Author, Author

David Lodge

LONDON, December 1915. In the master bedroom (never was the estate agent's epithet more appropriate) of Flat 21, Carlyle Mansions, Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, the distinguished author is dying — slowly, but surely. In Flanders, less than two hundred miles away, other men are dying more quickly, more painfully, more pitifully -young men, mostly, with their lives still before them, blank pages that will never be filled. The author is seventy-two. He has had an interesting and varied life, written many books, travelled widely, enjoyed the arts, moved in society (one winter he dined out 107 times), and owns a charming old house in Rye as well as the lease of this spacious London flat with its fine view of the Thames. He has had deeply rewarding friendships with both men and women. If he has never experienced sexual intercourse, that was by his own choice, unlike the many young men in Flanders who died virgins either for lack of opportunity or because they hoped to marry and were keeping themselves chaste on principle.

The author is dying propped up in bed among starched sheets and plump pillows, attended by three servants and two professional nurses working in rotation, while the young men are dying in the mud of No Man's Land, or in squalid trenches, or on jolting stretchers, or on camp beds in field hospitals amid the groans of their wounded comrades. But of the little group caring for the author only his manservant Burgess Noakes knows what dying on the Western Front is like, and he doesn't want to talk about it. He's happy to be out of it, is Noakes, with a Blighty wound — thirty small wounds to be exact, thirty bits of shrapnel from a German mortar bomb that had to be painfully winkled out of his head, body and legs — and with his hearing permanently damaged by the blast; glad to be on convalescent leave extended by special dispensation so that he can attend his distinguished master (who has friends in high places - as high as the Prime Minister himself, Mr Asquith) and hopeful of a discharge on medical grounds in due course. As for the others — the cook/housekeeper Joan Anderson, the parlour-maid Minnie Kidd, who both live in, and Mr James's secretary/typist, Miss Theodora Bosanquet, who has a small flat in nearby Lawrence Street — the drama of his dying is inevitably more vivid and involving than the carnage in Flanders, because it is personally present to them. As it happens, none of them has lost a near relative in the war — yet. Of course they are depressed by the long daily lists of casualties in the newspapers, and share sympathetically the grief of bereaved friends, but they cannot really imagine those deaths.

In fact it is Henry James himself who, if he were compos mentis, would be better able to imagine them, up to a point, being a novelist whose job it is to imagine things he has never personally experienced. Stephen Crane, for instance, once briefly his neighbour in East Sussex, wrote the best novel ever published about the American Civil War though he wasn't even born when it took place. Henry had at least some experience of that war to go on, having been as a young man an anxious and uneasy spectator of it, exempted by an obscure back injury from taking part himself, but

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with two younger brothers who served gallantly on the Union side. He never forgot visiting seventeen-year-old Wilky at his training camp with the 44th Massachusetts, one of a crowd of sunburnt smiling confident young men in smart new blue uniforms, and then seeing him brought back months later to the family home in Cambridge on a stretcher, half dead, with terrifying stories of battle to tell when he recovered.

Perhaps it was because he had lived through the first major war of the industrial age, the first with casualties on an industrial scale, that Henry foresaw the catastrophic consequences of the European conflict sooner than most Englishmen. Only two days after war was declared he was writing to his friend Edith Wharton, fellow Anglophile and Francophile (not knowing when or where his letter might reach her, for she was motoring somewhere in Spain as the armies mobilised and the ultimatums expired), to say 'I feel all but unbearably overdarkened by this crash of our civilisation', and he has been in a state of handwringing mental anguish ever since. Not that he has been a passive, or pacifist, observer of the conflict. On the contrary, he is convinced of the iniquity of German aggression, and has done as much as a portly, valetudinarian, expatriate American of his years could possibly do to help the Allied cause. He has visited wounded soldiers in hospital (his fluency in French was appreciated by the Belgian Walloons, though what they or the Tommies made of his convoluted style of utterance was a subject of amused speculation among his friends) and been active in charitable work assisting Belgian refugees in Rye. He became Honorary President of the American Volunteer Motor Ambulance Corps. He has urged American participation in the war on his compatriots by every means, even to the extent of granting an interview to a journalist from The New York Times to promote the cause, in spite of a lifetime's aversion to this form of publicity. (He did however insist on seeing the text of the article before publication and completely rewrote it, so that he was, Theodora Bosanquet reflected with quiet amusement, in effect interviewing himself.) And in the summer of 1915 he made the biggest commitment of all, taking British nationality in a gesture of solidarity with his adopted country.

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