the premonitory ache
> Of bodies whose feet, hands, and side
> Must soon be torn, pierced, crucified.

In Sassoon's "The Redeemer," the speaker, directing a party working with planks in a soaking trench, is struck by the resemblance of one of his men, both arms supporting his heavy planks, to Christ at Golgotha:

> He faced me, reeling in his weariness,
> Shouldering his load of planks, so hard to bear.
> I say that He was Christ. . . .
> Then the flame sank, and all grew black as pitch,
> While we began to struggle along the ditch;
> And someone flung his burden in the muck,
> Mumbling, "O Christ Almighty, now I'm stuck!"

Wilfred Owen draws the same equation between his soldiers and the Christ who approaches His Crucifixion. In a letter to Osbert Sitwell written in early July, 1918, he speaks of training new troops in England:

> For 14 hours yesterday I was at work—teaching Christ to lift his cross by numbers, and how to adjust his crown; and not to imagine he thirst until after the last halt. I attended his Supper to see that there were no complaints; and inspected his feet that they should be worthy of the nails. I see to it that he is dumb, and stands at attention before his accusers. With a piece of silver I buy him every day, and with maps I make him familiar with the topography of Golgotha.[17]

(Better prose, by the way, is hardly to be found in the war, except perhaps from the hand of Blunden.) The idea of sacrifice urged some imaginations—Owen's among them—to homoeroticize the Christ-soldier analogy. Leonard Green, in his short story "In Hospital" (1920), depicts a handsome boy dying of his wounds. "His blood poured out in sacrifice," says Green, "made possible the hazardous success of the more for-

tunate. He was the pattern of all suffering. He was Christ. . . . He was my God, and I worshipped him." [18] All this considered, the rumor of the Crucified Canadian seems to assume an origin and a locus, as well as a meaning. He is "the pattern of all suffering." His suffering could be conceived to represent the sacrifice of all, at the same time that it was turned by propaganda into an instrument of hate. No wonder that, serving both purposes, it was a popular legend.

Most of the rumors originating in the Great War have become standard for succeeding wars. On the American line in January, 1945, it was believed that the Germans across the way had crucified an American. In 1944 and 1945 it was also fervently believed that the Germans would shoot any prisoner caught with German objects on his person. This was a replay of a rumor originating in the Great War. Once H. H. Cooper, in danger of capture, emptied his pockets: "Before going further I threw away any souvenirs I had in my pockets, German buttons and badges, coins and bullets, for if I was caught and had these things I had visions of being 'done in' by irate Jerries." [19] In both wars alike a perennial rumor was that the enemy had women in his entrenchments. The women's underwear sometimes found in dugouts was assumed to belong to the residents rather than to represent gifts destined for home by soldiers hoping for leave. And in both wars it was widely believed but never, so far as I know, proved that the French, Belgians, or Alsatians living just behind the line signaled the distant German artillery by fantastically elaborate, shrewd, and accurate means. In 1972 Stuart Cloete is still convinced that one Belgian near Ypres in 1916 signaled to the Germans by changing from time to time the position at the plow of his grey horse and his brown. Cloete believes that this Belgian was caught and shot.[20] So much plowing was always going on behind the line that it suggested a host of variations on signaling technique. Some French farmers, says Blunden, were reputed to plow arrows pointing to crucial British emplacements, as well as, in the classical way, "ploughing in view of the Germans with white or black horses on different occasions." [21] In the same way, back-of-the-line laundresses were believed to send signals by arranging their drying bedsheets in various significant patterns on the ground.

For sheer inventiveness in this line the prize would have to go to a Canadian artillery sergeant, Reginald Grant, whose fatuous and self-congratulatory *S.O.S. Stand To!* appeared while the war was going on and thus can be assumed to contain nothing at odds with official views. We can now see that the book is a virtual anthology of fables, lies, superstitions, and legends, all offered as a sober report. Sergeant Grant's

problem is simple: he simply can't believe that Huns can be skilled at counter-battery location through sound and flash calculations. Seeing his own battery constantly hit by accurate counter-battery fire no matter how cleverly it moves or hides itself, he must posit some explanation. This he does by conceiving of the Belgian landscape as swarming with disloyal farmers who signal the Canadian artillery locations to the Germans by the following means: (1) windmills which suddenly turn the wrong way; (2) four white cows positioned briefly in front of the guns of the battery; (3) manipulation into anomalous positions of the hands of the clock in the village steeple; and (4) heliographic apparatus concealed in farmhouse attics. All this fantasy of folk espionage Grant projects in a frantic search for some way of explaining the disasters suffered by the Canadian artillery which will not have to acknowledge the enemy's skill in observation, mathematics, and deduction.

The Belgian station-master at Poperinghe is as subtle as his treasonable countrymen in the field. He was shot, Grant reports, when it was discovered that he had "a wire running from the station depot straight to the German lines, together with some other signaling apparatus." This he employed on one occasion to notify the German artillery that the baths at Poperinghe were at that moment full of British troops. Thirty were killed and forty wounded.[22] Again, two Belgian women lurking about British installations were seen to release a pigeon from a basket: one hour later a German shell hit a hospital, killing every single man in one of the wards.[23]

These rumors resemble much of the more formal literature of the war in that their purpose is to "make sense" of events which otherwise would seem merely accidental or calamitous. Other rumors were consolatory in function, like the popular one hinting the imminent transfer of a unit to Egypt, or later, to Italy. Or the rumor Stanley Casson remembers, that "no shell ever bursts in a hole made by one of its predecessors." He adds: "For so we fondly believed." [24] Some rumors were witty and sardonic, like the one maintaining that the British Army paid the French Government rent for the use of the trenches; or the famous one—a dramatization of the conviction that the war would continue forever—that the end of the war would be signaled by four black or dark blue Very lights shot up into the night sky.

Still other rumors developed into fully fleshed narrative fictions, almost short stories. One of the best of these, bred by anxiety as well as by the need to find a simple cause for the failure of British attacks, is the legend of the ghostly German officer-spy who appears in the British trenches just before an attack. He is most frequently depicted as a major.

No one sees him come or go. He is never captured, although no one ever sees him return to the German lines. The mystery is never solved. The version Blunden retails in *Undertones of War* includes all the classic details, not omitting the significant giveaway deviation in uniform (at this time the British were all wearing steel helmets in the line):

> A stranger in a soft cap and a trench coat approached, and asked me the way to the German lines. This visitor facing the east was white-faced as a ghost, and I liked neither his soft cap nor the mackintosh nor the right hand concealed under his coat. I, too, felt myself grow pale, and I thought it as well to direct him down the communication trench, . . . at that juncture deserted; he scanned me, deliberately, and quickly went on. Who he was, I have never explained to myself; but in two minutes the barrage was due, and his chances of doing us harm (I thought he must be a spy) were all gone.[25]

George Coppard's odd major also arouses suspicion by an irregularity of uniform:

> I remember during the Loos battle seeing a very military-looking major complete with monocle, and wearing a white collar. He asked me the way to Hay Alley and spoke good English. I never suspected that anything was wrong, though I was puzzled about his collar, as all our officers were then wearing khaki collars. Shortly after there was a scare, and officers dashed about trying to find the gallant major, but he had vanished.[26]

Since Reginald Grant is in the artillery rather than the infantry, his wraithlike spy must appear at a battery position instead of in a trench, asking pointed questions about the guns and their ammunition. He is of course a major, accompanied by a captain.

For the student of folklore there is much interest in watching the officer-spy-in-the-trenches legend mutate into other narrative types. An example is the legend of the lunatic inventor nicknamed The Admiral, which retains two elements of its officer-spy original or analog: the irregularities of uniform and the odd total disappearance of the protagonist. As Henry Williamson tells the story, a familiar but mysterious figure behind the lines was an eccentric officer called The Admiral because he wore both an Army captain's insignia and the wavy cuff stripes of an officer in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve. His passion was inventions. He devised a steel body-shield which did not work, and died finally by blundering into his own cunning booby-trap. Says Williamson: "His body was found (according to rumor) half a mile away. . . . Half a mile! It seems a long way to be wafted. Anyhow, the Admiral and his fearful toys were never seen again. Some said he was a spy, and had gone through the German lines again when he had got all the information he required. . . ." [27]

The finest legend of the war, the most brilliant in literary invention and execution as well as the richest in symbolic suggestion, has something of this fantastic quality. It is a masterpiece. The rumor was that somewhere between the lines a battalion-sized (some said regiment-sized) group of half-crazed deserters from all the armies, friend and enemy alike, harbored underground in abandoned trenches and dugouts and caves, living in amity and emerging at night to pillage corpses and gather food and drink. This horde of wild men lived underground for years and finally grew so large and rapacious and unredeemable that it had to be exterminated. Osbert Sitwell was well acquainted with the story. He says that the deserters included French, Italians, Germans, Austrians, Australians, Englishmen, and Canadians; they lived

> —at least they *lived*—in caves and grottoes under certain parts of the front line. . . . They would issue forth, it was said, from their secret lairs, after each of the interminable checkmate battles, to rob the dying of their few possessions. . . . Were these bearded figures, shambling in rags and patched uniforms . . . were they a myth created by suffering among the wounded, as a result of pain, privation, and exposure, or did they exist? . . . It is difficult to tell. At any rate, the story was widely believed among the troops, who maintained that the General Staff could find no way of dealing with these bandits until the war was over, and that in the end they had to be gassed.[28]

In some versions the ghouls are even wilder. Ardern Beaman tells of meeting a salvage company at work on the battlefields of the Somme, where the "warren of trenches and dugouts extended for untold miles":

> They warned us, if we insisted on going further in, not to let any man go singly, but only in strong parties, as the Golgotha was peopled with wild men, British, French, Australian, German deserters, who lived there underground, like ghouls among the mouldering dead, and who came out at nights to plunder and kill.

Beaman's details are telling:

> In the night, an officer said, mingled with the snarling of carrion dogs, they often heard inhuman cries and rifle-shots coming from that awful wilderness.

And he concludes with a vignette whose tone seems to evoke the style less of the First World War than of the Second:

> Once . . . the Salvage Company had put out, as a trap, a basket containing food, tobacco, and a bottle of whisky. But the following morning they found the bait untouched, and a note in the basket, "Nothing doing!" [29]

That sounds like Joseph Heller or Thomas Pynchon. Pynchon, indeed, has refracted the legend of the wild deserters in *Gravity's Rainbow*, adapting it to the special plausibilities of the Second War. The ghoulish wild men have now metamorphosed into wild dogs, who, immediately after the war, occupy a German village:

> One village in Mecklenburg has been taken over by army dogs, . . . each one conditioned to kill on sight any human except the one who trained him. But the trainers are dead men now, or lost. The dogs have gone out in packs. . . . They've broken into supply depots Rin-Tin-Tin style and looted K-rations, frozen hamburger, cartons of candy bars. . . . Someday G-5 might send in troops.[30]

One reason the legend of the wild deserters is so rich is that it gathers and unifies the maximum number of meaningful emotional motifs. For one thing, it offers a virtual mirror image, and a highly sardonic one, of real, orderly trench life, in which, for example, night was the time for "work." For another, it projects the universal feeling of shame about abandoning the wounded to spend nights suffering alone between the lines. It embodies in objectified dramatic images the universal fantasy—the Huckleberry Finn daydream—of flagrant disobedience to authority. It conveys the point that German and British are not enemies: the enemy of both is the War. And finally, it enacts in unforgettable terms a feeling inescapable in the trenches—that "normal" life there was equal to outright bestiality and madness.

One would have to be mad, or close to it, to credit talismans, in the first quarter of the twentieth century, with the power to deflect bullets and shell fragments. And yet no front-line soldier or officer was without his amulet, and every tunic pocket became a reliquary. Lucky coins, buttons, dried flowers, hair cuttings, New Testaments, pebbles from home, medals of St. Christopher and St. George, childhood dolls and teddy bears, poems or Scripture verses written out and worn in a small bag around the neck like a phylactery, Sassoon's fire-opal—so urgent was the need that no talisman was too absurd. And sometimes luck depended not on what one carried but on what one did, or refrained from doing. Robert Graves asserts that he regarded the preservation of his virginity essential to his survival at the front, and imputes to his continence his remarkable good fortune in surviving for many months when the average front-line life of a "wart" was only six weeks.[31] Philip Gibbs met a colonel of the North Staffordshires who believed that it was his will power that warded off flying metal. He told Gibbs:

> "I have a mystical power. Nothing will ever hit me as long as I keep that power which comes from faith. It is a question of absolute belief in the domination of mind over matter. I go through any barrage unscathed because my will is strong enough to turn aside explosive shells and machine-gun bullets. As matter they must obey my intelligence. They are powerless to resist the mind of a man in touch with the Universal Spirit. . . ."

"He spoke quietly and soberly," says Gibbs, "in a matter-of-fact way. I decided that he was mad." [32]

THREES

As we have seen, there are three separate lines of trenches: front, support, reserve. A battalion normally spent a third of its duty time in each, and the routine in each line was similar: the unit was divided into three groups, one of which kept alert while the other two stood down. "Day and night," says Max Plowman, "we have three men to every bay: one on sentry while the other two rest or sleep." [33] The daily pattern was similar in the artillery: an officer would spend one day, the most dangerous, as forward observing officer; one day, the next most dangerous, firing with the battery; and one day, the least dangerous, in the rear, supervising the transport of ammunition and supplies. Even the U-boats observed the ubiquitous pattern of threes: one-third were actively patrolling while a third were moving to or from duty stations and a third underwent repair or refitting. After endless months and years of participating in such tripartite ways of dividing things, it was natural to see everything as divisible by threes. "I had become very sensitive to atmosphere, to the three zones of war," says Stuart Cloete, projecting the pattern of front, support, and reserve lines onto areas well behind the line. The three zones he distinguishes are

> the line where there were only fighting men; the next zone that was semi-immune to shellfire, where there were the ancillary services, Army Service Corps, casualty clearing stations, horse lines, and possibly some heavy guns. There were also some civilians and one could buy food, wine, and women . . . ; and finally the back areas peopled by old men, cripples, children and virtuous women. This arrangement must have applied equally to the German side.[34]

In Cloete's mind "the sequence of desires" in those just relieved from the front was also triadic: "First sleep. . . . Then food. And only then a

woman—when they had been rested and fed. That was something the bloody civilians never knew. The sequence." [35]

Even colors formalized themselves into threes. One observer described the attack on Gommecourt on July 1, 1916, this way: "Everything stood still for a second, as a panorama painted with three colors—the white of the smoke, the red of the shrapnel and blood, the green of the grass." [36] White, red, and green can turn (sardonically) to red, white, and blue once the element of temporal sequence is added. A facetious poem by "R.W.M." titled "Tricolor" in the *Wipers Times* for December, 1918, finds that when wounded the soldier sees red; in hospital, he sees white; and released as ambulatory, he sees blue (the color of the official invalid bathrobes). When John Ball, the just-wounded soldier of David Jones's *In Parenthesis*, entertains a fantasy of the hospital at home, it comes out in a similar tripartite way, and the vision of the three colors seems then to trigger a further triadic division, this time of the setting:

> Mrs. Willy Hartington has learned to draw sheets and so has
> Miss Melpomené; and on the south lawns,
> men walk in red white and blue
> under the cedars
> and by every green tree
> and beside comfortable waters.

For the poet Charles Sorley the transformation of man into corpse is a three-part action. First man; then, when hit, animal, writhing and thrashing in articulate agony or making horrible snoring noises; then a "thing." Bringing in wounded, Sorley observes in himself and his fellows "the horrible thankfulness when one sees that the next man is dead: 'We won't have to *carry* him in under fire, thank God; dragging will do.' " And he notes "the relief that the thing has ceased to groan: that the bullet or bomb that made the man an animal has now made the animal a corpse." [37]

It could be said that it was the habit of thinking strictly by threes, and of considering the three land combat arms, infantry, artillery, and cavalry, as entirely distinct from each other, that contributed to the frustration of Haig's and General Sir Henry Rawlinson's plan of attack on the Somme. The order of events was planned to be as precisely sequential as Cloete understands men's desires to be once out of the line. First the artillery was to perform while the other two elements did nothing; then the infantry was to take over; once it penetrated, it was to stand fast and allow the cavalry to pass through it for the pursuit. It was not until two weeks after the initial attack that any major change was made in this rigorous three-part conception: only on July 14 was artillery used simultaneously with an advance by the infantry, which was allowed to follow a creeping barrage.

Counting off by threes: no soldier ever forgets it or its often portentous implications. "At night, we numbered off," says Frank Richards, "one, two, three, one, two, three—ones up on sentry, twos and threes working." [38] That was in 1914. In 1943 Guy Sajer, an Alsatian fighting with the German Army on the Eastern Front, was in a company facing Russian infantry defending a factory building. By telephone came down the order: "One-third of the men forward. Count off by threes":

> One, two, three . . . One, two, three. Like a miracle from heaven I drew a "one," and could stay in that splendid cement hole. . . . I cut off a smile, in case the sergeant should notice and send me onto the field. . . .
>
> The fellow beside me had number three. He was looking at me with a long desperate face, but I kept my eyes turned front, so he wouldn't notice my joy and relief, and stared at the factory as if it were I who was going to leap forward, as if I were number three. . . . The sergeant made his fatal gesture, and the . . . soldier beside me sprang from his shelter with a hundred others.
>
> Immediately, we heard the sound of Russian automatic weapons. Before vanishing to the bottom of my hole I saw the impact of the bullets raising little fountains of dust all along the route of my recent companion, who would never again contemplate the implications of number three.[39]

What we must consider now is the relation between this practical, *ad hoc*, empirical principle of three in military procedure and the magical or mystical threes of myth, epic, drama, ritual, romance, folklore, prophecy, and religion. In the prevailing atmosphere of anxiety, the military threes take on a quality of the mythical or prophetic. The well-known triads of traditional myth and ritual donate, as it were, some of their meanings and implications to the military threes. The result is that military action becomes elevated to the level of myth and imbued with much of its portent.

The tripartite vision is so ancient in Indo-European myth, religion, and folklore that there is no tracking it to its origins.[40] By the time of written documents it already has an infinite history. To Pythagoras, three is the perfect number, implying beginning, middle, and end. It is an attribute of deity, and ultimately of the Trinity. Graves's primordial White Goddess is a triple deity, presiding over sky, earth, and underworld. Greek religion recognizes the tripartite rule of the universe and assigns a deity to each part: Jupiter to heaven, Neptune to the sea,

Pluto to Hades. Each is equipped with his triadic emblem: Jupiter wields his three-forked lightning bolts and Neptune his trident, while Pluto is accompanied by his three-headed dog. It is on a tripod that an oracle sits above her gas-vent, and those who share her world and credit her visions, like Oedipus, are dominated by threes: the Sphinx's riddle solved by Oedipus divides the stages of human life into three, and the crucial place where Oedipus slays Laius is one where three roads meet. In early Christianity the enemies are three: the World, the Flesh, and the Devil, just as the virtues are three: Faith, Hope, and Charity. And in adjacent mythologies there are three Furies, three Graces, and three Harpies, Norns, or Weird Sisters.

As Northrop Frye points out, "A threefold structure is repeated in many features of romance—in the frequency, for instance, with which the successful hero is the third son, or the third to undertake the quest, or successful on his third attempt. It is shown more directly in the three-day rhythm of death, disappearance and revival which is found in the myth of Attis and other dying gods, and has been incorporated in our Easter." In the First Book of *The Faerie Queene*, "the battle with the dragon lasts, of course, three days." [41] And drama which is close to folklore and romance sources seems to behave in a similar triadic way. Observing that Shakespeare's plays generally exhibit distinct beginnings, middles, and ends, Maurice Charney finds that in such traditional drama "there is an implicit assumption that human experience, which supplies the plots for plays, also has beginnings, middles, and ends, and is causative, rational, progressive, and triadic in structure." [42] Traditional in pre-romantic thought—which would extend from 1789 all the way back to the fifth or sixth millennium B.C.—is the understanding of human life as meaningfully tripartite: each of the three stages, youth, maturity, and old age, imposes unique, untransferable duties, and each offers unique privileges and pleasures. Bent in a Christian direction, the classical concept generates the three stages of Christian experience: Innocence, Fall, Redemption. Laid "laterally," as it were, over the experience of infantry soldiers, in the Great or any other War, it produces, as we shall see, the structure of the paradigmatic war memoir: training, "combat," recovery. Or innocence, death, rebirth.

We can get a sense of the way traditional triadic meanings visit the practical threes of military experience and attach special import to them by looking at one of Ivor Gurney's poems, "Ballad of the Three Spectres." It is about what a folklorist would recognize as the Weird Sisters, and just as in Guy Sajer's ominous counting-off, the number three is the sinister, magical number:

As I went up by Ovillers,
  In mud and water cold to the knee,
There went three jeering, fleering spectres,
  That walked abreast and talked of me.

The first said, "Here's a right brave soldier
  That walks the dark unfearingly;
Soon he'll come back on a fine stretcher,
  And laughing for a nice Blighty."

The second, "Read his face, old comrade,
  No kind of lucky chance I see;
One day he'll freeze in mud to the marrow,
  Then look his last on Picardie."

Though bitter the word of these first twain,
  Curses the third spat venomously:
"He'll stay untouched till the war's last dawning,
  Then live one hour of agony."

Typically, the last hour of dawn, the last stand-to of the war, is the portentous, ironic moment chosen by the Third Spectre for the "right brave soldier's" fatal wound. The final stanza assures us that

Liars the first two were . . .

and invites us to contemplate the soldier's year-long agonizing wait for the prophecy of the third to fulfill itself. While waiting, the soldier constantly recalls the prophecy while performing armsdrill "by the numbers," that is, while literally counting to three:

Behold me
At sloping arms by one—two—three;
Waiting the time I shall discover
Whether the third spoke verity.

The daily counting to three used to be only practical, mnemonic. It is now prophetic, or both practical and prophetic at once. It has become invested with myth.

One rumor circulating during the war suggests the naturalness with which the traditional threes of folktale could be aligned with a war having so much of the tripartite about it. This rumor, Stephen Southwold reports,

told of a babe born into a Welsh farm up in the hills. Twenty-four hours after the child's birth, the nurse, in washing up, dropped a plate, and the

child cried out, "One." . . . Some few seconds later a second crock was dropped, whereat the infant cried gravely, "Two." Finally a third article fell crashing, and the babe in a great voice that filled the house with a rushing sound cried, "Three; in three days the war will end," and incontinently expired. Weeks, months, years were variants, according to the pessimism of the teller, but the three was invariable.[43]

The threefold actions of Gurney's spectres and Southwold's "babe" resemble in miniature the structure of threes in larger mythic and folk narratives. As Frye reminds us, a standard "quest" has three stages: first, "the stage of the perilous journey and the preliminary minor adventures"; second, "the crucial struggle, usually some kind of battle in which either the hero or his foe, or both, must die"; and third, "the exaltation of the hero, who has clearly proved himself to be a hero even if he does not survive the conflict." [44] It is impossible not be be struck by the similarity between this conventional "romance" pattern and the standard experience re-enacted and formalized in memoirs of the war. First the perilous journey, by both water and land, through the Bull Ring at Etaples and up to the ever more menacing line itself; second, the "crucial struggle" of attack or defense or attrition in the trenches; and third, the apotheosis of the soldier turned literary rememberer, whose survival—not to mention his ability to order his unbelievable, mad materials into proportion and serial coherence—constitutes his "victory," and thus his heroism. Every total experience of the war is "romantic" in the strict sense of the word. Every successful memoir of that experience shares something with traditional literary "romance," and indeed, regardless of its "truth" or accuracy of documentary fact, in its "plot" could be said to lean towards that generic category.

We must notice too that training in military maneuver and technique is governed by a simplified three-part conception of the elements of the process: first, preparation; then execution; and finally, critique. What war memoirs do is replicate this process, drummed during training into the head of every recruit and every new officer until he wants to scream with boredom. The "paradigm" war memoir can be seen to comprise three elements: first, the sinister or absurd or even farcical preparation (comic experiences on the French railway moving up the line are conventional; so are humorous accounts of the training at Etaples: "We have just returned from a lecture on sandbags, not bad" [45]); second, the unmanning experience of battle; and third, the retirement from the line to a contrasting (usually pastoral) scene, where there is time and quiet for consideration, meditation, and reconstruction. The middle stage is always characterized by disenchantment and loss of innocence, which tends to

make the whole tripartite experience resemble the psychological scheme of the lost and regained Paradise posited by traditional literary Christianity. Another way of putting it would be to say that war experience and its recall take the form of the deepest, most universal kind of allegory. Movement up the line, battle, and recovery become emblems of quest, death, and rebirth.

Because simplification is a characteristic of all ritual, ritual is likely to flourish where experience is simplified to essentials. Stand-to is easily conceived as a "ritual" in an environment that knows only two essential actions—attack and defense. Rituals come readily to those whose experience of life and dread of death have undergone such drastic simplification. Thus one of the survivors of the first day's attack on the Somme, Private H. C. Bloor, says in 1971: "I first went back to the Somme on a motorbike in 1935. I have been back twelve times since then and I intend to keep going as long as I can. I try to be there on 1 July. I go out and, at 7:30 AM, I stand at the exact spot where we went over the top in 1916." [46] Ernest Parker, "miraculously" spared while his battalion was all but wiped out on September 16, 1916, says in 1964: "One day . . . I shall revisit that little undulation in the fields between Gueudecourt and Delville Wood on an early morning in mid-September. There I will give thanks for being spared another fifty years of happy and fruitful life. . . ." [47] Such leanings towards ritual, such needs for significant journeys and divisions and returns and sacramental moments, must make us skeptical of Bernard Bergonzi's conclusion: "The dominant movement in the literature of the Great War was . . . from a myth-dominated to a demythologized world." [48] No: almost the opposite. In one sense the movement was towards myth, towards a revival of the cultic, the mystical, the sacrificial, the prophetic, the sacramental, and the universally significant. In short, towards fiction.

THE GOLDEN VIRGIN

A memorable instance of the prevailing urge towards myth is the desire felt by everyone to make something significant of the famous leaning Virgin and Child atop the ruined Basilica at Albert. No one wanted it to remain what it literally was, merely an accidentally damaged third-rate gilded metal statue now so tenuously fixed to its tower that it might fall any moment. Myth busily attached portentous meaning to it.

Mystical prophecy was first. The war would end, the rumor went, when the statue finally fell to the street. Germans and British shared this

belief, and both tried to knock the statue down with artillery. When this proved harder than it looked, the Germans promulgated the belief that the side that shot down the Virgin would lose the war. This is the prophecy recalled by Stephen Southwold, who associates the wonders attaching to the leaning Virgin with those ascribed to miraculously preserved front-line crucifixes:

> There were dozens of miracle-rumors of crucifixes and Madonnas left standing amid chaos. In a few cases the image dripped blood or spoke words of prophecy concerning the duration of the war. Around the hanging Virgin of Albert Cathedral there gathered a host of these rumored prophecies, wonders and marvels, the chief one being that whichever side should bring her down was destined to lose the war.[49]

The statue remained hanging until April, 1918, after the British had given up Albert to the Germans. Determined that the Germans not use the tower for an artillery observation post, the British turned heavy guns on it and brought it down, statue and all. Frank Richards was there:

> The Germans were now in possession of Albert and were dug in some distance in front of it, and we were in trenches opposite them. The upside-down statue on the ruined church was still hanging. Every morning our bombing planes were going over and bombing the town and our artillery were constantly shelling it, but the statue seemed to be bearing a charmed existence. We were watching the statue one morning. Our heavy shells were bursting around the church tower, and when the smoke cleared away after the explosion of one big shell the statue was missing.

It was a great opportunity for the propagandists:

> Some of our newspapers said that the Germans had wantonly destroyed it, which I expect was believed by the people that read them at the time.[50]

But while the statue was still there, dangling below the horizontal, it was seen and interpreted by hundreds of thousands of men, who readily responded with significant moral metaphors and implicit allegorical myths. "The melodrama of it," says Carrington, "rose strongly in our hearts." [51] The most obvious "meaning" of the phenomenon was clear: it was an emblem of pathos, of the effect of war on the innocent, on women and children especially. For some, the Virgin was throwing the Child down into the battle, offering Him as a sacrifice which might end the slaughter. This was the interpretation of Paul Maze, a French liaison NCO, who half-posited "a miracle" in the Virgin's precarious maintenance of her position: "Still holding the infant Jesus in her outstretched arms," he says, "the statue of the Virgin Mary, in spite of many hits,

The Golden Virgin on the Basilica at Albert, 1916. (Imperial War Museum)

still held on top of the spire as if by a miracle. The precarious angle at which she now leaned forward gave her a despairing gesture, as though she were throwing the child into the battle." [52] Philip Gibbs interpreted the Virgin's gesture similarly, as a "peace-offering to this world at war." [53]

Others saw her action not as a sacrifice but as an act of mercy: she was reaching out to save her child, who—like a soldier—was about to fall. Thus S. S. Horsley in July, 1916: "Marched through Albert where we saw the famous church with the statue of Madonna and Child hanging from the top of the steeple, at an angle of about 40° as if the Madonna was leaning down to catch the child which had fallen." [54] Still others took her posture to signify the utmost grief over the cruelties being played out on the Somme. "The figure once stood triumphant on the cathedral tower," says Max Plowman; "now it is bowed as by the last extremity of grief." [55] And to some, her attitude seemed suicidal: she was "diving," apparently intent on destroying herself and her Child with her.[56] But regardless of the way one interpreted the Virgin's predicament, one's rhetoric tended to turn archaic and poetic when one thought of her. To Stephen Graham, what the Virgin is doing is "yearning":

"The leaning Virgin . . . hung out from the stricken tower of the mighty masonry of the Cathedral-church, and yearned o'er the city." The poeticism *o'er* is appropriate to the Virgin's high (if vague) portent. In the next sentence Graham lays aside that particular signal of the momentous and resumes with mere *over*, which marks the passage from metaphor back to mere cliché: "The miracle of her suspense in air over Albert was a never-ceasing wonder. . . ." [57]

Whatever myth one contrived for the leaning Virgin, one never forgot her or her almost "literary" entreaty that she be mythified. As late as 1949 Blunden is still not just remembering her but writing a poem of almost 100 lines, "When the Statue Fell," imagined as spoken to a child by her grandfather. The child has asked,

> "What was the strangest sight you ever saw?"

and the ancient responds by telling the story of Albert, its Basilica, the statue, its curious suspension, and its final fall, which he makes coincide with the end of the war. And in 1948, when Osbert Sitwell remembered Armistice Day, 1918, and its pitiful hopes for perpetual peace, he did so in imagery which bears the deep impress of the image of the golden Virgin, although she is not mentioned at all. His first image, remarkably, seems to fuse the leaning Virgin of one war with the inverted hanging Mussolini of another:

> After the Second World War, Winged Victory dangles from the sky like a gigantic draggled starling that has been hanged as a warning to other marauders: but in 1918, though we who had fought were even more disillusioned than our successors of the next conflict about a struggle in which it was plain that no great military leaders had been found, we were yet illusioned about the peace.

Having begun with a recall of the leaning Virgin as an ironic and broken Winged Victory, he goes on to remember, if subliminally, her bright gilding: "During the passage of more than four years, the worse the present had shown itself, the more golden the future . . . had become to our eyes." But now, remembering the joy on the first Armistice Day, his mind, he says, goes back to two scenes. In both gold is ironically intrusive: "First to the landscape of an early September morning, where the pale golden grasses held just the color of a harvest moon": but the field of golden grasses is covered with English and German dead. "It was a superb morning," he goes on,

> such a morning, I would have hazarded, as that on which men, crowned with the vast hemicycles of their gold helmets, clashed swords at Mycenae, or outside the towers of Troy, only to be carried from the field to lie entombed in air and silence for millenniums under their stiff masks of virgin gold.[58]

Thirty years after Sitwell first looked up and wondered what to make of her, the golden Virgin persists, called up as a ghost in his phrase *virgin gold*. Perhaps he thought he had forgotten her. Her permanence is a measure of the significance which myth, with an urgency born of the most touching need, attached to her.

THE ROMANCE QUEST

A distinguished critic of our time has specified the following as characteristic of a certain kind of narrative. The protagonist, first of all, moves forward through successive stages involving "miracles and dangers" towards a crucial test. Magical numbers are important, and so is ritual. The landscape is "enchanted," full of "secret murmurings and whispers." The setting in which "perilous encounters" and testing take place is "fixed and isolated," distinct from the settings of the normal world. The hero and those he confronts are adept at "antithetical reasonings." There are only two social strata: one is privileged and aloof, while the other, more numerous, is "colorful but more usually comic or grotesque." Social arrangements are designed to culminate in "pompous ceremonies." Training is all-important: when not engaged in confrontations with the enemy, whether men, giants, ogres, or dragons, the hero devotes himself to "constant and tireless practice and proving." Finally, those engaged in these hazardous, stylized pursuits become "a circle of solidarity," "a community of the elect." The critic defining this kind of narrative is Erich Auerbach, and he is talking not about war memoirs, of course, but about medieval romance, of the sort written in France by Chrétien de Troyes in the twelfth century and in England by Sir Thomas Malory in the fifteenth.[59]

The experiences of a man going up the line to his destiny cannot help seeming to him like those of a hero of medieval romance if his imagination has been steeped in actual literary romances or their equivalent. For most who fought in the Great War, one highly popular equivalent was Victorian pseudo-medieval romance, like the versified redactions of Malory by Tennyson and the prose romances of William Morris. Morris's most popular romance was *The Well at the World's End*, published in 1896. There was hardly a literate man who fought between 1914 and 1918 who hadn't read it and been powerfully excited by it in his youth. For us it is rather boring, this protracted tale of 228,000 words about

young Prince Ralph's adventures in search of the magic well at the end of the world, whose waters have the power to remove the scars of battle wounds. But for a generation to whom terms like *heroism* and *decency* and *nobility* conveyed meanings that were entirely secure, it was a heady read and an unforgettable source of images. The general familiarity with it and the ease with which it could be applied to the events of the war can be gauged from this: in May, 1915, an illustrated weekly headed an account of a trench skirmish won by the British with a caption in the stylish poetic-prose of the period, which here goes all the way and turns into blank verse: "How Three Encountered Fifty and Prevailed." [60] That caption could easily stand as one of the chapter titles in *The Well at the World's End*, like "How Ralph Justed with the Aliens." An audience to whom such "chapter headings" appealed in journalism was one implicitly learned in Morris's matter and style, or one which could easily come to value them. C. S. Lewis was only sixteen when the war began, but by 1917 he was nineteen and ready to go in. Just before he left he did a vast amount of reading, discovering books for the first, ecstatic time. "My great author at this period," he writes, "was William Morris. . . . In [his friend] Arthur's bookcase, I found *The Well at the World's End.* I looked—I read chapter headings—I dipped—and next day I went off into town to buy a copy of my own." [61]

There were many who arrived at Mametz Wood and Trones Wood and High Wood primed by previous adventuring in Morris's Wood Debateable and Wood Perilous. Both the literal and the literary are versions of what Frye calls the "demonic vegetable world" often associated with romance quests, "a sinister forest like the ones we meet in *Comus* or the opening of the *Inferno*, or a heath, which from Shakespeare to Hardy has been associated with tragic destiny, or a wilderness like that of Browning's *Childe Roland* or Eliot's *Waste Land.*" [62] Morris's "end of the world" is a cliff overlooking a boundless sea, very unlike the world ending with the British front line. Yet in describing the landscape of the front Sassoon seems often to recall some of Morris's sinister settings as well as echoing Morris's title. "On wet days," he says, "the trees a mile away were like ash-grey smoke rising from the naked ridges, and it felt very much as if we were at the end of the world. And so we were: for that enemy world . . . had no relation to the landscape of life." [63] Again, "The end-of-the-world along the horizon had some obscure hold over my mind which drew my eyes to it almost eagerly, for I could still think of trench warfare as an adventure. The horizon was quiet just now, as if the dragons which lived there were dozing." [64] At the front, he finds another time, "we had arrived at the edge of the world." [65] And so literary an imagination as Blunden's was of course not behindhand in recalling and applying Morris. Thiepval in the winter of 1916 we today would call something like *sheer hell:* he designates it as a "filthy, limb-strewn, and most lonely world's-end. . . ." [66]

The prevailing ghostliness of the line was often registered in images deriving from such romances as Morris's. The infamous white chalk Butte of Warlencourt whose machine guns dominated the Somme lines for miles was like a terrible enormous living thing. Carrington says of it: "That ghastly hill . . . became fabulous. It shone white in the night and seemed to leer at you like an ogre in a fairy tale. It loomed up unexpectedly, peering into trenches where you thought yourself safe: it haunted your dreams." [67] (As well it might: many said that it was not a natural terrain feature at all but a Gallic burial tumulus, an antique mass grave.) Guy Chapman experienced the same sense of being secretly observed, secretly followed, the sense that Eliot dramatized in the final section of *The Waste Land* (lines 360–66, and note). "There is a secret magic about these waste lands [i.e., environs of the derelict villages on the edge of the battlefields]. While you wander through the corrupted overgrown orchard, there is always someone at your back. You turn. It is nothing but the creak of a branch. . . ." [68]

Hugh Quigley was thoroughly familiar with Victorian literary and aesthetic texts, which he recalled constantly at the front to help him "see." He does this with Ruskin's *Modern Painters*, as we have seen, and he knows *The Well at the World's End* as intimately. To him the ghastly canal at Ypres, clotted with corpses, is "like" the poison pool under the Dry Tree in Morris, around which lay the bodies of men with "dead leathery faces . . . drawn up in a grin, as though they had died in pain . . ." (Book III, Chap. 18).[69] One of Quigley's problems is how to remember. He seems to solve it by associating the thing to be remembered with an analog in a well-known literary text. This is what he does in recalling the bizarre look of the ruined Cloth Hall at Ypres in autumn, 1917. It was "so battered that not a single sculpture figure, or shadow of a figure, remained, except one gargoyle at the end, which leered down as jauntily as ever." He fixes this image by relating it to the Morris landscape, where similar figures leer: "When I come back, this incident will remain one of the treasured memories, something to recount time and again, as happening in a land of horror and dread whence few return, like that country Morris describes in the *Well at the World's End.*" [70]

But there was one English "romance" even better known than Morris's. This was Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress.* Everybody had been raised on it. When in the *Daily Express* on November 12, 1918, the columnist

"Orion" described his feeling upon hearing that peace had come, he wrote, "Like Christian, I felt a great burden slip from off my shoulders." The *Daily Express* was a "popular" paper, but "Orion" didn't have to say, "Like Christian in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*." He knew he would be understood, not least by the troops, who had named one of the support trenches of the Hohenzollern Redoubt "Pilgrim's Progress." They would not fail to notice the similarity between a fully loaded soldier, marching to and from the line with haversack, ground-sheet, blanket, rifle, and ammunition, and the image of Christian at the outset of his adventures: "I saw a man clothed in rags . . . and a great burden upon his back." Recalling a terrible night march in the mud, Quigley writes: "The spirit takes note of nothing, perception dies, and, like Christian, we carry our own burden [here, rifle and ammunition], thinking only of it." [71] Christian's burden drops away when he beholds the Cross; Private Anthony French's when his equipment is blown off by the shell that wounds him in the thigh: "I had ceased to be a soldier. . . . Only my helmet remained. . . . I found myself without waterbottle, iron rations, gasmask. My watch had lost cover and glass. . . . Then an enormous burden of responsibility seemed to roll away as if this were the end of a pilgrim's progress. There was no pain. I felt at rest." [72] R. H. Tawney's burden falls away when, attacking the first day on the Somme, he realizes—it is his first action—that he is not going to be a coward after all:

> I hadn't gone ten yards before I felt a load fall from me. There's a sentence at the end of *The Pilgrim's Progress* which has always struck me as one of the most awful things imagined by man: "Then I saw that there was a way to Hell, even from the Gates of Heaven, as well as from the City of Destruction." To have gone so far and be rejected at last! Yet undoubtedly man walks between precipices, and no one knows the rottenness in him till he cracks, and then it's too late. I had been worried by the thought: "Suppose one should lose one's head and get other men cut up! Suppose one's legs should take fright and refuse to move!" Now I knew it was all right. I shouldn't be frightened and I shouldn't lose my head. Imagine the joy of that discovery! I felt quite happy and self-possessed.[73]

Even when Gunner William Pressey chooses the word *great* instead of *large* to describe the burdens carried by the French civilians retreating before the German advance in spring, 1918 ("Some had carts, others great bundles on their backs" [74]), we may suspect that *Pilgrim's Progress* is helping to determine his choice.

It is odd and wonderful that front-line experience should ape the pattern of the one book everybody knew. Or to put it perhaps more accurately, front-line experience seemed to become available for interpretation when it was seen how closely parts of it resembled the action of *Pilgrim's Progress*. Sassoon takes it for granted that his title *Sherston's Progress* will contribute significant shape to his episodic account of his passage through anxiety to arrive at his triumphant moment of relief as Rivers enters his hospital room. Like Christian, he has been looking for something and going somewhere, and at the end he knows fully what his goal has been all the while. And allusion to Bunyan can work sardonically as well, as it does in Henry Williamson's *The Patriot's Progress* (1930), whose hero, John Bullock, enters the war with enthusiasm and endures it stoically, only to end in bitterness, one leg missing, patronized by uncomprehending civilians.

The problem for the writer trying to describe elements of the Great War was its utter incredibility, and thus its incommunicability in its own terms. As Bernard Bergonzi has said, "The literary records of the Great War can be seen as a series of attempts to evolve a response that would have some degree of adequacy to the unparalleled situation in which the writers were involved." [75] Unprecedented meaning thus had to find precedent motifs and images. It is a case illustrating E. D. Hirsch's theory of the way new meanings get proposed:

> No one would ever invent or understand a new type of meaning unless he were capable of perceiving analogies and making novel subsumptions under previously known types. . . . By an imaginative leap the unknown is assimilated to the known, and something genuinely new is realized.[76]

The "new type of meaning" is that of the new industrialized mass trench warfare. The "previously known types" are the motifs and images of popular romance. The "something genuinely new" is the significant memories of the war we have been focusing on, where *significant* means, in fact, *artistic*. Because Dante has never really been domesticated in Protestant England, when an English sensibility looks for traditional images of waste and horror and loss and fear, it turns not to the *Inferno* but to *Pilgrim's Progress*.

It would be impossible to count the number of times "the Slough of Despond" is invoked as the only adequate designation for churned-up mud morasses pummeled by icy rain and heavy shells. It becomes one of the inevitable clichés of memory. So does "the Valley of the Shadow of Death," where, in Bunyan, "lay blood, bones, ashes, and mangled bodies of men, even of Pilgrims that had gone this way formerly." Major Pilditch invokes that valley to help him describe the indescribable:

> The bare poles and brick heaps of Souchez looked perfectly weird and unnatural as the sun came out and threw it all up into a livid pink-hued dis-

Near Zonnebeke, Ypres Salient. (Imperial War Museum)

> tinctness. I knew I should never be able to describe its sinister appearance, but that I should never forget it. It reminded me of an old wood-cut in my grandfather's "Pilgrim's Progress," of the Valley of the Shadow of Death where Christian met Apollyon.[77]

When 2nd Lt. Alexander Gillespie was killed at Loos, on his body, we are told, was found a copy of *Pilgrim's Progress* with this passage marked: "Then I entered into the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and had no light for almost halfway through it. I thought I should have been killed there, and the sun rose, and I went through that which was behind with far more ease and quiet." [78] Apparently Gillespie had been using the passage as a sort of consolatory psalm, a version of Psalm 23:4 ("Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil") more appropriate for trench use because of its image of significant dawn.

Possessing so significant a first name, the artillery subaltern Christian Creswell Carver was in a special position to imagine himself re-enacting

Pilgrim's Progress. Writing his brother in March, 1917, he describes a mounted ammunition detail at night on the Somme:

> To our right and below us is the river stretching across a vista of broken stumps, running water and shell pools, to the skeleton gleaming white of another village on the far bank. If only an artist could paint the grim scene now while the hand of war and death is still hovering over it. In our steel helmets and chain visors we somehow recall *Pilgrim's Progress*, armored figures passing through the valley of the shadow. On—for Apollyon's talons are ever near.[79]

And of course he signs this letter "Christian."

The road which Good Will advises Christian to follow to get from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City is specifically "straight and narrow." So was the infamous miry twelve-kilometer road that led from Poperinghe to Ypres; and it was while moving up into the Salient on this road in darkness that soldiers seem most often to have recalled Christian's journey, in order to confer some shape and meaning on their suffering. "Hundreds of thousands of men must remember the road from Poperinghe to Ypres," says Henry Williamson. "Its straitness begins between two long lines of houses. . . ." [80] Carrington finds *Pilgrim's Progress* applicable in an almost uncanny way. "To find the way in the dark" up this road, he remembers, "was a task worthy of Bunyan's pilgrim." He then quotes Bunyan's account of Christian's progress through the Valley of the Shadow of Death:

> The pathway was here also exceeding narrow, and therefore good Christian was the more put to it; for when he sought in the dark to shun the ditch on the one hand, he was ready to tip over into the mire on the other. Thus he went on, for the pathway was here so dark that oft-times, when he lifted his foot to set forward, he knew not where, nor upon what, he should set it next. And ever and anon the flame and smoke would come out in . . . abundance, with sparks and hideous noises. . . . Thus he went on a great while; yet still the flames would be reaching towards him: Also he heard doleful voices and rushings to and fro, so that sometimes he thought he should be torn to pieces, or trodden down like mire in the streets.[81]

Such scenes of hazardous journeying constitute the essence of *Pilgrim's Progress*, whose title page itself specifies "His Dangerous Journey" as one of the three stages of Christian's experience, the other two being "The Manner of His Setting Out" and "Safe Arrival at the Desired Country." If the title of Sherriff's *Journey's End* alludes overtly to Othello's famous speech of acquiescence and surrender (V, ii, 263–85), it points implicitly as well to such a world of literary romance as Bunyan's, where combat-

as-journeying promises a meaning to be revealed at the end. Gordon Swaine's poem of the Second War, "A Journey Through a War," picks up the image of journeying, although by now the romance hero has attenuated to

> A figure through the pages of a fable,

and the allegorical meaning has clouded over:

> Obscure the moral and the fancy feeble.

It is the *Pilgrim's Progress* action of moving physically through some terrible topographical nightmare along a straight road that dominates Anthony French's memory, in 1972, of his whole war: "For me," he says, "and probably for all who served and survive, there runs through this panorama of memory, through the web of divergent, intersecting byways, from the last sunset of rational existence to the morning of armistice and reckoning, one road along which the continuity of those days is traced." [82]

Although the delicate, sensitive batman Alfred M. Hale was never close to the line, he too interpreted his experience by calling *Pilgrim's Progress* to his assistance. If he had no occasion to advert to the Valley of the Shadow of Death, he did find a use for his memory of Christian's anxious care of his "roll with a seal upon it," his all-important "certificate" which admits him, finally, to the Celestial City. Christian loses this certificate once while asleep and spends an anxious time looking for it. Hale's "certificate" takes two forms. The first is the slip of paper marked *C-2* attesting his status as a low-category man and constituting for a time his defense against his own Slough of Despond—i.e., "overseas": "This slip of paper I kept tight hold of and hugged to myself, as it were, until one day . . . it was suggested to me by a sarcastic N.C.O. that I really better keep it to myself, and not be so fond of trotting it out on all occasions." The second form Christian's "certificate" takes in Hale's agon is that of the magical Yellow Paper admitting the bearer to the Celestial City of demobilization and home.

The scene is the port at Dunkirk, March 4, 1919. Happy as a bridegroom, Hale files with others marked for demobilization down "the long cobbled roadway on our way at last for the sea and England." At the quay the Celestial City awaits: "Then I saw our steamer waiting for us in the mist and the rain." It is "the Big Ship"—the troops' mythological, pseudo-Arthurian term for the once only imaginable boat plying between France and Demobilization. In *Pilgrim's Progress* the Prophets, looking out over the gate of the City, are told: "These pilgrims are come

from the City of Destruction for the love that they bear to the King of this place." Then, Bunyan goes on, "The Pilgrims gave in unto them each man his certificate," whereupon the King "commanded to open the gate." Hale's welcome is less splendid but scarcely less gratifying: "The gangway was placed in position, and a very dirty looking individual in civilian garments stood on guard as we went one by one on board." Bunyan's account of Christian's salvation by certificate takes place in simple, passionate prose in which *then* is the principal connective, as in "Then the Pilgrims gave in unto them each man his certificate." Likewise Hale:

> Then it was I both saw and knew, as I had not done before, the value of that yellow paper. For now we were bidden to show it, and I held tight to it in the rain and displayed it to view as I went on board. . . . as did everybody else with but one exception. My paper held so tightly was all limp and sodden and torn with much handling, but I had it safe and sound right enough, and that was all I cared for.

As Bunyan's Christian enters the gates and looks back, he sees Ignorance, "a very brisk lad," soliciting admission. "Asked for his certificate," Ignorance "fumbled in his bosom for one, and found none." Asked by the Prophets "Have you none?" Ignorance is silent. What follows is the same thing that stuck with R. H. Tawney:

> The King . . . commanded the . . . Shining Ones . . . to go out and take Ignorance, and bind him hand and foot, and have him away. Then they took him up, and carried him through the air to the door that I saw in the side of the hill, and put him in there. Then I saw that there was a way to Hell, even from the gates of Heaven, as well as from the City of Destruction.

Hale's version of this is exquisite. Safe on the deck, ecstatic that his certificate has carried him to bliss everlasting, he looks back down to the quay one last time. "Not so the poor young devil pacing the quayside alone and forlorn. He had lost his paper; . . . I sincerely pitied him, . . . and have often wondered since what became of him." [83]

Bunyan's Celestial City is a fantasy of gold and jewels. It looks the way Dresden does when Vonnegut's Billy "Pilgrim," in *Slaughterhouse-Five,* sees it suddenly shining through the opened doors of a boxcar: "The doorways framed the loveliest city that most of the Americans had ever seen. The skyline was intricate and voluptuous and enchanted and absurd." Vonnegut's answer to the question "What did it look like?" suggests some of the continued capacity of *Pilgrim's Progress* to elicit the

illusion of meaning from the wars of the twentieth century: "It looked like a Sunday school picture of Heaven to Billy Pilgrim." [84]

THE HONORABLE MISCARRIAGE OF *IN PARENTHESIS*

"My father sometimes read Bunyan aloud," recalls David Jones,[85] that odd, unassignable modern genius, half-English, half-Welsh, at once painter, poet, essayist, and engraver, a prodigy of folklore and liturgy and an adept at myth, ritual, and romance, the turgid allusionist of *In Parenthesis* and *The Anathémata*. He is one of those remarkable talents spawned in the late-Victorian atmosphere in whom aestheticism and religion met for mutual enrichment, and of whom T. S. Eliot, who in 1961 recommended *In Parenthesis* in an Introduction, is perhaps the most conspicuous example. Jones was born in 1895 at Brockley, Kent, of a Welsh father, who was a painter, and an English mother. His earliest bent was to drawing, which he began at the age of five. He drew impressively before he learned to read, around the age of nine. He was educated as a draughtsman and designer, from 1909 to 1914 at the Camberwell Art School, and, after the war, at the Westminster School of Art. In January, 1915, he enlisted in the Royal Welch Fusiliers and served at the front as a private from December, 1915, to March, 1918. He regarded himself as a "grotesquely incompetent [soldier], . . . a parade's despair," [86] but front-line existence made on him a permanent impact inseparable from the idea of medieval romance. As he says in the Preface to *In Parenthesis*,

> I think the day by day in the Waste Land, the sudden violences and long stillnesses, the sharp contours and unformed voids of that mysterious existence, profoundly affected the imaginations of those who suffered it. It was a place of enchantment. It is perhaps best described in Malory, book iv, chapter 15—that landscape spoke "with a grimly voice." [87]

Even physically Jones never got over the war. Like Hemingway selecting his table in the corner of a restaurant to secure his flanks and rear, Jones said around 1943, speaking of the kind of painting he liked to do: "I always work from a window of a house if it is at all possible. I like looking out on to the world from a reasonably sheltered position." [88]

In 1921 he became a Roman Catholic and learned of the artistic-religious community at Ditchling, Sussex, led by the sculptor, engraver, and typographer Eric Gill. The next year he joined this colony of devout craftsmen and for several years practiced engraving and watercolor there, developing his sacramental view of art and pursuing his interests in ritual

and liturgy. He joined the Society of Wood Engravers in 1927, and thereafter worked as an illustrator for private presses, as well as for the firm of Faber and Faber. Whether engraving or painting, his favorite themes came from the Matter of Britain, the whole legendary narrative of King Arthur. Malory remained one of his favorite authors, as he had been Eric Gill's. Jones visited the Holy Land in 1934, and in 1937 published *In Parenthesis*, on which he had been working for ten years. His other long poem, dealing with (among other things) the Christianization of Britain, he titled *The Anathémata* and published in 1952. It was followed by a number of odd writings said to be elements of a continuing work in progress: *A, a, a, Domine Deus* (1955); *The Wall* (1955); *The Tribune's Visitation* (1958); *The Tutelar of the Place* (1961); *The Dream of Private Clitus* (1964); *The Hunt* (1965); *The Fatigue* (1965); and *The Sleeping Lord* (1967). These works, published as *The Sleeping Lord and Other Fragments* just before Jones's death in 1974, bespeak his lifelong obsession with the War: although many deal with Roman soldiers during the time of Christ, "the day-to-day routine and the language used to describe it," as David Blamires says, "are those of a British soldier of the First World War. Duckboards, bivvies, chitties, and the like mingle with the technical terms of Latin military vocabulary. . . ." [89] All these works are strenuously allusive—some think to the point of incoherence. All testify to Jones's serious, if perhaps Quixotic, desire to rescue and reinvigorate traditional pre-industrial religious and ethical connotations. His search is always for "valid signs," for an unimpoverished system of symbols capable of conveying even to a modern audience the rich complications of the Christian view of history. His method is that of association: he mines the "deposits" clustering around traditional meanings, anxious that not a one be lost. As he says, "If the painter makes visual forms, the content of which is chairs or chair-ishness, what are the chances that those who regard his painting will run to meet him with the notions 'seat,' 'throne,' 'session,' '*cathedra*,' 'Scone,' 'on-the-right-hand-of-the-Father,' in mind?" [90] In all his work, whether about trench life in the war or the military fatigues attending the Crucifixion, the experience of The Soldier is taken—as Conrad Aiken takes it too in *Ushant* (1952)—as representative of essential human experience. We are all on a hazardous advance through "a place of enchantment," towards, in Carrington's words, "No Man's Land and the unknown world beyond it." [91] The awful vulnerability of both nature and man—and their paradoxical privilege of glory—is what Jones learned at the front. "Wounded trees and wounded men," he says, "are very much an abiding image in my mind as a hang-over from the War." [92]

David Jones. (Mark Gerson, courtesy Faber & Faber)

In Parenthesis poses for itself the problem of re-attaching traditional meanings to the unprecedented actualities of the war. Jones expresses the problem in his Preface: "Some of us ask ourselves if Mr. X adjusting his box-respirator can be equated with what the poet envisaged, in 'I saw young Harry with his beaver on' " [93] (*Henry IV, Pt. I*, IV, i, 104). Jones believes such an equation can be made, and to assert it he associates the events of front-line fighting not only with Arthurian legend but with Welsh and English folklore, Old Testament history, Roman Catholic liturgy, Norse myth, Chaucer, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the poems of G. M. Hopkins, and even the works of Lewis Carroll. But by placing the suffering of ordinary modern British soldiers in such contexts as these, Jones produces a document which is curiously ambiguous and indecisive. For all the criticism of modern war which it implies, *In Parenthesis* at the same time can't keep its allusions from suggesting that the war, if ghastly, is firmly "in the tradition." It even implies that, once conceived to be in the tradition, the war can be understood. The tradition to which the poem points holds suffering to be close to sacrifice and individual effort to end in heroism; it contains, unfortunately, no precedent for an understanding of war as a shambles and its participants as victims. Actually, young Harry is not at all like Mr. X, but it is the ambition of *In Parenthesis* to obscure the distinction. The poem is a deeply conservative work which uses the past not, as it often pretends to do, to shame the present, but really to ennoble it. The effect of the poem, for all its horrors, is to rationalize and even to validate the war by implying that it somehow recovers many of the motifs and values of medieval chivalric romance. And yet, as Jones re-lives the experience of his actual characters, he is fully sympathetic with their daily painful predicament of isolation from home, from the past, and from values that could honestly be reported as heroic. The trouble is that the meddling intellect, taking the form this time of a sentimental Victorian literary Arthurianism after Tennyson and Morris, has romanticized the war. If we place *In Parenthesis* next to Masefield's *Gallipoli*, with its panoply of epigraphs from *The Song of Roland*, we can see its kinship with documents which are overtly patriotic and even propagandistic.

The poem is in seven parts, which bring the all-but-anonymous central character, Private John Ball, gradually closer to his climactic wounding in a wood on the Somme. John Ball, named after the priest who led the Peasants' Revolt in 1381, is the representative Briton. His name may have reached Jones through the agency of Morris's romance of 1888, *The Dream of John Ball*. Jones's John Ball is no leader of revolts: he is closer to Sad Sack, the constant butt of his corporal. He is in B Company of the Royal Welch Fusiliers, and when we first see him, at the opening of Part 1, he has just appeared late for final parade in a camp near an English port of embarcation:

> Take that man's name, Sergeant Snell (1).[94]

It is December, 1915, and Ball's battalion is marching to the port. His platoon is commanded by twenty-year-old 2nd Lieutenant Piers Dorian Isambard Jenkins, whom Ball rather likes for his kindness, his flax-colored hair, and his well-cut uniform. Jones goes so far as to compare him to the noble foregound figure in Uccello's *Rout of San Romano*, which he has seen in the National Gallery. Economically Jones depicts the battalion's arrival at the quay, its boarding the ship and passage to France, its disembarcation there and train journey in cattle-cars up to the "new world" (9). Although we begin in an atmosphere of language very like that of a "realistic" post-Joycean novel, already Jones is beginning to make "equations," whose effect will be to relate military procedures to

religious rituals and chivalric usages. Parade-grounds and refectories, he says, have this in common: they can be very quiet at times, even when crammed with men. The admonitions of the NCO's during the march—"Stop that talking. / Keep those chins in" (4)—are likened to a "liturgy." And the idiom of Shakespearian history plays is invoked to tell us that the transport left the dock: "They set toward France" (8).

Part 2 finds the battalion training behind the lines, listening to "lectures," propagating rumors, and generating anxieties. It moves still closer to the line by foot and bus-march, sees its first shell-damaged buildings, and gets its first whiff of gas. Ball hears his first shell arrive. It is aimed at a nearby battery, and this time damages only nature and a machine: "The sap of vegetables slobbered the spotless breech-block of No. 3 gun" (24). Ball's world is still vegetable and mineral, still innocent.

It begins to turn animal in Part 3, which takes Ball's unit into trenches for the first time, near Béthune. It performs the standard nightmare relief of a "quiet sector" in darkness, mud, and cold. The formulaic questions and answers exchanged between relievers and relieved are repeatedly conceived as "liturgy" and "ritual words" (28), and Jones explains the conventionality of this trench antiphon in a note:

> These coming from and these going to the front line used almost a liturgy, analogous to the seafaring "Who are you pray" employed by shipmasters hailing a passing boat. So used we to say: "Who are you," and the regiment would be named. And again we would say: "What's it like, mate," and the invariable reply, even in the more turbulent areas, would come: "Cushy, mate, cushy" (195).

Again, metaphors are doctrinal and chivalric:

> For John Ball there was in this night's parading, for all the fear in it, a kind of blessedness, here was borne away with yesterday's remoteness, an accumulated tedium, all they'd piled on since enlistment day: a whole unlovely order this night would transubstantiate, lend some grace to (27).

Mr. Jenkins's "little flock" is equated to an "armed bishopric" (31); the troglodytes Ball's platoon encounters peeping from their funk-holes are "Lazarus figures"; the neighboring corpses shrouded with chloride of lime were once "dung-making Holy Ghost temples"; and the whole theater of the relief is seen to be a "sepulchre" (43). When the relief is completed and everyone in his place, John Ball is ordered on sentry-duty, and in the light of a Very flare, he perceives a flooded shell hole in Arthurian—indeed, Tennysonian—terms: "corkscrew-picket-iron half submerged, as dark excalibur, by perverse incantation twisted" (50).

Part 3 ends with a "lyric" on rats testifying to Jones's admiration for the Eliot of

> I think we are in rats' alley
> Where the dead men lost their bones,

an admiration signaled earlier by Jones's choice of "Prickly Pear" to be the password for this first night.

> You can hear the silence of it,

meditates David Jones–John Ball:

> you can hear the rat of no-man's-land
> rut-out intricacies,
> weasel-out his patient workings,
> scrut, scrut, sscrut,
> harrow out-earthly, trowel his cunning paw;
> redeem the time of our uncharity, to sap his own amphibious paradise (54).

Like men, the rats dig their own saps and trenches, go on their own carrying-parties, wear slimy "khaki," generally "dig in." After the sight and smell of his first corpses, Ball's world is now assuredly animal.

"A Day in the Trenches" is what someone else might have titled Part 4. Jones calls it "King Pellam's Launde," implying a similarity between the Waste Land of the front and the Waste Land of Malory's King Pellam, the maimed king of the grail story. Part 3 gave us trench life at night. Part 4 offers a typical day, from morning to evening stand-to. After rifle-cleaning, John Ball finds himself on sentry duty again, this time with a periscope. A lyric celebrates the woods of folklore and ballad, the bower of first love and the domain of the banished princes and dukes of romance. Merlin is mentioned, and so is Diana: the wood is being prepared to turn into the Sacred Wood Jones wants it to become when Ball's platoon is finally destroyed in it. Ball goes off on a pioneer fatigue, and on his way to draw picks and shovels with the section he notices—or is it Jones that notices?—the similarity of the trench scene to the modern urban, industrial squalor. Whoever is doing the noticing, it is a perceptive and prophetic moment:

> Slowly they made progress along the traverses, more easy to negotiate by light of day. Not night-bred fear, nor dark mystification nor lurking unseen snares any longer harassed them, but instead, a penetrating tedium, a boredom that leadened and oppressed, making the spirit quail and tire, took hold of them, as they went to their first fatigue. The untidied squalor of the loveless scene spread far horizontally, imaging unnamed discomfort, sordid and deprived as—

and here Jones conflates the vision of this horror with the standard urban backyard scene of the thirties—

> ill-kept hen-runs that back on sidings on wet weekdays where waste-land meets environs and punctured bins ooze canned-meats discarded, tyres to rot, derelict slow-weathered iron-ware disintegrates between factory-end and nettle-bed (75).

It is a way of implying the war's power to go on forever, however cunningly the postwar world of 1927 to 1937 may try to disguise itself as Paradise.

The next "lyric" is given to Ball's colleague Dai: he delivers what amounts to a history of wars and soldiers based on personal testimony through multiple incarnations. The stress is on Arthur's battles, but he includes some crucial moments of conflict in Christian history:

> I was in Michael's trench when bright Lucifer
> bulged his primal salient out.
> That caused it,
> that upset the joy-cart,
> and three parts waste (84).

Likewise,

> I was with Abel when his brother found him,
> under the green tree (79).

And he was, he says, a Roman soldier playing at the foot of the Cross the popular Great War gambling game of Crown and Anchor:

> I served Longinus that Dux bat-blind and bent;
> the Dandy Xth are my regiment;
> who diced
> Crown and Mud-hook
> under the Tree. . . (83).

The reader comes away from this persuaded that the state of the soldier is universal throughout history. But the problem is, if soldiering is universal, what's wrong with it? And if there is nothing in the special conditions of the Great War to alter cases drastically, what's so terrible about it? Why the shock? But Jones's commitment to his ritual-and-romance machinery impels him to keep hinting that this war is like others: he is careful to say of the NCO who issues the digging tools that he is "thickly greaved with mud" (89), and we get a sense that his condition is really no worse than that of the Roman soldiers wearing greaves who diced at the Crucifixion. Cushy, really.

"We shall be in it alright—it's in conjunction with the Frogs" (103)—so an estaminet acquaintance of Ball's prophesies near the beginning of Part 5, which covers several months. It is dominated first by rumors of the forthcoming summer Push on the Somme and then by the battalion's laborious marches southward as the prolonged though still distant artillery preparation grows louder and louder. Part 6 brings us closer still to the Somme catastrophe. It begins with a flurry of preparatory disjunct battle quotations from Malory. We are immediately in "the terrain of the bivouac" (135), a saucer valley directly behind the Somme jump-off line. The artillery drum fire goes on for days. The valley is a place not of three-man tents now but of "tabernacles" (144), and while the battalion waits to be committed, it enjoys something like a "proletarian holiday" (144): visits are paid, and skepticism and optimism collide in conversations like this:

> Fishy he don't put some back.
> He's legging it, mate—he's napoo (136).

But there are forebodings. Private Saunders, detached as a headquarters runner, returns with a vivid rumor couched in a medley of comic "Other-Ranks" and Malory:

> He said that there was a hell of a stink at Division . . . as to the ruling of this battle—and the G.S.O.2 who used to be with the 180th that long bloke and a man of great worship was in an awful pee. . . . this torf he forgot his name came out of ther Gen'ral's and say as how it was going to be a first clarst bollocks and murthering of Christen men and reckoned how he'd throw in his mit an' be no party to this so-called frontal attack never for no threat nor entreaty, for now, he says, blubbin' they reckon, is this noble fellowship wholly mischiefed (138).

The battalion's evolutions on the night of June 30 are scarcely promising. It moves forward in darkness during the height of the bombardment, but after considerable confusion moves back at daylight to find itself in oddly neat and orderly deserted German trenches. At nightfall, it is back in its saucer again. But during the night, it moves one last time, into assembly trenches.

Part 7 begins ominously with fragments of prayer and liturgy. Something terrible is about to happen. Ball's platoon is in a forward trench facing a wood, and there are casualties already. Finally they attack,

> and Mr. Jenkins takes them over
> and don't bunch on the left
> for Christ's sake (160),

and as they go over we see that they comprise all of Britain and all the conditions and beliefs of uncomprehending, pathetically obedient mankind:

> but we are rash levied
> from Islington and Hackney
> and the purlieus of Walworth
> flashers from Surbiton
> men of the stock of Abraham
> from Bromley-by-Bow
> Anglo-Welsh from Queens Ferry
> rosary-wallahs from Pembrey Dock. . . .

Everyone goes over, even

> two lovers from Ebury Bridge,
> Bates and Coldpepper
> that men called the Lily-white boys (160–61).

It is a disaster. Jones makes an effort to equate these men disemboweled or torn apart by machine guns with dismembered antique gods in sacred groves (with an eye to Sir J. G. Frazer, F.R.S, and T. S. Eliot, and "literature"), but now the poem doesn't work the way he wants it to, and we focus only on innocent young Lieutenant Jenkins, who is shot almost immediately, and on Sergeant Quilter, who gets it next, and on "the severed head of '72 Morgan" (180). Despite Jones's well-intentioned urging, we refuse to see these victims as continuing the tradition of such high-powered swordsman and cavalry heroes of romance, Renaissance epic, and sacred history as Tristram, Lamorak de Galis, Alisand le Orphelin, Baumains, Balin and Balan, Jonathan, Absalom, Peredur, and Taillefer. It is too much for "literature" to bear. We feel that Jones's formula is wrong, all wrong, but it is exactly the vigor and pathos of his own brilliant details that have taught us that.

What remains of the platoon struggles through German wire into the wood, into the very center of Frye's "demonic vegetable world." There is nasty fighting with grenades, and they take some prisoners and finally dig in, surrounded by the dead of the battalion. Bates's friend Coldpepper has been killed, and

> Bates without Coldpepper
> digs like a Bunyan muck-raker for his weight of woe (174).

At 9:35 that night they are ordered to attack through the woods and clear it. Ball is machine-gunned through the legs. Like Christian dropping his burden, he sloughs off rifle and ammunition as he drags himself toward

the rear, but not without a guilty reminiscence of months of earnest lectures about the inestimable value of his rifle. His reminiscence will remind us of what our fatigue and cynicism have made to seem the most comprehensive English poem about the Second World War, Henry Reed's "Naming of Parts." Ball remembers,

> It's the soldier's best friend if you care for the working parts and let us be 'aving those springs released smartly in Company billets on wet forenoons and clickerty-click and one up the spout and you men must really cultivate the habit of treating this weapon with the very greatest care and there should be a healthy rivalry among you—it should be a matter of very proper pride and
> Marry it man! Marry it!
> Cherish her, she's your very own (183).

With such clichés sounding in his ears, Ball, adding guilt to physical pain—where is young Harry with his beaver now?—abandons his rifle "under the oak" (186) and crawls back to wait for the stretcher-bearers.

There remains one final ritual. "The Queen of the Woods," a spirit combining aspects of the classical Diana and the Oak Spirit or Dryad of folklore, decorates the dead with appropriate wood-flowers, dealing with British and German alike:

> Some she gives white berries
> some she gives brown
> Emil has a curious crown, it's
> made of golden saxifrage.
> Fatty wears sweet-briar,
> He will reign with her for a thousand years (185).

In another writer that passage might be highly ironic, but here it's not, for Jones wants it to be true.

Jones has attempted in *In Parenthesis* to elevate the new Matter of Flanders and Picardy to the status of the old Matter of Britain. That it refuses to be so elevated, that it resists being subsumed into the heroic myth, is less Jones's fault than the war's. The war will not be understood in traditional terms: the machine gun alone makes it so special and unexampled that it simply can't be talked about as if it were one of the conventional wars of history. Or worse, of literary history. What keeps the poem from total success is Jones's excessively formal and doctrinal way of fleeing from the literal: the books and the words of Malory, Frazer, and Eliot are too insistently there, sometimes at the expense of their spirit. One result of this appliqued literariness is rhetorical uncertainty and dramatic inconsistency. John Ball has never heard of the Greek

Premier Venizelos (140), and yet it may be thought that he is presumed to be learned in the mystical meanings of sacred woods according to the scholarly traditions of European folklore. As readers, we don't always know who's speaking, and to whom. The thirty-four pages of rather pedantic notes at the end bespeak the literary insecurity of the autodidact; they sometimes prop up the text where the author suspects the poetry has miscarried. Some of the poem is badly overwritten, just as the frontispiece drawing by Jones is too crowded with everything he can recall as relevant: a dead body, wire-pickets, rats, barbed wire, a tunic, a steel helmet, an ammunition belt, sandbags, blasted trees, mules, carrying parties, bully-beef tins, shattered houses, chicken-wire netting, and an entrenching tool. Too much. It is the visual equivalent of diction like *millesimal*, *brumous*, *pernitric*, *inutile*.

And yet for all these defects, *In Parenthesis* remains in many ways a masterpiece impervious to criticism. When it forgets momentarily its Romans and its Lancelots and its highminded medieval beadsmen and focuses on "that shit Major Lillywhite" (15) or on the visiting staff officer denominated as "that cissy from Brigade, the one wat powders" (40), the humanity of the poem seizes the reader. Jones's reading of physical details is accurate and evocative. Rifle bullets passing close overhead do crack just as Jones says: "Occasionally a rifle bullet raw snapt like tenuous hide whip by spiteful ostler handled" (42-43). And the poem is profoundly decent. When on his twenty-first birthday Mr. Jenkins receives both his promotion to full lieutenant and a nice parcel from Fortnum and Mason's, we are pleased. Details like these pull the poem in quite a different direction from that indicated by its insistent invocation of myth and ritual and romance. Details like these persuade us with all the power of art that the Western Front is not King Pellam's Land, that it will not be restored and made whole, ever, by the expiatory magic of the Grail. It is too human for that.

V
Oh What a Literary War

THE SENSE OF A NATIONAL LITERATURE

Looking back on a bad day spent worrying over a forthcoming night attack, Captain Oliver Lyttelton, educated at Eton and at Trinity College, Cambridge, says: "Well, that day dawdled away. Ovid and his mistress would not have addressed the gods that day: *O lente, lente currite noctis equi.*" [1] Remembering going up the line in a crowded third-class railway car, Private Stephen Graham, hardly educated at all, says:

> Huddled up in a dark corner of the carriage a-thinking of many such occasions in life when I have parted for the unknown, listening to the soldiers' tales, it recalled the mood of Clarence's dream when he was pacing on the hatches of the ship at night with the Duke of Gloucester, talking of the Wars of the Roses.[2]

"The mood of Clarence's dream" is that of guilt-ridden nightmare and "dismal terror":

> As we pac'd along
> Upon the giddy footing of the hatches,
> Methought that Gloucester stumbled, and in falling
> Struck me, that thought to slay him, overboard
> Into the tumbling billows of the main. . . .
> Methoughts I saw a thousand fearful wrecks,
> A thousand men that fishes gnaw'd upon,
> Wedges of gold, great anchors, heaps of pearls,
> Inestimable stones, unvalued jewels,