Through Dread of Crying You Will Laugh Instead:
Disillusionment in World War I

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The beliefs with which one is raised and in which one trusts unquestioningly are often the most difficult to change. Usually beliefs are reinforced by one's community, schools, family and friends and as long as nothing occurs to bring the beliefs into question, they remain unchanged and unquestioned. Such was the belief in the nobility and glory of war prior to World War I. War and self-sacrifice were the obligations of the patriotic, the chivalrous, and the strong. It was with such firmly established beliefs that the young men of the "generation of 1914" enlisted in the war against Germany. But World War I would prove to be unlike any previous war: it lasted longer, took more lives and was carried out under more horrifying conditions than anyone could have anticipated in 1914. So unexpected were the conditions and horrors of this war, and so unheroic were the deaths of young men, that any illusions of war that the soldiers may have held were slowly stripped away. Disillusionment with the war, however, did not lead large numbers of soldiers to escape from the front. Rather, disillusionment created a state for which coping mechanisms proved necessary and the war proved to be a rich source for the grim humor of the trench journals - a useful outlet for soldiers' pent up dismay. Thus, rather than pulling soldiers away from their duties, disillusionment created a situation in which soldiers were forced to find creative ways to fulfill their obligations despite the inglorious conditions of war.

To understand disillusionment in World War I, it is first necessary to understand the nature and sources of the illusion. Where disillusionment is the process of freeing or depriving one of illusions, beliefs or ideals, an illusion is "something that deceives by producing a false or misleading impression of reality." For many of the soldiers who wrote journals, letters, poetry and novels, the illusion was created by their schools.

During the nineteenth century, the English public school system promoted the values and ideals necessary for good soldiers, an important step for a country which relied on a volunteer army in war. Peter Parker writes:

Whilst few people can have been prepared for the nature of the War, there is no doubt that one section of the community was ready to meet the challenge: the English Public Schools... Educated in a gentlemanly tradition of loyalty, honor, chivalry, Christianity, patriotism, sportsmanship and leadership, public-school boys could be regarded as suitable officer material in any war.

However, the public school values did not always align with those of the boys' parents. In her war memoirs Vera Brittain writes of her father:

Having himself escaped the immersion in the public-school tradition which stood for militaristic heroism unimpaired by the damping exercise of reason, he withheld his permission for any kind of military training and ended by taking Edward [her brother] to the mills to divert his mind from the war.

Edward had learned all of his military beliefs in the English Public Schools and not at home, where such sentiments were not appreciated. Thus, for many of the middle- and upper-class soldiers, education away from home, and the influence of those parents who did not favor war, was useful in establishing and maintaining the necessary values for soldiering.
Literature and young men's magazines also served to reinforce these values. Classics and literature formed the basis of the traditional education in both English and French public schools. These glorified war and created heroes out of dead soldiers — who were usually understood to have died quickly and gracefully. The emphasis that classic and contemporary authors gave to the glory of war was later recalled by soldiers who wrote trench magazine poems with titles such as Sic Transit Gloria, or "With Apologies to Rudyard Kipling", both of which depict war as horrible and degrading and leave as desirable. The authors were clearly responding to the literature they had read in school and the ideals it promoted.

Popular before and throughout the war, boy's magazines also helped support ideals of heroism, patriotism and duty and were useful in spreading those values to lower class youth. In England, magazines such as The Boy's Own Paper and Young Gentleman's Journal, as well as other similarly-titled periodicals, perpetuated public school values through popular adventure stories. The magazines' importance lie not only in their content, but also in their appeal: they promoted the middle- and upper-class public school values and were widely read among lower-class youth. Thus, the patriotic values of the upper classes were being packaged into an accessible form for young, lower-class boys to learn and admire.

These values promoted a very romantic and sterile view of war which proved useful for attracting volunteers, but they were not uniquely English; France, too, had a similar tradition, particularly among the middle-classes. The need to imbue youth with ideals that would encourage them to willingly risk their lives as a moral obligation to protect the state (and their parent's livelihoods) from tyranny was every bit as valuable to the French as it was to the English.

The values promoted by the schools, literature and periodicals notwithstanding, war was declared by England and France with specific objectives: to defend Belgium's neutrality and protect France against German invasion. In 1914, Robert Graves enlisted because he believed that the war would be a short one, "two or three months at the very outside" and because he "...entirely believed that France and England had been drawn into a war which they had never contemplated and for which they were entirely unprepared." Thus, for many men like Graves, the war was a clear-cut case of German aggression which had to be countered. This was not expected to take a very long time.

But for all the ideological preparation for war that they had been given, the real war was not what the young men had anticipated and, as the years rode on, it became a source of frustration and discouragement. The real war was not fought by proud men in staunch uniforms planning and carrying out battles which would lead up to a final decisive battle, but by faceless men in mud-caked remnants of uniforms wading in trenches filled with lice, water, mud and bodies. Soldiers did not die gloriously, but slowly and painfully. The image of the young, glorious hero was carried in the minds of the young volunteers entering the war, but the horrors of the war and the loss of comrades eventually destroyed any of these illusory perceptions of war.

Henri Barbusse describes the most pervasive means of disillusionment: the reality of war. The inglorious image of war is central to Henri Barbusse's depiction of disillusioned soldiers in Under Fire: The Story of a Squad. Barbusse published the book in 1917 and dedicated it to the memory of his fallen comrades at Croisy. The book is, as Madame Mary Duclaux accurately describes it, a "series of episodes rather than a novel." Each of the episodes deals with themes that frequently appear in both post-war literature and the trench magazines: the image of soldiers not as heroes, but cannon-fodder; the loss of friends and ever-present death; and the horrible conditions of the trenches. Barbusse thus described the most common source of disillusionment in World War I: the harsh reality of war which slowly eroded the glorious and noble illusion in which young men had firmly believed.

Barbusse depicted this reality as a painful, terrifying experience that was more about survival than heroism. He makes the point that soldiers are replaceable by having one of his characters ask: "[w]hat's a soldier, or even several soldiers? — Nothing, and even less than
nothing, in the whole crowd; and so we see ourselves lost, drowned, like the few drops of blood that we are among all this blood of men and things."16 These soldiers realized that as individuals they were easily spent and used up; it was the whole army which was valued, not the individual man. This theme also appears in the English trench magazine The B.E.F. Times, but the person realizing it is not an Englishman, but a German citizen. In the poem entitled "Profit and Loss" the author writes of a German family's seven sons who are "quickly clad in suits of grey and labelled 'food for guns,' while the Kaiser's six sons remain at home."17 Through the poem the author expresses the anger and frustration of those who feel that their own needs and feelings have been disregarded in order to supply the needs of state with bodies for the army. That the English author used this theme, even while applying it to the enemy, means that the feeling that they too are "food for guns" is extant, thought about, and perhaps even discussed among his own comrades.

Part of the soldiers' perception of themselves as cannon-fodder stems from the loss of individualism in war. J. G. Fuller points out that upon becoming a soldier, "all external marks of civilian identity and individuality vanished. The soldier became a number, identically dressed with his fellows, stripped of status and reduced to common subjection to another's will, deprived of the right to shape his own actions."18 The shift from being an individual in a world to being one of many bodies was difficult enough, but when this realization was coupled with the nature of their duty, to kill or die, the loss of identity was overwhelming. The feeling that soldiers were no more than mere ammunition rather than the heroes of folklore and history was painfully disillusioning.

This feeling is reinforced by the ever-present death of other soldiers, both friend and foe. Barbusse uses the imagery of death frequently throughout his novel to make this point. The protagonist, whose name we are never given, describes the death of his closest comrade who dies horribly in an explosion while he watches.19 Later, when he goes on guard duty at night, he leans in the darkness against a stack of logs which, he discovers, are the piled up corpses of his comrades Lamuse, Barque, Biquet and Eudore.20 Even Corporal Bertrand, the man the protagonist describes as the incarnation of "a lofty moral conception" was found dead among nameless other dead men.21 Of his Corporal the protagonist says that "by virtue of always doing his duty, he has at last got killed."22 So pervasive and violent is death that when one comrade calls gas "unfair" Barque retorts that when "one has seen the destruction that shells, guns and bayonets have done, what does it matter if something is fair or unfair."23 Dead or dying soldiers were always present. They were not limited to the battlefield or "No Man's Land," but were in the trenches themselves, sometimes to be used as support for guns or as markers in the trenches.24 Death was common, everywhere, and inglorious. For many soldiers, it was nothing like the literature had portrayed it to be; it was not always quick, nor was it clean and graceful. One's comrades in war often died painfully, gruesomely and ignobly. And as the war dragged on funerals, much less burials and other traditional rites of death, were forgotten. The reality was that death in war was painful and degrading.

The degradation of soldiers in war was underscored by the conditions in which they had to survive to make it onto the battlefield. Fuller notes that:

Time in the trenches was...the hardest part of the infantryman's service, and the lot of infantrymen of all nations was here in many ways comparable. The same enemies recur in British and French troop journals: the mud, the rain, the cold, the shells, the lice and the rats. This was the common environment.25

Barbusse compared the dangers of mud and rain with that of enemy fire. Soldiers on a fatigue-party trying to dig a trench suddenly find themselves in the middle of a bombardment and a rainstorm. Lost and searching for a trench in which to take cover, the party is told that the mud and rain are pouring into the trenches.26 By morning, the party finds themselves in a swamp; the
trenches were filled with water and the bodies of men who could not escape the mud and who "died clinging to the yielding support of the earth." Of the whole devastating situation the protagonist tells us: "I used to think that the worst hell of war was the shells; and then for a long [time] I thought it was the suffocation of the caverns which eternally confine us. But it is neither of these. Hell is water." But inclement weather was not the only enemy in the trenches, soldiers also had to battle with rats and lice. The vermin in the trenches seemed to be in optimal conditions for reproducing, for they did so at a rapid pace. All of these conditions threatened soldiers' morale and lives. If dying in a painful, horrible way seemed inglorious, death due to disease or the loss of a limb from trench foot was humiliating. Thus, for many soldiers the reality of war sharply contrasted with their expectations. It was not a glorious adventure in which men went off to protect their nation and defend against potential tyranny, rather, war was a series of inglorious, humiliating and self-defeating experiences which ate away at soldiers' illusions. As the war dragged on, the reasons for continuing seemed to sink into the mire with so many dead soldiers.

It was on this last point that Siegfried Sassoon expressed his own anger and disillusionment with the war. Sassoon believed, as did his friend Robert Graves, that the war was to be a defensive and short one. However, by 1917, after three years of war and with no end in sight, Sassoon could take no more. In "an act of willful defiance of military authority," Sassoon wrote to his commanding officer: "I believe that the war is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it." Sassoon believed that he entered the war to defend, not to vindicate, and that had this been the chief objective, negotiations would have ended the war. The prolonged war combined with the "sufferings of the troops" led Sassoon to "protest against the deception which is being practiced on them." Sassoon believed that he had been deliberately misled, that the war for which they had volunteered was not the one they were fighting. Sassoon's statement is very telling of the horrible effects that disillusionment could have on a soldier: once the meaning of war was lost, the reasons for suffering were gone and there was little reason to continue. Suffering through disillusionment of ideal forms of war was difficult, but without an aim or purpose, it was impossible.

Sassoon, however, was unusual. Most men endured the war and their loss of ideals without much fanfare and despite losing ideals of heroism and glory, patriotism and duty remained effective for keeping them in the trenches and on the battlefield. Given the conditions of war and the constant threat to a soldier's life, the threat of court martial could not have been too great of a deterrent. Rather, it was the long-held and firmly established belief in one's duty to one's nation, comrades, and family that kept the soldiers in place. At the end of Barbusse's novel the soldiers committed to carrying on the battle to end the War and war in general, and to put an end to German militarism: "war must be killed...war must be killed in the belly of Germany" a soldier yelled to his comrades. War, despite disillusionment, was still a battle against the enemy, but it also became a battle to prevent future wars. Thus Sassoon's reaction to deception was not shared by most. Instead, for many soldiers disillusionment fed a greater sense of duty to future generations--soldiers did not want their children to have to go through it. Indeed, because soldiers moved away from self-pity, they were able to use their disillusionment as a cause: although they had been misled, future generations would not be so. Therefore, they still had a purpose and an obligation.

This purpose compelled soldiers to see through their disillusionment to a coping devise; one which fed the humor, self-effacement and sales of the trench magazines. The magazines assured readers that the war was the same for everybody while writers had an opportunity to vent their frustrations creatively. While trench magazines were outlets for soldiers' frustrations and fears, they did not have, like Barbusse's novel, graphic depictions of war. Instead, they had poems, short stories, and amusing advertisements that made fun of the war and depicted it as frustrating, but sufferable. The themes used helped to keep the troops amused and also to sway the onset of le cafard, the French term for what Helen McPhail describes as "deep melancholy
and an overwhelming sense of depression and misery which has no precise linguistic equivalent in the English vocabulary of the Great War."\textsuperscript{34} In this way disillusionment allowed soldiers to understand the reality of their situation and move forward to coping with it through reading and writing.

By late 1916, \textit{le cafard} began to take its toll on French and English troops, the wish to combat this malaise stirred would-be editors into action:

We hope to have the strength to fight against the dreaded cafard, the source of all misery, against the monstrous cafard which tortures us so terribly at times, seeking to ravage our ranks: to fight it – we hardly dare add to conquer it – is the primary purpose of this paper.\textsuperscript{35}

Here the editor looks beyond the obvious cause of \textit{le cafard}, the war, and instead urges the soldiers to battle it by reading his uplifting and entertaining newspaper. By contrast, editors of the English trench journals avoided stating a clear aim to their papers, but the intent is clearly implied by the content: the papers deal with the war as if it were a farce, a source of amusement carried on by foolish leaders. Though the approaches were different, the intent was the same: the magazines were intended to lift the reader's spirits, if only for a moment.

The journals did not suffer from lack of material; indeed the war was full of sources for mockery. Throughout the \textit{Wipers Times} and the \textit{B.E.F. Times} run advertisements for the "Hotel des Ramparts"\textsuperscript{36} and "Cloth Hall" at Ypres, advertising shows ranging from "The Three Sisters Hun-y" and "The Brothers Whizz-Bang"\textsuperscript{37} to the "celebrated male impersonator Little Willie"\textsuperscript{38} and "Professor Scrapper's performing troupe of highly-trained animals."\textsuperscript{39} Every paper began with an advertisement which made fun of the Germans, the weaponry, the army's leaders or themselves.

The papers continually sought to minimize the war and its effects by turning the conditions in which they lived into sources of soldiers' amusement. One example is found in the poem "Rats" where a rat and his wife open a tin of sardines, eat it, and then seal the time back up.\textsuperscript{40} Here the author took his own disgust with rats and turned it into an amusing tale for his comrades. In \textit{Tempora Mutantur}, the author claims that although he knows he played soldier as a boy, he cannot remember "how we fought the dirtiest foe of all, If we had mud then memory is a liar."\textsuperscript{41} Moreover, "no flight of fancy ever found me glad a filthy dug-out, full of rats, to see; I cannot e'er remember being mad chloride of lime to sample in my tea."\textsuperscript{42} Here the author mocks his own disillusionment by claiming that he simply did not remember playing war the way he actually was living it. In both of these poems the authors turned their disgust with the conditions of war into a source of distraction and entertainment for other soldiers. The disgust at the rats in the first poem is amusing and light, but in the second poem the theme is a bit more serious, but they both convey the frustration and disgust with the war in ways which minimize their frustration with the conditions.

The magazines also reflect the sentiment which by 1917 became more frequent: the soldier's desire to get away from the war. In a poem entitled "With Apologies to Rudyard Kipling" the soldier expresses his desire to escape the war through alcohol, sleep, or leave.\textsuperscript{43} An advertisement placed by "D. Haig, esq." encourages soldiers to enroll in the "Great Army Peace Movement."\textsuperscript{44} The reference is to Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, the leader of the British Army in France, hardly a leader of a peace movement. The war had, after three years, dragged on for far too long and the soldiers were more willing to express their desire to end the war than before.

When it did finally come to an end, the editor of the \textit{Better Times} summed up many soldiers' sentiments:
Although some may be sorry it's over, there is little doubt that the line men are not, as most of us have been cured of any illusions we may have had about the pomp and glory of war, and know it for the vilest disaster that can befall mankind.\textsuperscript{45}

The soldiers had learned that war was not the stuff of adventure stories, but that of horror novels. They had suffered through indescribable conditions and were fully exposed to the reality that was war. But this disillusionment with the war had been useful for the soldiers: through their anger and suffering they found a purpose through preventing future war and exposing this one for the nightmare that it was. This enabled soldiers to redirect their anger towards helping themselves sort out the meaning of the war and the result was the mocking, bitter, absurd writings of the trench magazines. Trench magazines were attempting to lift soldiers spirits through grim humor; attempts to do it through the usual sort of cheerleading would have failed because the soldiers were tired of hearing about glorious and heroic duty to their country. Not every soldier read or wrote for a trench magazine, but for those who did, it was an effective means of dealing with what was a potentially debilitating reality of death, vermin and filth. The need for humor in the face of these conditions was expressed in the poem "With the Usual Apologies":

If you can crawl through wire and crumpholes reeking with feet of liquid mud, and keep your head turned always to the place you are seeking, through dread of crying you will laugh instead, If you can fight a week in Hell's own image and at the end just throw you down and grin...You'll be a soldier one day, then, my son.\textsuperscript{46}

In this way disillusionment with the war enabled soldiers to find alternative means through which they could fulfill their obligations despite their anger at having lost the ideals of glory and heroism in war.

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\textsuperscript{1}Peter Parker, \textit{The Old Lie: The Great War and the Public-School Ethos} (London: Constable and Company Limited, 1987), 105.
\textsuperscript{3}\textit{Compact Unabridged Dictionary}, Special 2nd ed., s.v. "Illusion."
\textsuperscript{4}Parker, 17.
\textsuperscript{6}Parker, 116.
\textsuperscript{7}Ironically, one former English Public-School student translating \textit{The Iliad} in 1950 realized that he had not been given an entirely correct translation of the book as a child. Although there was a fascination with war in \textit{The Iliad}, the book was written "not to glorify war, but to emphasize its tragic futility". \textit{Ibid.}, 95.
\textsuperscript{8}F. J. Roberts and J. H. Pearson, eds., \textit{The Wipers Times: Including for the first time in one volume a facsimile reproduction of the complete series of the famous wartime trench magazines} (London: Eveleigh Nash & Grayson, 1930), \textit{B.E.F. Times} 2, no. 6 (February 26 1918): no page numbers given. Because this compilation contains many differently-titled trench magazines without page numbers, hereafter, I will refer to the specific journal and date in which a citation can be found.
\textsuperscript{9}\textit{Ibid.}, \textit{B.E.F. Times} 2, no. 2 (September 8 1917).
\textsuperscript{10}Parker, 129-130.
\textsuperscript{11}\textit{Ibid.}, 126-127.
\textsuperscript{13}Robert Graves, \textit{Good-Bye To All That} (New York: Blue Ribbon Books, 1930), 88.
16 Barbusse, 26.
17 *The B.E.F. Times* 2, no. 5, (January 22 1918).
19 Barbusse, 173.
22 *Ibid*.
25 Fuller, 59.
26 Barbusse, 330.
29 Denis Winter points out that the army made such diseases as trench foot (caused by standing in water for long periods of time) and trench fever (spread by lice) criminal, with punitive rehabilitation techniques employed in the cure. Denis Winter, *Deaths Men: Soldiers of the Great War* (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), 99.
30 Graves, 308.
33 Barbusse, 345.
36 *The Wipers Times*, et. al., passim.
38 *The Somme-Times* 1, no. 1, (July 31, 1916).
41 *Ibid*.
42 *Ibid*.
43 *The B.E.F. Times* 2, no. 3, (November 1, 1917).
44 *Ibid*.
45 *Better Times* 2, no.2 (December, 1918). No specific date given.
46 *The B.E.F. Times* 2, no. 3 (November 1, 1917).