

# What the Soldier Said: Silence, (Bad) Language and the Great War

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A few weeks after the Great War began, on 2 September 1914, a secret meeting of distinguished authors was convened in London, at Wellington House. Twenty-five of the period's leading writers attended, including J. M. Barrie, Arnold Bennett, G. K. Chesterton, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, John Galsworthy, Thomas Hardy, John Masefield, H. G. Wells, and the Poet Laureate, Robert Bridges. Rudyard Kipling sent apologies, but—like several other absentees, including John Buchan, Hugh Walpole and Ian Hay—he soon became involved in the issues discussed. These concerned the dissemination and popularisation of war ideals: Wellington House was the base of Britain's War Propaganda Bureau. Headed by the cabinet minister and former literary editor C. F. G. Masterman, it was soon employing the authors named in producing small books or pamphlets supporting the British cause. To minimise evidence of government involvement, these were usually placed discreetly with established publishers, such as Oxford University Press, with a fee paid to the author concerned and an additional contribution made to cover the costs of production and distribution.

Some of the books produced—such as Ford Madox Ford's detailed study of German education and culture, *When Blood is their Argument* (1915)—seem unlikely to have had a significant effect on popular opinion. Others, though, were altogether more readable and potentially influential. In *Over There: War Scenes on the Western Front* (1915), for example, Arnold Bennett offered an engaging, optimistic account of the conflict in France—almost a travelogue—despite being deeply disturbed even by the limited view of the trenches that the authorities had allowed him. A leading literary figure before the Great War, Bennett went on to develop an important role as a propagandist, writing more than four hundred articles about the war and finding himself briefly in charge of propaganda

operations towards its end. These operations had steadily expanded in scale and influence throughout the conflict.

Thomas Hardy was later to remark that 2 September 1914 was a day of “yellow sun shining (...) in a melancholy manner I shall never forget” (Waller 932). The authors’ meeting that late summer afternoon deserves not to be forgotten: it marked both a zenith and yet also a nadir in literary history. In one way, the government’s haste to employ authors highlighted the importance and the central role in public awareness still enjoyed by literature at the time. Probably never before, and certainly never since—as more and more new media have eroded the cultural centrality of the written word—has it seemed so essential to co-opt so many leading writers into disseminating the views of the state. Yet probably never before, or since, have so many authors so readily discarded or suppressed their freedom and autonomy of vision. In that way, the Wellington House meeting initiated a form of melancholy lasting throughout the Great War and beyond, invalidating readers’ natural expectation that literature can be relied upon to provide an unfettered, unbiased vision of the world as authors see it.

This melancholy situation extended into other forms of publication and written communication, as reporting of the Battle of the Somme, in 1916, vividly exemplifies. Even after war correspondents had been allowed to send reports from the Front, after mid-1915, these remained so firmly controlled by military censors that newspapers were hardly more reliable than when they had depended exclusively on information supplied by the Admiralty and the War Office. On Saturday, 1 July 1916, during the first few hours of the Battle of the Somme, the British Army endured the most disastrous morning in its history: around 20,000 soldiers were killed, and there were nearly 60,000 casualties overall. Yet the following Monday, the *Times* reported “a good beginning”, adding that “our casualties have not been heavy” and that “everything has gone well”—also recording the view of the British commander, Sir Douglas Haig, that “the general situation was favourable” (3 July, 8, 9, 10). As the former *Guardian* journalist C. E. Montague recorded in his war memoir, *Disenchantment* (1922), men who had lived through the Somme campaign read newspaper reports of it “open-mouthed (...) the fighting soldier gave the Press up” (98). Another former soldier, Eric Partridge, later concluded that official language—

riddled with the mendacities of Press and propaganda—had become “callously, cynically, mockingly, or desperately and sadistically debased” during the war (34).

Fighting soldiers had little opportunity to resist this debasement. By 1917, eight million items of army mail were being sent to and from the Western Front every week, but with little scope for soldiers to describe truthfully, in their letters, the conditions they experienced there. Soldiers in Fredric Manning’s novel *The Middle Parts of Fortune* (1929/1977) indicate the constraints involved when discussing how to write home:

‘I’m not writin’ any bloody lies’, said Madeley, ‘I’m tellin’ ’em I’m in the pink, an’ so I am.’ (...)  
 ‘Nothin’ but the bloody truth, eh? “Dear Mother, by the time you get this I’ll be dead.’  
 ‘If you do write the truth they rub it out in th’ orderly-room’, said Martlow; ‘so you might just as well write cheerful. Me mother told me the first letters I sent ’ome was all rubbed out wi’ indelible pencil, so as she couldn’t read anythin’, ’cept that it were rainin’.’ (192-93)

Naturally enough, another soldier concludes that “writin’ all manner o’ bloody lies” to those at home is the only option military discipline allows.

Faced with constraints on letter-writing, the Press, and the literary sphere, soldiers might have been expected to rely on what must have seemed the only option still open to them: reportage directly, in their own voice. This option did offer substantial and various potentials, further discussed below, but even these were seldom straightforwardly realised. Soldiers naturally avoided descriptions of the Front which were only too likely to “give them the horrors” at home (188), as R. H. Mottram’s central figure records in *The Spanish Farm Trilogy* (1927). Even when they did attempt a full and true description, it was quite likely to fall on deaf ears. Because “civvies (...)/ (...) read the war news”, George Willis complains in his poem “To my Mate”, “they think you daft, or shell-shocked, if you speak what ain’t a lie” (Noakes 362). In the war volumes of his epic novel *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* (1951-69) Henry Williamson’s hero likewise finds that even when he can bear to describe trench experiences, while on leave, these count for nothing, as his father simply accuses him of pretending to know better than the newspapers.

The Home Front was evidently not inclined to “give the Press up”. On the contrary, as Robert Graves recalled in *Goodbye to All That* (1929), “civilians talked a foreign language; and it was newspaper language” (188). Finding home so foreign, in this way, left soldiers in a condition of perplexing epistemic isolation; experiencing a cognitive gap—between home and abroad, civilian and military—as deep as any in British history. Many shared, as a result, feelings of belonging to a separate, excluded community, and able to communicate only within it, much as Wilfred Owen suggests in “Smile, Smile, Smile” (1918). Wounded soldiers, reading “Yesterday’s *Mail*”, are described smiling “at one another curiously”—knowingly—“like secret men who know their secret safe” (1: 190). By 1918, the poem suggests, the nature of the war had become a secret fully shared only by those who had been involved directly, and almost incommunicable to those who had not. “The great silence” was the phrase newspapers coined to describe moments on the first Armistice Day, 11 November 1919, when the nation halted for two minutes of “reverent remembrance”, suddenly strangely stilling the rattle and roar of Britain’s streets. Yet the phrase has been applied, equally aptly, more generally: to cultural conditions in the years immediately following the war, when returning soldiers rarely seemed to find means, or outlets, or a language, to communicate to an uncomprehending wider public the overwhelming events they had experienced.

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Yet within a few years of the Armistice, it became apparent that although—or perhaps because—soldiers had been so excluded by official forms of discourse, they had developed all the more vigorously a language of their own: not exactly a secret one, but esoteric or often partly foreign itself. Long-sustained policing of the British Empire, in India most extensively, had led the Regular Army to incorporate into daily use numerous foreign terms, including many—such as “blighty”, “cushy” or “dekko”—from Urdu or Hindi. Recent service in France and Belgium had equally strong effects, army slang quickly transforming French terms such as “il n’y a plus” into “na pooh”, or place-names such as Ypres into “Wipers”. Experience not only of foreign locations and languages, but of the weird, unusual or foreign nature of war and military service further encouraged the invention of slang and non-standard items of vocabulary. When these were collected

by John Brophy and Eric Partridge, their glossary extended to more than fifteen hundred entries.

For others interested in army language, its copious inventiveness represented more than just the wit and verbal ingenuity of soldiers. In “What the Soldier Said: Collecting the Slang of the Great War” (1922) the journalist Wilfred Whitten suggested that the imagination involved seemed both inexhaustible and even to an extent redemptive, reconfiguring alien, shocking experience in familiar or more congenial terms. As Whitten notes, for example, a powerful, murkily-exploding shell was generally known as a “Jack Johnson”, named after a black boxer famous at the time, while a less menacing one was cheerfully dismissed as a “pip-squeak”. Slang of this kind, Whitten suggests, demonstrates “an instinct of self-protection against the terrible assaults of reality” and “the amazing powers of adaptation which the human mind can summon to the breach of all ordinary habit, outlook and experience”. Such wit and linguistic inventiveness, he concludes, seek somehow to suppress a “sense of the unutterable” (480).

By the end of the 1920s, the nature of the war’s “terrible assaults on reality”, and on the lives of ordinary soldiers, had become more often and more vividly a subject of published literature. The great silence of the immediately post-war years was replaced—quite suddenly, critics have often suggested—by what seemed a hubbub of memoirs, novels and poetry by former combatants. The vividness of the experience this new writing presented—and its distance from what had regularly been communicated by official discourse—was often highlighted by emphases on soldiers’ own speech, language and slang. Manning’s central figure in *The Middle Parts of Fortune* extends his scepticism of “all the solemn empty phrases” in the newspapers into a conviction that written forms in general may offer only “dead words there on the paper (...) graven rigid symbols [which] could never again kindle with the movement and persuasion of (...) living voice” (42, 117). The novel’s own tactics reflect this conclusion. Throughout *The Middle Parts of Fortune*—typically in the passage quoted earlier—copious inverted commas and slangy terms such as “in the pink” (used ubiquitously during the Great War) meticulously reproduce the idiosyncrasy and subversive vitality of soldiers’ dialogue.

Similar reproductions of soldierly speech figure can be found in poems by Wilfred Owen—such as “The Chances”, “The Letter” and

“À Terre” —and in Siegfried Sassoon’s “Died of Wounds” and “In the Pin”. They work to particular effect in some of Edmund Blunden’s poetry. “Vlamertinghe: Passing the Chateau” begins with references to Keats and descriptions of a flowery pastoral prospect of “Bold great daisies, golden lights, / Bubbling roses, pinks and whites”. Yet this florid rhetoric is soon brought up short by the colloquial interjection “But if you ask me, mate ...” and the suggestion that flowers closer to the colour of blood would be more appropriate to the fate of the soldiers marching by (152). Contrasts between official or conventional rhetoric and the language of ordinary soldiers are further explored in “Trench Nomenclature”, in terms familiar from Whitten’s “What the Soldier Said”. “Trench Nomenclature” praises the affirmative, inventive “name on name” soldiers find even for sodden, lethal sections of the Front – designating an inadequate earthwork as “*The Great Wall of China*”, and another area as “*Picturedome*”, though it offers a prospect only of “greyed corpses and morass”. Like Whitten, Blunden finds in these “sharp Shakespearean names” a “genius” which “could compress / in a title what man’s humour said to man’s supreme distress” (173).

In these works and others, “what the soldier said” emerged from the great silencing of earlier years and could be heard clearly, widely and powerfully in literature by 1930. Yet it was never heard in its entirety. Other silencings remained, then and since. David Jones indicated their nature in introducing his Great War epic *In Parenthesis* (1937), noting that its composition had been “hampered by the convention of not using impious and impolite words”—a thoroughly misleading one,

because the whole shape of our discourse was conditioned by the use of such words. The very repetition of them made them seem liturgical (...) [and] gave a kind of significance, and even at moments a dignity, to our speech (...) [which] reached real poetry (...).

I say more: the ‘Bugger! Bugger! Of a man detailed had about it the ‘Fiat! Fiat!’ of the Saints. (xii)

The exclusion Jones identifies widely troubled Great War authors. In *Under Fire* (*Le Feu*, 1916), Henri Barbusse relies heavily on dialogue, like Frederic Manning, but one of his characters raises a problem with its presentation when he asks the narrator about his attitude to “swearwords

(...) something that the printers won't much like to print". If these are omitted, the soldier continues, the picture offered of soldiers' lives "won't be very accurate; it's like you wanted to paint them and didn't put in one of the most glaring colours". The narrator reassures him that he will "put the swearwords in, because it's the truth" (155)—a promise largely maintained in *Under Fire*, though swearing is employed sparingly enough not to have deterred publishers, or the reading public, perhaps because the novel first appeared in a literary journal.

Other authors were less fortunate. Before Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) could be accepted for publication, its language had to be emasculated, in the view of its author, by editorial elimination of obscenities. Hemingway's compatriot John Dos Passos was likewise exasperated that "the printer refused to print the swearwords" (34) he had intended to appear in *One Man's Initiation* (1920)—an omission particularly irritating to an author fascinated enough by the vernacular to have claimed later that "U.S.A. is the speech of the people" (*U.S.A.* 7). Frederic Manning's commitment to "living voice" entailed inclusion of "all the fuckin' patter" (38), but this ensured that *The Middle Parts of Fortune* was confined to a limited edition, privately circulated in 1929, with the author named only as "Private 19022", Manning's army number. An expurgated but still pseudonymous version, *Her Privates We*—surely a raunchier Shakespearean title—followed in 1930, but it was not until 1977 that an unexpurgated text of *The Middle Parts of Fortune* became generally available. John Brophy and Eric Partridge were comparably constrained in documenting army songs and slang, omitting obscenities from their huge list of terms when it was first published in 1931. Even when their work was re-issued in the supposedly-liberated mid-1960s—and although acknowledging that "custom and opinion have changed"—they still chose to omit many obscenities, though intriguingly permitting "arse, balls, ballocks, piss and shit" (21).

Restraint, editorial intervention, or censorship of this kind leaves an odd lacuna in Great War literature. As David Jones recalled, and Robert Graves confirmed in 1929, "in trench-warfare (...) swearing had become universal" (45). Yet this locutionary dimension—known to have been in universal use, and often directly discussed by authors concerned—remains almost entirely missing from their texts. In Ernest Raymond's popular,

patriotic novel *Tell England* (1922), the padre is ready to acknowledge that swearing corresponds to “the rock-bottom level on which we are fighting this war”, and should not be condemned by anyone “who hasn’t foundered in mud under shell-fire” (190-91). In “Apologia Pro Poemate Meo”, Wilfred Owen finds “much beauty / In the hoarse oaths that kept our courage straight” (1: 124). Yet this “beauty” or “rock bottom level” is at most only indirectly available to later readers, unless through unpublished recollections and memoirs. One of these, by Sidney Myers, suggests how Great War literature *might* have read, had it been published in a different moral climate. Myers recalls of the end of the Great War, on 11 November 1918, that

At 10.40 a.m., Brig. Gen. Maxwell, commanding the 174<sup>th</sup> Brigade (...) rode up to the head of the column and informed the Adjutant that an armistice had been declared to commence at 11 a.m. The news was passed down the column—there were no cheers as might have been expected—almost as though it had been pre-arranged, a mighty shout went up ‘F ... the armistice, where’s our f ... ing breakfast’. (50)

Intriguingly, Myers still found it preferable in 1977 to employ ellipses—even in a typescript not intended for publication in any form—to diminish the force of the “f...” word. The extract nevertheless indicates very clearly the gap between official language and the “truth” of soldierly discourse that had opened up by the end of the Great War.

Divergences between “what the soldier said” and ways it was written down might be seen merely as a consequence—regrettable, misleading, but more or less inevitable—of changing public taste or morals, and the slow relaxation of embargoes on published obscenity. Robert Graves invited a straightforward interpretation of this kind—though with an added sense of frustration—in a little-known volume he published a couple of years before his popular *Goodbye to All That*. In *The Future of Swearing and Improper Language* (1927), Graves suggests that:

some historian of the future will write of the social taboos of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He will postulate the existence of an enormous secret-language of bawdry and an immense oral literature of obscene stories and rhymes known (...) to every man and woman in the country, yet never consigned to writing or openly admitted as existing. (70-1)

In one way, Graves might be considered simply to be exaggerating. Could obscene language have been so thoroughly known, but suppressed, by *every* man and woman in the country? Historical and linguistic study of the 1920s tends to suggest that this might well have been the case—at any rate, more than is usually supposed. Christopher Hilliard’s analysis of a famous court case in 1923, for example, describes a judge’s conviction that an elegantly-attired, genteel-seeming defendant could neither have used nor even known a range of obscene vocabulary—which she had nevertheless, it transpired, vigorously employed in a series of poison-pen letters.

“Historians of the future”—including readers of Great War literature in the twenty-first century—might therefore conclude that soldiers’ hoarse oaths would have been familiar enough to civilians, too, and that only “social taboos” prevented them from sharing this “rock bottom level” of war experience. In one way, this might be seen merely as a loss of authenticity or “truth”—making inaudible a key component of “what the soldier said”, and regrettably diminishing “the movement and persuasion (...) of living voice”. Yet swearing involves more than that, as Graves and many other combatants testified. Significantly, Owen finds that swearing offers not only “much beauty”, but also a resource that “kept our courage straight”. In his Great War memoir, *With a Machine Gun to Cambrai* (1968), George Coppard recalls finding swearwords both a “proper way to talk” and “an unconscious protective shield to keep us from becoming crazy” (47). In *The Future of Swearing*, Graves likewise defines “a definite physiological function” in swearing—a response to what “the nervous system demands” in reaction to “intense bombardments and sudden panics” (44-5). In these views, swearing offers a particularly effective means—much more powerful than colloquial or vernacular language in general—of speaking back against the kind of “supreme distress” Whitten and Blunden identify.

Swearing provides in this way a key instance of Eric Partridge’s conclusion, in his *Essays on Language* (1950), that “behind a war vocabulary there lies a fundamental, complex psychology” (58). Many later studies—linguistic, historical, psychological, or neuroscientific—extend this conclusion, and the others above. In one straightforward way, commentators have often confirmed Owen’s judgement that “much beauty” can be found in oaths; or David Jones’s, that they constitute “real poetry”. Ashley Montagu’s *The Anatomy of Swearing* (1967) finds oaths offering

“an originality, a virtuosity, a musicality, and an eloquence” (3). Steven Pinker’s study of language, *The Stuff of Thought* (2007), likewise envisages that swearing shares “certain affinities with poetry”, demonstrating “the evocativeness of metaphor; the pleasure of alliteration, meter and rhyme” (339, 372). Pinker’s study also analyses swearing as “a coherent neurobiological phenomenon” (336), extending the kind of views Montagu offers of its role in restoring or maintaining “the normal psychophysical equilibrium of the individual” (72). Psychology experiments by Richard Stephens and others have confirmed this restorative function—in one celebrated case, by means of a trial requiring volunteers to submerge their hands for as long as possible in ice-cold water. This indicated that swearing can extend significantly the period in which immersion could be endured, and that it “increased pain tolerance, increased heart rate, and decreased perceived pain”—physiological or “psychophysical” evidence clearly supporting Owen’s views of keeping “courage straight”, or Coppard’s, concerning “unconscious protective shield” (Stephens et al 1056).

Stephens’s account of his findings also refers specifically, like Pinker, to swearing as a “neurobiological phenomenon”, mentioning research that suggests it may “tap into ‘deep and ancient parts of the emotional brain’” (1059). Pinker summarises some of this neuroscientific research, suggesting that swearing depends less on the left hemisphere of the brain—the part most concerned with “propositional speech, in which combinations of words express combinations of ideas according to grammatical rules”—than on the right hemisphere, and on other, deeper, evolutionarily-ancient cerebral structures (334). These include the basal ganglia, the amygdala, and the limbic system—responsible, according to Pinker, for strong emotion, primal responses of mortal fear or rage, and sometimes for their expression in screams and cries. Neuroscience, in this way, conceptualises swearing as an inexpungable, unavoidable, rock-bottom level of response to “supreme distress”, and one potentially restorative or ameliorative in its effects. The Great War’s “hoarse oaths” might therefore be understood not as merely bad or delinquent language, but as a kind of internal armament, or armour—an essential part of soldiers’ “self-protection against the terrible assaults of reality”. Omitting this component of “what the soldier said” from written accounts of the war is almost as misleading as suggesting that the soldiers fought without helmets, rifles, or uniforms.

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Robert Graves introduces other factors affecting the role of “hoarse oaths”—and the balance of language and silence generally, during and after the Great War—when *The Future of Swearing* describes a particular response to the documentary film, *The Battle of the Somme*. Released in August 1916, *The Battle of the Somme* included genuine footage of the army’s work in France alongside staged scenes, set up with the help and approval of British propaganda. None of this material, of course—in a silent, black-and-white film—could communicate the kind of “colour” Barbusse’s soldier feared might be missing from accounts of the war. “Living voice” may survive, tenuously, in literature, but it is generally still harder to recover from the many documentary films of the Great War—their grainy, flickering, soundless qualities if anything encouraging later generations to envisage the conflict as interred, remotely, in a very different age.

For civilians at the time, *The Battle of the Somme* nevertheless made the war seem anything but distant. Many of its early audiences were deeply disturbed by what they saw on the screen. Debates ensued, in the letter pages of *The Times*, about the propriety of making into public spectacle the kind of scenes the film included—even though these had mostly been carefully constructed to mitigate the full impact of the conflict. Yet there were also *Times* correspondents who enthusiastically supported the film, one of them explaining that it contributed more to his “realization of what war is” than “all the (...) books [he] had read” (2 Sept 1916, 3). The film’s huge popularity seemed to confirm this view. Shown throughout Britain in the latter months of 1916, in church and village halls as well as established cinemas, it may have attracted as many as twenty million spectators—nearly 50% of the country’s entire population at that time. Its success indicated another kind of silencing, or side-lining, of the written word, or even words in general. Never again would literary authors—rather than film-makers and experts in visual media—appeal to governments as the most promising and influential creators of propaganda.

In *The Future of Swearing*, Graves identifies a very particular audience response to *The Battle of the Somme*—one strangely enabled almost to recover “living voice” after all. His “historian of the future” speculates that “a party of deaf and dumb children were taken to a silent

film called “The Somme” and had to be taken away because of the ‘bad language’ on the screen” (88). Graves uses this episode simply to highlight the lacuna described above, noting that— “beyond an occasional *damn* or *bloody*”— “not a trace” of the kind of bad language that could be lip-read on the screen “occurs in the ‘realistic’ War poetry published between 1914 and 1918” (88). Yet the episode he describes is also emblematic of more general concerns about the language and literature of the Great War. This wider, symbolic significance accrues from the suggestion that the audience members most in touch with the true, full range of soldierly discourse and experience—most able to “read” what they saw—were also, ironically, those least able to speak of what they knew.

Constraints of this kind can be seen as typical of experiences of the Great War—primarily, of frustrated attempts to communicate its true nature to the civilian population, but also of difficulties soldiers encountered even in trying to describe and assimilate events for themselves. Combatants’ memoirs and diaries often highlight these problems. “The most practised pen cannot convey a real notion of life at the Front, as the words to describe war do not exist” (12) remarked Vernon Bartlett, later a journalist and politician, in *Mud and Khaki* (1917). “A bombardment is beyond my description”, Private Len Smith’s journal records—beyond the resources even of the most “clever writing” (np). “I can write nothing”, Ford Madox Ford explains in his essay “A Day of Battle: Arms and the Mind” (1916), finding himself unable “to evoke pictures of the Somme (...) as for putting them—into words! No: the mind stops dead and something in the brain stops and shuts down” (456). One of Barbusse’s soldiers in *Under Fire* likewise remarks that “when you talk about the war (...) it’s as though you didn’t say anything. It stifles words. We are here, looking at this, like blind men” (303).

As these comments suggest—Ford’s and Barbusse’s especially—the challenges of communicating war experience may have been primarily linguistic, or perceptual, but they were severe enough sometimes almost to resemble the kind of physical disability endured by the deaf-mute children Graves describes, or to be represented in comparable terms. In several 1920s novels, this “sense of the unutterable”, or of stifled words, extends into forms of dumbness, literal or metaphoric. In Ford Madox Ford’s *Parade’s End* tetralogy (1924-8), the hero’s brother is rendered

permanently speechless after the Armistice. The central character in Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* (1922) is figured mostly through silence and vacancy, and the human voice is similarly stifled, or just absent, in the darkling middle section of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Among later novelists writing about the Great War, Pat Barker describes in *Regeneration* (1991) the pioneer psychologist W. H. R. Rivers treating a soldier traumatised into dumbness by events in the trenches. Experiences at the Front likewise leave Sebastian Faulks's protagonist in *Birdsong* (1993) unable to speak for two years.

Psychoanalysis developed rapidly, during and after the Great War, in response to the need to treat traumatised ex-servicemen, and its practitioners soon recognised silencing and dumbness as among major symptoms they had to deal with. Published by Sándor Ferenczi, Ernest Jones and others in 1921, with an Introduction by Sigmund Freud, *Psychoanalysis and the War Neuroses* describes how frequently “attacks (...) associated with mutism” figured among ailments associated with what was still generally known as “shell-shock” (39). The extent of their contemporary appearance suggests another interpretation of the “great silence” that followed the war. A generation of ex-servicemen, noted for its reluctance to speak of their experiences in the Great War, may have been silenced not only by a “debased” official language, or uncomprehending civilians, but by forms of the traumatised “mutism” psychoanalysis identified.

Or they may have encountered the kind of fundamental incongruity which Ford, Barbusse and others indicate between words and war—an inappropriateness, in containing certain experiences within the formal order of conventional language, which Paul Fussell analyses in his definitive study, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975). Discussing the dubious effectiveness in describing the war of “rhetoric” and literary devices such as “assonance, alliteration, allusion”, Fussell wonders if events might be “deformed” even by “sentence structures and connectives implying clear causality”. He goes on to question whether there is “any way of compromising between the reader's expectations that written history ought to be interesting and meaningful and the cruel fact that much of what happens—all of what happens?—is inherently without ‘meaning’” (172). In this view, the experience of the Great War may have overwhelmed, or

eluded altogether, the kind of “propositional speech” which Steven Pinker describes tidily operating “according to grammatical rules”.

The inappropriateness or inadequacy of this form of language, with its tidy rules, might further explain the conclusion Melissa Mohr mentions in her history of bad language, *Holy Sh\*t* (2013), that

during and after World War I and World War II, people began to swear *more* than they had in the past. The particular horrors of these wars—the constant threat of death by poison gas and machine guns, trench warfare, incendiary bombing—led to feelings of rage and helplessness that needed an outlet in frequent swearing. (227)

Such feelings might also be reflected in the lexical inversions described by Hemingway’s narrator in *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). In response to mendacious propaganda and grandiose government proclamations, he reflects that “the things that were glorious had no glory (...) there were many words that you could not stand to hear (...) abstract words such as glory, honour, courage or hallow were obscene” (165). For Hemingway, it is debased official discourse, and not ordinary swearing, which is obscene, with the words omitted in the editorial emasculation of *A Farewell to Arms* an essential but excluded corrective. The growing allure of swearing might likewise correspond to an intuition—perhaps shared, as Graves suggests, among the whole population—that the conventionally polite or “official” language of “propositional speech” is unable, alone, to encompass the overwhelmingly violent twentieth-century history that Mohr summarises. Not unlike some of the aphasics who intrigue neuroscience—ones for whom damaged left cerebral hemispheres have disturbed almost all speech *except* oaths—generations since the Great War may have been shocked by their historical experience into increasing reliance on the residual, “rock-bottom” potentials of obscenity. Only the addition of more primal, compensating, re-equilibrating speech-forms—full of rage and vehemence; employing fully the linguistic resources of *both* cerebral hemispheres—might avoid Ford’s fear that in the face of some experiences “the mind stops dead and something in the brain stops and shuts down”.

All of which might lead only to the melancholy conclusion that Great War literature comprehensively omits exactly those words it most needed to employ and extol. Two or three other conclusions—more

affirmative ones!—may nevertheless be available. One of these follows from extending into later literary history the reconfigured understanding of ‘bad’ language outlined above—acknowledging that official discourse during the Great War was on the whole more damaging and culpable than anything soldiers said. Paul Fussell talks of a long-enduring “devaluation (...) even of language itself” (316) following from the mendacities practised by this official discourse and by contemporary Press and propaganda generally. Scepticism of “language itself” was certainly evident in the modernist literature developing alongside war writing during the 1920s—written by a younger generation of authors often hostile to literary figures, such as Arnold Bennett, who had flocked to that 1914 meeting in Wellington House. “All the great words (...) were cancelled for her generation (...) great, dynamic words were half dead now” (64), D.H. Lawrence’s heroine concludes in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928). “I fear those big words (...) which make us so unhappy”, Stephen Dedalus remarks in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), taking “glorious”, like Hemingway, as one of his examples (38). “Little words (...) fluttered sideways and struck the object inches too low”, Lily Briscoe reflects in *To the Lighthouse*: “no, she thought, one could say nothing to nobody” (202).

Words—whether big or little—and the conventions of “propositional speech” no longer seemed wholly reliable to these authors. Nor, of course, did swearing offer them much alternative, though Joyce does represent more accurately than any other novelist in the 1920s what soldiers said when one of them, in the “Nighttown” chapter of *Ulysses*, offers to “wring the neck of any fucking bastard says a word against my bleeding fucking king” (694). Each author nevertheless did attempt to represent deeper, more extra-rational or unconscious areas of their characters’ minds—culminating in the dream-language of that “Nighttown” chapter, and in the subsequent “Work in Progress” Joyce eventually published as *Finnegans Wake* (1939). Origins of this key development in modernist writing might be attributed rather more to the disillusioning, linguistically-challenging experience of the Great War than critics have usually allowed.

Another potentially affirmative conclusion relies simply on the freedoms of readers and their perennial powers of imagination. Words omitted from Great War literature can still be putatively reinserted into its pages, or into imaginative reconstruction of the experiences they describe

—following the example of those deaf and dumb children, recovering the true language of soldiers when watching *The Battle of the Somme*. A century after the Great War, the dignity, poetry, or just “straight courage” of soldierly voices can still be partially recovered in this way, along with better understanding of the “terrible assaults of reality” that made hoarse oaths essential to endurance of the daily ordeals of the Front. Recalling soldiers’ most profane and impious words brings readers closer to the “bottom line” on which their war was fought—to an obscene viciousness, perversity and destruction demanding responses in the most obscene language available. It also brings readers closer to the vitality and resilience of soldiers themselves—to their vehement, full-throated response to the military hierarchy, officialdom, and ultimately the whole unutterable experience of the Great War itself. A distant, imagined uproar of swearing offers in these ways an essential addition to what can still be heard of the Great War, confirming that its enormities did not altogether overwhelm or “stifle words”, and that some inherently restorative neurobiological power could be found within “bad” language. Recollection of hoarse oaths offers twenty-first century readers a key addition even to the best of written history and literature in which the Great War is preserved. It encourages them to move beyond the “dead words there on the paper” Frederic Manning described, allowing the imagination still to “kindle with the movement and persuasion of (...) living voice”.

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**ABSTRACT**

The Great War's influences on language and representation are well documented. The effects of censorship and propaganda have been widely discussed; likewise, the inventiveness and vitality of soldiers' own discourses in forms of slang and the vernacular. Understandably, less attention has been paid to the role in this discourse of obscenity and blasphemy—of swearing, generally. Poets and commentators do mention its use, and importance, but swear-words themselves have vanished fairly comprehensively—or been excised—from published texts. This essay uses some of Robert Graves's reflections in the 1920s to discuss this excision, along with its implications for language, silence and authenticity in Great War writing—and in later literature, modernism included.

**KEYWORDS**

Language; representation; swearing; censorship; silence

**RESUMO**

Estão bem documentadas as influências da Grande Guerra na linguagem e na representação. Amplamente têm sido discutidos os efeitos da censura e da propaganda; a capacidade inventiva e a vitalidade dos registos discursivos próprios dos soldados através do calão e de linguagem vernácula. Compreende-se que, no interior destes registos, muito menor atenção tenha sido dedicada ao papel das obscenidades e da blasfémia—dos palavrões, em geral. Nem poetas nem comentadores referem o seu uso, e a sua importância, mas os palavrões em si mesmo desapareceram quase totalmente—ou foram erradicados—de textos publicados. Este texto utiliza algumas das reflexões de Robert Graves, durante a década de 20 do século XX, para discutir tal erradicação, ponderando as implicações que esta realidade terá tido sobre a linguagem, o silêncio e a autenticidade na escrita da Grande Guerra—bem como em literatura posterior, incluindo a literatura modernista.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Linguagem; representação; palavrões; censura; silêncio

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