CONFLICTING DISCOURSES, COMPETING MEMORIES: COMMEMORATING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Commemorating the First World War might seem a superfluous, superficial gesture. On this occasion, the question of the utility of remembrance appears particularly important. The first industrialised war of the 20th century seems to have been overshadowed by other, more horrible and traumatising, military conflicts of the twentieth century. Yet, the First World War still continues to haunt European imagination. If we generally agree that the concentration camps of the Second World War marked the collapse of the Enlightenment faith in progress and humanity, in many ways the mass slaughter of the First World War inaugurated the process of rupture and questioning of the progressive ideologies of modernity. As James Campbell contends, already during World War One,

> The products and techniques of industrial culture turn on their users: what had been tools for efficient production of goods become weapons in the efficient production of death. Mass armies of draftees are marched to their mechanized destruction with all the organization that industrial capitalism has learned from the factory and the abattoir. (261)

Perhaps a hundred years after the outbreak of the Great War, we have only begun to understand its impact on our vulnerabilities and imaginations.

World War One has also become a cultural myth—"a common set of events or images that have come to represent the narrative landscape or structure of feeling of the war" (Ouditt 246). As Samuel

Hynes demonstrastes, in the English context the Great War is a "great *imaginative event,*" "a gap in history," an abrupt disjunction between the present and the past (ix). The myth, shaped during the war, highlights disenchantment, bitterness, cynicism, and the absurdity of the Cause (Hynes 439). In the later years, images of mud, rats, lice, wire and craters in No Man's Land, shell-shocked soldier cowering in the trenches to clamber heroically "over the top," have shaped the post-memory of the Great War (Löschnigg and Sokołowska-Paryż 7–8; Ouditt 245). The First World War thus subsists in popular memory as a futile waste of life, evidence of military incompetence and debasement of men, a source of suffering and trauma. Even though military historians have tried to revision the "established tropes of disillusionment and despair" (Wilson 43), presenting the Great War as an operational success, highlighting positive values, such as loyalty, camaraderie and determination, the "rats, gas, mud and blood" image of the Great War still prevails in our imagination (Wilson 43). This stereotypical representation of World War One has been shaped to a large extent by literary responses to this catastrophic event, and the poetic tradition of war writing, particularly important in the Anglo-Saxon world. Later in the century, cinema has also contributed to the spread of such limited views of the war (Löschnigg and Sokołowska-Paryż 1). The reason why the "futility myth" persists in post-memory of the Great War might be connected with the fact that, as Marzena Sokołowska-Paryż suggests,

> this specific version of what the soldiers endured on the battlefronts of France and Flanders is more acceptable for generations shaped by the knowledge of the Holocaust and subsequent genocides, as well as various politically and ethically questionable military conflicts (Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan). (98–99)

However, even when considered as a mythical structure, the Great War played a different function in different parts of the world. If in the British tradition, "the pain and anguish of the soldier in the trenches is sacrosanct" (Wilson 49) and the war is most often imagined "as a chasm, or an abyss, or an edge" (Hynes xi), in Ireland the commemoration of the Irish Volunteers who died defending the

Empire is still a matter of controversy, while for Canadians the First World War has the function of a foundational myth, according to which Canada as a nation was born at Vimy Ridge. We might ask as well what was the impact of the war on American or Italian individual and collective identity? And, most importantly, what were the responses to the First World War on the, largely neglected, Eastern (home) front? Tentative answers to these questions are provided by the authors of this volume. As a result, the First World War emerges as a site of conflicting discourses and competing memories, each act of re-imagining and/or critical reassessment functioning as a significant act of commemoration.

We open the collection with an essay by **Wojciech Szymański**, entitled "Images from the Eastern Flank. Great Returns or Death among Old Decorations? Remarks on the Representation of the Great War in Polish Art," which presents a comparative analysis of the Western and Eastern fronts. Contrasting the two fronts in terms of military and political experience, Szymański moves on to analyse literary and artistic representations of the ontological event of the First World War. While he notices the difference in theoretical assessment of the war, showing that such clichés as the lost generation, scatological school, trench immobility, growing disillusionment and despair could hardly be applied to interpretations of the First World War in the Polish context, he also suggests that the differences between the two "wars"—in the West and in the East of Europe—might have been over-exaggerated.

Brygida Gasztold in "Post-World War I Poland Through the Eyes of a Jewish Soldier: Israel Rabon's *The Street*" explores a unique testimony of trauma suffered by Polish post-war society. Israel Rabon was one of the most outstanding Yiddish language writers in inter-war Poland. *The Street* was published in Yiddish in 1928, and in English in 1985. Analysing Rabon's narrative composed of vignettes, Gasztold shows how the hero experiences the callousness of human relations, which were corrupted by the trauma of war. She also studies issues of post-war displacement and transformation, as seen from the perspective of the Jewish writer, in the urban environment of Łódź.

Anna Branach-Kallas explores the co-relation between abjection, trauma and anti-war protest in early Great War Fiction.

Following Santanu Das, she traces the beginning of theoretical reflection upon abjection to the First World War. Applying Julia Kristeva's theoretical framework, she then studies the deserter as a figure of abjection in Frederic Manning's *Her Privates We*; the abject, traumatic effects of the war in Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*; and the abjectification of amnesia in Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier.*

In "Post-war Trauma and the Crisis of Masculinity in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and *The Hollow Men*," **Joanna Stolarek** examines how the First World War trauma affected one of the most significant Anglo-American writers, T.S. Eliot. In Stolarek's view, the fragmented structure of *The Waste Land* as well as *The Hollow Men* reflects the unsettled consciousness of a post-war world. Yet, these two works also illustrate the artist's attempts to create thematic and structural cohesion by referring to myths and ancient rituals, which provide meaning to a modern world shattered by the experience of war.

In "The Legacy of *Oh, What a Lovely War!*: Remembering and Re-Imagining the First World War," **Edyta Lorek-Jezińska** explores how the pacifist and irreverent message of the play, first presented by Theatre Workshop on 19th March, 1963, was accommodated within the politics and poetics of commemoration of the centenary of the First World War. She analyses the remounting of the production and the educational project launched by the Theatre Royal Stratford East in 2014 as well as the Curtain Raiser competition, in which young participants managed to construct an imaginative link between the Great War, the original production, directed by Joan Littlewood, and the 21st century.

Beata Piątek in "From 'the Age of Mud' to the Age of Smoke—the Great War in the Novels of Graham Swift" examines the significance of the First World War in the novels of the British writer—*Waterland, Out of This World, The Sweet Shop Owner,* and *Wish You Were Here* in particular — applying the theory of cultural trauma. Analysing the recurrence of specific motifs connected with the Great War in Swift's fiction, Piątek pays special attention to the complex ways in which his last novel uses the symbolic connotations of WWI in the context of broader concerns with modern economic crisis in England.

Anna Olkiewicz-Mantilla approaches Sebastian Barry's *A Long Long Way* (2005) and *On Canaan's Side* (2011) in the context of the

Irish culture of remembrance. She concentrates on the representation and the repercussions of the First World War in Barry's acclaimed novels, showing that armed conflict does not end with the signing of the capitulation document. In Olkiewicz-Mantilla's opinion, Barry's fiction offers individual accounts of trauma that represent more effective forms of commemoration than official acts of memory.

In "Canada's Great War: The Rise of Canadian Policy of Autonomism," **Tomasz Soroka** discusses the First World War as a crucial factor of Canadian identity and autonomy. In the war years, the policy of autonomism allowed Canadians to control their military units in Europe and to acquire more influence upon the policy of the British Empire. In the post war reality the autonomists' demands forced the British government to include the dominions at the peace talks negotiations in Versailles, recognizing the importance of their war sacrifice.

Zachary Abram in "From Crusaders to Cannon Fodder: Cultures of Militarization in Canadian War Novels, 1900–1930" explores the romance tradition as the dominant mode of Great War writing in Canada. While the Christian imperialist paradigm was perfected by Ralph Connor, in Abram's view, the convention was already shaped in the novels written in the wake of the South African War, such as Sara Jeannette Duncan's *The Imperialist* (1904). Abram also demonstrates that some Canadian authors writing about the Great War fused the romance with realism.

In his essay, **Paweł Ufnal** explores the representation of the First World War in two neglected war novels, *Generals Die in Bed* (1930) by Canadian author Charles Yale Harrison and *Company K* (1933) by American writer William March. He attempts to illustrate the anti-war ideology proposed in Harrison's text: war discomforts, disillusionment, the absurdity of the cause. In Ufnal's view, March also debunks the romantic myth of the Great War, yet *Company K* synchronously highlights the importance of comradeship and the power of endurance, thus presenting a more complex and ambivalent image of the First World War.

Eusebio Ciccotti in turn analyses four literary works published in the 1920s and the 1930s that share the central theme of the First World War with their respective film adaptations. Cicotti traces the

permutations in meaning and emotional appeal from *The Forest of the Hanged* (1922) by Liviu Rebreanu to the film of the same title (1965) by Liviu Ciulei; *The Four Infantrymen on the Western Front* (1928) by Ernst Johannsen to W. Pabst's film *Westfront 1918* (1930); *Im Western nichts Neues* (1929) by E.M. Remarque to Lewis Milestone's film *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930); *Un anno sull'altipiano* (1938) by Emilio Lussu to Francesco Rosi's *Uomini contro* (1967).

Finally, **Monika Sarul** in "The Myth and Reality of War in *Johnny Got His Gun* by Dalton Trumbo" explores anti-war protest in the classic 1971 American anti-war film. Through Johnny's dreams and hallucinations, Sarul exposes the traps of propaganda that objectifies human beings. Applying Lawrence LeShan's division into mythic and sensory perception of war, she shows how in Trumbo's vision World War One started with promises of democracy and freedom to end with loss and disillusionment.

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