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Charles Yale Harrison's
"Little-Known Minor Masterpiece":
Generals Die in Bed, Modernism, and
the Canon of World War I Fiction

I

The canon of Great War poetry and fiction has been firmly established at least since Bernard Bergonzi's *Heroes' Twilight* (1965) and, a decade later, Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975). Absent from both these studies, however, and from the canon of WWI literature, is Charles Yale Harrison's novel *Generals Die in Bed* (1930). Although the subject of fierce debate when it appeared and despite occasional high praise, it has never achieved the canonical status and hence the critical attention afforded such well-known Great War novels as Eric Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) and Frederic Manning's *Her Privates We* (1930), or by such memoirs as Edmund Blunden's *Undertones of War* (1928), Robert Graves' *Goodbye to All That* (1929) and Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (1928). That Harrison was an American working as a reporter in Canada when the First World War broke out, and that, shortly after the war ended, he returned to the United States, where he remained for the rest of his life, may partly account for the novel's marginal status in the canons of both

Canadian and American fiction. He has certainly not been honoured in his own country. Stanley Cooperman mentions Harrison only in passing in his *World War One and the American Novel* (1967). And his name does not even merit a mention either in the 6th edition of *The Oxford Companion to American Literature* or in the recent *A New History of American Literature* (2009), edited by Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors.

Although Harrison has virtually disappeared from American literary history, he has fared slightly better among critics of Canadian literature. John Moss claims that *Generals Die in Bed* is “possibly the best novel in English to have come out of the First World War” (162). And in *We Wasn't Pals* (2001), an anthology of Canadian literature of the First World War, the editor, Barry Callaghan, recalls a conversation with Joe Rosenblatt in which Rosenblatt called it “the great war novel. The real thing” (Foreword xv). Yet praise like this has not resulted in the novel entering the canons of either Canadian or war fiction. The anomaly of Harrison’s novel—occasional high praise combined with increasing neglect—is perfectly caught in W. J. Keith’s description of it as a “little-known . . . minor masterpiece” (131). Why has a novel of acknowledged literary value been excluded not only from the canons of both Canadian and American fiction but also, even more surprisingly, from the canon of WWI fiction? Just what makes a work canonical has been one of the questions posed by the Theory revolution of the past few decades. The debates around canonicity have brought to light an important fact about the relation of canonical works to literary value: a literary work is valued not, as was previously thought, because it possesses qualities or characteristics deemed literary (an explanation that borders on tautology) but because it belongs to a valued tradition, and its value accrues in proportion to its contribution to the establishment, the continuation, or the renovation of that tradition. Common sense may tell us that great works are in the canon because they obviously possess greatness, but Jane Austen’s novels were admitted to the tradition of English literature not when ‘literary’ properties were discovered in them, but only after the novel as a genre was afforded the same literary prestige and value as poetry and drama and after a “great tradition” of fiction was established. The value of a work—why it continues to be read and studied and thereby to acquire permanent currency—is inescapably tied to its placement within a larger group of affiliated and valued works—a tradition—that underwrites its value. Thus feminist critics have rescued neglected, ignored, or devalued works by women writers not by uncovering intrinsic literary value that was there all along waiting to be recognized, like priceless gems hidden in the dark unfathomed caves of ocean, but by incorporating them into the existing literary

tradition—by adding, for example, Anna Barbauld to the canon defined by the big five male Romantic poets (six if one includes Blake, who was not fully canonized until Northrop Frye explained just how traditional a poet he was)—or by inscribing them within a newly minted tradition of Women’s Writing, as Elaine Showalter did in her pioneering *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (1977). Value is rarely if ever bestowed on an individual literary text, particularly one from the past, in isolation from a valued literary tradition in which it can be securely placed. Eliot’s individual talent can be recognized as talent only when it is located within a valued tradition. In short, the value that we place upon a text, or claim to find in it, depends on finding the right company for it to keep. So a novel without a tradition to belong to, or one that has been misplaced in an inappropriate tradition—in the wrong company—has a hard time getting literary recognition.

Generals Die in Bed is an instructive example of a novel forced to keep the wrong company and hence unjustly neglected. The critical issue raised by the history of *Generals Die in Bed* is illuminated by a perceptive observation made by Peter Rabinowitz in his book *Before Reading*, in which he explores how readers read, or more accurately *pre-read*, narratives. Readers, especially experienced ones, rarely read a novel without any expectations of what they are likely to find in it. According to Rabinowitz, readers do not come to a novel with minds like a blank slate: “what we attend to in a text is [...] influenced by the other works in our minds against which we read it. Particular details stand out as surprising, significant, climactic, or strange in part because they are seen in the context of a particular intertextual grid—a particular set of other works of art” (186). Now the “intertextual grid” against which *Generals Die in Bed* has been read—or, as I shall argue, *misread*—is the canon of World War I fiction that includes the novels of Hemingway, Manning, and Remarque.² In 1930 most reviewers placed *Generals* in the company of these war novels rather than the literary fiction of the day. For example, *The New York Times Book Review* placed it with four other war novels under the title “And Still the Great War Thunders in Literature.” A young Lionel Trilling reviewed it, under the title “Fighting It Over,” in *The New Republic* along with *Her Privates We*, by Private No. 19022 [Frederic Manning]; *War is War*, by Ex-Private X; *Medal Without Honour Bar*, by Richard Blaker, and *Retreat*, by C. R. Benstead. And Vernon Bartlett reviewed it in *The Spectator* along with *Everyman at War*, *Her Privates We*, and *Captured!*, by Ferdinand Horvath.

The reason that *Generals Die in Bed*, despite being occasionally singled out for high praise, has fallen into obscurity and neglect is that it has not been located

within a valued tradition of fiction that can render visible, and thereby confirm, its artistic merit. *Generals* has been read almost exclusively within the canon of realist war novels—a context that tends to render invisible those aspects of the novel that are not the merits of realism. I propose to reread and re-evaluate Harrison's masterpiece as a late example of Modernist fiction. This reading and reevaluation will, I believe, not only bring *Generals* into the canon of modernist fiction, but also reconfirm the proposition that literary value is not an intrinsic property of a literary work but a quality that is acquired from its inclusion in a valued literary tradition.

Although *Generals* attracted considerable attention when it was published, later criticism of it has been confined to asides in discussions whose main focus is on other war novels. The only sustained recent criticism of it is in Dagmar Novak's *Dubious Glory: The Two World Wars and the Canadian Novel* (2000). When critics do not mention *Generals* in relation to other War novels, they refer to it in passing in the context of the project to establish realism, not modernism, in Canadian fiction. As E. L. Bobak demonstrates in "Seeking 'Direct, Honest Realism': The Canadian Novel of the 1920's," the major critical issue in Canadian fiction in the 1920s was not a conflict between realism and *avant-garde* modernism but the effort to overcome the dominant style of sentimental romance, a style that drew the critical wrath of A. J. M. Smith in his famous 1928 attack on the Canadian literary establishment, "Wanted—Canadian Criticism."³ Later critics of Canadian fiction followed Smith as they have tried to define a Canadian tradition of realist fiction. When viewed from the perspective of this effort, *Generals* provides evidence of the final triumph, at the end of the 1920s, of tough-minded realism over sentiment and romance. Pierre Berton called *Generals* "the most cynical novel of the era" and claimed that its "blunt style [...] heralded the tardy arrival of the new realism to Canadian fiction" (302). Though Berton is a popular historian and not a literary critic, his comment confirms the ingrained critical practice of reading *Generals* as an early example of the effort to establish a tradition of realism in Canadian fiction. Thus for W. J. Keith,

The little-known *Generals Die in Bed* [...] occupies the extreme edge of fiction as it adjoins documentary. Intended to offer a representative account of an ordinary soldier in the ranks, it presents a determinedly unheroic perspective. 'It's beer we want. To hell with glory' (Ch. 6) sums up the whole. (131)

In her study of the Canadian war novel, Dagmar Novak also stresses the novel's realism:

The first of the Canadian novels which consciously sets for itself the task of telling "the truth about the war," its central theme is the brutalizing effect of war. Replete with scenes depicting the deplorable conditions of the front line, sketches of soldiers whose basic instinct is survival, and stories detailing the atrocities of Canadian troops, its eventual American publisher demanded that Harrison sign a statement that the events the novel describes actually took place. (60)

But if one does not read *Generals* against the intertextual grid of the canonical war fiction of the late 1920s and early 1930s, or against the novels that led to the triumph of realism in Canadian fiction, against what other possible intertextual grid could one read it? My own first reading of *Generals* is, I think, instructive. I first read it while preparing a course on the literature of the Great War, and I read it primarily because I felt obliged to include some Canadian content in the course. At it happened, I began preparing this course shortly after teaching a course on British Modernism, and I was immediately struck, as I read *Generals*, by how modernist, in form and narrative technique, it appeared to be. In contrast, most other war novels that I was reading seemed securely ensconced within the realist tradition of the English novel that Virginia Woolf was at pains to distance herself from. My impression that most War novels are within the tradition of realism was confirmed when I read two essays on WWI fiction, one by Lynn Hapgood and another by Evelyln Copley. As Hapgood points out, although most canonical war novels were published a decade or more after the War, when the examples of modernist experimentation might have inspired at least some novelists to seek new narrative forms, most War fiction "adopts realism as its literary mode. Writers who had earlier been associated with the modernists, such as Robert Graves and Richard Aldington, did not carry literary experimentation into their writing about the war. Only David Jones's *In Parenthesis* exploits a break with realism to capture the impact of war" (32-33). As the title of Hapgood's book suggests, the main tradition of war fiction lies "outside modernism," a point that has frequently been made about the poetry of the Great War; like the poems of Sassoon and Owen, the canonical war novels are valued today for their realism, not for their literary innovation. Copley confirms Hapgood's claim, pointing out that in most novels of the Great War, as well as in memoirs and autobiographies, a sense of reality, of

“telling it like it was,” is created largely through extensive realistic description of the Front, a technique inherited from nineteenth-century and Edwardian realism:

The conventions of nineteenth-century realism seemed best suited to name the unnameable in the most immediate and authentic fashion. Relying on long descriptive passages, the First World War writers invoked a stock of familiar knowledge so as to make the unfamiliar less strange. Since most war accounts devote relatively little time to dramatic battle scenes, the accumulation of descriptive details was a particularly attractive means for conveying the often monotonous routines of everyday life at the front. What is depicted, often at exhaustive length, are such mundane activities as eating, drinking, sleeping, marching, moving through trenches, enduring fatigue duties, going on patrol, dealing with lice and rats, receiving letters, going on sick or home leave. (99-100)

From within the intertextual grid of the canonical war novels, then, *Generals* has been read as an anti-war novel and, more relevant to my argument, as an example of literary realism. But reading *Generals* exclusively as a realistic anti-war novel has prevented us from recognizing the fact that it adopts many of the conventions of literary modernism to represent the War realistically. Although I agree with those critics who have placed a high value on *Generals*, my reason for this valuation is not its realism but rather its success in bringing the techniques of literary modernism into a form, the war novel, which remained outside modernism and within the tradition of literary realism. It is as a war novel that adopted the conventions of Modernism nearly a decade before Jones's *In Parenthesis* did, and thus as one of the first Canadian modernist novels, rather than as a realist anti-war novel, that the literary merits of *Generals Die in Bed* will stand out.

My proposal to re-evaluate *Generals* by reading it as a modernist novel finds a methodological precedent in David Lodge's reevaluation of Kipling's short story "Mrs. Bathurst" by (re)reading it against the intertextual grid of modernist fiction. Kipling's reputation as a popular Victorian writer of boys' adventure stories, such as *Kim*, had long blinded critics to the modernist narrative techniques in at least some of his short stories. But Lodge showed that if we read Kipling against a different intertextual grid than the one in which he was usually placed, the results could be surprising, leading to a reevaluation of his fiction. Once Lodge mapped "Mrs. Bathurst" onto the "intertextual grid" of modernist fiction, Kipling's modernist narrative technique stood out clearly:

If Rudyard Kipling is not usually thought of as a modern writer in the sense of *modernist*, it is because his work seems, superficially, to belong to a traditional kind of storytelling discourse familiar from the nineteenth-century novel, in which a lucid, literary and reassuringly normative authorial narration frames and judges the speech and actions of characters who belong to distinct and recognizable social and ethnic types. This impression is, however, misleading. It is true that Kipling does not indulge in the kind of stylistic experiment by means of which writers such as Joyce, Woolf and Lawrence represented the subjectivity of experience and the relativity of 'truth'. But the relationship between the story and the telling of it in Kipling's work is often highly problematical, making the latter as teasingly ambiguous, as difficult and 'polysemous' as that of the acknowledged modern masters. (*Working with Structuralism*, 143)

Lodge goes on in his brilliant analysis of "Mrs. Bathurst" to show that Kipling's artful story displays as much indeterminacy and ambiguity as many modernist short stories. But so long as Kipling was read as a popular Victorian writer, those highly valued literary qualities simply could not be perceived. Similarly, if Harrison is not thought of as a modernist writer it is because his novel has been read within the nineteenth-century traditional of realism, despite the fact that, like some of Kipling's stories, his novel does not follow the "storytelling discourse familiar from the nineteenth-century novel." Just as Kipling's placement within the intertextual grid of popular adventure fiction prevented critics from recognizing his affinities with literary modernism, so, I would argue, reading *Generals* exclusively within the tradition of realist war fiction has blinded critics to the novel's reliance on modernist narrative techniques and led to its exclusion from the canon of modernist fiction. So long as *Generals Die in Bed* continues to be read against the intertextual grid of literary realism—whether the realism of the canonical war novel or the realism emerging in Canadian fiction in the 1920s—it will continue to be undervalued. Paradoxically, the way to rescue *Generals* from continuing critical neglect as a war novel is to stop reading it as a realist war novel and instead read it as the first modernist Canadian novel.

II

The dominant critical practice of reading *Generals* against the intertextual grid of realist war novels can be traced back to the novel's first reviewers, who

focused almost entirely on the debate over whether it represented the war accurately, a debate that trumped any literary discussions of the novel. This debate, known as the war books controversy,⁴ at least partly explains the failure of both contemporary reviewers and later critics to recognize the novel's obvious links to literary modernism. They could not recognize these links because in order to do so they would have to abandon two assumptions: first, that the value of the war novels, unlike that of most other fiction, depended largely on their authenticity and verisimilitude, on their claim to have represented the War truthfully and accurately; and, second, the assumption that these novels' perceived authenticity in representing the War realistically was inseparable from their reliance on the formal conventions of realism in fiction. That is, these novels' documentary truthfulness was assumed to be underwritten by their adherence to the conventions of literary realism. Therefore, before exploring the novel's overlooked affinities with literary modernism, I want first to show how its initial reception reinforced its subsequent placement within the tradition of literary realism, and thereby led to its neglect and undervaluation.

Today we take the Owen and Remarque perspective on the horrors and waste of the Great War as normative—a view summed up in the title of Graves's memoir, *Goodbye to All That*. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century the canonical war novels have been seen as truthful, realistic representations of the War written by combatants who were eyewitnesses. But in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the general public, ex-soldiers and reviewers were outraged and shocked by what they regarded as outright lies about the War purveyed by these novels and memoirs, which were taken as deliberate attacks on the British and Canadian soldiers who had fought so bravely and heroically. Veterans were particularly angry. In New Zealand, they succeeded in getting the film versions of Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and R. C. Sherriff's play *Journey's End* banned. The war novels so outraged public opinion in Britain that two veterans, Douglas Jerrold, who had served in Gallipoli and France, and Cyril Falls responded with, respectively, *The Lie about the War* (1930) and *War Books* (1930). Both argued that accounts of the war by novelists were unrepresentative of the war experience because they presented a distorted, biased and highly personal interpretation of the war. In Canada, Lieutenant-Colonel F. C. Curry, writing in the *Canadian Defence Quarterly*, attacked the war novels, particularly *Generals*, for the same reason. Colonel Cy Peck, MP for Skeena and recipient of the Victoria Cross, attacked them for their "filth, demoagogy [sic], morbidity and hopelessness," singling out *Generals* as "a gross and shameful slander on the Canadian soldier, by a degenerate-minded fool"

(7). Veterans' groups and the Canadian Legion demanded, unsuccessfully, that *Generals* be banned. And in the Preface to his war memoir *As We Go On*, Will Bird charged that the war novels were "putrid with so-called 'realism'" and labelled them "an irrevocable insult to those gallant men who lie in French or Belgian graves" (x).

Many reviewers sided with the veterans, and were preoccupied with questioning the novel's documentary realism, its historical truthfulness. In *The Saturday Review of Literature*, for example, Emerson G. Taylor lumped Harrison with "the horde of recent horror mongers," and accused him of besmirching the honour of Canadian soldiers:

In a series of incoherent reminiscences, daubed in nightmare colors, the reader is invited to accept Dominion soldiers, whether in battle or billets, as wearing typically the guise of lice-infested sots and lechers, hysterical victims of oppression, or brutish savages. (1123)

In *The Spectator*, Vernon Bartlett fired a similar attack: "From the Canadian barracks with their 'heavy odour of stale booze and women', as described on the first page, we are frog-marched to a war, the bestiality and horrors of which are so emphasized that the author's sincere and passionate desire to do what he can to prevent its recurrence is entirely defeated" (981). In his review in *Saturday Night*, Nathaniel Benson said that an officer who served in Harrison's battalion told him that the novel was "50 per cent truth and 50 percent cook-house rumours." Like most reviewers, Benson judged the novel on its authenticity:

Such a book as "Generals Die in Bed" depends solely for its importance on its authenticity. If authentic, it becomes immediately a document of historical value, an honest revelation of horrors previously shrouded in official silence; if false, the book is merely a low, sensational would-be "shocker." (9)

Both veterans and reviewers, then, accused Harrison of libelling Canadian manhood by emphasizing the evils of the war and ignoring the heroism and decency of Canadian soldiers. In the words of historian Jonathan Vance,

They judged any account, be it Canadian, British, or German, on the degree to which it captured the balance of the war experience as they remembered it. When Reverend Ephram McKegey, wounded in 1918

while serving as chaplain to a Canadian infantry battalion, reminded his listeners at a 1928 Armistice Day service that to recall the terrible life at the front was also to recall the wonderful spirit of fellowship that prevailed there, he was merely expressing what many veterans had accepted as the only criterion for evaluating any memory of the war [...]. Those versions which gave equal emphasis to the harrowing artillery bombardments and the rollicking evenings drinking *vin blanc* were acceptable; those which dwelt only on the horrors were invalid. (246).

Generals lacked such balance; hence it was false to history and a slander on veterans.

The war books controversy occluded all other perspectives on *Generals*, making it virtually impossible for reviewers to see the novel in relation to the formal and stylistic concerns of the modernists. None of the contemporary reviewers discussed the novel in the literary context of the late 1920s, when the masterpieces of literary modernism had gained wide currency in literary circles. In so far as the debate was literary at all, it tended to evaluate *Generals* as a realistic novel, and reviewers praised or damned it for the accuracy or inaccuracy of its representation of the War. It was widely assumed that in order to be a successful war novel, a novel had to give a truthful picture of what trench warfare was really like, and, furthermore, that to achieve that goal the novelist would rely on the techniques of literary realism. When the discussion of the novels was literary at all, it remained within pre-War notions of realism in the novel. Those reviewers who praised the novel did so on the grounds that it was a truthful, realistic representation of the War. For example, Horace Gregory in his review in *The Nation* called the description of the looting of the town of Arras, which had so outraged other reviewers and veterans, “a piece of superlative reporting,” and he ended his favourable review with the words: “If after reading ‘Generals Die in Bed’ you have any enthusiasm left for the glorious aspects of modern warfare, you have a strong and excessively *non-realistic* imagination” (71; italics added). In *The New Republic* a young Lionel Trilling, also praised the novel for its realism, calling it “a fresh, downright piece of writing, unpretentious but thoroughly efficient. It is full of anger and disgust, not frenetic but intensified by the clarity of sane recollection of an insane hoax. Its descriptions of horror and suffering are excellent . . .” (296).

The contemporary reception of *Generals* shaped later criticism of the novel. Although the judgment of later critics reverses that of most contemporary reviewers, they, too, tend to assume that a war novel should be judged according to whether it gives a truthful and honest representation of war’s reality. Later critics have for the

most part accepted the terms of debate established by the contemporary reviewers. Reiterating the judgments of Trilling and Gregory, they have praised the novel for its documentary realism. Like Gregory and Trilling, later critics conceive of realism primarily in terms of truthfulness and historical authenticity. For Gregory the novel is “a piece of superlative reporting”; for Keith, over half a century later, it “occupies the extreme edge of fiction as it adjoins documentary.” This debate has prevented critics from perceiving how different, from a literary perspective, *Generals* is from the typical realist war novel.

III

The *literary* differences between *Generals* and most other Great War novels can be explained in terms of the opposition between realism and modernism made by David Lodge in *The Modes of Modern Writing*. According to Lodge, modernist fiction is

experimental or innovatory in form, displaying marked deviations from pre-existing modes of discourse, literary and non-literary. [...] A modernist novel has no real ‘beginning’, since it plunges us into a flowing stream of experience with which we gradually familiarize ourselves by a process of inference and association; and its ending is usually ‘open’ or ambiguous, leaving the reader in doubt as to the final destinies of the characters. To compensate for the diminution of narrative structure and unity, alternative methods of aesthetic ordering become more prominent, such as allusion to or imitation of literary models or mythical archetypes, and the repetition-with-variation of motifs, images, symbols—a technique variously described as ‘rhythm’, ‘Leitmotif’ and ‘spatial form’. Modernist fiction eschews the straight chronological ordering of its material, and the use of a reliable, omniscient and intrusive narrator. It employs, instead, either a single, limited point of view, or a method of multiple points of view, all more or less limited and fallible [...]. (45-56).

Because *Generals* has been read primarily as a realist novel, critics have failed to notice that it exhibits most of Lodge’s formal features of the modernist novel, including an abrupt beginning and an open ending, allusion to literary models and archetypes, the use of a single, limited point of view, and the repetition of images, symbols and other motifs.

Perhaps the most obvious sign of Harrison's break with literary realism is his rejection of linear narrative and the replacement of it by the discontinuous, fragmented, non-linear narrative form associated with Modernist fiction. Although the action of the novel does move chronologically from the summer of 1917 (when the nameless narrator enlists in Montreal) to August 1918 (when he is wounded in the Battle of Amiens), there is little sense of linear progression or forward movement in the novel. Its twelve chapters are divided into 79 juxtaposed sections, often with little or no transition between them, a structural device that Timothy Findley resurrected half a century later in *The Wars* (1977). The reader experiences the events of the novel as a series of often disconnected fragments, and if the order of many of these fragments were changed, the reader would not feel particularly disoriented.

Although this technique may create an impression of documentary realism, it is not a realist narrative technique. Harrison has borrowed it from modernist poetry, especially Imagism. To achieve a heightened sense of realism, several War poets, such as Richard Aldington, Robert Nichols, and Alec Waugh, introduced into their war poetry the technique of the Imagist poets. A good example is "From Albert to Bapaume," by Alec Waugh, the brother of the novelist Evelyn Waugh:

Lonely and bare and desolate,
Stretches of muddy filtered green,
A silence half articulate
Of all that those dumb eyes have seen.

A battered trench, a tree with boughs
Smuted and black with smoke and fire,
A solitary ruined house,
A crumpled mass of rusty wire.

And scarlet by each ragged fen
Long scattered ranks of poppies lay,
As though the blood of dead men
Had not been wholly washed away. (Waugh 86)

An even closer parallel to Harrison's fragmented, discontinuous prose style appears in Robert Nichols's experimental poem "The Assault," in which Nichols attempts to capture the immediacy of the thoughts of a junior officer as he waits to blow the

whistle that will signal the beginning of an assault on the enemy trenches, and then as the officer participates in the assault itself. The following passage, describing the moment just before the men go over the top, is representative:

Blindness a moment. Sick.
There the men are!
Bayonets ready: click!
Time goes quick;
A stumbled prayer . . . somehow a blazing star
In a blue night . . . where?
Again prayer.
The tongue trips. Start:
How's time? Soon now. Two minutes or less.
The gun's fury mounting higher . . .
Their utmost. I lift a silent hand. Unseen I bless
Those hearts will follow me.
And beautifully,
Now beautifully my will grips,
Soul calm and round and filmed and white!
A shout: 'Men, no such order as retire!' (ll. 49-64)

The obvious similarity to the prose style of *Generals* suggests that Harrison has adapted Imagist techniques to represent the fragmented and discontinuous experience of the trenches. Harrison's staccato style has of course been commented on. Keith, for example, remarks that the novel is "told in the present tense, in short unadorned sentences; often a single sentence is set apart as a paragraph, producing a jumpy, disturbing but ultimately deadening effect as one event harshly and remorselessly succeeds another" (131). John Moss makes a similar point: "The style is simple, direct, unpretentious: words are concrete, sentences brief, paragraphs so short they follow a staccato rhythm down the page, echoing the inexorable onslaught of the war they describe" (162). This is perceptive, but what it overlooks is the fact that the style of the novel is obviously indebted to recent examples of literary modernism rather than to the conventions of realism that most war novels conformed to.

In place of the lengthy descriptions and the linear, sequential, cause-and-effect plot of realist fiction, Harrison employs the novelistic equivalent of rapid cuts in film. Although the abrupt juxtapositions of scenes in the novel are perhaps not

cinematic enough to be called montage (Eisenstein's *Battleship Potempkin* had appeared just five years earlier in 1925), nevertheless the narrator does at one point actually use a cinematic metaphor to describe the jerky, discontinuous experience of an artillery bombardment: "The force of the detonation causes the light of the candle to become a steady, rapid flicker. We look like men seen in ancient, unsteady motion pictures" (Ch. 6: 97; italics added). Harrison's narrative technique creates the effect of a documentary motion picture filmed using only one hand-held camera: the reader is restricted to what that single camera can record from the limited vantage point of the narrator. This narrative technique produces the illusion of immediacy along with the equally strong illusion of objectivity. Combined with the first-person narrative voice and the present tense, it creates the sense of an eyewitness account, giving the reader the impression of being in the trenches.

Perhaps the most important influence of literary modernism on the novel is that its structure is metaphoric (linking scenes through resemblances between them) rather than metonymic, as in a realist novel, in which narrative items are linked through contiguity. As Cobley points out in her discussion of Findley's *The Wars*, a major difference between modernist novels and realist WWI novels is that the modernist text

superimposes what structuralists identify as the paradigmatic axis of meaning onto the syntagmatic chain of signification. Instead of taking its significance from the linear forward movement of the narratives (its metonymic axis, the [modernist] text establishes a network of associative links (its metaphoric axis). Most documentary World War One narratives are predominately metonymic, eschewing metaphorical ostentation for fear that poetic license would distort their supposedly objective accounts. (114)

But establishing a network of associative links is just what Harrison does. Take, for examples, the resemblances between Chapters 1, 7 and 8. Chapters 7 and 8, set, respectively, in Bethune and London, open with descriptions that call attention to the similarities between the Front and London. Chapter 7 opens:

Béthune.

A dirty, squat, coal-smudged city.

The black North of France. In the days of peace black with the soot of coal, now blackened with the smoke of war. [. . .]

Béthune with its narrow, grimy streets. Its undersized mining population which walks down the streets with that peculiar stunted walk of human moles. Wine shops, stores, egg and chip joints! (Ch. 7: 135)

The next chapter, describing the narrator's experience while on leave, is contrastingly entitled "London," but its opening echoes the opening of the previous chapter:

London.

It is three o'clock in the morning.

We are weary with the long hours of travel. I walk out of the soot-colored ugly Waterloo station and hail a cab. (Ch. 8: 155)

The parallels, signalled by the first words, "Bethune" and "London," and the omnipresent ugly soot, imply that for the narrator London is not all that different from Béthune. At the end of Chapter 8 his separation from Gladys repeats the scene at the Montreal train station in Chapter 1. "I want to . . . stay with this fair girl who smells faintly of perfume. I grip her arm *tightly*" (Ch 1: 10). "Once more we embrace. She holds me *tightly*" (Ch 8: 174).

Even more significant than these verbal echoes are the associative links between this scene set in London and an earlier one in which the soldiers, in a pastoral interlude, go for a swim in "a little stream about three kilometres from the village" (Ch. 5: 60). "Who can describe the few moments of peace and sunshine in a soldier's life? The animal pleasure in feeling the sun on a naked body. The cool, caressing, lapping waters. The feeling of security, of deep inward happiness ..." (Ch. 5: 61). But this pastoral scene is abruptly interrupted by a reminder of the war. Cleary suddenly stops swimming, emerges from the water, and stands on the bank, pointing to something "dark" in the water near the bank. It is the dead body of a French soldier, identifiable by the field blue uniform and the "thin red stripe wriggling up the trouser leg." The narrator comments: "We thought we were safe. We thought we could forget the horrors of the line for a brief few weeks—and here this swollen reminder drifts from the battlefield to soil our sunny afternoon for us" (Ch. 5: 62). Death is also in Arcadia. Similarly, in London the narrator thinks that he can forget the war for a moment by visiting a music hall with his girl friend, Gladys. But as in the swimming episode, he finds that escape from the horrors of the war is impossible. As in Siegfried Sassoon's poem "Blighters" (which is based on a similar music-hall experience), the music, instead of helping him forget the horrors of the front, reminds him of them. The audience, including Gladys, laugh

uproariously at “a vulgar-faced comic [who] is prancing up and down the apron of the stage, accompanied by about fifty girls dressed in gauzy khaki stage uniforms, who look like lewd female Tommies, danc[ing] to the tune of the music.” They dance and sing:

Oh, it's a lovely war.
What do we care for eggs and ham
When we have plum and apple jam. (Ch. 8: 115)

The narrator is outraged that civilians are laughing while soldiers are dying at the Front: “They have no business to forget. They should be made to remember” (Ch. 8: 160).

This scene and the earlier bathing scene are connected not only by the inability of the narrator to forget the War—the word *forget* is significantly repeated—but also by the symbolic role that music plays in each scene, reminding him of the horrors of the Front. It is not just the body of the French soldier that reminds him of the battlefield; the distant sound of the guns, “like the subdued throbbing of violins in a symphony,” proclaims

I am still here . . . You may sleep quietly at night in sweet-smelling hay, you may lie sweating under a tree after a drill and marvel at the fine tracings on a trembling leaf over your head, but I am here and you must come back to my howling madness, to my senseless volcanic fury. I am the link that binds you to your future, it mutters. (Ch. 5: 86)

What “binds” this scene to the one in London, as well as to several others in the novel, is the motif of music. There are over a dozen references to music in the novel, beginning with the trio of drunken soldiers who enter singing in Chapter 1 and with the “war song” sung “with a mock pathos by another group of recruits: “*I don't want to die, I don't want to die*” (Ch. 1: 5). Anderson, a middle-aged Methodist chaplain, has a voice that “sounds like an insistent piccolo above the braying trombones” of the other soldiers’ voices (Ch. 1: 7). The singing of the soldiers is, of course, a realistic detail, but music plays a more subtle role as well: no matter how often the men sing to forget, music only serves to remind them—and the reader—of the horrors they are singing to forget. The “subdued throbbing violins” are simply a less intense form of the “howling madness” of war. The climax of this identification of music and

the sounds of war comes immediately after the narrator's visit to London, when in Chapter 9, "Over the Top," the German soldiers are insanely singing as they attack:

They are insane, it seems
We cannot miss them.
On and on they come.
Above the clatter of the Lewis guns I can hear snatches of song.
They are singing. (Ch. 9: 191)

In addition to repeated motifs, the novel also relies on literary allusions. The reference to Sassoon's "Blighters" is not the only literary allusion. Early in the novel, when the men are recounting their recent escapes from death, the narrator quotes a line from Oscar Wilde's poem "The Ballad of Reading Goal": "He who lives more lives than one, more deaths than one must die" (Ch. 2: 29). Since Wilde's ballad is about a man who has been condemned to die for murdering the woman he loved, the narrator implies a parallel between the subject of Wilde's ballad and the equally condemned soldiers in the trenches, whose deaths are as inevitable and that of Wilde's guardsman. There is also an allusion to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which by the time *Generals* was published had become the most famous contemporary poem in English. In Chapter 4 the narrator describes the Front as a "waste land": "The trees here are skeletons holding stubs of stark, shell-amputated arms towards the sky. No flowers grow in this waste land" (Ch. 4:53). But it is not just the word "waste land" that evokes Eliot's poem; the line "No flowers grow in this waste land" recalls two famous lines in the first part of the poem: "What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish?" The metaphor of tree branches resembling "the stubs of stark, shell-amputated arms" foreshadows the amputation of a soldier's legs by a German artillery shell during an attack: "Fry's legs from the knees down are torn from under him. He runs a few paces on his gushing stumps and collapses" (Ch. 9: 200). The war mutilates and kills all living things indiscriminately, turning the fields of Flanders into a waste land. And finally, the bitter title of the novel is clearly an allusion to Sassoon's poem "Base Details," which opens with the lines

If I were fierce, and bald, and short of breath,
I'd live with scarlet Majors at the Base,
And speed glum heroes up the line to death

and ends with one of the bitterest couplets in WWI poetry: “And when the war is done and youth stone dead, / I’d toddle safely home and die—in bed.”³⁵ The allusions to Wilde, Eliot, Sassoon and Owen encourage us to read the novel the same way we read an allusive modernist text: not as a documentary report but as a re-presentation of the War meditated through other literary texts.

Perhaps the most thematically relevant literary allusion comes at the end of Chapter 8, “Bombardment,” when the narrator, reflecting on the deaths of all the young soldiers, alludes to the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac:

What is so terrible about the death of one of these boys—about the death of one of us?

I guess it is because we do not want to die—because we hang on so pitifully to life as it slips away. Our lives are stolen—taken from us unawares.

Back home our lives were more or less our own—more or less, there we were factors in what we were doing. But here we are no more factors than was the stripling Isaac whom the hoary, senile Abraham led to the sacrificial block. (Ch. 6: 131)

The narrator here is alluding not only to the Old Testament story of Abraham and Isaac but also to one of Wilfred Owen’s most angry war poems, “The Parable of the Old Man and the Young,” which subverts the happy ending of the Biblical story by substituting a savagely ironic one: “But the old man [Abraham] would not so, but slew his son, / And half the seed of Europe, one by one.” The phrase “stripling Isaac” refers both to Cleary, who has just been killed in the raid on the German trenches—his discovery of the dead French soldier foreshadows his own death—and to Karl, the German soldier killed by the narrator during the raid. The biblical allusion gives both Cleary and Karl symbolic and mythic resonance, but it also echoes an earlier line in the novel: “We are being fattened for the slaughter” (Ch. 5: 84). The line almost certainly alludes to Owen’s “Anthem for Doomed Youth,” which opens: “What passing bells for these who die as cattle?” Like Wilde’s condemned guardsman and Owen’s “doomed youth,” Harrison’s soldiers are marked for death. *Generals Die in Bed* is dedicated to “the bewildered youths—British, Australian, Canadian, and German—who were killed in that wood a few miles beyond Amiens on August 8, 1918,” and thus, like Owen’s poem, the novel is an elegy to the ‘lost generation’ of the Great War.

IV

The obviously non-linear structure of *Generals* has, of course, been commented on. “There is no plot as such,” remarks Eric Thompson, “only the relentless alternation between trenches and rest camps across muddy and bombed fields from month to month and year to year” (88). But this narrative technique, along with the others I have mentioned, has not been viewed in the context of modernist fiction. What has been surprisingly overlooked is the fact that the Modernist form of the novel, particularly its cyclic structure and lack of linear progression, is perfectly suited to the representation of trench warfare. The repetitive form of the novel reflects the “monotonous routines of everyday life at the front” (Cobley 99): “Six days in reserve [trenches] near the light artillery, six days in supports [the support trenches], six days in the front trenches—and then out to rest. Five or six days out on rest and then back again; six days, six days, rest” (Ch. 4: 53). As one day blurs indistinguishably into the next, the soldiers lose track of time: “We do not know what day it is. We have lost count. It makes no difference whether it is Sunday or Monday. It is merely another day—a day on which one may die” (Ch. 2: 27). The repetition of scenes and events implies that nothing changes in the lives of the soldiers, that each dawn in the trenches is the same as every other dawn, each march like every other march, each rest period indistinguishable from countless other rest periods. The title of Chapter 6, “Back to the Round,” calls attention to the cyclic pattern, and hence the futility, of the soldiers’ lives. In what amounts to a gloss on the structure of the whole novel, the narrator explicitly comments on the repetitiveness of life at the Front:

Endlessly in and out. Different sectors, different names of trenches, different trenches, but always the same trenches, the same, yellow infested earth, the same screaming shells, the same comet-tailed “minnies” with their splintering roar. The same rats, fat and sleek with their corpse-filled bellies, the same gleaming gimlet eyes. The same lice which we carry with us wherever we go. In and out, in and out, endlessly Somewhere it is summer, but here are the same trenches. (Ch. 4: 53)

The static, repetitive structure of the novel also mirrors the larger pattern of the War. The reality of trench warfare was that it was a stalemate: for four years most of the line separating the Allied and German troops changed no more than a few hundred yards. Each battle was an attempt to break through the enemy line of defence and each attempt, like earlier and later ones, failed. The early weeks of

the War gave the deceptive impression that it was going to one of rapid movement. For both the Germans and the French, the initial timetables and deployment of troops were based on the idea of a vast, swift and decisive offensive. The Schlieffen Plan called for the French army to be encircled and crushed by German armies moving swiftly through Belgium; the French plan of action similarly called for a massive offensive along the frontier with Germany. Until mid-October, as each side desperately tried to outflank the other's line, the war retained some degree of mobility. But by the end of October, the futility of head-on infantry assaults in the face of modern rifles, machine guns and artillery became horribly apparent, and the battle lines congealed into the Western Front. Both sides were forced to dig holes in the ground and concentrate on repulsing any attacks while trying, unsuccessfully, to launch their own assaults. Trench warfare had begun. "At the end of 1915," says military historian Martin Gilbert, "the line of trenches on the Western Front, with its ever-thickening barbed-wire entanglements on both sides, its ever-stronger machine-gun defences on the German side, and its well-defended artillery positions, was virtually the same line as at the start of the year" (6).

Just as there was no military progress to the war, there is no linear movement in the novel. The war ended not with a clear military victory for one side but with an armistice. Similarly, Harrison's novel does not conclude; it just stops. The lack of military progress, with later battles repeating the same mistakes as earlier ones, is paralleled by the lack of development of the narrator as a character, something that would be a conspicuous fault in most realist narratives. "The narrator," says Thompson, "speaks from the beginning of the story with the cynical wisdom of someone who was born old and for whom neither the butchery of war nor the dullness of ordinary life holds any surprises" (87). Like its non-linear plot, this absence of development distinguishes *Generals* from most other WWI novels. "First World War writers," remarks Cobley, "sought to make sense of the inexplicable horrors they had witnessed by imposing on them the comforting *Bildungsroman* paradigm, thereby suggesting that the war could be interpreted as a deplorable but necessary stage on the road to a better future" (106). No such comforting paradigm is available for Harrison's narrator, for whom the war to end all wars and preserve civilization is certainly not a stage on the road to a better future.

So if *Generals Die in Bed* relies as much on the techniques of literary modernism as I have claimed, why has this fact been overlooked? The short answer is that critics are unlikely to see what their critical presuppositions prevent them from seeing. We rarely come to a text without some preconceptions about it, and we rarely, if ever, read a text in complete isolation. When we read it, we are, as Rabinowitz

suggests, inevitably “influenced by the other works in our minds against which we read it.” In the case of *Generals* those “other works” are the novels in the canon of WWI fiction established over the past seventy-five years, and so what stands out in *Generals* as significant and meaningful are those things that we have learned to look for in WWI novels, especially their realism. And since Harrison did not entirely abandon the conventions of realism, it has been easy to read his novel within the tradition of realist war fiction. Doing so has, however, come at a price: Harrison’s masterpiece has been relegated to the periphery of the canons of both the WWI novel and the novel in general. The masterpieces of fiction in the first third of the twentieth century remain the canonical works of modernist fiction. Few WWI novels have been praised for their style or for their formal innovations within the tradition of the novel. These novels stand outside the tradition of Modernist fiction, just as most of the canonical war poems—those of Sassoon, Owen and Blunden—stand outside the tradition of modernist poetry. And so long as *Generals Die in Bed* continues to be read against the intertextual grid of the canonical war novels, and valued for its documentary realism and its anti-war message rather than for its successful deployment of the new techniques of modernist fiction to represent the new subject matter of modern trench warfare, it will continue to be undervalued. But if it is read as a late example of modernist fiction, it may, belatedly, get the recognition that it deserves.

Notes

1. The likeliest explanation for Harrison’s neglect by Canadian critics is that the creation of a tradition of Canadian fiction has focused on establishing a canon of novels that are Canadian in setting and that explain Canada to Canadians—a tradition that conventionally begins with the novels of Hugh MacLennan and Sinclair Ross. “Canadian literary criticism,” says Leon Surette, “has always been an enterprise in which the central purpose was the discovery of the Canadian-ness of the literature written in this country” (17). W. J. Keith sums up this nationalist project in his *Canadian Literature in English*:

‘There is yet no tradition of Canadian literature.’ MacLennan made this observation in the foreword to his first published novel, *Barometer Rising* (1941), and we can now see that, if Grove is the first important Canadian novelist, MacLennan became the first to articulate a Canadian tradition in fictional terms, to create it by prodding his readers into becoming aware of themselves and of their country. (133-34)

The historian Jonathan Vance says that “*Generals Die in Bed* has become a staple of undergraduate, and indeed history, courses” (35), but I have found little evidence to support this claim. W. J. Keith’s claim that it is “little-known” is supported by the paucity of criticism on it; the only entry on *Generals* listed in the MLA International Bibliography is Eric Thompson’s “Canadian Fiction of the Great War.”

2. "The most interesting aspect of Harrison's novel," says Eric Thompson, "is its resemblance to Remarque's book" (87).
3. A. J. M. Smith, *Towards a View of Canadian Letters: Selected Critical Essays 1928-71* (Vancouver: Univ. of British Columbia Press, 1971).
4. For a discussion of the contemporary reception of WWI novels, including *Generals Die in Bed*, see Jonathan F. Vance, "The Soldier as Novelist" in *Canadian Literature: A Quarterly of Criticism and Review*. Also relevant is Modris Ekstein's discussion of the contemporary response to Eric Marie Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* in *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Toronto: Lester and Orpen Dennys, 1989), pp. 175-99.
5. According to military historian Gordon Corrigan, "over 200 British generals were killed, wounded or captured" in WWI (10); the indisputable literary merit of *Generals Die in Bed* is in no way diminished by the factual inaccuracy of its brilliant title.

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