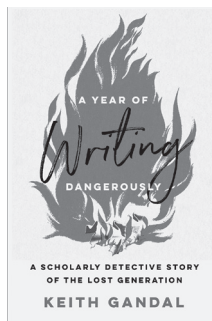
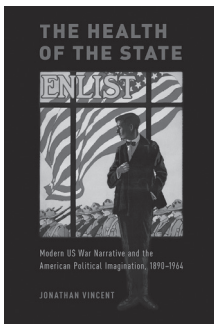


Review Essay

The Health of the Field: American World War I Literary Studies at the Centenary

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THE HEALTH OF THE STATE: Modern US War Narrative and the American Political Imagination, 1890-1964. By Jonathan Vincent. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

WAR ISN'T THE ONLY HELL: A New Reading of American World War I Literature. By Keith Gandal. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018.

AMERICAN POETRY AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR. By Tim Dayton. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Coming towards the end of the World War I centenary, these works arrive at a point when American World War I literary studies may be said to have come

of age. Given the major role the war played in the lives and fiction of America's most significant 20th-century authors, a surprisingly sparse and intermittent series of monographs followed Stanley Cooperman's classic synthesis of the lost generation paradigm in *World War I and the American Novel* (1967). Since the millennium, however, interest gradually has grown in the form of monographs by Patrick Quinn (2001), Jennifer Haytock (2003), Keith Gandal (2008), Mark Whalan (2008), Karsten Piep (2009), Pearl James (2013), Hazel Hutchison (2015), and Kimberly Licursi (2018), as well as in the extensive work done by the area's leading proponent, Steven Trout (most notably in *On The Battlefield of Memory* (2010)).

Accompanying this expansion in scholarly interest has been an equally important rehabilitation of non-canonical World War I writers. Authors such as Thomas Boyd, Ellen La Motte, Mary Borden, Laurence Stallings, Hervey Allen, and Victor Daly are now moving from the status of peripheral curiosities toward the center of this ever-growing conversation. With the Dayton, Gandal, and Vincent studies reviewed here—and *A History of American Literature and Culture of the First World War* (Cambridge University Press) and more book-length studies in the wings—American World War I literary studies has transitioned from a niche interest to a major field. It is heartening to see this rich area now receiving attention commensurate with its vast and still-to-be-determined merits. However, the consolidation of this area—and the increasing scholarly competition taking place within—poses the question of how this field should develop. Though indelibly inscribed on the period, the lost generation notion is thoroughly exploded. Rehabilitation, though incomplete, has surely recovered the most significant forgotten voices. What direction, then, remains open to scholars?

In response to the narrow logic of the lost generation—that Americans were left disillusioned and disgusted by the war—the natural course was to diversify and recover the experiences of smaller constituencies of memory, to look at home front, pro-war, female, African American, and political perspectives, for instance. Alternatively, different hermeneutic constituencies have been proposed, where scholars have argued that the entire corpus of American World War I writing can (or should) be seen in the light of one dominant emotion or type of reaction. The occasional problem with this development is that—sometimes implicitly in the first category, and often explicitly in the latter—textual and historical nuances are either left out or suppressed in order to uphold the parameters of a particular line of reasoning. Selectivity and focus in academic inquiry are inevitable and desirable, but there is always the risk of formulaic rigidity and reductive analysis. Each of the works discussed here negotiates these issues.

The Health of the State: Modern US War Narrative and the American Political Imagination, 1890-1964 provides a long-term discussion of the ways American war-making has advanced liberal capitalist democracy. Discussing a wide range of fiction, from the Civil War to World War II, Vincent argues that in these works “the political solution of war, the liberal ideal's supposed adversary, becomes here its necessary, ascriptive supplement, the constitutive

gel of its hegemony.” *War Isn’t the Only Hell* explores the tensions caused by the meritocratic organization of the US army, which challenged the masculinity of Anglo American combatants and non-combatants. Gandal assesses canonical figures such as Faulkner and Hemingway, but also broadens his scope to include lesser-studied authors like Boyd, Stallings, Daly, and La Motte. Gandal also expands his interest in meritocracy to the African American war experience, which involved discrimination as well as new (slim) chances for advancement, and to American women, for whom the war likewise presented social challenges and opportunities. *American Poetry and the First World War*, meanwhile, provides a historical materialist analysis of the relationship between poetry and America’s economic and political rise “as the hegemonic power of the capitalist world-system” during the war. Dayton discusses several forgotten poets as well as, in discrete chapters: Alan Seeger’s medievalism, Edith Wharton’s culturally deterministic view of war, epic verse, and the poetry of E.E. Cummings—assessing these texts as they accede to or resist America’s emerging identity as the world’s dominant superpower.

Vincent argues that the need to “coordinate public energies in line with US Global expansion” caused Civil War novels from this time—such as Joseph Kirkland’s *The Captain of Company K* (1891) and Ellen Glasgow’s *The Battle-Ground* (1902)—to promote ideals “of cooperation and incorporation ... attributable only to the power of that era’s political imagination.” Moving to the years of World War I, Vincent describes novels from this period—by the likes of Mary Raymond Shipman Andrews and Gertrude Atherton—“[a]dapting further the emphasis on transpersonality in turn-of-the-century Civil War fiction,” by promoting “a mystical culture of sacrifice, fantasies of spiritual rebirth through self-surrender drawn from older Christian ontologies.”

The homogeneous, unified inclusivity Vincent identifies in the Progressive Era, while valid for a time, could not be sustained into the “diverse, more sophisticated culture that outlived it.” For Vincent, some post-war texts still worked in an inclusivist vein. John Thomason’s *Fix Bayonets* (1925), for instance, he views as sustaining “reverence for ... preparedness sensibilities,” while he credits Jessie Redmon Fauset’s *There is Confusion* (1924) with seeking to advance the standing of the black community through “accommodationist metaphors.” Vincent, however, also attempts to incorporate dissenting voices into his vision of evolving liberal capitalism. These critical, disillusioned texts “helped sort out and stabilize the panoply of competing social visions confronting architects of a modernizing state, a continuation, rather than a renunciation of the more general, overarching desire for social cohesion and predictability.”

Vincent’s postulation of “competing social visions” relies almost exclusively on snippets quoted from David Harvey’s *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989), and here his argument becomes less convincing. Throughout, Vincent, whose background is in critical social theory and political philosophy, employs a dense prose style abounding in abstract terminology that—though always admissible—would perhaps be better exchanged for a clearer, more-developed

analysis. Stylistics aside, since both dissenting and complicit voices apparently count towards the same end, one wonders if any text *would not* buttress the evolution of liberal capitalism under Vincent's schema?

Moreover, because Vincent is painting with very broad brushstrokes, he does overlook the nuances in some of the works he draws on. For instance, he argues that Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928) repudiates "national absorption," though at the same time promotes a kind of "racial essentialism" through the display of an individualism which reinforces the status quo. Though, in fact, McKay's book consistently argues for the unique character of individual African Americans. "We may all be niggers aw'right," observes the main character, Jake Brown, "but we ain't nonetall all the same."

For Vincent, E.E. Cummings's *The Enormous Room* (1922) and Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) display a "suspicion of society." Their focus on "processes of self-reinvention, rather than modes to address state power," amount to a "political refusal" which "inaugurated and substantiated the identity structure most amenable to 'corporatist pluralism.'" However, as Alex Vernon has noted, Hemingway's novel is invested in "the class unrest that manifested in much of Europe's attraction to socialism and communism," at a time where, in Italy, "capitalism held no proprietary claim to modernization and democracy." Cummings, meanwhile, was incarcerated in a French military prison after he and a friend, William Slater Brown, expressed (allegedly) pro-German statements in their correspondence. Richard S. Kennedy describes *The Enormous Room's* irreverent attitude to authority, bureaucracy, and the military as "a symbolic attack upon all governmental structures." Given a clearer prose style and more deliberate textual analysis, the readings Vincent proposes would feel more convincing. As it is, one gets—at times—the feeling his argument is being imposed on the texts, rather than traced from careful readings.

Gandal's work continues the view outlined in his 2008 study, *The Gun and the Pen*, where he argued with reference to Hemingway, Faulkner, and Fitzgerald: "their renowned high modernist style, in particular its symbolism and tragedy, issued, not primarily ... out of the trauma of the war or a break with tradition that the catastrophe of the war had proven failed, but rather out of a need to both express and submerge" the stigma of their emasculatory war service. Gandal develops this theme in *War Isn't the Only Hell*, claiming that lost generation literature is "largely a dismayed and disillusioned response, not to the war but to the mobilization of the new American army," though in the latter study the net is widened to examine the reverberations of this forgotten social moment amongst female, combatant, and African American perspectives.

Gandal takes justifiable pride in his focus on mobilization's social consequences. He makes the valuable point that the structure of AEF service posed many threats to American masculinity: exchanging personal freedom and privilege for military authority and bureaucracy; witnessing non-white (and to a lesser degree, African American) upward social mobility as a result of mobilization; not to mention the fact that majority of soldiers served in a non-combatant

capacity—a potentially belittling status given the ubiquity of heroic images of war service in contemporary propaganda.

When it works, Gandal's research throws up revelatory interpretations. He makes, for instance, a highly compelling case that John Andrews of John Dos Passos's *Three Soldiers* (1921) becomes dehumanized by his army physical examination and that this, rather than the grind of military routine, leaves him "traumatized." Gandal also makes a fine argument that Thomas Boyd's *Through the Wheat* (1923), rather than being an "anti-war" text, actually reflects protagonist William Hicks's pride at succeeding in the meritocratic army. Likewise, Gandal contends that Victor Daly's *Not Only War* (1932) not only displays the superficiality of racial prejudice but also focuses on the emasculation endured by Anglo American Robert Lee Casper when he finds his conception of racial supremacy threatened by French social attitudes. Equally, however, Gandal's analysis can sometimes feel forced, as he determinedly pursues his line of reasoning.

He claims, for instance, that Hemingway "transmuted" his supposedly emasculatory war service into the physical emasculation of Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). "Something similar happened to Hemingway ... because of his position as an ambulance driver, a mere boy." However, Hemingway's war service on the Italian front, though short, actually exposed him to more combat than the average American soldier. Furthermore, Gandal echoes Agnes von Kurowsky's "Dear John" letter breaking off her relationship with Hemingway, inferring this is symptomatic of his military emasculation. In reality, he was passed over by a woman who was uneasy about their age difference—she was seven years older than the teenage Hemingway—and who had fallen for an Italian officer. These circumstances have nothing to do with US mobilization. There is also the—entirely unsubstantiated—claim that Jay Gatsby's death in *The Great Gatsby* (1925) is "a backlash against the military's sudden extension of equal opportunity to ethnic Americans." Similarly, there is the—baffling—contention that Ellen La Motte, a professional nurse and the author of *The Backwash of War* (1916), was "so dedicated to usefulness and efficiency that she was at times incapable of politic compromise and or even perhaps humaneness." One wonders, firstly, if her attitude might not instead reflect the degree of detachment necessary for medical professionals? Secondly, the outrage La Motte demonstrates at the hypocrisy, insensitivities, and meretricious rhetoric of the war effort surely demonstrates a very high degree of empathy.

As with *The Health of the State*, Dayton's study considers literary engagement with the "advancement of the project of establishing the United States as the hegemonic power in the capitalist world-system." In tracing this trajectory of American expansion, he makes the valuable point that much of the rhetoric surrounding American intervention—and its resulting fiction—was intimately tied to and shaped by "the millennialist tradition in American culture." "This American ideology manifests itself as a collection of cultural-symbolic and rhetorical patterns that define the United States in terms of a redemptive mission of global and ultimately transcendental import." These feelings built on the Puritan sense

of an “errand into the wilderness”—a crusade to establish a Christian community in the New World—which fed into Manifest Destiny and were re-appropriated for the Great War. As Dayton writes: “Wilsonian universalism imagined America as the new Israel, with the concept of errand licensing a project to save the world through active involvement in its affairs.” But the American project has expanded, now, not just to purify the American hinterland but to “redeem a fallen world.”

Dayton discusses obscure poets such as M. A. DeWolfe Howe and Percy MacKaye whose poetry describes American intervention “in terms of a redemptive mission of global and ultimately transcendent import.” In Dayton’s analysis, mobilization poetry—which might otherwise be dismissed as simply bad—attains a new degree of significance when it is seen to adapt distinctively American cultural paradigms to the nation’s role in the first global war. Though Dayton’s focus is on the war’s role in the dawning of American global hegemony, he is not prescriptive in his analysis of the literary response, which he presents as being highly individual.

In his chapter on Alan Seeger, for instance, Dayton notes that Seeger’s view of the war as a martial crusade aligned him with the wider presentation of the war as a medieval quest. For Seeger, however, “the value of martial ideals and martial experience was primarily personal and only secondarily social.” For Dayton, Edith Wharton shares Seeger’s view of the war as an ennobling quest—as witnessed in her sincere application of Horace’s “*dulce et decorum est*” in *A Son at the Front* (1923)—and in seeing the conflict as a means of “freeing modern society from the vices of modernity.” Unlike Seeger, her war writing is animated by a collectivist impulse, but one invested in the preservation of Old World civilization (symbolized by France). Thus, Wharton is at odds with the hegemonic rhetoric of American intervention, yet dependent upon it for the preservation of her beloved adopted culture. Meanwhile, Dayton contends that, rather than being apolitical and disillusioned in *The Enormous Room*, E.E. Cummings, in fact, satirically registers his repudiation of the political climate surrounding American intervention. Specifically, he alleges that the poem “next to of course god America i” is a rebuke to the nationalistic propaganda poetry generated by the war. Altogether, he “set out to destroy ... the ideological armature of the American war effort.”

Dayton could probably have reached his conclusions without his lengthy invocation of Goran Therborn’s idea of the “inclusive-historical register,” and likewise Dayton’s repeated attempts to distance his work from that of Mark Van Wienen—the main commentator on US World War I poetry—sometimes feel unnecessary. More importantly, the reader is left to wonder, since Dayton does touch on the fiction of Wharton, how he views other novelists reacting to the dawning of American hegemony? To what degree does this feature in the work of Boyd, Fitzgerald, and Borden, for instance? However, his central focus—the evolution of American hegemony and its support by poetic adaptations of the iconography of American exceptionalism—is an important addition to the debate,

and one which further suggests the underappreciated significance of poetry in these discussions.

Each of these volumes enriches American World War I studies and indicates a strong state of health in the field. They also suggest the challenges ahead of future scholars. The corpus of American World War I fiction is sizable, but one nevertheless approachable in the round within the length of a monograph. The challenge appears to be advancing a fresh methodological approach while avoiding skewed readings of texts to support it. The surge of scholarly interest in American World War I literature has only been possible because of the underappreciated social and literary importance of these works, several of which have moved from peripheral to canonical status. It seems unlikely this collective interest could have been sustained if the texts involved merely reflect the war in a simplistic, one-dimensional way. And to claim or imply this is the case does not seem, to me, to be the most fruitful way of continuing the recovery of this area of literary history.