

TWO COMMENTARIES BY W. D. EHRHART

Paul Fussell: A Remembrance

Not surprisingly, virtually every publication in the English-speaking world from the *New York Times* and Britain's *The Guardian* to the *Scranton Times Tribune* and the *Kennebec Journal* took note of the recent death of Paul Fussell. Beginning with the 1975 publication of his landmark study *The Great War and Modern Memory*, which earned him both the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award, he rapidly became a towering figure on the cultural landscape of modern American life.

One need only head for the computer and search for "Paul Fussell obituaries" to see the magnitude of his influence and to read about the particulars of his life from his privileged upbringing as the son of a prominent lawyer to his near-fatal wounding in Europe during World War II to his career as scholar, professor, and social critic. Most of the obituaries describe him as grouchy, curmudgeonly, caustic, or acerbic. He himself attributed his attitude to his experiences in the war, which left him permanently, in his own words, "a pissed-off infantryman."

My first encounter with Fussell—or, more accurately, with Fussell's writing—came in the fall of 1970, during my second year of college, before he had become famous. I was taking a course with the poet Daniel Hoffman in which the assigned text was Fussell's *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*, a book which was then rapidly on its way to becoming for the writing of poetry what William Strunk and E. B. White's *The Elements of Style* became for the writing of prose. Forty-two years later,

I still have that copy of *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*, heavily underlined, annotated, dog-eared, and always close at hand.

I don't remember when I first began to hear about *The Great War and Modern Memory*, but I kept hearing and seeing deferential references to it for years before I finally got around to reading it. Long before I had finished it, however, I found myself berating myself for not having read it sooner. Aside from the sheer brilliance of the thinking and writing Fussell demonstrates, his analysis of Robert Graves's memoir *Goodbye to All That* lifted from my shoulders a powerful burden of guilt I had been carrying regarding my own memoir of the Vietnam War. How accurate does memoir have to be? Fussell's answer: memory is fallible, but the truth is not; tell the truth.

Well, I may be slow, but I learn from my mistakes, so when Fussell published his 1989 study of World War II, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War*, I read it immediately. Iconoclastic and irreverent, *Wartime* destroys all pretense that World War II was a good war, let alone "the Good War," and for his audacity and cheek, Fussell took no small amount of guff from the owners of the oxen he had gored.

For me personally, however, the book had a profound impact. It taught me that while there are significant differences between the war I fought and the war he fought, what we share is much greater than what separates us.

But that does not convey what I mean. I had grown up in the shadow of World War II, that great crusade my father's generation had so bravely fought and so decisively won, only to find myself adrift in the ricefields and moral aimlessness of the war in Vietnam, and finally forever diminished by it. Worse still, the generation of the Second World War implicitly—and sometimes explicitly—told us soldiers of the Vietnam War that the My Lai Massacre, and the years of nightmares and cold sweats, and all the other baggage we brought home from Asia were only reflections of our own weaknesses of character, our own failures of will.

Now, for the first time in my life, someone of the generation Tom Brokaw would later call "the Greatest Generation" (a label Fussell, incidentally, ridiculed) was telling me, "No, kid, it's not you. It isn't your fault. This is what war is. This is what war does. What happened to you is what happened to us." It was as if a conspiracy of silence had finally been broken. *Wartime* changed my entire way of thinking about war, my entire way of looking at generational differences and at the generation that raised me and my generation. That is what I mean when I talk about the profound impact Fussell's book had on me.

Only a few times in my life has something I have read crucially and immediately changed my way of thinking about something important to me, and all but one of those times has been occasioned by Fussell (the other was a chapter in Paul Lyons's 1994 book *Class of '66*). A prime example is his essay "Thank God for the Atom Bomb," which forced me to reverse long-held beliefs I had had about the dropping of the atomic bomb on Nagasaki.

It was about this time that I first met Fussell, who was then teaching at the University of Pennsylvania, at a gathering of authors at Robin's Bookstore in Philadelphia (now Moonstone Arts Center). He subsequently read several of my memoirs, and wrote me a most generous letter that launched a friendship I felt—and still feel—honored to have shared. Adding another layer of delight to the relationship, his second wife, Harriette Behringer, became a great fan of Svityanya, the women's Eastern European vocal ensemble my wife and daughter helped found, even hiring the group to sing at Paul's 80th birthday party.

Fussell was a curious combination of political and social progressiveness coupled with arch cultural conservatism. He was scathingly critical of cant, hypocrisy, greed, stupidity, and the Powers That Be (be they in academia or business or politics). As he wrote in *Doing Battle: The Making of a Skeptic*, "I came to see the similarity between *infantrymen* and *labor*, and to develop some social-justice convictions quite at odds with my upbringing." But he demanded that all things artistic pay visible homage to tradition.

A great advocate of the likes of Siegfried Sassoon and Isaac Rosenberg from the Great War, of Lincoln Kirsten and Keith Douglas from World War II, he made no secret of his low opinion of Vietnam War poetry. "But Bill," he once told me with genuine exasperation, "You can't *scan* it!" He included only three poems from the Vietnam War in his massive *Norton Anthology of Modern War*, one of which was written by the World War II veteran Hayden Carruth.

I could live with that, however, because most of what he thought and said and wrote was so spot-on that it took your breath away. Or at least it did mine. In his books, you will find page after page of what I mean. Here are a few samples:

From *Class: A Guide through the American Status System*: "To achieve even greater ugliness, the prole will sometimes wear his cap back to front. This places the strap in full view transecting the wearer's forehead, as if pride in the one-size-fits-all gadget were motivating him to display the cap's 'technology' and his own command of it."

From *Uniforms: Why We Are What We Wear*: "Comprehensive as the re-enactors' ambitions to achieve absolute authenticity are, they neglect certain details, like the

writhing of the wounded, their attempts to thrust back into their abdomens their protruding intestines, and their weeping and calling on Mother.”

From *Thank God for the Atom Bomb and Other Essays*: “If around division headquarters some of the people [J. Glenn] Gray talked to felt ashamed [of the U.S. use of atomic bombs], down in the rifle companies no one did, despite Gray’s assertions.”

From *Wartime*: “In war it is not just the weak soldiers, or the sensitive ones, or the highly imaginative or cowardly ones, who will break down. Inevitably, all will break down if in combat long enough.”

From *The Boys’ Crusade: The American Infantry in Northwestern Europe, 1944-1945*: “While drawing up tables of organization and elementary guides to tactics, [higher echelons] appear to have neglected a sufficient study of actual human behavior.”

From *Doing Battle*: “How could I help equating the college administration [where Fussell was teaching] with the military staff I’d been hating for years? Both seemed to me to consist of parasites, sequestered safely in offices and orderly rooms while others performed the real strenuous work in the field.”

While Fussell wrote on a wide variety of subjects over his long life—ranging from Augustan humanism, Samuel Johnson, and Kingsley Amis to the 2nd Amendment, the Indianapolis 500, and travel in between-the-wars Europe—war, the irony of war, the suffering and lunacy and permanent damage of war, the unfairness of war, lay at the heart of his writing and of his being. He never outgrew the 20-year-old infantry officer lying badly wounded next to his dead platoon sergeant.

The last few times I saw Paul, he was looking very old indeed, and he walked with a visible limp that had not been there when I’d first met him. The limp was the result of his encounter with German artillery those long years ago, Harriette told me, but age had exacerbated the pain and made him less able to ignore it. He never mentioned it himself, of course, which was no surprise, given that he had once written, “Even the coarsest conception of honor requires that when hurt, one keep it to oneself.”

It had been several years since I’d heard from either of them, so it came as a surprise when I saw that he had died in Oregon, where he and Harriette had been living for the past several years. I was even a little hurt that they had not let me know they were moving. But then Dan Hoffman, the man who had first introduced me to Paul’s writing and who had been a much closer friend than I had been, told me that the news of Paul’s whereabouts in his last years had come as a surprise to him, too. Paul and Harriette seem to have kept the move largely to themselves and their immediate family.

I'll never know, of course, but I suspect that as Paul's health deteriorated, he chose to remove himself quietly from public life and others' sympathy, even that of his friends, living out his belief about "even the coarsest conception of honor." As with his assessment of Vietnam War poetry, I'm not sure I agree with him about what honor requires. My own experience has taught me that hiding the hurt can often do more damage than the initial hurt itself, and I wonder if he would have been so grouchy, curmudgeonly, caustic, or acerbic if he had confronted earlier in his life the hurt his war had done him.

On the other hand, if he had done so, perhaps we would not now have the wonderful, diverse, often hilarious, often profound, always provocative body of work that Fussell leaves behind. I, for one, am grateful to have known him, and even more grateful for the body of work that has so enriched my life. The world is a livelier place for his having been here, and an emptier place for his absence.

The Pity of War Poetry

I was very familiar with Wilfred Owen's poetry while I was still in high school. I even had—and still do—a book of his, *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen* (New Directions, 1963) edited by C. Day Lewis and with an essay by Edmund Blunden. I was much enamored of Owen, finding him heroic, tragic, magnetic. Even his death, a week short of the armistice, was romantic to a starry-eyed schoolboy.

But knowledge without experience is at best an empty thing, at worst a disaster. I read Owen's poems, but I didn't begin to understand what he was trying to tell me. Instead, imagining that I might become the Wilfred Owen of my own war (while avoiding death, of course), I enlisted in the United States Marine Corps when I was just seventeen. And by the time I was able to connect experience with knowledge, it was too late.

By the grace of chance, I survived my war, and in an odd way I have indeed become a Wilfred Owen of sorts, a chronicler in verse of the war I fought. But I often wonder, when people—especially young people—read my poetry, do they understand what I am trying to say any better than I understood Owen when I was young? Sadly, I don't imagine they do.

Indeed, years ago, when I was still in college after I'd come back from my war, I wrote a poem called "Imagine." In a 1988 edition of Owen's selected poetry and prose, an Owen scholar took umbrage with my poem, thinking that I was somehow reducing Owen's poetry to "a stereotype in the public's response to war," but my poem is only trying to express this terrible gulf between those who have known war and those who have not, the gulf between knowledge and experience. Owen, I think, would have understood my poem, "Imagine":

The conversation turned to Vietnam.
He'd been there, and they asked him
what it had been like:
had he been in battle?
Had he been afraid?

Patiently he tried to answer

questions he had tried to answer
many times before.

They listened, and they strained
to visualize the words:
newsreels and photographs, books
and Wilfred Owen tumbled
through their minds.
Pulses quickened.

They didn't notice, as he talked,
his eyes, as he talked,
his eyes begin to focus
through the wall, at nothing,
or at something inside.

When he finished speaking,
someone asked him:
had he ever killed?

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