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Herbert Read and the fluid memory of the First World War: poetry, prose and polemic*

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Abstract

According to many critics, Herbert Read's experience fighting in the trenches of the First World War was a formative one that shaped his intellectual life. His war poetry and autobiographical prose reflected on the horrors of fighting, and his anarchist-pacifism was a product, they argue, of experiencing the war first hand. Utilizing archival material and analysing Read's poetry, prose and polemical writing, the present article contests this reading. It argues that Read's perception of the war was deeply ambiguous, and shifted in response to the changing view of the war in British cultural history. He saw the war as at once disabling and liberating, and his continual return to the conflict as a subject in his writing was a process of attempting to fix its ultimate meaning to his life.

The First World War was an enduring frame of reference for Herbert Read. Corresponding with Francis Berry in 1953, who was busily writing an essay on him for the British Council, Read reflected on how the experience of war set him apart from others of his generation. Responding to Berry's observation that the power of Read's early poetry lay in its unflinching clarity – 'crisp as medals, bright but cool' – he stated that this diction emerged from a war that also reconfigured the cultural scene: 'I think the trauma of war experience has more to do with it than anything else. [Siegfried] Sassoon was finished by the war; [Wilfred] Owen would have been. [T. S.] Eliot and [Ezra] Pound did not experience the war (I mean the blood and shit of it)'.¹ This sense of being distinguished from others by the war was one to which Read would return throughout his life. He would continually revisit his war experiences in a career that saw him emerge as the foremost spokesman for modern art in Britain, as well as an influential literary critic, philosopher of art and distinctive political theorist.² 'No man since Ruskin ... can have had such a deep and complex association with the world of the visual arts in this country than Herbert Read', wrote Basil Taylor in his

obituary in the *Burlington Magazine*, while *The Guardian* noted that: ‘With him have died a whole team of men: a soldier, a poet, a museum curator and a Don, a literary critic, and an art historian, an educationalist and a political pamphleteer’.³ As a public intellectual active in mid twentieth-century Britain, Read held an appropriately cavalier attitude to disciplinary boundaries, but maintained that a common thread ran through his work.⁴ Indeed, he noted with pleasure that Berry’s pamphlet had recognized the ‘unity of the various aspects’ of his work, something, he added, that was ‘obvious to me’, despite often being ‘charged with inconsistency’.⁵

The issue of consistency is one that plagued Read: a self-professed pacifist who contemplated a career in the army; the self-described poet who found fame in other fields; and the committed anarchist who accepted a knighthood. While these issues have sparked fierce debate over the nature of Read’s ideas – whether his was a distinctive political voice or theoretical posturing, and whether his aesthetic ideas owed as much to his politics as he argued – a rare element of consistency is the view that the war defined Read’s intellectual growth.⁶ This was a view that Read did much to cultivate, placing a narrative of his war exploits at the centre of his autobiographical writing, and, given that much of his work was ‘a continuous expression of his own distinctive personality’, at the heart of his broader intellectual project.⁷ The war therefore stands tall in Read’s work, as a formative period in which his hitherto diffuse political values began to crystallize, but also as the time of a broader intellectual awakening that would lead to his eventual career as a cultural commentator. Critical appraisals of Read largely take this characterization of his war years as a given. Spending his formative years mired in the mud during a worthless war of imperialist aggression, the path is set for Read to adopt the anarchist philosophy that he would espouse in the mid century.⁸ So too, they argue that the memory of the war, a memory buttressed by harrowing experience, was integral to the pacifism that he would make a central pillar of his

political vision.⁹ Overarching this interpretation is an implicit contrast between Read the warrior and Read the autodidact, developing the resources for critique through voracious reading, as the verities of the Edwardian age were found wanting in the trenches.¹⁰ He would end the war like so many others, ‘with a strong sense of pessimism’, but also with a burning conviction to make a difference, keenly aware ‘of the dire need for a source of renewal’.¹¹

These interpretations, however, fail to appreciate the real significance of the war for Read’s intellectual development, not as a period of his life that imparted clear lessons informing his future action, but a continually unfolding source of inspiration understood through the lens of hindsight. Read was not exorcizing a haunting memory of the First World War in his poetry, prose and polemic, but in these literary forms he was attempting to fix and comprehend this memory itself. The stress in recent scholarship in the field of memory studies on the fluidity of memory and the insistence that memories ‘are subjective, highly selective reconstructions, dependent on the situation in which they are recalled’, is a useful way of framing Read’s approach to his experiences.¹² His ‘remembrance’ – a term that underlines the ‘agency’ of remembering – was necessarily ‘unstable, plastic, synthetic, and repeatedly reshaped’.¹³ That the enduring ‘myth’ of the First World War ‘as tragedy and disaster’ was in many ways a ‘postwar construct’ is a well-established theme in the literature, but considering Read’s writing on the war is illuminating.¹⁴ Read was novel in writing about the war from a variety of perspectives, as a poet, prose writer, memoirist and polemicist, and he continued to write about the conflict across his long career in British intellectual life. What this analysis shows is that while Read often characteristically remembered his wartime ‘experience into available cultural scripts’, disillusionment was not his only interpretation of the conflict.¹⁵ Rather than reducing the meaning of the war to a simple ‘symbol’, Read’s work reinforces the idea that the war was a ‘multi-faceted, personally remembered event’.¹⁶ His experiences could never be reduced to a single meaning, and rather Read articulated a

number of often mutually incompatible feelings and thoughts about the conflict. This, ultimately, was why it remained an enduring frame of reference for him. His war experience did not contain any immutable meaning, but rather his career was defined by a continual quest to determine the perpetually elusive meaning of the war, both for himself and for his generation.

While Read's prodigious output of art and literary criticism, his Jungian interventions in aesthetics and his work on art education gather dust in university libraries around the world, his comparatively slight oeuvre of war poetry continues to draw attention.¹⁷ Even after his fame in the arts had outstripped his initial prominence in this field, Read continued to identify himself primarily as a poet. Writing to the umbrageous American novelist Edward Dahlberg in 1956, Read reacted angrily to Dahlberg's demands on his time, and tellingly invoked his war experience:

I am always working under tremendous pressure, a fact you never seem to realize, and ... devoting myself to other people, with no thought of my own genius or ... fame ... I found myself in a situation (in this country) where I was the only person with the ... energy ... to take on the defence of modern art. I would willingly have stood down ... but I belong to a generation ... decimated by the war, and people who might have done this necessary task – men like T.E. Hulme – were killed in that war, and I found myself a solitary survivor.¹⁸

In the year before his death, this 'solitary survivor' noted that an emotional response to the war had always been central to his attempts to capture the meaning of the conflict in verse. In his collection *Poetry and Experience* (1967), Read cleaved to Wordsworth's characterization of the poetic process as 'emotion recollected in tranquillity', adding that a 'particular kind of experience ... the experience of war' had been his lifelong preoccupation.¹⁹ He also sought to break down the divide between poetry written about the war as 'an actuality' and 'as a memory', noting his complicity in the debacle that followed the publication of *The Oxford*

Book of Modern Verse (1936), and the decision of the editor, W. B. Yeats, to exclude the poetry of ‘actual experience’.²⁰ While the work of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon was absent, Read’s ‘The end of a war’ was present; a poem published some fifteen years after the end of the conflict.²¹

Read’s solution to the debate over the relative merit of poetry informed by direct experience and that stemming from memory was to deny the purity of experience, noting the inevitable intervention of the ‘unconscious mind’ in recovering ‘perceptual experience’.²² Reflecting a position that he developed primarily with reference to the visual arts, he added that this psychological filtration did not damage the epistemological value of the art work, but often opened fresh perspectives – the poet ‘*sees* something with mental acuteness’.²³ Read’s early poetic career was informed by a literal, and often partisan, commitment to ‘acuteness’ in verse, apparent in his early devotion to **Imagism** in poetry.²⁴ In a letter to his future wife Evelyn, written while Read was in a military training camp in Staffordshire, he argued for semantic precision and a rejection of the baroque: ‘To express an emotion one must be *exact*: one must use the exact word and not the merely decorative word ... or the word that may happen to rhyme but does not exactly express the idea. Hence rhyme and mere prettiness disappear from the essentials of Poetry’.²⁵ While his initial attempts at a career in poetry foundered, with his first collection *Songs of Chaos* (1915) selling just twenty-two copies, Read continued undeterred. He followed this volume with the more successful *Eclogues: a Book of Poems* (1919), containing three works published during the war in Dora Marsden’s modernist organ *The Egoist*.²⁶ Although these poems dwelt primarily on bucolic themes, his subsequent short collection *Naked Warriors* (1919) dealt directly with the experience of fighting on the western front.

Read later stated that the abstract clarity of the Imagist technique that he outlined in his letter to Evelyn was a coping strategy for the horrors of war, noting that ‘intellectual reveries

saved me from a raw reaction to these events'.²⁷ Yet, *Naked Warriors*, which Read described as a distillation of these experiences, offered a number of competing perceptions of the war, that characterize Read's imprecise and constantly developing attempt to make sense of the conflict. For George Woodcock, Read's friend and most perceptive critic, *Naked Warriors* was the angry sibling of *Eclogues*, a visceral collection that expressed Read's developing social philosophy.²⁸ Certainly, Read's preface to the book, excised from later collections of his poetry, starkly presented the war as a process that shattered the hubris of the pre-war era:²⁹ 'We, who in manhood's dawn have been compelled to care not a damn for life or death, now care less still for the convention of glory and the intellectual apologies for what can never be to us other than a riot of ghastliness and horror, of inhumanity and negation'.³⁰ This bleak opening salvo largely reflects the tone of the subsequent poems, and the confessional quality of the collection was evidently its marketing point. One advertisement for the book collated five reviews that all stressed the 'relentless' power of the poems, and their skill in representing the 'elemental horrors of the conflict'.³¹

Split into two sections, the first comprising the lengthy narrative poem 'Kneeshaw goes to war', and the second, eight verses under the heading 'The scene of war', the poems centre on the stark emotional and physical impact of the war. In the four-stanza poem 'Fear', for instance, Read muses on the artifice of composure in war, a disposition that fades quickly in the heat of combat:

But when the strings are broken
then you will grovel on the earth
and your rabbit eyes
will fill with fragments of your shatter'd soul.³²

In the six-line poem 'The crucifix', an image perhaps inspired by the oft-repeated story of the crucifixion of a Canadian soldier in 1915, Read dwelt on the impact of the war upon the body.³³ Along with showing the enduring power of religious symbols for modernist writers,

the poem is obsessed with the primitive brutality of the war: 'His body is smashed ... Emblem of agony/we have smashed you!'³⁴ Read was also sensitive to the broader impact of fighting, away from the bodies and minds of its combatants, to the landscape and the civilians caught in the maelstrom. In 'Village démolis' and 'The refugees' the bleak imagery is accentuated by Read's precise language. The former contemplates the suddenness of destruction, as 'interior walls/lie upturned and interrogate the skies amazedly', and 'the soul' previously held within 'lies strewn/in red and yellow/heaps of rubble'.³⁵ 'The refugees' introduces 'mute figures with bowed heads' trudging through the countryside in an attempt to flee the fighting. 'They do not weep/their eyes are too raw for tears', but the civilians are granted a temporary reprieve 'towards nightfall' as the enemy advance falters, with 'only the creaking cart/disturbing their sorrowful serenity'.³⁶

Amid all the contemplation of devastation, however, several of the poems possess a more ambiguous tone, and present the war as a complex experience. 'Liedholz' fictionalizes Read's capture of a German officer mentioned in his autobiography, noting the precious moments of sophisticated conversation ('In broken French we discussed/Beethoven, Nietzsche and the International'), and a reflection, as they stroll back to the Brigade, worthy of the Romantics: 'the early sun made the land delightful/And larks rose singing from the plain'.³⁷ Read's rumination on natural beauty was a clumsy attempt to stress the irony of the situation – the fleeting tranquillity in the raging storm – and he would explore various permutations of this theme.³⁸ In 'My company', Read juxtaposed the horrors of war with a paean for the comradeship he felt for the soldiers with whom he served, echoing a homoeroticism characteristic of much war literature.³⁹

A man of mine
lies on the wire.
...

And he will rot
and first his lips
the worms will eat.

It is not thus I would have him kiss'd
but with the warm passionate lips
of his comrade here.⁴⁰

Through their shared travails, Read senses an almost spiritual unity developing in his company, 'a body souled, entire', forged 'compact, unanimous' in the heat of combat.⁴¹ Even the opening poem of the collection, 'Kneeshaw goes to war', despite its comment on 'the ghastly desolation' that 'sank into men's hearts and turned them black', is, as Woodcock admitted, an 'awkward, ambiguous poem'.⁴² Kneeshaw, living an insular existence 'like a woodland flower whose anaemic petals/Need the sun', is plucked from this life and experiences the gruesome barbarity of war, ultimately being left physically disabled.⁴³ Yet, Read concluded by presenting Kneeshaw, 'minus a leg, on crutches', as mentally emancipated:

I stand on the hill and accept
The flowers at my feet and the deep
Beauty of the still tarn:
...
The soul is not a dogmatic affair
...
But these essentials there be:
To speak truth and from this hill
Let burning stars irradiate the contemplated
sky.⁴⁴

Despite his suffering, Read presents Kneeshaw achieving a certain equanimity and self-mastery. While damaged, in acquiescing to the demands of fate ('Chance ... gave me a crutch and a view'), Kneeshaw begins to recognize the deeper importance of life: 'I count not kisses nor take/Too serious a view of tobacco'.⁴⁵ Even in an indictment of war, therefore, Read suggests that its personal impact can be multifaceted.

One person evidently not concerned by these ambiguities was Siegfried Sassoon, who wrote to Read in 1919 to congratulate him on his 'fine' poetry. 'As you know', he confessed, 'I am old fashioned in my method ... but your stuff absolutely gets me'.⁴⁶ For his part, Read was unimpressed by Sassoon's oeuvre. His 'sarcasm' spoke directly to 'our post-war mentality', Read wrote in 1939, but once this began to fade, Sassoon lapsed into being a 'conventional Parnassian', like a latter-day Kipling albeit with 'immensely inferior skill'.⁴⁷ The comparison with Sassoon is illuminating, both in his similarities with Read, and differences. As Janet S. K. Watson points out, 'memory, rather than experience' was at the heart of Sassoon's comments on the war, with his writing about the past continually shaped by the present.⁴⁸ Sassoon admitted as much when he wrote in his memoir that 'not until afterwards' can a 'coherent picture' of the past emerge, but his role as truth-teller, talking to a public 'that weren't capable of wanting to know the truth', would continue.⁴⁹ Edmund Blunden made a similar point in his powerful *Undertones of War* (1928), noting the obfuscating 'playfulness' of memory, and sombrely observing that the failure of his readers to really '*understand ... will not be all my fault*'.⁵⁰ Like these writers, Read's work was shaped by the present, but a notable difference is that while Sassoon often simplified 'the complexities of original emotion' in the service of articulating a more powerful anti-war line, Read's war writing continually implied the variety of experience.⁵¹ Read may have disliked Sassoon's stylistic conservatism, but his identification of an inflexibly 'post-war' mordancy in the latter's verse highlights the fluidity of Read's own response to the war.

Read's identification of a post-war mentality that added power to the poetic indictment of the First World War is revealing. As Modris Eksteins observes, with that classic example of the post-war literary exposé in mind, Erich Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1928), in many ways these works were less a comment on the war itself than 'a comment on the postwar mind, on the postwar view of war'.⁵² In time, one historian

observes, narratives like Remarque's would become 'culturally triumphant', dominating the popular perception of the conflict.⁵³ When one of Remarque's characters reflects early on that 'the war has ruined us for everything', this is patently the voice of mature reflection, not of a callow recruit.⁵⁴ In deeper terms, the post-war period saw a reaction to the failure of the war to deliver the international stability that had been one of the key justifications for fighting in the first place, which in turn led to the resuscitation of the peace movement in Britain.⁵⁵ Read was shaped by this post-war reassessment, both in comprehending its psychological and emotional legacies for those who fought it, and its political ramifications. Having moved away from the war as a source of poetic inspiration after *Naked Warriors* to explore a new, 'deliberately intellectual' diction in *Mutations of the Phoenix* (1923), he would return to the subject later in the decade.⁵⁶ Read acknowledged the significance of Remarque's book in this, commenting on the publication of 'the German narrative that ... caught the attention of the whole world', and attempted to ride the wave of popularity, publishing his own disillusioned selection of stories, *Ambush*, in 1930.⁵⁷

In 1932, shortly after Robert Graves had published *Good-Bye to All That* (1929) and Remarque's book had been adapted for the silver screen, Read revisited the war in poetry. *The End of a War*, reflecting in its title a similar attempt finally to entomb the memories of war apparent in the title of Graves's book, was a triptych poem recounting an apparently true story of an advancing British force preparing to enter a French town.⁵⁸ Discovering a mortally wounded German officer on its outskirts, who assures the enemy that the defenders have departed, the allied troops advance, only to be ambushed and suffer heavy losses. Eventually clearing the town, an enraged group return to bayonet the officer, while others uncover in the town the mutilated body of a French girl, her limbs scattered around an abandoned house.⁵⁹ Each section of the poem is devoted to the internal dialogue of those involved: the German officer, the body and soul of the French girl, and a British soldier

waking to hear church bells announcing the Armistice. Aside from showing that Read readily bought into some familiar atrocity stories, the poem continues to explore the war in all its ambiguity.⁶⁰ The duplicitous German officer dies with his destructive faith in ‘The Father and the Flag, and the wide Empire’ intact, while the soul of the French girl muses on the innocence shattered by war, snaring ‘victims beyond the bands bonded to slaughter’, like her body ‘caught in the cog and gear of hate’.⁶¹ The English officer, woken by the peal of bells signalling peace, reflects on his hopes for a world reborn after war, and on his personal growth through the travails of combat: ‘myself a twig/torn from its mother soil/and to the chaos rendered/ ... and hope and faith and love coiled in my inmost cell’.⁶² Again, Read’s poetic representation of the war focuses on the complexity of experience: the feelings of loss, and lost innocence, but also growth in combat, and liberation from the fog of innocence.

While *The End of a War* reveals Read trying to add finality to his memories, the sense that the conflict held a number of competing meanings was undiminished. One reviewer found Read’s verse oppressively ‘earnest’, and decried the enduring ‘obsession’ with the war among poets, who turned to the event neither with ‘freshness of impulse’ nor in pursuit of a ‘new vision’.⁶³ This review is indicative of the broader context of renewed fascination with the war years, as a spate of bitter war reflections in the late nineteen-twenties ended the ‘silence of the veteran’, but Read’s poetic ambiguity is stark.⁶⁴ The war for Read was at once a tragic waste, with unimaginable sufferings and psychological strain, but also a period of self-realization. His characters struggle with these tensions, like the British officer waking into peace and pondering the iconoclasm of the war, but also its decisive impact on his spiritual awakening, and Kneeshaw, disabled but also liberated by the war.

These conflicting feelings were most visibly expressed when Read returned to the subject of war after Britain was embroiled in fresh combat, in his two collections *Thirty-Five Poems* (1940) and *A World Within a War: Poems* (1944). Both volumes offered a varied

commentary on warfare, including reflections on the Second World War and the Spanish Civil War, an event that decisively shaped Read's political thinking. Like Picasso's *Guernica*, 'Bombing casualties in Spain' focuses on those tragically trapped by the conflict, and as with Read's early poems, emphasizes the loss of innocence:

Dolls' faces are rosier but these were children
their eyes not glass but gleaming gristle
...
These are dead faces.
Wasps' nests are not so wanly waxen
wood embers not so greyly ashen.⁶⁵

Other poems reflect more obliquely on the state of Europe in the inter-war years. 'Herschel Grynsban',⁶⁶ a poem inspired by Herschel Grynszpan, who assassinated diplomat Ernst vom Rath in 1938 in protest against the Nazis' treatment of the Jews, pondered both the desperation of his act, and a Europe suspended over the abyss:

He lifts his hand in calm despair.
The gesture loses its solitary grace
and violence is answered by violence
until the sluggish tinder of the world's indifference
is consumed, consumed to the end.⁶⁷

The poem that gives the book its title offers a personal meditation on the ideal life in a world at war. The genteel existence the narrator has crafted ('I built this house/By an oak tree on an acre of wild land') supports his scholarly endeavours ('My work is within/Between three stacks of books'), away from encroaching pressures of modern life ('For years the city like a stream of lava/Crept towards us: now its flow/Is frozen in fear').⁶⁸ Outside his 'sedate ... palisade', there is tumult:

But well we know there is a world without
Of alarm and horror and extreme distress
Where pity is a bond of fear
And only the still heart has grace.⁶⁹

In spite of the barbarity, Read discerns potential redemption in self-abnegation:

Vision itself is desperate: the act
Is born of the ideal ...
... We shall act: we shall build
A crystal city in the age of peace
...

Should the ravening death descend
We will be calm: die like the mouse
Terrified but tender. The claw
Will meet no satisfaction in our sweet flesh
And we shall have known peace.⁷⁰

There is a notable tonal shift in these poems away from the ‘austerity’ that characterized *Naked Warriors*. While Read continued to be influenced by the Imagist commitment to semantic precision, his fascination with the inner voice of feeling was mirrored in a renewed contact with the language of Romanticism.⁷¹ This attempt at a fusion of styles was, as a number of reviewers concluded, most successfully achieved in ‘A world within a war’, a poem whose moralizing showed the imprint of political convictions that had hardened since the Spanish Revolution caught Read’s attention.⁷²

A World Within a War has a melancholic quality that its concluding poem, ‘Epitaph’, with its contemplation of the transience of life, encapsulates: ‘Yes yes/and ever it will come to this:/Life folds like a fan with a click!’ The title of the volume itself seeks to emphasize the centrality of war to both Read’s life and the tragic century in which he lived, but also reveals an act of ‘emotional immunization’, as he again tried to finalize and contain his memories.⁷³ Yet, as with Read’s earlier works, those dealing explicitly with the experience of fighting express sentiments that are difficult to reconcile, and show that a final comprehension of his experiences remained out of reach. ‘Ode’, written during the British army’s ignominious retreat to Dunkirk, expressed frustration at the failure to heed the lessons of the previous war – the ‘world was tired and would forget’.⁷⁴ However, a subsequent poem, ‘To a conscript of 1940’, had an altogether different tone. The narrator, encountering a young soldier of the second war, engages him in conversation, which leads to the veteran conversing across the

ages with his younger self.⁷⁵ When the fighting ended in 1918 ‘the world was not renewed’, the narrator laments, ‘the old world was restored and we returned/to the dreary field and workshop’.⁷⁶ Although those that returned survived in body, he points to the scars too deep to see: ‘Of the many who returned and yet were dead’.⁷⁷ While the scene is set for a conventional condemnation of war, the mood of the poem then shifts, with the narrator concluding with an incongruous reflection on individual growth in fighting:

To fight without hope is to fight with grace
The self reconstructed, the false heart repaired.
Then I turned with a smile, and he answered my salute.⁷⁸

This theme of ‘self-understanding in battle’ is a recurring one in Read’s war poetry, and in ‘To a conscript of 1940’ the conflict between the war as a catalyst for individual mastery and an experience that left its participants psychologically haunted is acute.⁷⁹ Read would explore this tension in a number of forms, as he continually returned to the war to examine its significance afresh as it receded into his past, and to seek to understand its significance for his personal biography.

One of the poems that appeared in *A World Within a War* bore the title ‘The contrary experience’. The poem reflects on a quandary: ‘Live in action’, the ‘ancient wisdom whispers’, but the character then admits to having sworn an oath ‘Not to repeat a false act/Not to inflict pain/To suffer, to hope, to build’. Yet, experience tests this ascetic doctrine:

But time has broken
the proud mind
No resolve can defeat suffering
no desire establish joy.⁸⁰

Read evidently thought that the title of this poem captured a prominent theme in his life, and he used it again for the definitive edition of his memoirs, *The Contrary Experience*:

Autobiographies (1963), inserting the poem as a postscript, under the title, 'Envoy'.⁸¹ His first experiment with autobiography was the short book *The Innocent Eye* (1933), focusing exclusively on his rural childhood. Later Read substantially added to this work, incorporating material that dwelt heavily on his war experiences, and a detailed overview of his intellectual growth, under the Blakean title *Annals of Innocence and Experience* (1940).

While Read experienced increasingly mixed reviews for his poetry, his autobiographical writing was warmly received. Indeed, Graham Greene and George Orwell, who would both display some expertise in the form, commented that Read's memoirs were his most enduring achievement. In a poignant 'personal forward' to *The Contrary Experience* published shortly after Read's death, Greene suggested that the early sections of the book were 'perhaps the best autobiography in our language', and deemed Read one of the 'the two great figures of my young manhood'.⁸² Orwell, while criticizing the 'wateriness' of Read's political and critical writing, admitted that *The Innocent Eye* had left a 'deep ... impression' on him, and even arranged for Read to read excerpts from the volume on his wartime radio programme, *Voice*, in October 1942.⁸³ Although both were friends of Read, their thoughts reflect critical opinion. One review of *The Innocent Eye* noted that it was 'as brief, alas! as it is treasurable', adding that its ethereal charm meant 'continuous delight, evocation, speculation and daydream'.⁸⁴ The more practical Compton Mackenzie perhaps had this in mind when he wrote that *The Innocent Eye* was 'not a book to obtain from a library, but one to buy and read very slowly', in order to appreciate Read's 'exquisitely caught' picture of youth.⁸⁵

Careful reading was even more necessary once Read had revised his autobiography, adding substantial material on his First World War experiences, and an examination of his evolving philosophical interests. The latter amounted to a narrative of his life mapped onto a discussion of his broadening intellectual horizons: from his discovery of poetry, to his

developing theory of aesthetics, and his attempt to construct an aesthetic politics. These additions made *Annals* a very different, and challenging book, but in the words of one commentator a worthwhile and ‘deeply interesting record of an industrious intelligence ... finding fulfilment’.⁸⁶ Another suggested that the work’s ‘unflinching diagnosis of his mind’ would be of immense value to the future historian seeking to understand the dark years between Europe’s ‘two great wars’.⁸⁷ Read revised this material again for *The Contrary Experience*, leaving *Annals* intact, but appending a series of chapters recounting his return to live in the land of his childhood, and inserting a lengthy ‘War diary’ covering the years 1915–18 in the middle of the book. These changes were not wholly welcome. As a number of reviewers noted, the closing narrative exploring the history, mythology and natural beauty of Read’s home in Ryedale, North Yorkshire, might have added a sense of cyclical completion to the book, but it detracted from its power. One suggested that Read was ‘a little self-congratulatory’; while another disliked that the closing section was ‘free from the tensions and growing pains of the rest ... [Read] ... one could gather, is becoming a man of leisure with a taste for local history’.⁸⁸ While the critics may have found some of Read’s revisions rather anodyne, an account of his wartime experience occupied a pivotal place in his autobiographies. Moreover, the way he structured and revised these books also served to accentuate the centrality of the war to the personal narrative of his life.

Annals adopts a linear pattern, beginning in a sedate fashion with a series of chapters exploring Read’s early life on a farm in North Yorkshire. Like the war, his bucolic childhood left a deep imprint on Read, imparting a lifelong desire to escape the bustle of the London publishing world for the tranquillity of rural Yorkshire, but in a more profound sense informing his aesthetics and politics.⁸⁹ The organic metaphor is a prominent one in the history of anarchist political thought, and for Read contact with the patterns of nature was not only moralizing, but also central to aesthetic perception.⁹⁰ The first half of *Annals* reflects on

the serenity of this period of his life, on the orchard and ‘the line of plum-trees’, before the tone shifts in the thirteenth chapter with the death of Read’s father.⁹¹ Transported by a ‘devious train’ to a Halifax orphanage, Read starkly contrasts the ‘unearthly bliss’ of his early childhood and the ‘cloud of unhappiness’ that enveloped him at his Dickensian school.⁹² The subsequent chapters explore his discovery of poetry while working as a clerk in a Leeds bank, and his eventual enrolment at Leeds University, where war interrupted his studies.

From Leeds, *Annals* takes the reader to France, after Read joined his local regiment the Green Howards, swayed by the promise of ‘adventurous romance’.⁹³ Running parallel with this narrative is one of his increasing intellectual cosmopolitanism, as he devoured the classics of western philosophy in his brief spell at university, encountered modernist aesthetics in periodicals like the *New Age*, and discovered socialism through the fragmentary remains of nineteenth-century pamphlet literature.⁹⁴ Closing *Annals*, these threads cohere into a statement of Read’s aesthetic philosophy, emphasizing the value of aesthetic contemplation, and portraying anarchism’s ‘natural order’ as the political expression of this philosophy.⁹⁵ The war registers in this narrative as a catalyst for his politicization, and conversely, encouraging a political apathy that meant Read would shy away from active politics until the mid nineteen-thirties.⁹⁶ He did, nevertheless, stress that the practical experience of fighting – the ‘primitive filth, lice, boredom and death’ – removed any of the ‘lingering ... romance’ that led him to enlist.⁹⁷ As with his poetry, *Annals* also explores the ambiguity of this experience. Read observed that the bonds of friendship forged in the trenches surpassed all others, and approximated communism: ‘one lived in a complete communal bond of thoughts as well as goods’.⁹⁸ He also added, in a narrative that would become a familiar explanation behind the broadening of the franchise in 1918, that these relationships overcame class division.⁹⁹ It was only the ‘public-school snob’, or the ‘worse snob ... from the fringes of the

working-classes', he wrote, who could not 'develop a relationship of trust and even ... intimacy with his men'.¹⁰⁰

Revising his autobiography for its life as *The Contrary Experience*, Read added fresh material but also adopted a structure that placed renewed emphasis on the war as a climacteric period of his life. Between the end of the first section of the book, recounting his halcyon rural childhood, and the second part narrating his life in Halifax and as a young man in Leeds, Read inserted a disrupting interregnum. An eighty-seven-page 'War diary' covering the years 1915–18 divided Read's reflections on his childhood from those of his adulthood.¹⁰¹ The effect is to stress the disconcerting 'turmoil' of war, the idyllic childhood coming to an abrupt end, only for the focus to shift not to the Victorian austerity of Read's school, but to the tragedy of the western front.¹⁰² This, indeed, was how Read presented the diary, noting that the war had faded inappropriately into 'cool history', and bemoaning the physical and emotional damage done to his generation.¹⁰³ Echoing his angry letter to Dahlberg, Read repeated the idea of a 'lost generation' that had left the post-war intellectual world bereft of talent, and bemoaned a lassitude in those that survived who returned as if 'stragglers from a fallen outpost'.¹⁰⁴

Despite the rhetorical construction of the book emphasizing this vision of lost opportunity and dashed hopes, the diary itself paints a more complicated picture. Principally following Read while stationed at various training camps in England, the focus is overwhelmingly on his severe course of intellectual self-improvement. Giving his opinion on everything from George Bernard Shaw ('the last word on Christianity') to Wagner ('I do *not* like, generally speaking'), the diary recounts his varied reading habits: D. H. Lawrence, Plato and A. J. Penty.¹⁰⁵ Regarding the war, as with Read's poetry, the tone is ambiguous. He voices frustration, in contrast to his paean for the brotherhood of trench warfare, at the 'remarkably dense recruits' he has to cajole into 'forming fours', and admits to 'hating the

Army ... ever since the first day I knew it'.¹⁰⁶ At the same time, he expresses competing feelings. He appeared to enjoy his brief time at the infamous Etaples base in 1916, and the society of officers at Brocton training camp in 1917, despite 'half of us belong[ing] to that argumentative race of Scotland'.¹⁰⁷ Of his return trip to the front later that year, he wrote triumphantly that he had mastered his seasickness ('I WAS *NOT* SICK!!!') and admitted to 'waiting impatiently' to get to the front.¹⁰⁸ When in the trenches, Read fluctuated between confidence and fatalism, and was vexed by more parochial concerns. 'We've got the Boche absolutely cowed', he wrote in April, before complaining that he was tired of tea that tasted like a 'mixture of ink and petrol' and '20 days' without a bath.¹⁰⁹ At the same time, his diary is interspersed with periods of pessimism. Caught in the heat of battle, Read wrote that he was expecting to 'make an attack' at any moment, and was passing the time 'eating, sleeping and enduring shellfire'. Closing his entry, he commented on the high rate of casualties, and laconically noted, 'I guess I shan't be long'.¹¹⁰

Read's diary reveals that even at the level of direct experience, the war held a number of competing and at times contradictory meanings. His poetry might encapsulate the tensions some distance from the event, but even at the time Read was torn between interpreting the war as an enlivening experience and a disabling one. What is particularly striking is that these competing feelings, both as reflection in his poetry and immediate experience in his diary, frequently appear simultaneously in the same piece of writing, or in chronologically contiguous texts. The war spiritually emancipates but also physically disables Kneeshaw, while ten days separate Read's image of a cowed German army from his premonition of his imminent death. His autobiographical prose also gives a mixed picture of his feelings about military life. He admits to enjoying the comradeship of the army, confiding that this 'wonderful' unity is the only thing that 'makes the Army tolerable', but is also frustrated by the ineptitude of many recruits and the superciliousness of many fellow officers.¹¹¹

Peculiarly, while expressing exasperation at the banality of military life, Read made it clear that he contemplated staying in the army after the war, an option he rejected in favour of joining the civil service, hoping it would be a sinecure that would allow him time to write.¹¹² Reflecting on this issue later, Read added that those aspects of army life that he had enjoyed – the comradeship, equality, and purpose in fighting – would not endure in peacetime, instead ‘bringing back that world of parade, discipline and snobbery’ of the pre-war years.¹¹³ Given his future political direction, his attraction to the military is nevertheless strange, as is the incongruous dedication of his chapbook *In Retreat*, published in 1935 when he was growing increasingly politically conscious, to his regiment, the Green Howards.¹¹⁴ While not quite as ‘pro-militarist’ as Graves, the military life certainly had its attractions.¹¹⁵ The tension that characterizes Read’s position, torn between a future in the army and the blossoming of his critical faculties that impelled him towards socialism, is acute. This specific issue, however, is indicative of a broader tension in Read’s thought, and his divided feelings about the significance of the war to his life.

These were tensions that Read never resolved, but his quest for resolution animated his intellectual project. Around the time that *The Contrary Experience* appeared, Read published a biographical article with the elegiac title ‘What is there left to say?’ Here he wrote of the war as a ‘cataclysm’, not just in personal terms, but repeating his refrain, also in British intellectual life.¹¹⁶ He added that his own career might have been more precarious without it, but if only there had been ‘bright young rivals’ rather than Bright Young Things, what ‘might have been!’¹¹⁷ Alongside this narrative of lost opportunity, however, Read returned to the idea that understanding the real impact of the war upon his life was an elusive task: ‘I still do not know whether the thing I stepped on in August, 1914, was a snake’s head or a ladder. Materially, it could be thought of as a ladder, for it gave me four years of ... security ... But at the end it left with me with a pathetic longing for security’.¹¹⁸ Given that Read received

both the Military Cross and Distinguished Service Order, we might dismiss the idea that his longing for security was ‘pathetic’, but the fact that he continued to equivocate on the impact of the war shows that it escaped any simplistic comprehension. The war period was a time of immense intellectual and personal growth, and he emerged from it eager for comfort, but equally intent to pursue a career in the arts. Read found conviction and confidence amid the slaughter, but the terror left its imprint too. ‘The experience was for me one of overwhelming horror’, Read wrote, in one of his earliest political statements, ‘and in 1919 I left the Army a more convinced pacifist than ever’.¹¹⁹

For many of Read’s commentators, it is in this connection between the war and his turn to pacifism that the imprint of his war experience is most vivid. While they may concede that his pre-war political values were inchoate, the futility of the war decisively shaped his politics, and Read, as he was demobilized, was an inveterate critic of violence.¹²⁰ Ironically, while the sincerity of Read’s politics continues to be the cause of debate, particularly in the context of his acceptance of a knighthood in 1953, his supposed pacifism is often seen as an oasis of consistency.¹²¹ Certainly in his explicitly political writing Read emphasized his pacifist credentials. In his first anarchist pamphlet *Poetry and Anarchism* he wrote that he had ‘hated’ the war ‘from the minute it began until the end’, and deduced an ineluctable connection between anarchism and non-violence: ‘Peace is anarchy’.¹²² Yet, as the foregoing has made clear, Read’s polemical description of the experience of war as a horrific one paving the way for his pacifism is difficult to sustain when juxtaposed with his literary engagement with the legacies of the conflict. Even in *Poetry and Anarchism*, Read stated that the war had also been in some senses a vitalizing experience, revealing wells of courage that disproved the superiority of the ‘heroes of the playing-fields of Eton’, and imparting a personal ‘self-confidence’.¹²³ The emphasis on self-mastery apparent in his comments on

combat suggests a connection with his anarchism, especially as his politics stressed the importance of self-realization. While he did educe a political lesson from the war, this did not centre on the individual growth visible in his poetry, so much as on the importance of community in enduring the fighting. This communitarian conclusion, though, contrary to prevailing interpretation, was the product of distance.¹²⁴ To understand Read's polemical rendering of his war experiences, it is therefore necessary to contextualize his political development, in terms of his scholarly career, but also against the mutable perception of the war in post-war British society.

Although Read stressed that his work was a unified expression of a single philosophical vision, this was not a system of ideas that emerged fully formed.¹²⁵ As his obituaries testified, Read ranged widely as a public intellectual, but there is a distinct periodization to his career vital in understanding the significance of the war in his polemical writing. The publication of *Reason and Romanticism: Essays in Literary Criticism* in 1926 marked a shift in his life, at which point rather than being a poet dabbling in cultural criticism, Read became a critic sporadically producing poetry.¹²⁶ His interests widened to encompass art theory in the early nineteen-thirties, and in tandem Read developed a concern for the social influences that shaped art, and subsequently the position of art in society. In 1935, he published the political tract *Essential Communism* that would become, with crucial rewrites, *Poetry and Anarchism*.¹²⁷ From here, especially after the Spanish Civil War cemented his conversion to anarchism, the political aspect of his writing came to the fore, and he began to attempt the aesthetic and political synthesis that defined his career. From 1938, Read frequently contributed the fruits of his pen to the anarchist cause. Along with a number of pamphlets, he wrote for the newspaper of the Freedom Press Group as it underwent a series of reinventions in the lead up the Second World War: first as *Spain and the World*, then *Revolt!*, followed by *War Commentary*, before it switched back to *Freedom* with the war's

end.¹²⁸ This is not to deny that Read's burgeoning politics were important before his explicit declaration for anarchism.¹²⁹ In his autobiography he argued that there was an 'unfailing continuity in my political interests', if not 'unfailing consistency', and that a set of 'basic principles' had always underpinned his philosophy.¹³⁰ Nevertheless, while Read may have seen the rudiments of his anarchism as eternally present, his increasing confidence in these political attachments was a product of the nineteen-thirties. And, as these ideas matured against the backdrop of the failures of Bolshevism and new hope in Spain, Read's understanding of the political implications of the First World War developed.

Read's poetry and prose in the nineteen-thirties continued to stress the ambiguities of his war experience, but a different authorial voice was apparent in his polemical writing of the same period. The general reassessment of the First World War that began in the late nineteen-twenties, occasioned by a spate of literary depictions that characterized it as the 'quintessence of futility', and the corresponding resuscitation of pacifism as an oppositional stance in British politics, shaped Read's approach.¹³¹ Although he continued to present the experience of war as one that generated a complex of emotions in poetry and prose, in his political writing, a more straightforward condemnation superseded these ambiguities. Admitting in passing in *Poetry and Anarchism* that the war had some personally beneficial consequences, he stressed that the horrors of fighting outweighed these, and stated that the current political system was wholly to blame. 'The greatest intensification of the horrors of modern war', he wrote, 'is a direct result of the democratization of the State'. In making the professional army redundant, democracy had made it 'everyman's duty' to protect hearth and home, giving warfare 'free ... range' and the capacity to 'attack every form of life ... associated with that home'.¹³² For Read, democratization had multiplied the number of potential victims of war without offering any worthwhile benefits. Drawing on a familiar anarchist argument that political rights were a palliative rather than a panacea, his excoriation

of war highlighted that alongside imperialism, the psychological impact of the relations fostered by capitalism explained the human tendency towards aggression. ‘We fight because we are too tightly swathed in bonds’, Read concluded, ‘because we live in a condition of economic slavery and of moral inhibition’.¹³³

There is nothing profound about Read’s treatment of the issue of war in *Poetry and Anarchism*. He shows a clear debt to psychoanalysis, one that would strengthen and become more sophisticated after the Second World War, but at this stage remained a rather crude extension of ideas explored in his literary criticism.¹³⁴ What is striking about the pamphlet, however, is the way in which Read framed his pacifism and politicized the consequences of the war. Rather disingenuously, he implied that he held a latent pacifism that was emboldened by his time on the western front, stating that the war left him ‘a more convinced pacifist than ever’.¹³⁵ In domestic terms, his lament that ‘the world was not renewed’ in his poem ‘To a conscript of 1940’ suggests frustration that the sacrifices were not translated into social revitalization.¹³⁶ And, in *Poetry and Anarchism*, he painted a picture of himself as a scholar full of ‘impotent rage’ at the ‘real problems of life’, torn from his books in 1914, with the war a vexing interlude ‘in the great struggle for social justice’.¹³⁷ In fact, in all this, Read is reading his mature politics back into his younger self. There is an indicative parallel here with other notable writers. Graves ‘changed important details of his experience to fit his postwar disillusionment’, and Vera Brittain, whose *Testament of Youth* (1933) is a frequently cited example of the war’s impact on British women, emphasized in her memoir an opposition to war that was, in reality, held inconsistently.¹³⁸ The lesson in political disillusion that Read took from the war was a position that he developed in the late nineteen-twenties and early nineteen-thirties, as continued international friction showed that Europe’s geopolitical issues persisted, and the notion of the war as a radical break with the past rose to prominence in literary condemnations of the conflict.¹³⁹

Read may have attributed his political silence in the nineteen-twenties to the official censorship imposed by his civil service career, but a more realistic view is that he remained apathetic to political events in these years.¹⁴⁰ Like many of his generation, he was concerned with mapping ‘new paths out’ of the ruins, but the pressing concern was his path away from the provincial life he had left when he enlisted.¹⁴¹ In *Poetry and Anarchism*, he ascribed the beginning of his political disillusionment to the ‘Treaty negotiations’, and ‘the indifference which people in power felt for the opinion of the men who fought’.¹⁴² The ‘farce’ at Versailles vanquished any lingering idealism, he wrote, but in his diary, his real concerns came to the fore.¹⁴³ Read expressed disgust at the conduct of the conference, noting that the treatment of Germany betrayed the demise of the ‘Englishman’s renowned sense of fair play’, but this musing was sandwiched between a reflection on Canterbury cathedral (‘disappointing’) and the news that he was busily attempting to ‘rejuvenate’ the journal *Arts and Letters* with Osbert Sitwell.¹⁴⁴ Read’s politicized reading of the peace, embryonic and instinctually present in the immediate aftermath of the war, was nevertheless a later product. As he entered civilian life, he had other things on his mind.

With distance, and once his anarchist convictions became a prominent feature of his thought, Read began to trace a political lesson from his wartime experiences. This was not his pacifism, which steered an erratic course when confronted by fascism in Europe.¹⁴⁵ Rather, Read began to interpret his feeling that the bonds forged between comrades in the trenches surpassed all others through the lens of his anarchism. While far from alone in affirming the emotional importance of this solidarity – Sassoon, Graves and Owen all highlighted it in their poetry¹⁴⁶ – Read was rare among British post-war literary figures in allying this to a radical political vision. Indeed, the political silence of many of the most prominent inter-war detailers of the ‘soldier’s story’ is striking. Members of the literati such as Sassoon and Graves generally eschewed political comment, and even Sitwell, whom Read initially

confused for a fellow traveller, would couple his pacifism with an elitist disdain for politics.¹⁴⁷ Perhaps indicative of the general trend is the playwright R. C. Sheriff, who followed his traumatic production *Journey's End* (1929) with the novel *The Fortnight in September* (1931), a story about a middle-class family's seaside holiday in Bognor Regis. There is in the book's muted domesticity a subtle contrast with the chaos of war, but the story also hints at a deeper desire for modesty, conceiving of post-war England as 'a nation of gardeners and housewives' rather than imperial adventurers.¹⁴⁸

In the spirit of the Victorian social explorer, Read confided early in his diary that military life had brought him 'into direct contact with a class of men I wanted to know', primarily recruits from the coalfields of 'Durham and Middlesbro''.¹⁴⁹ Under fire, this fascination morphed into admiration, and a feeling that this community made life tolerable. 'To create a bond between yourself and a body of men ... that will hold at the critical moment', he wrote, 'that is ... an achievement to be proud of'.¹⁵⁰ Introducing his diary, Read tied this experience of comradeship directly to his politics. It was not a 'sentimental' attachment, he argued, but a feeling of 'unanimity aroused by common stresses', and one that was to 'have great influence on the subsequent social attitudes of the diarist'.¹⁵¹ Instead of a model for the mass organization of the proletariat that traditionally informed socialist reflections on the military, Read interpreted his experience of army life in terms borrowed from the anarchist theoretician Peter Kropotkin.¹⁵² For Kropotkin, writing in his classic work *Mutual Aid*, group co-operation rather than individual competitiveness was the key to evolutionary survival, a theory that supported his mutualist ethics, and thereby his faith in a federalist social organization.¹⁵³ Attracted by the plasticity of this social system, Read seized on its emphasis on the artisanal labourer as an example of a form of organization in which creative work could be universal, while at the same time, like Kropotkin, defending the value of modern technology.¹⁵⁴ With Read's Kropotkinism hardening towards the end of the

nineteen-thirties, he then began to look back to his experience of wartime comradeship as an exemplar of mutualism at work:

Fidelity is the word ... [that] ... describe[s] the simple idea ... revealed to me in the First World War – the fidelity of one man to another, in circumstances of common danger, the fidelity of all men in a group to one another and to the group as a whole. I read ... Kropotkin's great book *Mutual Aid*, and there I found this simple idea enshrined in a philosophy of society.¹⁵⁵

What had originally been an instinctual pleasure at the joys of comradeship, a common emotional response to the pressures of fighting, Read invested with a definite political meaning.¹⁵⁶ There was a 'paradox' in this, he noted, that the truth of the principle of mutual aid was revealed to him while 'engaged in the beastly business of killing other men', but this did not dilute the logic of the lesson. In fact, it accentuated its truthfulness, for while Read was aware that 'the enemy' held to the same idea of fidelity, he defined this as a 'social' rather than 'moral' virtue. Cultivated by 'example and habit', this mode of group organization emerged to meet the challenges at the front, but held a broader, revolutionary, potential.¹⁵⁷

A. J. P. Taylor may have written, with characteristic incaution, that 'idealism perished on the Somme', but by the start of the Second World War, Read's idealism held fast.¹⁵⁸ In 1941, as German tanks rolled into the U.S.S.R., Read pondered what should be done this time with the German 'menace'.¹⁵⁹ The Versailles settlement was a patent failure, with reparations a 'capitalist illusion' helping no one, but Read traced the real problem to Germany's 'conception of sovereignty' that repeatedly sanctioned 'armed might and arbitrary aggression'.¹⁶⁰ This must be shattered, he wrote, and with it the 'fanatical beliefs' of the German people, and their attachment to the 'most centralized State in Europe'.¹⁶¹ Instead of disarmament, which had already proved futile, Read suggested a new path, the anarchizing of Germany. Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid* had shown the capacity for groups to organize themselves outside the auspices of the state, and if the German state were destroyed, through a

devolution of power to the provinces and the diffusion of economic authority to the ‘trade unions and voluntary organizations’, Germany would be ‘immunized’ against further aggression.¹⁶² More than this, Read added hopefully, the example of an anarchist Germany, building life again peacefully in its city-squares and hamlets, would be a shining lesson in the virtues of anarchism. ‘Quickly and voluntarily’ countries would hasten to follow the same ‘path ... [f]orce would be abolished and individual life would once more expand in freedom and beauty’.¹⁶³ Read’s faith in the future had returned, informed by his anarchism. This also led him to rethink his past, and interpret his wartime experience in terms of these political beliefs. Perhaps this time Europe would learn its lessons, and emerge from the mire reborn.

After the opening credits in Lewis Milestone’s 1930 film adaption of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, there is a brief prologue. Embellishing the note that appears in the book, it warns the viewer that what follows is ‘neither an accusation nor a confession’, and certainly not an ‘adventure, for death is not an adventure to those who stand face to face with it’. Instead, the film desires to ‘simply tell of a generation ... who, even though they may have escaped its shells, were destroyed by the war’. The pathos of this preamble perhaps betrays that *All Quiet on the Western Front* aimed to do more than tell a story, and in Jay Winter’s words, presents a ‘pacifist ... message ... in a self-consciously American accent’.¹⁶⁴ Rather, the film, and Remarque’s book, aimed to tell a particular truth about the war, and reinforce the centrality of the disillusioned ‘soldier’s story’ to the wider cultural memory of the conflict.¹⁶⁵

It was a truth with which Read would have agreed, and one that he explored in his own writing, but it was not the only truth about the war, and not the only truth that Read wrote about. While the war was a perpetual touchstone for Read, his response to his

experience was polyphonic. There is an echo of this in the more prominent literary figures writing alongside him. Both Sassoon and Graves reflected on the pleasures of comradeship, and even Blunden, who bitterly lamented the damage done to his generation in *Undertones of War*, noted the vitality of a ‘friendship that outweighed all sorrows’.¹⁶⁶ As Read interrogated the memory of war in a variety of media, he continually returned to these memories with the fresh purpose demanded by change in form. Yet, more significant than form was context, and the changing interpretation of the war in British history influenced the mutability of Read’s interpretation of the war’s meaning. The war had been both a harrowing and liberating experience, but as the disillusionment narrative began to capture the popular imagination in the late nineteen-twenties, against a backdrop of political and economic instability, Read’s sense of its political consequences became clearer. It is not a coincidence that he broke his political silence in the wake of this reassessment, as the Spanish Civil War reignited his political idealism, and the troubled nineteen-thirties added urgency to the problems of political life.

Those writing about Read have failed to appreciate either the complexity of his responses to the war, or their historically contingent nature. They draw too hastily the connection between his wartime experience and his pacifist-anarchism, with the received image of the war – the ‘blood, mud and futility’ – a convenient hinge upon which to hang his political thought.¹⁶⁷ As his poetry and prose did a better job of showing, Read’s feelings about the war were often ambiguous. The war was, in part, an adventure, but it also gave Read a sense of self-worth, courage and conviction. He entered a post-war literary scene dominated by figures who had taken a very different journey to his from Halifax orphanage to an aborted tenure at Leeds University – Sassoon’s Marlborough and Cambridge, and Eliot’s sojourns at Harvard, Oxford and the Sorbonne, for instance – but Read joined this world with undeterred enthusiasm. As the characters in his verse showed, and his

autobiography made clear, as damaging as the war was it also destroyed his parochialism, and the self-mastery crucial in combat imparted an enduring confidence. Yet, this does not mean he can be comfortably located as a representative of the ‘positive view’ of war, just as he escapes straightforward location in the disillusioned generation that felt the war gave nothing and took everything.¹⁶⁸ That he could never escape the war, and was puzzling over its consequences even at the end of his life, shows that it escaped simple categorization. Read continually applied his intellectual powers to the ‘re-cognition’ and ‘re-collection’ of the war, and with it, its reconstruction as a matrix of disabling and empowering experience.¹⁶⁹ It was, as he hesitantly concluded, both a snake’s head and a ladder.

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¹ F. Berry, *Herbert Read* (1st pub. 1953; 1961), p. 24; University of Victoria, Herbert Read papers (hereafter H.R.P.), 61/20/9, Herbert Read to Francis Berry, 10 Apr. 1953.

² J. King, *The Last Modern: a Life of Herbert Read* (New York, 1990).

³ B. Taylor, ‘Obituary: Herbert Read’, *Burlington Magazine*, cx (Aug. 1968), 462; ‘Obituary: Sir Herbert Read – a man of the arts’, *The Guardian*, 13 June 1968, p. 5.

⁴ S. Collini, *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 436, 470–1.

⁵ H.R.P., 61/20/9, Read to Berry, 10 Apr. 1953.

⁶ For the war as a period of intellectual growth, see H. Cecil, ‘Herbert Read and the Great War’, in *Herbert Read Reassessed*, ed. D. Goodway (Liverpool, 1998), pp. 30–45; D. Goodway, *Anarchist Seeds Beneath the Snow: Left-Libertarian Thought and British Writers from William Morris to Colin Ward* (Liverpool, 2006), p. 179; C. Honeywell, *A British Anarchist Tradition: Herbert Read, Alex Comfort and Colin Ward* (New York, 2011), pp. 37–8; M. Paraskos, ‘Imagination seizes power: a brief introduction’, in *ReReading Read: New Views on Herbert Read*, ed. M. Paraskos (2007), pp. 8–17; B. Read, ‘Herbert Read: an overview’, in *Herbert Read: a British Vision of the Art World*, ed. B. Read and D. Thistlewood (Leeds, 1993), pp. 11–24, at p. 12; G. Woodcock, ‘The philosopher of freedom’, in *Herbert Read: a Memorial Symposium*, ed. R. Skelton (1969), pp. 68–87.

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- ⁷ P. Abbs, 'Herbert Read as autobiographer', in Goodway, *Herbert Read Reassessed*, pp. 83–99, at p. 83.
- ⁸ Honeywell, p. 37.
- ⁹ Honeywell, p. 56; Woodcock, 'Philosopher of freedom', p. 74. For a contrary view, see Goodway, *Anarchist Seeds*, pp. 176–7.
- ¹⁰ Indirectly, the material on Read draws on a prominent, but also prominently criticized, interpretation of the First World War as a 'caesura' in British cultural history (see S. Heathorn, 'The mnemonic turn in the cultural historiography of the Britain's Great War', *Historical Jour.*, xlviii (2005), 1103–24, at p. 1106).
- ¹¹ Honeywell, p. 38.
- ¹² A. Erll, *Memory in Culture*, trans. S. B. Young (Basingstoke, 2011), p. 8.
- ¹³ J. Winter, 'Forms of kinship and remembrance in the aftermath of the Great War', in *War and Remembrance in the 20th Century*, ed. J. Winter and E. Sivan (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 40–60, at p. 40.
- ¹⁴ D. Todman, *The Great War: Myth and Memory* (2011), pp. xiii, xi; J. S. K. Watson, *Fighting Different Wars: Experience, Memory, and the First World War in Britain* (Cambridge, 2004), p. 187.
- ¹⁵ M. Roper, 'Re-remembering the soldier hero: the psychic and social construction of memory in personal narratives of the Great War', *History Workshop Jour.*, 1 (2000), 181–204, at p. 183.
- ¹⁶ Todman, p. 186.
- ¹⁷ *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, ed. J. Silkin (1988), pp. 150–66; D. Hibberd and J. Onions, *Poetry of the Great War: an Anthology* (Basingstoke, 1986); N. Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (1998), pp. xxx, 201, 348; P. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Cambridge, 1975), pp. 50, 79, 162–3; M. Gilbert, *First World War* (1994), pp. 476–7.
- ¹⁸ H.R.P., HR/ED-228 encl. 018, Herbert Read to Edward Dahlberg, 20 Apr. 1956; see also H. Read, *The Contrary Experience: Autobiographies* (1963), p. 61.
- ¹⁹ H. Read, *Poetry and Experience* (1967), pp. 104, 105.
- ²⁰ Read, *Poetry and Experience*, p. 106. Yeats's *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* collected Read's three-part poem 'The end of a war' (*The Oxford Book of Modern Verse: 1892–1935*, ed. W. B. Yeats (Oxford, 1936), 343–60).
- ²¹ Read, 'The end of a war', in Yeats, pp. 343–60.
- ²² Read, *Poetry and Experience*, p. 118.
- ²³ Read, *Poetry and Experience*, p. 119 (original emphasis). Read developed this position most thoroughly in *The Forms of Things Unknown: Essays towards an Aesthetic Philosophy* (1960).

²⁴ See Read, *Contrary Experience* (1963), pp. 174–7. For Read’s **imagism**, see P. Gibbard, ‘Herbert Read and the anarchist aesthetic’, in *To Hell with Culture: Anarchism and 20th-Century British Literature*, ed. H. Gustav Klaus and Stephen Knight (Cardiff, 2005), pp. 97–110.

²⁵ Read, *Contrary Experience* (1963), p. 78.

²⁶ Read, *Contrary Experience* (1963), p. 162. Read’s poems in *The Egoist* were not published in 1915, as George Woodcock suggests (G. Woodcock, *Herbert Read: the Stream and the Source* (1972), p. 23). For Read’s early poems, see H. Read, ‘In the orchard’, in *The Egoist*, iv, no. 4 (May 1917), 54; H. Read, ‘The meditation of a lover at daybreak’, in *The Egoist*, **v, no. 8** (Sept. 1918), 111; H. Read, ‘At Rivière’, in *The Egoist*, **v, no. 9** (Oct. 1918), 123; H. Read, *Eclogues: a Book of Poems* (1919), pp. 9, 13, 35.

²⁷ Read, *Contrary Experience* (1963), p. 177.

²⁸ Woodcock, *Stream and the Source*, p. 91.

²⁹ This has since become an influential lens through which to consider the war (see, in particular, Fussell).

³⁰ H. Read, *Naked Warriors* (1919), n.p.

³¹ ‘Naked Warriors by Captain Herbert Read, D.S.O., M.C.’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 1 May 1919, p. 230.

³² Read, *Naked Warriors*, p. 26.

³³ See Fussell, pp. 117–18.

³⁴ Read, *Naked Warriors*, p. 24; J. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: the Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 219–22.

³⁵ Read, *Naked Warriors*, p. 23.

³⁶ Read, *Naked Warriors*, p. 28.

³⁷ Read, *Naked Warriors*, p. 27.

³⁸ For more on this idea, see S. Hynes, *A War Imagined: the First World War and English Culture* (New York, 1991), p. 426.

³⁹ Fussell, pp. 270–309.

⁴⁰ Read, *Naked Warriors*, p. 34.

⁴¹ Read, *Naked Warriors*, p. 31.

⁴² Read, *Naked Warriors*, p. 14; Woodcock, *Stream and the Source*, p. 92.

⁴³ Read, *Naked Warriors*, p. 11.

⁴⁴ Read, *Naked Warriors*, p. 19.

⁴⁵ Read, *Naked Warriors*, pp. 19, 18.

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- ⁴⁶ H.R.P., HR/SS-4, Siegfried Sassoon to Herbert Read, 22 March 1929.
- ⁴⁷ H. Read and others, 'The present state of poetry: a symposium: in England, in France, in the United States', *Kenyon Rev.*, i (1939), 359–98, at pp. 360, 361.
- ⁴⁸ Watson, p. 231.
- ⁴⁹ S. Sassoon, *Siegfried's Journey: 1916–20* (1945), pp. 223, 14.
- ⁵⁰ E. Blunden, *Undertones of War* (1982), p. 7 (original emphasis).
- ⁵¹ Watson, p. 237.
- ⁵² M. Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: the Great War and Birth of the Modern Age* (New York, 2000), p. 282.
- ⁵³ Watson, p. 217; see also Todman, pp. 153–86, 221–30.
- ⁵⁴ E. M. Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, transl. B. Murdoch (1996 edn.), p. 61.
- ⁵⁵ For this, see M. Ceadel, *Semi-Detached Idealists: the British Peace Movement and International Relations, 1854–1945* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 239–80.
- ⁵⁶ Woodcock, *Stream and the Source*, p. 97.
- ⁵⁷ Read, *Contrary Experience* (1963), p. 60; H. Read, *Ambush* (1930).
- ⁵⁸ This was originally published in *The Criterion* in 1932.
- ⁵⁹ Read set the scene for the poem with a narrative description at the beginning (H. Read, *The End of a War* (1933), pp. 9–10). See also Cecil, 'Herbert Read and the Great War', pp. 39–40.
- ⁶⁰ Read added a postscript to this poem insisting that the story 'can be vouched for by several witnesses' (Read, *End of a War*, p. 31). This addendum also appeared in Yeats's collection (Read, 'The end of a War' in Yeats, p. 360). For a discussion of atrocity stories like this, see A. Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 40–69.
- ⁶¹ Read, *End of a War*, pp. 11, 17.
- ⁶² Read, *End of a War*, p. 24.
- ⁶³ 'Some recent poetry', *Times Literary Supplement*, 15 March 1934, pp. 190.
- ⁶⁴ E. J. Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (Cambridge, 1979), p. 192.
- ⁶⁵ H. Read, *A World Within a War: Poems* (1944), p. 37.
- ⁶⁶ Later versions of the poem spelt Grynszpan's surname correctly, but the title of the poem is 'Herschel Grynsban' in both *Thirty-Five Poems* and *A World Within a War*.
- ⁶⁷ Read, *World Within a War*, p. 40.
- ⁶⁸ Read, *World Within a War*, pp. 27, 28.

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- ⁶⁹ Read, *World Within a War*, pp. 30, 34.
- ⁷⁰ Read, *World Within a War*, pp. 35, 36.
- ⁷¹ K. Winn, 'The poetry of Herbert Read', in Goodway, *Read Reassessed*, pp. 13–29, at p. 25.
- ⁷² H. H. Hays, 'A World Within a War by Herbert Read', *Poetry*, lxvi, no. 4 (July 1945); 'Men and war: Mr Herbert Read's poems', *Times Literary Supplement*, 25 Nov. 1944, p. 575.
- ⁷³ Woodcock, *Stream and the Source*, p. 110.
- ⁷⁴ Read, *World Within a War*, p. 11.
- ⁷⁵ This poem appeared in both *Thirty-Five Poems* and *A World Within a War*; here the citation refers to the latter volume.
- ⁷⁶ Read, *World Within a War*, pp. 22, 23.
- ⁷⁷ Read, *World Within a War*, p. 22.
- ⁷⁸ Read, *World Within a War*, p. 23.
- ⁷⁹ Cecil, 'Herbert Read and the Great War', p. 40; see also King, pp. 37–55.
- ⁸⁰ Read, *World Within a War*, p. 25.
- ⁸¹ Read, *Contrary Experience* (1963), pp. 355–6.
- ⁸² G. Greene, 'A personal forward' to H. Read, *The Contrary Experience: Autobiographies* (New York, 1973), pp. 7–10, at p. 7.
- ⁸³ G. Orwell, 'Review of *A Coat of Many Colours: Occasional Essays* by Herbert Read', in *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, ed. P. Davison and others (?? vols., 1998), xvii. 402–5, at p. 405; "'Voice' 3: a magazine programme: 6th October 1942', in Davison and others, xiv. 77–85.
- ⁸⁴ 'Happy those early days', *Times Literary Supplement*, 6 Apr. 1933, p. 245.
- ⁸⁵ C. Mackenzie, 'Novelist recaptures his youth', *Daily Mail*, 20 Apr. 1933, p. 4.
- ⁸⁶ H.P.A.F., 'Autobiography', *Manchester Guardian*, 24 Dec. 1940, p. 8.
- ⁸⁷ 'The making of a poet', *Times Literary Supplement*, 19 Nov. 1940, p. 570.
- ⁸⁸ 'Memory's bright inventory', *Times Literary Supplement*, 31 May 1963, p. 387; E. Newton, 'The Contrary Experience by Herbert Read: review', *Jour. Royal Society of Arts*, cxii (Dec. 1963), 49–50, at p. 50.
- ⁸⁹ King, pp. 248–9.
- ⁹⁰ A good example of this is Read's writing on the role of art in education (see H. Read, *Education through Art* (1943), p. 70).
- ⁹¹ Read, *Annals*, p. 27.

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- ⁹² Read, *Annals*, pp. 67, 69.
- ⁹³ Read, *Annals*, p. 138.
- ⁹⁴ T. Steele, 'The Leeds art club: a provincial avant-garde?', *Literature and History*, xiv (1988), 91–109.
- ⁹⁵ Read, *Annals*, p. 232.
- ⁹⁶ Read, *Annals*, p. 147. There is debate over whether Read is the best guide to his politicization (see D. Goodway, 'Herbert Read, organicism, abstraction and an anarchist aesthetic', *Anarchist Studies*, xix (2011), 82–97; A. Antliff, 'David Goodway critiques Herbert Read', *Anarchist Studies*, xix (2011), 98–106.
- ⁹⁷ Read, *Annals*, p. 142.
- ⁹⁸ Read, *Annals*, p. 145.
- ⁹⁹ For an example of this approach, see A. J. P. Taylor, *English History: 1914–45* (1970), p. 135.
- ¹⁰⁰ Read, *Annals*, p. 146.
- ¹⁰¹ The diary was in fact letters from Read to his first wife Evelyn. As Abbs has noted, as the 'War diary' is comprised of edited letters, the originals of which were destroyed, it is likely that Read excised sexual and sentimental sections, thus giving the diary its tone of 'business-like despatch'. For a discussion of this work, see P. Abbs, 'Herbert Read as an autobiographer', in Goodway, *Read Reassessed*, pp. 83–99, at p. 95.
- ¹⁰² Read, *Contrary Experience*, p. 59.
- ¹⁰³ Read, *Contrary Experience*, p. 60.
- ¹⁰⁴ Read, *Contrary Experience*, p. 61.
- ¹⁰⁵ Read, *Contrary Experience*, pp. 72, 73 (original emphasis).
- ¹⁰⁶ Read, *Contrary Experience*, p. 72.
- ¹⁰⁷ Read, *Contrary Experience*, p. 84.
- ¹⁰⁸ Read, *Contrary Experience*, pp. 88, 89 (original emphasis).
- ¹⁰⁹ Read, *Contrary Experience*, pp. 91, 92.
- ¹¹⁰ Read, *Annals*, p. 92.
- ¹¹¹ Read, *Contrary Experience*, p. 97.
- ¹¹² Read, *Contrary Experience*, pp. 63, 256.
- ¹¹³ Read, *Contrary Experience*, p. 256.
- ¹¹⁴ H. Read, *In Retreat* (1935), p. 5.
- ¹¹⁵ Watson, p. 221.
- ¹¹⁶ H. Read, *The Cult of Sincerity* (1968), p. 52.

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- ¹¹⁷ Read, *Cult of Sincerity*, pp. 53, 54.
- ¹¹⁸ Read, *Cult of Sincerity*, p. 54.
- ¹¹⁹ H. Read, *Poetry and Anarchism* (1st pub. 1938; 1947), p. 63.
- ¹²⁰ Honeywell, p. 17; Woodcock, 'Philosopher of freedom', p. 74.
- ¹²¹ N. Walter, *Damned Fools in Utopia*, ed. D. Goodway (Oakland, Calif., 2011), pp. 184–8; A. Meltzer, *I Couldn't Paint Golden Angels* (Edinburgh, 1996), p. 63.
- ¹²² Read, *Poetry and Anarchism*, pp. 63, 75.
- ¹²³ Read, *Poetry and Anarchism*, pp. 63, 64.
- ¹²⁴ Honeywell, p. 38.
- ¹²⁵ See Read, *Contrary Experience*, pp. 344–53; H. Read, *Anarchy and Order: Essays in Politics* (1954), p. 9.
- ¹²⁶ H. Read, *Reason and Romanticism: Essays in Literary Criticism* (1926).
- ¹²⁷ H. Read, *Essential Communism* (1935). This pamphlet had, as Goodway points out, a 'mongrel' origin (Goodway, *Anarchist Seeds*, p. 178).
- ¹²⁸ G. Woodcock, *Anarchism: a History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* (1986), pp. 382–5.
- ¹²⁹ See Antliff, 'Open form and the abstract imperative'; Antliff, 'David Goodway critiques Herbert Read', pp. 98–100.
- ¹³⁰ Read, *Contrary Experience*, p. 206.
- ¹³¹ J. Winter and A. Prost, *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present* (Cambridge, 2007), p. 196.
- ¹³² Read, *Poetry and Anarchism*, p. 74.
- ¹³³ Read, *Poetry and Anarchism*, p. 75.
- ¹³⁴ For an early example of Read's psychoanalytic criticism, see Read, *Reason and Romanticism*, pp. 83–106.
- ¹³⁵ Read, *Poetry and Anarchism*, p. 63.
- ¹³⁶ Read, *World Within a War*, p. 22.
- ¹³⁷ Read, *Poetry and Anarchism*, p. 63.
- ¹³⁸ Watson, pp. 221, 247–59.
- ¹³⁹ M. Ceadel, 'The peace movement between the wars: problems of definition', in *Campaigns for Peace: British Peace Movements in the 20th Century*, ed. R. Taylor and N. Young (Manchester, 1987), pp. 73–99, at pp. 76–9.
- ¹⁴⁰ Read, *Contrary Experience*, p. 206.

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- ¹⁴¹ Hynes, *A War Imagined*, p. 239.
- ¹⁴² Read, *Poetry and Anarchism*, p. 26; Read, *Cult of Sincerity*, p. 54.
- ¹⁴³ Read, *Poetry and Anarchism*, p. 26.
- ¹⁴⁴ Read, *Contrary Experience*, pp. 145, 144, 146.
- ¹⁴⁵ M. S. Adams, 'Art, education, and revolution', *Hist. of European Ideas*, xxxix (2013), 709–28.
- ¹⁴⁶ See J. Anderson Winn, *The Poetry of War* (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 154–7.
- ¹⁴⁷ P. Ziegler, *Osbert Sitwell* (New York, 1999), pp. 314–17.
- ¹⁴⁸ A. Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars* (1991), p. 211.
- ¹⁴⁹ Read, *Contrary Experience*, p. 70.
- ¹⁵⁰ Read, *Contrary Experience*, p. 97.
- ¹⁵¹ Read, *Contrary Experience*, pp. 65–6.
- ¹⁵² For socialism and military organization, see K. Morgan, 'British guild socialists and the exemplar of the Panama Canal', *Hist. of Political Thought*, xxviii (2007), 120–57.
- ¹⁵³ P. Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: a Factor of Evolution* (1902).
- ¹⁵⁴ See P. Kropotkin, *Fields, Factories and Workshops* (1899); H. Read, *The Grass Roots of Art: Lectures on the Social Aspects of Art in an Industrial Age* (1955), pp. 152–7.
- ¹⁵⁵ Read, *Cult of Sincerity*, p. 41.
- ¹⁵⁶ See E. Jones, 'The psychology of killing: the combat experience of British soldiers during the First World War', *Jour. Contemporary Hist.*, xli (2006), 229–46, at pp. 244–5.
- ¹⁵⁷ Read, *Cult of Sincerity*, p. 41.
- ¹⁵⁸ A. J. P. Taylor, *The First World War: an Illustrated History* (1974), p. 140.
- ¹⁵⁹ Read, *Anarchy and Order*, p. 135.
- ¹⁶⁰ Read, *Anarchy and Order*, p. 135.
- ¹⁶¹ Read, *Anarchy and Order*, p. 135.
- ¹⁶² Read, *Anarchy and Order*, p. 136.
- ¹⁶³ Read, *Anarchy and Order*, p. 136.
- ¹⁶⁴ Winter, *Sites of Memory*, pp. 132–3.
- ¹⁶⁵ Watson, p. 185.
- ¹⁶⁶ Blunden, p. 188.

¹⁶⁷ D. Taylor, 'Blood, mud and futility? Patrick MacGill and the experience of the Great War', *European Rev. of Hist.*, xiii (2006), 229–50.

¹⁶⁸ H. Cecil, *The Flower of Battle: British Fiction Writers of the First World War* (1995), p. 117.

¹⁶⁹ Winter, *Remembering the War*, p. 275.