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DOCUMENT A

Dulce et Decorum Est

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
 Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
 Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
 And towards our distant rest began to trudge.

5 Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
 But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
 Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
 Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.

10 Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!-An ecstasy of fumbling,
 Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
 But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
 And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime...
 Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
 As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

15 In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
 He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
 Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
 And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
 20 His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
 If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
 Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, -
 25 My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
 To children ardent for some desperate glory,
 The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
 Pro patria mori.

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DOCUMENT B

5 "You will be astonished to find how like art is to war, I mean 'modernist art' (4), Wyndham Lewis writes in *Blasting and Bombardiering*, and Gertrude Stein makes a similar point - that the art was the war's historical referent and not the other way around - when she describes it as a cubist painting : " really the composition of this war, 1914-1918, was not the composition of all previous wars, the composition was not a composition in which there was one man in the center surrounded by a lot of other men but a composition that had neither a beginning nor an end, a composition of which one corner was as important as another corner, in fact the composition of cubism" (11).

10 Lewis made a similar point. Asked if the fighting was hell, he replied, "It was Goya, it was Delacroix - all scooped out and very el Greco. But hell, no" (180). The war was preceded by its simulacra not only as art but as language. Even the "proper names" that might have overcome is formlessness and become its historical sign - Loos, Verdun, Ypres, Passchendaele, the Somme - fail to cohere as battles. Fussell
15 says later historiography calls them battles to imply that they had a rational causality and "to suggest that the events parallel Blenheim and Waterloo not only in glory but in structure and meaning" (9). Lewis writes of Passchendaele:

20 The very name, with its suggestion of *splashiness* and of *passion* at once, was subtly appropriate. This nonsense could not have come to full flower at any other place but at Passchendaele. It was preordained. (160)

25 "It was clear by the end of 1914 that this war would be different - it would be the most literary and the most poetical war in English history," Samuel Hynes writes in *A war Imagined* (28). But this prior textualization contributed to the strange phenomenon of a "Great War" that was present to itself chiefly as a misleading sign - misleading because none of its multiple discourses, themselves inconsiderable
30 dispute, were able to totalize either its experience or its significance. T.S. Eliot wrote in 1929, "Perhaps the most significant thing about the War is its insignificance" (Chace¹, 145).

35 This aesthetic and poetic enscription of the war - both before and after the event - raises the question whether the significant insignificance that Eliot identifies as its outcome is not produced by what Marianne DeKoven calls the suppression of the historical referent in modernist writing. If that referent is identified with the mass dead of World War I - "Nearly 60,000 of these men were to become casualties on the first
day of the Somme offensive in 1916" (Stephen^{2,6}) - then the early effects of a kind of Baudrillardian hyperreality may be seen in modernism's construction - or lack of

¹ William M. CHACE, *The Political Identities of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot*, Stanford, 1973

² Martin STEPHEN, ed., *Never Such innocence : A New Anthology of Great War Verse*, London, 1988

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construction - of World War I. The elegant figurations of the modernists - for example, Pound's powerful synecdoche in Canto IV: "Troy but a heap of smouldering boundary stones" (Cantos, 13) - tropes the destructiveness of war as the atomic power of rhetoric itself, capable of reducing the world to a burning stone. This figure so dramatically inverts the ground of the reference (rhetoric as figure of war, or war as figure of rhetoric) that the question of the poem's Nietzschean amnesia can seem itself an ideological violence. Canto IV, written in 1918 and 1919, either "forgets" or pointedly disregards the recent closure of World War I, and the elision of the dead bodies in the self-reflexive figure and poem seems to enact Elaine Scarry's argument about the role of disavowal in the discourses of war. The 10 million war dead of 1918 are the historical referent of the war without having themselves a referent; this gives them the referential instability that allows them to serve what Scarry oxymoronically describes as "their 'fiction-generating' or 'reality-conferring' function" (121). Dead bodies make the issues and outcomes of war real because "the human body, the original site of reality" (121), serves a semiological function as a code of the real. This endows the bodies of the war dead with the power to transfer the signification of reality onto the abstractions that have been the issues of war. The unreality and insignificance of the Great War may thus be implicated in modernism's disavowal of mass warfare's material and affective reference. The dead, whose sign is needed to make war's issues real, must always simultaneously be there yet be disavowed, in order to serve the purely symbolic function (to signify reality) that conceals their lack of instrumental function (to effect control over territory). This lack has never been more glaringly obvious than in this war, in which territorial gains and losses were sometimes nearly zero over the course of a year's unimaginable carnage. Furthermore, the present absence of the killed soldier's body was encoded in postwar England as cenotaphs - memorials in which empty space signified the soldier's body, as Allyson Booth has argued. Modernism's self-reflexive pre-scription of the war as (energetic) formalism may thus have colluded in the phenomenology of the Great War by placing the mass dead's irrational and illogical production under an erasure that itself pre-scripted and, in a sense, pre-dicted World War II. One is tempted to worry that the failure of the dominant World War I discourses to reference the mass dead as anything but unreferential may have contributed to making their reproduction in World War II unstoppable.

Margot Norris, *Writing War in the 20th century*, University Press of Virginia, 2000

(chapter 2: *The Trace of the Trenches*, pages 34-36)

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DOCUMENT C



William Orpen

The Signing of Peace in the Hall of Mirrors, Versailles, 28th June, 1919 (1921)
Oil on canvas 152,4 x 127 cm