

## Getting the Frame into the Picture: Wells, West, and the Mid-War Novel

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### Through/Behind the Window

It's one of the most iconic images of the Great War: two women support each other as they stare out a window, a child beside them, clinging. Outside, rolling hills, lushly green, and the end of a uniformed troop of soldiers, marching out of the frame: the caption is "Women of Britain Say—'GO!'" Created by the artist E. V. Kealey for the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee in 1915, the poster spawned imitations during the war itself, and has since become one of the most frequently cited visual texts in academic disputes about the significance and effect of Great War propaganda (Figure 1).

Yet whether we deem such posters, as in Jay Winter's view, part of a "grammar of consent" that reflected "an existing and powerful consensus" (38, 42), or see them as "rhetorics of shame and coercion" (Albrinck 323), we cannot help but acknowledge the way in which viewers are implicated in the poster's perspective. As viewers, we stand behind the women, "in" the interior space; the window frames our glimpse of the marching column. But the poster also makes available a species of double vision—one rarely acknowledged in analyses of its significance as part of the gendered regime of Great War propaganda discourse. If the framing within the poster delineates, as Meg Albrinck has suggested, gendered spaces and behaviors—locating the viewer in a noncombatant posture from which she will or will not assent to (and he be shamed by) the caption's exhortation—the double framing by window and poster's edge, the framing of the act of framing—simultaneously exposes these processes. Far more than other gendered propaganda exhortations ("Daddy, what did YOU do in the Great War?" and the like), "Women of Britain Say—'GO!'" operates as a self-conscious media artifact, commenting on the very construction of the viewer that it performs.

In its employment of and attention to the animating tropes of gendered propaganda, the poster thus implies two different reading practices, two different models for negotiation between the individual and the apparatus of manipulation—one that involves assent or

disputation within the formal and ideological frame, and the other that resists (as far as possible) such integration by exposure of its terms. If, as Mark Wollaeger has argued, the unprecedented British propaganda apparatus of the Great War helped precipitate a crisis of information control to which modernist form multiply represents both symptom and response,<sup>1</sup> “Women of Britain Say—‘GO!’” demonstrates such multiple negotiations already at work during the war itself.

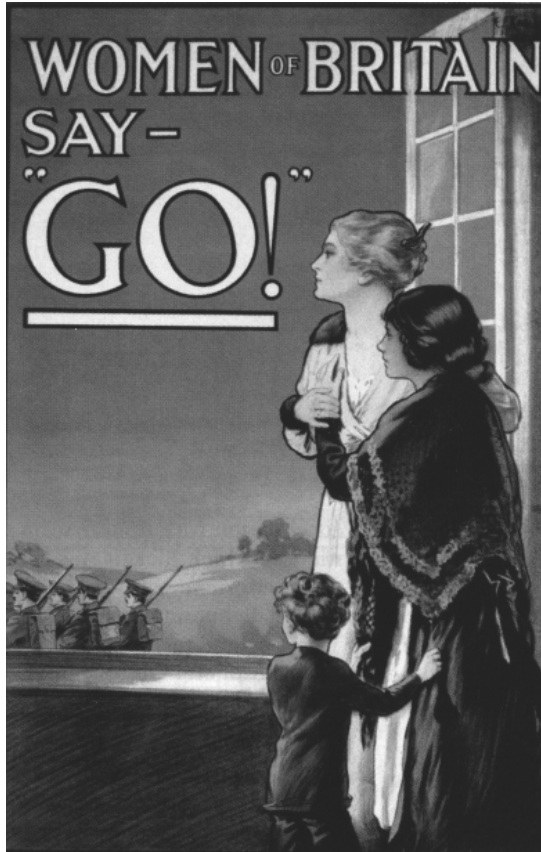


Figure 1. E. V. Kealey's recruitment poster, 1915.

The poster's tension between what one might call a diegetic, integrative relation to the propaganda message (engaging it within the frame) and an extradiegetic, metacritical one (engaging with the act of framing)<sup>2</sup> in fact reflects and illuminates the intertextual relations between two important wartime novels, H. G. Wells's *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* (1916) and Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918). Though both novels are deeply concerned with limning the pervasiveness

of propaganda, both official and unofficial, on the home front, Wells treats it as overt subject, measuring it through the disillusion of his protagonist, whose sloganeering must be revised by circumstance—yet he himself both reproduces without comment many gendered propaganda tropes, and structures the conclusion of his novel in such a way as to keep its revelations strictly, as it were, within the frame. West, by perhaps deliberate contrast, slips both acknowledged and unacknowledged imagery from wartime propaganda into the consciousness of her unreliable narrator to expose the broader operations of what Wollaeger, using Jacques Ellul's term, calls "integration propaganda."

As Wollaeger explains, integration propaganda includes not just the state manifestations of "official war culture,"<sup>3</sup> but also "more diffusely constellated organizations and institutions, such as advertising, public relations, and popular films, whose interactions effectively reinforce political propaganda" (9). Unlike in the top-down model of Horkheimer and Adorno's "culture industry," in Ellul's formulation individuals "collaborate in their own subjection" because the rationalizing processes of modernity—including, as here, war—create "needs that only propaganda can fill" (Wollaeger 9, 10). Such a concept is particularly germane to the propaganda environment of the Great War, in which state intervention, though unprecedented, was, as Patrick Deer notes, hardly monolithic, relying on the participation of "a largely loyal, patriotic, and often jingoistic Home Front press and mass culture" (37).

Among the needs that propaganda can provide is, signally, the comfort of closure. As I've discussed elsewhere, novels such as Wells's and West's, written during the course of the conflict, should be seen as compositions in crisis; they operate under a peculiar set of generic constraints over and above the well-documented material wartime restrictions of censorship, seizure, and prosecution, constraints that form and deform them in ways that set them apart from fictions written after the conflict, when closure is untroubled and myth is codified.<sup>4</sup> The epistemological suspension of mid-war writing, the problem of how one enacts closure when the times themselves refuse it, frequently involves the creation of a peculiar "framing" by genre that legitimates the consolations of a decisive ending—the "consoling coherence" that, as Wollaeger puts it, "is the special province of propaganda" (27).

Popular wartime fictions thus often garb in the trappings of genre, especially romance, the trajectory of the conversion narrative, which offers its own built-in teleology. As Jane Potter has chronicled, in such novels the satisfactory coming together of lovers both structurally coincides with and ideologically ennobles the inevitable parting-by-war of those lovers that served in lieu of closure. Such standardized plotting disguised as well the very uncertainties inherent in the neologism "home front." Even as the

dichotomy of *home* and *front* was destabilized by the new logic of total war these novels—like the diegetic scene of “Women of Britain Say—‘GO!’—reassuringly reasserted the absolute (and absolutely gendered) difference between those terms by their final emphasis on the soldier’s departure. And in moving towards a moment of valediction that was also an assertion of unity, they reflect a more general wartime embrace of the mechanics of conversion as a reassuring rationale for literary closure.

Indeed, virtually all Great War home front fiction can be read as conversion narrative, whether patriotic or pacifist, chronicling a shift in attitude towards the war and presenting it as exemplary. Romances like Ruby Ayres’s *Richard Chatterton, V.C.*, for instance, typically depict the “transformation” of effeminate slacker into manly patriot; the rhetoric of conversion is rendered in the terms of the romance, allowing for an emphatic closure in the acceptance of the newly masculinized soldier figure by his designated mate. If the narrative of conversion by definition enacts the initiation and socialization of an individual, his or her inscription into broader societal norms and practices (Peters 3), in Great War novels this translates into the individual’s incorporation into a figure of national unity (or often, in pacifist narratives, a projected universal spiritual unity). Not only is this of course a trajectory that’s perfectly adapted for the bearing of propaganda *messages*; more importantly, it reiterates the totalizing nature of most propaganda *form*.

The conclusion of a classic conversion narrative always exhorts the reader, explicitly or by implication, “go thou and do likewise.” In the mid-war narrative, such an exhortation—a definite imperative when definitive statement is elusive—amounts to a hubristic assertion of the author’s power. In other words, it claims to offer certainty that the mid-war world cannot. In some cases the plot itself becomes secondary, an excuse for the exhortatory performativity of its ending, and the security of the totalizing message, the assertion of meaning, that this allows.<sup>5</sup> While the conversion narrative may itself be a tightly structured genre, with defined and nearly constant attributes, it is also one that cannot acknowledge itself as such, cannot view itself as a *medium*: its coherence, dependent as it is on exemplarity, lies in the assumption of the exact contiguity between the diegetic and extradiegetic worlds.

### **The Public Private War**

Examining West’s and Wells’s novels in these terms illuminates the relationship between two books that have in the past been linked, if at all, only reductively, through the relationship of their authors. Indeed, it’s become a convention in West scholarship to lament the fact that despite her prominence as journalist, novelist, literary and cultural critic, and political savant—and despite a spate of recent efforts to establish her as a legitimate

presence within canons both modernist and intermodernist—much discussion of West's career is still circumscribed by the impulse to read it in light of her ten-year affair with Wells and the birth, on 4 August 1914, of their illegitimate child.<sup>6</sup> Early readings of *The Return of the Soldier*, written when West was living in seclusion after her son Anthony's birth, found it difficult to escape a kind of biological determinism: and the book may be West's only novel consistently in print as much because of its surface endorsement of a comforting and essentialist myth of motherhood seen as organically derived from West's own maternity as for its subtle experimentalism, its accessible anti-war message, and its compact, undergraduate-friendly, readability. In fact, however, the treatment of motherhood in *Return of the Soldier* represents a vital element in the novel's nuanced exposure of the operations of integration propaganda, highlighting the appropriation of maternalism for propaganda purposes as an essential element of wartime discourse.

The amusing but inessential linkages between the novels on a private level—the scattered in-jokes of reference to sites and images of the ongoing affair<sup>7</sup>—have thus unfortunately obscured the more important relation between them: that West's novel both answers and corrects the gendered apparatus of Wells's conversion narrative and comments formally on *Britling's* relation to mediation by its exposure of the process of "framing." *The Return of the Soldier*, in fact, takes on—in the sense of combating, rather than imitating—many features of *Mr. Britling Sees It Through*: in its spareness, its viscosity, its embrace of the modernist principle of "show, don't tell," its foregrounding of the processes of representation through the flawed observations of its unreliable narrator, it implicitly counters Wells's own conviction that a "novel of ideas" must necessarily center on explicit discussion, on "magnified and crystallized conversations and meditations" ("The Novel of Ideas" 220).<sup>8</sup> By doubly framing through narrative unreliability the "conversion" of her narrator, Jenny, West critiques the kind of diegetic closure that Wells creates at the end of *Mr. Britling*, with his protagonist's sudden, jarring embrace of what he dubs the "Finite God." While both novels function as home front diagnoses, *in medias res*, of the national flaws that led England into war, West's work is assertively darker, pointedly striking down the very structural consolations in which Wells's novel allows itself to indulge.

Serialized in *The Nation* beginning in May of 1916, and published that September to enormous success, *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* chronicles the mental gymnastics and shifting attitudes of a capaciously verbal, intellectually expansive Wells-surrogate in the days leading up to and during the first year of the war, from his first conception of the conflict as "the end of forty years of evil suspense" somehow both "crisis and solution" (196), on to mounting anger and disillusionment. By mid-1915, Britling is bemoaning the death of idealism, the fact that the war has become "a war like any other .

. . . a war that has lost its soul” (351); and the death of his son Hugh catapults him—until his discovery of the “Finite God”—into overweening despair.

From the outset this is a tale of transmutation and conversion played out by and through media, reflecting Wells’s belief that “this was a struggle in which Opinion was playing a larger and more important part than it had ever done before” (*War and the Future* 241). Britling, to whom the American visitor Direck comes as a kind of pilgrim in the year before the war, in hopes that the great man will bring “the best thought of the age” to his group of “thoughtful Massachusetts business men,” is “distinguished,” “in the *Who’s Who* of two continents” (7, 9); his pronouncements have been disseminated widely, and Direck regards him as a kind of prophet. The text mocks the way Direck’s expectations for his meeting with Britling are peculiarly shaped by his reliance on predigested formulations—being in Britain is like “travelling in literature,” he thinks (6)—and the media distillation of “personality.” This is underscored by the depiction of Direck as himself a kind of media production, who measures his past humiliation in love by the fact that “they had made jokes about him in the newspapers” (70): “He was very much after the fashion of that clean and pleasant-looking person one sees in the advertisements one sees in American magazines, that agreeable person who smiles and says ‘Good, it’s the Fizzig Brand,’ or ‘Yes, it’s a Wilkins, and that’s the Best,’ or ‘My shirt-front never rucks; it’s a Chesson.’ But now he was saying, still with the same firm smile, ‘Good. It’s English’” (4). But Direck finds both England and Britling somehow both bigger and messier than expected, less reducible to “epigram,” “dictum,” or image: “No photographer had ever caught a hint of his essential Britlingness” (33, 34, 9).

Indeed, Direck’s reliance on packaging and the performance of “personality” through media is represented initially as distinctively American, an American failing—and something against which Britling has inveighed in print. But when war comes and the narrative lodges itself squarely in Britling’s consciousness—that consciousness which is the novel’s true subject—it becomes clear that Britling himself, despite his constant self-differentiation from the constructors and consumers of facile judgments, is apt to fall into a similar trap. Even his last-ditch optimism in the summer of 1914 relies on the mediated image of personality: “[The Emperor] is—if Herr Heinrich will allow me to agree with his own German comic papers—sometimes a little theatrical, sometimes a little egotistical, but in his operatic, boldly coloured way he means peace. I am convinced he means peace . . .” (125).

As the war progresses, even as Britling tracks the appearance of and dismisses as facile new forms of propaganda and sloganeering—“new and more resonant” headlines, “watchwords” such as “Business as Usual,” and “Leave it to Kitchener” (209)—his own constant resort is to the act of

framing pithy summations as a mechanism for shaping the world, “texts” on which he can “enlarge”—beginning with “And Now War Ends.” He begins, horribly, to perceive the futility of this process: “All his talking and thinking became to him like the open page of a monthly magazine. Across it this bloody smear, this thing of red and black, was dragged. . . .” (240). Yet when the bombing of civilians gives him a vital experience of the horror of war “as if he had never perceived anything of the sort before, as if he had been dealing with stories, pictures, shows and representations that he knew to be shams” (291)—it sends him again in search of a phrase to sum it up and circulate for “comfort and conviction”—even if that phrase is not of his own devising: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (298).

Britling, in other words, exhibits a prewar naïve reliance on media, then a critical sensitivity to its flaws shaped by wartime dependence on censored bulletins—which is undercut by the reassertion of the desire to speak “through” it, to sum up the war’s truths in pithy slogans, to attain, in Wollaeger’s terms, “consoling coherence.” This progression—clearly patterned on Wells’s own propaganda exertions and ideological struggles of the months before<sup>9</sup>—would seem, then, to indicate the novel as both self-exposure and exposure of the operations of mediation, a metacritical double framing similar to that available to the viewers of “Women of Britain Say—GO!” Indeed, Wells’s metaphor for the operation of public opinion initially implies that this is the case, as he chronicles “a confusion of headlines and a rearrangement of columns in the white windows of the newspapers through which those who lived in the securities of England looked out upon the world” (160).

Yet Wells’s novel, notably, exempts *itself* from the category of media. Wells’s ventriloquistic inclusion, late in the book, of Hugh’s letters to his father from the front, not only lets him express (as he explained in a late essay) “things that could be said in no other way” (“The Novel of Ideas” 219), but also allows him to legitimize his home front narrative with the “authentic” soldier’s voice. This “artificial authenticity in service of ‘true facts,’” much like that which characterized British propaganda itself (Wollaeger 26), gained credibility from Wells’s obtrusive autobiographical patterning of his hero; indeed, Wells received hundreds of cards offering sympathy for his “son’s” death.<sup>10</sup> In “voicing” Hugh without acknowledging his own mediating performance, Wells simultaneously exploits and transcends his authorial status as noncombatant, a status that even early in the war had come to be represented as separated from the soldier’s by a chasm of unspeakable knowledge.<sup>11</sup> West, by contrast, in *The Return of the Soldier*, refigures that chasm as an emblem of willed ignorance that serves as a synecdoche for a broader social blindness.

### Reading the Frame

As in *Britling*, the opening of *The Return of the Soldier* plunges the reader into a wartime world of mediation. Joanna Scutts has ably detailed how the text, despite its spareness, is saturated with reference to print and visual media, from letters to popular magazines to the local newspaper to the “war-films”—undoubtedly 1916’s *The Battle of the Somme*<sup>12</sup>—that demonstrate “how embedded the novel is in the mediated contemporary moment” (7). But it’s not just, as Scutts claims, that the novel is “strikingly prescient in its consideration of the effects of the . . . media in shaping human experience” (1); rather, the novel self-consciously performs such mediation, constantly alerting its reader to the disjunction between diegetic and extradiegetic worlds.

The plot itself is almost fabulistic: Chris Baldry’s shell-shock has caused him to forget fifteen years of this life—the years in which took over the family business, he married his brittle and privileged wife Kitty, expensively remodeled his family estate, and fathered and buried a son—to return mentally to the idyllic summer when he was in love with Margaret Allington, an innkeeper’s daughter. Though the women of Baldry Court see Margaret, now a worn suburban wife, as “a spreading stain on the fabric” of their lives (17), their snobbery and materialism is rebuked by the spiritual communion she shares with Chris. At novel’s end, Margaret voluntarily brings back Chris’s memory, even though doing so means to return him both to Kitty and to the battlefield: he walks back to the house observed from the window by his cousin Jenny, the narrator, and Kitty, once more “Every inch a soldier” (90).

This final tableau, as many critics have observed, seems to deliberately invoke the diegetic scene of “Women of Britain Say—GO!” But the novel itself emphasizes the constructedness of that last scene by establishing it as one of a series of similar images framed within Jenny’s narration. From her unstable and secondary position at Baldry Court, where she is a dependent relation, Jenny constantly looks out the window—assuming the posture of the owner of the landowner’s “view”—to secure her status and “frame” her sense of self. Seen from the posture of an insider, the “miles of emerald pastureland” and “suave decorum of the lawn” (4) comfort her by allowing her to shape and control her world—though as Wollaeger notes, even that tenuous ownership is no longer safe (218). A mediated modernity has already further destabilized it, dissipating the singular aura of the image Jenny frames by disseminating it through the popular press; “You probably know the beauty of that view” she tells the reader (4).<sup>13</sup> Yet the act of aesthetic framing—framing against instability—continues to be Jenny’s refuge and fallback position throughout the novel. She focuses, for instance, on an art object, a “white naked nymph” crouching in a black bowl to restore her assumptions about “Chris’ conception of women,” to



Margaret's detriment (56, 57); later, when her allegiance has shifted toward Margaret, she encapsulates the image of them lying together in the woods as itself the essence of emblematic beauty and truth: "If humanity forgets these attitudes there is an end to the world" (69-70). Jenny's framing is the response to modern uncertainty of one sort of modernist artist, or propagandist, the creation of a pocket totality.

But Jenny's acts of framing are not West's.<sup>14</sup> Rather, Jenny's picture-making—echoing the nostalgic artificiality of visual propaganda—is used by West to foreground for the reader the constructed and contingent nature of her viewpoint, and the corresponding salience of the "framing" that is her narration. The implied reader may be drawn, as in the poster, to stand with Jenny at the window, to see what she sees, and move, like her, away from an identification with Kitty's aestheticized classism to a valorization of Margaret's spiritual beauty,<sup>15</sup> but never without an awareness of how Jenny's limitations set the parameters for such identification. If Jenny's shift of affiliation forms the basis for a diegetic narrative of conversion in the classic wartime mold, that conversion narrative itself, through double framing, becomes the subject of extradiegetic critique.

Key to West's argument here is her highlighting of discourses of maternalism in structuring the ostensible either-or decision, Kitty versus Margaret, implied by the exigencies of the romance plot. The novel opens with Kitty in the nursery of her dead child, where she is neither mourning her past loss nor anguishing over a possible future one by fretting for her absent soldier husband; rather, she is brushing her hair, since "this is the sunniest room in the house" (4); indeed, she regrets that Chris has preserved it as a nursery in the dead child's memory. Margaret, who is later revealed to have also lost a child, is by contrast from the outset a figure of maternal generosity and compassion: "when she picks up facts," says Chris, she "gives them a motherly hug" (36).

West undercuts Jenny's overt celebration, in her eventual championship of Margaret, the working-class "natural" mother, whose instinct is to protect Chris's soul rather than his property, by exposing the integration propaganda imbedded in Jenny's "converted" vision. Through a gauze of religious imagery, Jenny both ennobles Margaret—she refers to her as "a patron saint," a "mystic," a "martyr," "transfigured in the light of eternity"—and elides the reality of Margaret's lived life by reading her poverty as deliberate "sacrifice" (77, 78, 47, 66-67, 71). The glorification of Margaret as protective mother figure reaches its apotheosis in Jenny's use of the Pietà image: Margaret watches over Chris, "mournfully vigilant," as he lies "in the confiding relaxation of a sleeping child, his hands unclenched and his head thrown back so that the bare throat showed defenselessly" (69).

West here alludes to the widespread use of the *mater dolorosa* figure in wartime propaganda both official and unofficial. Through Jenny's limited

vision, she confronts the rhetoric of a patriotic maternalism that itself had reconfigured as a positive trope Olive Schreiner's minatory image of sons as "the primal munition of war" (174), with "the nurturing of babies . . . as a sort of vicarious form of killing uniquely accessible to women" (Gullace 62). In the wartime context, the image that Jenny exalts does not, as she would have it, point to Chris's safety, but to his state-sanctioned role as sacrifice, preparing the way for the enactment of maternal "duty" in returning Chris to the battlefield.<sup>16</sup> As Nicoletta Gullace has shown, the suffrage bill enacted in 1918 just before the publication of *The Return of the Soldier* was largely configured as what Millicent Fawcett termed "a motherhood franchise," earned by "sacrifice and the blood of their sons" (193).<sup>17</sup> Both Kitty, then, as exemplar of the "parasite woman" against whom West (following Schreiner) had inveighed in her prewar writings, and Margaret, as the sacrificial mother, prove complicit in the operation of the war economy, rendering Jenny's "conversion" moot.<sup>18</sup>

Within the frame, Jenny's shift in affiliation is best read as a mode of securing her claim to "know" Chris—a knowledge that serves, like her poor-relation position within the household, as a substitute for a status she can never claim, that of the beloved. It is her supposed "knowledge" that she thrusts upon us, first in one mode, then the other, first by her assumption that "This house, this life with us, was the core of [Chris's] heart" (7), then by her claim that "[Chris and Margaret] were naturally my friends, these gentle speculative people" (63). Most saliently, Jenny performs her "knowledge" of Chris by claiming and redacting his narrative of his youthful idyll with Margaret on Monkey Island, which stands as a central chapter on its own: "I have lived so long with the story which he told me that I cannot now remember his shy phrases. But this is how I have visualized his meeting with love on his secret island. I think it is the truth" (33). Later, she creates an imaginative projection of his spiritual "choice" of the past and Margaret as taking place in a ruined French town "somewhere behind the front" while his shell-shocked body "lies out . . . in the drizzle" (66). This appropriation of the soldier's voice is markedly different from that in *Mr. Britling Sees It Through*; far from bolstering authorial authority through the pretense of transparency, it serves as a marker of the limitations of both Jenny's ideologically constructed viewpoint and her narrative power,<sup>19</sup> and thus another reminder of the action of mediation.

### **Women of Britling Say—"GO!"**

It's significant here that Wells's analysis of his own oeuvre invokes the metaphor of picture and frame. As he explicates the trope in his late *Experiment in Autobiography*, the "frame" stands for "the assumption of social fixity" within which the action of nineteenth-century realist fiction took place: "the criticism of [the English novel] began to be irritated and

perplexed when, through a new instability, the splintering frame began to get into the picture. I suppose for a time I was the outstanding instance among writers of fiction in English of the frame getting into the picture" (416). In seeking to expose the *ideological* framing by which the novel itself is built, Wells's aim is clearly the same as West's. But by the time *Britling* was written he insisted on privileging his authorial position in order to do so.

One can argue, in fact, that in this respect it was West, not Wells, who absorbed the methodological lessons of Wells's own "scientific romances," and that *The Return of the Soldier* adopts and adapts the genre-bending and fabulistic spareness of those early works to comment on Wells's messy *Britling*-era sprawl. Indeed, in West's novel such experimental form is the chief mode of political critique. In particular, the surface structure of West's novel recapitulates and tropes in multiple ways on that of *The Time Machine*: in its schematized class-based dualism; its narrative framing of "excursions" out of present time; the violence of its sundering, through technology, between present and past; the symbolic mobilization of architectural relic and ruin, even the ideologically-dependent unreliability of its overtly truthful narrator.

Building on such techniques, West's formal deployment of propaganda imagery such as those derived from the *mater dolorosa* and "Women of Britain Say—GO!" itself, allowing that imagery to percolate from beneath Jenny's consciousness, exposes the operation and integration of such imagery. But it answers and corrects as well the gendered sentimentalism of *Mr. Britling Sees It Through*. Wells's use of the ingénue character Cissie Corner as naïve mouthpiece, counterpointing the intellectual fervency of his main character's development, reduplicates rather than investigates the mobilization of women's images for military purposes at the same time as it assumes and thus forgives their lack of agency. The romance of Cissie and Direck in effect recapitulates the deployment of women in official propaganda over the first years of the conflict. Falling in love with Cissie, Direck perceives her as nationally emblematic: "She had to be in the picture and so she came in as if she were the central figure, as if she were the quintessential England" (68). As the war progresses, she thus functions for him as a shifting icon of womanhood—first the Madonna-like potential victim of German "outrages," over whom he offers to "throw the mantle of Old Glory," then Britannia as anti-Lysistrata, disciplining and channeling his virility by casting herself as an Amazonian alternative: "If I were a man—!" (212, 216, 360). From this exemplary position her repeated disparagement of American neutrality functions like the guilt-inducing slogan of "Women of Britain Say—Go!"—and results in Direck's enlistment, at novel's end, in the Canadian army.

On meeting Cissie, Direck is as romantically struck by her independence (as evidenced in her lack of feminine self-consciousness, her

aggressive hockey playing, and her reading of Tommaso Campanella's *City of the Sun*, with its eugenic treatment of sex) as much as by her "merciful" English eyes, and her look, as she holds her sister's child, of "a silvery Madonna" (71, 60). But as a character Cissie functions *only* as icon, is as limited as most Wells heroines, whose destinies, as Bonnie Kime Scott has noted, are subsumed in the Wellesian heroes they encounter (113): the tendency in Cissie to "think for [herself]. Almost fiercely" (62) that Britling approvingly notes to Direck reveals itself to the reader as the habit of quoting Britling. Her seeming passivity towards finding a civic role for herself other than caring for her sister Letty's child—despite her continued emphasis on the need to "do something definite for the world at large" (146)—is particularly disturbing in that the novel uses it to emblemize women's wartime role. While part of the character's flaccidity is due to Britling's hypertrophy, it is just this incomplete agency to which West repeatedly objected in Wells's delineation of his female characters.<sup>20</sup> Here the imbalance works to undercut both Britling's and Wells's public pronouncements about the war's potential significance as a catalyst for what Britling calls "the Northern tendency" to "diminish the specialisation of women as women" (257).<sup>21</sup> Cissie's prowess at hockey is asked to stand in for female efforts in the public sphere, as are Letty's fantasy of assassinating the "war makers" and the "several certificates" to which Mrs. Britling's volunteerism is reduced (379, 250). The only instance of "war-work" we see is Letty taking over for Teddy, her soldiering husband, as Britling's secretary, a domestic version of "dilution" that serves as the occasion for marital ragging (243).

Indeed, in this ostensibly public novel, the women serve a private function; poster-like caricatures, they project—like Cissie—Britling's own needs and desires, or act as irritants against which he can refine his ideas. Thus the only politically active women Britling encounters are Tory harridans whose appropriation of jingoistic privilege enables his rejection of the rhetoric of hate. His mistress, Mrs. Harrowdean, is by contrast a creature of aesthetic raptures and manipulative femininity, who urges him to reject "reality and newspapers" for poetic "Beautyland" and affirms his commitment to public service by her very "winsome feebleness" at the advent of war (141, 221). Whereas West makes clear the tie between Kitty's cultivated aestheticism and her class privilege, indicting what, following Schreiner, she termed the "parasite woman" (115) as complicit in the "civilizing mission" (75) of war and empire, Wells configures Mrs. Harrowdean as a personal impediment to Britling's progress, "like running your car into a soft wet ditch" (110).

Most importantly, as an intertextual reading of West's novel makes clear, it is only by his elision of the wartime power of maternalist discourse that Wells is able to appropriate the language of sacrifice that supports the teleology of his conversion narrative. *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* redirects

but still depends on the model of the sanctified sacrifice: both Britling's son Hugh and the family's German tutor, Heinrich, wind up dead, in effect, to bring about Britling's revelation, and his affirmation of God as the means to the World Republic. Though by 1915 the mourning mother was already the visible emblem of patriotic unity and "the embodiment of the civilian experience of war" (Grayzel 228-29), such figures are conspicuously absent from the novel, with the single female in mourning dress depicted as a "vulture" (345). Wells makes Britling's wife only Hugh's less-than-sympathetic stepmother so as to highlight the primacy of the father-claim, before which she falls back chastened and nearly mute: "It is so dreadful for you. . . . I know how you loved him" (369).

Though Britling communes in shared grief with Letty when she despairs, finally, of her "missing" husband, she too is forced to defer to the ineffable difference of fatherly loss—"less intimate, and more personally important" (392)—a loss that enables Britling to hold out to Letty the hope of the Finite God. That Teddy, on the heels of this talk, miraculously reappears, having escaped his German captors and made his way across Europe, serves as a narrative sign attesting to "this new idea of a friendly God, who had a struggle of his own, who could be thought of as kindred to Mr. Britling" (400). Thus, in a sense, Britling *becomes* God, allowing the sacrifice of his beloved son. Wells's effacement of the *mater dolorosa* figure allows Britling full transformative ownership of the death of "My Hugh," his vision of a sacrifice that "will have brought the great days of peace and man's real beginning nearer" (368, 396). But it is exactly this sacrifice that West will not countenance, this blinkered comfort she will not allow.<sup>22</sup>

The sacrifice that allows for closure allows as well for the reaffirmation of the author's power, that power that the uncertainties of mid-war composition threaten to undermine; moreover, the overt identification between Wells and Britling makes it imperative that such reaffirmation occur within the novel's frame. Wells's letters to West during the writing of *Britling* show him struggling with the novel; though he begins by stating confidently that he can "feel a fine big amoosing novel ahead," wartime events derail him, and he complains that, "everything in life is conspiring to make an utter mess of that book."<sup>23</sup> In other words, he is having trouble *shaping* it. In the final chapter of *Mr. Britling Sees it Through*, a similar collapse of writerly omniscience seems to be signaled by Britling's inability to finish a letter to the German tutor's family that will encapsulate the war's lessons; the text gives way to a "fac-simile" (430) page of emotive scrawls that recall *Clarissa's* Mad Papers (or perhaps Wells's version of modernist experiment). David Glassco argues that this moment "breaks down the formal integrity of the novel" (33), and Celia Kingsbury reads it as a kind of aphasia, as Britling's muting in response to the "socially sanctioned violence. . . . he has with his own words promoted" (82).<sup>24</sup>

However, the novel clearly establishes this final struggle as the dark night of the soul before conversion, leading to a new affirmation and a new phase in the production of public discourse: the book itself is testament to Wells's continued belief in the efficacy of his own writing.<sup>25</sup> (Indeed, a letter Wells wrote to Mary Butts, whom he was hoping to enlist to help him translate the novel, makes clear that that far from functioning as a statement of depletion, or as a metacritical exposure of novelistic device, the letter was in fact designed to be what Britling designed it to be: "a sort of message from England to Germany" (*Correspondence* 444, 14 February 1916).) This final chapter is entitled "Mr. Britling Writes Until Sunrise"; Britling writes, in other words, until his writing culminates in his revelatory celebration of "our sons who have shown us God" (432), and the new dawn carries with it the promise of a new mode of Britling discourse, to be expounded with evangelical fervor. Even the unarticulable trauma of war can only temporarily unsettle—shake, but not permanently stir—the Wellsian model of didactic self-packaging; the book, like all of Wells's novels, is a lesson, one that, as we are assured, Wells has learned in time to pass along to the rest of us. As Freda Kirchwey of the *Nation* put it, he offers "all the world in tempting cans with lively labels" (308).

Indeed, *Mr. Britling Sees It Through*, despite its overt engagement with the daily detail of wartime life, implicitly renders the writer's eternally churning mind the most salient arena of action, a kind of demiurgic subcontractor for the Finite God; by contrast, West's self-conscious narrative forces the frame into the picture, registering the operation of the very generic illusions on which her tale relies, those that sustain the social fantasies of patriarchy. Whereas West succeeds through her inward, Jamesian exploration of representation in articulating political substance through modernist style, it is, paradoxically, the ostensibly centrifugal, idealist *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* that seems to collapse back in on itself, intent on the seething responses of a single mind. Evading the despair that logically follows from the tortuous musings of his protagonist-self, Wells opts for artificial closure, enabled by Britling's discovery of the "Finite God"; as Samuel Hynes puts it, he ties God "to the end of the novel like a hook on a fishing line" (133). Just as Jenny does with her hagiographic elevation of Margaret, Britling invents the God he needs; and West's exposure of the self-delusion implicit in Jenny's construction serves to illuminate Wells's embrace of Britling's.

As Laura Cowan has noted, that no "apt or workable model" for identity, no adequate choice, exists within *The Return of the Soldier* is, itself, the point (304): the alternatives are presented from within a consciousness itself molded by the system West is critiquing, the gendered economic system that led to the war. Jenny is capable of reversing the terms of her received values, but not of imagining her way out of them—and, unlike Wells, West

refuses to indulge in a *deus ex machina* that will allow her to do so. At the novel's end, despite her own new loathing for the return of the soldier to the war, Jenny accedes to that return as an inevitable feature of "reality." Like Margaret's, her very instincts, her best impulses, are constrained and co-opted by the terms of integration propaganda; there is, for Jenny, no "outside the system," nothing outside the frame. It is left to readers, in recognizing the double frame of Jenny's narrative, to recognize the systemic overhaul that would be necessary to remove her blinders.

Margaret Stetz, in convincingly arguing that Jenny's philosophical growth is the actual subject of the book, thus takes us only so far: as far as Jenny herself, as far as Mr. Britling. West's novel, by exposing the fallacy of religious consolation, "the illusion that a wise and benevolent woman" (Margaret as Madonna), can put things right ("Drinking the Wine of Truth" 76), serves not, or not only, as an endorsement of individual philosophical growth, but as a propagandistic exposure of integration propaganda. As such it is itself propaganda, a radical call for social change. Jenny's final view through the window of Baldry Court, registering a painful awareness of Chris as refitted to the Procrustean bed of capitalist masculinity, is framed by its ideological as by its architectural structures; the self-revealing narrative, by "putting the frame into the picture," turns that carceral "house of conduct" (79) into a house of cards to be demolished by readerly intervention. Unlike Jenny's, West's narrative is the reverse of quietistic; rather, it serves up the socialist-feminist arguments of her prewar journalism folded neatly into a romance package, like a file baked into a cake. To understand the mediatizing framework of the book is to recognize that (*pace* Stetz) the conversion narrative is not its core—or rather, that its obtrusive centrality is both deliberate and vexed, that it *is*, rather than carries, the subject. While recapitulating the forms of wartime popular fiction, overtly embracing the logic of conversion, *The Return of the Soldier* in fact simultaneously interrogates and subverts the genre's conventions. It serves as the negative image of Ruby Ayres-style romances, with the cowed and drooping figure of its male protagonist at novel's end ironically hailed as "every inch a soldier" (188), and valediction promising only soldiering on. Where Wells's text, like most wartime novels, defies the war's uncertainty by an assertion of mastery, West's acknowledges rather than defies the war's lack of closure, explicitly making use of the apparatus of the conversion narrative as Peter Brooks says Flaubert made use of Balzacian conventions—as an "armature of readability" (177) from which to unsettle those same conventions.

Thus Wollaeger's assertion that *The Return of the Soldier* "narratizes" the poster "Women of Britain Say—'GO!'" is both correct and limited; it's rather *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* that does that, casually, as part of its duplication of media tropes. West, instead, narratizes the construction of the viewer, by using the formal elements of a self-conscious

narrative to “put the frame into the picture”—exhibiting what Julian Murphet has identified as perhaps *the* key measure of modernism, a sense of the “becoming-media of the arts” (5). Yet to impose a teleological framework here—Wells as a “transitional figure” in some inexorable progression toward modernism,<sup>26</sup> West as somehow “further along”—is far less useful than to recognize the two novels as representing two modes of response to a new emphasis on information control accentuated by the propaganda practices of the Great War. In other words, the novels represent two temporally coexisting tendencies that one can identify with different *modes* of modernism. Wells’s demiurgic control, despite the realist basis of his fiction, has more in common with the totalizing mythologies of high modernism than most literary histories have acknowledged, while West’s work represents a self-consciously mediated response to such mythologies. While both novels function as formal responses to and acts of propaganda, recognizing their different modes of negotiation helps fill our picture of the relation between the Great War and an ever more slippery “modernism.”

### Notes

1. Wollaeger memorably describes propaganda and modernism as “proximate information practices” (xvi).
2. Though these terms are differently valenced in different critical fields, they generally refer to the “action” of a text on the characterological level (diegetic) versus that on the level of production (extradiegetic); the classic illustration in film studies involves the distinction between music produced by a character versus that which exists on the soundtrack, commenting on the characters’ world. The best-known critical apparatus for discussing levels of narrative diegesis is Gerard Genette’s *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*.
3. The term is Patrick Deer’s; see *Culture in Camouflage*. Deer argues that the First World War involved an “unstable” and incomplete war culture that gained force and shape over the interwar period (27).
4. As such they trouble both conventional and revisionist accounts of the relationship between the war and modernism, including those that criticize the canonization of fragmentary narrative; see most recently Einhaus. For an earlier version of this argument see my *Remapping the Home Front*.
5. One thinks particularly in this connection of the wartime novels of Mrs. Humphry Ward. Take, for example, *Missing* (1917), in which a nearly arbitrary plot is ruthlessly shoved aside in the final pages. The plot revolves around two sisters, the passively winsome Nelly and the domineering Bridget, who resents her sister’s marriage to George, an insufficiently wealthy man. George goes off to war and is quickly reported missing; Bridget uses his absence as an excuse to encourage Nelly’s growing friendship with the local squire, Sir William Farrell. When George turns up comatose in a



French hospital, Bridget, who's asked to identify him, denies his identity in order to leave her sister free to marry. To this melodramatic plot is yoked the last fifth of the novel, which recapitulates in brief all the elements of the classic conversion narrative: Nelly travels from the darkness of George's death and Bridget's betrayal into the light; she recognizes her passivity and self-pity as a kind of sin; training at a hospital, she undergoes the symbolic mutilation that Gerald Peters pinpoints as marking the transition to "a new social self" (Peters 27). She feels that she is "born again" knowing only "that she was uplifted, strengthened—to endure and to serve" (387, 398); finally, she has the urge to testify and "convert" others. The ending looks forward to a possible union between Nelly and Farrell, but only after further ennobling endurance and service, a state that the author implicitly calls upon the readers to share. What George Otte sees as George's quick and convenient death (275) and Helen Small refers to as the novel's "relative lack of interest" in Bridget (36) are actually markers of Ward's insistence on achieving an exemplary, hortatory closure.

6. This tendency has only been exacerbated by recent popular works on Wells (such as David Lodge's *A Man of Parts* and James Kent's BBC Wells biopic *War with the World*), West (Susan Hertog's *Dangerous Ambition*) or both (*Uncommon Arrangements*, by "postfeminist" pontificator Katie Roiphe).

7. The most notable instances of such reference in *The Return of the Soldier* is the use of Monkey Island, the site of West's and Wells's trysts, as the location of Chris and Margaret's idyll; the name "Bert Wells" for the "town chap" who piques Chris's jealousy, and the limning of the psychiatrist in the final chapter in the image of Wells himself. In *Mr. Britling Sees it Through* there is a character named Cissie (West's real name was Cicely Fairfield) who, like West, has a sister named Letty. But although autobiographical elements are far more prevalent in Wells's novel—from Wells's snide portrait of his former mistress Elizabeth von Arnim to his depiction of his own terrible driving to the details of the local enthusiasm for hockey at his marital home—few critics would be likely to see these as the determinants of this or any other Wells novel. Paradoxically, the very centrality of autobiographical equivalents leads them to be assumed and discounted.

8. Wells retrospectively schematized his novelistic differences with West in such a way as to deny her all claim to the political: "She writes like a loom producing her broad rich fabric with hardly a thought of how it will make up into a shape, while I write to cover a frame of ideas. . . . She prowled in the thickets and I have always stayed close to the trail that leads to the World-State" (*H.G. Wells in Love* 102). Wells phrases his criticisms in such a way as to construe West's divergent methodology as character flaw, her embrace of modernism as gendered obstinacy: "she exalted James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence as if in defiance of me," he goes on. Wells's resistance

to literary modernism, which he here configures as itself dangerously, femininely undisciplined, is tellingly defensive.

9. Wells was one of the many notable writers summoned by C. F. G. Masterman to Wellington House at the launching of the War Propaganda Bureau, and produced a great flood of verbiage in the form of pamphlets, articles, and letters before and during the writing of the novel—most notably “The War That Will End War” (September 1914), clearly the model for Britling’s “And Now War Ends.” The phrase was to dog his career, “an ironic catch phrase for subsequent generations” (Buitenhuis 120). In that essay he declared that “the ultimate purpose of this war is propaganda, the destruction of certain beliefs, and the creation of others” (91).

10. David Smith implies that these letters are those of Kurt Bulow, the German tutor to Wells’s children who was the model for the tutor Heinrich in the novel (Wells, *Correspondence* 445 FN 4). Yet even if they served as source material, Wells remediated that material, and suffused it with English schoolboy ardor and argot, to form the “authentic” voice of Hugh.

11. Wells himself chafed mightily, especially early in the war, at the forcible inactivity of the noncombatant, and waged a campaign in the letters column of the *Times* demanding the creation of a uniformed and armed home guard: “At present we non-army people are doing only a fraction of what we would like to do for our country. We are not being used. We are made to feel out of it . . .” (*Correspondence* 393, c. 25 October 1914).

12. The reference to film and other internal evidence locates the action of the novel in late 1916, after conscription had begun; the implication is that Chris has been invalidated home from the Somme offensive. The Secret War Propaganda Department at Wellington House “sponsored filmmakers with increasing regularity from 1916” when “with casualties mounting and no obvious end to the war in sight, the need for domestic propaganda was seen as increasingly necessary to counter flagging morale” (Clark 45).

13. Indeed, almost every overt mention of media is tied to such encroachment: thus, Kitty’s expostulation, “If he could send that telegram he isn’t ours any longer” (17).

14. Margaret Stetz calls attention to this recurrent visuality in West’s fiction: “The hallmark of a Rebecca West novel is the scene, framed as if in the rectangle of a canvas, in which the moral understanding of an action becomes coexistent with and inseparable from the visual impression made by that action”; I would add that when West draws attention to the *action* of framing, as in this novel, she calls such “understanding” into question (“Rebecca West and the Visual Arts” 58).

15. Indeed, this conversion is at the heart of Stetz’s influential article on the novel, “Drinking ‘The Wine of Truth.’” See also Ouditt (116) and Smith (172-74).

16. I have argued this at greater length in *Remapping the Home Front*.

The best-known referent is the Nurse-as-Madonna image of Alonzo Earl Foringer's poster for the American Red Cross, which was issued contemporaneously with West's novel. For more on the *mater dolorosa* figure see Tylee (66-70).

17. This would have been a dreadful irony, of course, for the suffrage activist West, as signaled in the bleakness of the novel's ending.

18. The novel's critique of patriarchal economic and class structures has been addressed by Ann Norton and, more recently, Patricia Chu, who sees Jenny's narration as "West's way of exposing the gendered stakes various citizens could be granted in the nation [and] the way nationalism was mobilized as gendered narrative" (81). Susan Varney, in a psychoanalytic reading, registers the fundamental nature of the novel's critique; for West, she argues, "war trauma registers the libininal and phantasmic foundations of such concepts as 'social,' 'domestic,' and 'sexual' relations; it brings to the surface the role of fantasy in the formation of social reality as well as the potential violence inherent within" (266).

19. Chu notes that, "Jenny might get a new voice but it speaks from a soldier-identified standpoint. She is at first glance a power broker in the war and postwar era—a young single woman, undraftable and able to take the place of incapacitated men who have lost their ability to comprehend their lives in relation to national events or 'the national' itself. But she is absent from her own first-person narration" (94).

20. Famously, West met Wells after she published a mocking review of his novel *Marriage* in the *Freewoman* (*Young Rebecca* 64-69). For later criticisms, see *Young Rebecca* 79-83 and "Uncle Bennett" 199-200.

21. Wells made this argument in *The Ladies' Home Journal*, positing the replacement of "the loveliness-woman ideal" with the "citizen-woman ideal" and predicting that female munitions workers "have killed forever the poor argument that women should not vote because they had no military value" ("The Woman" 62; 60).

22. Wells, in a letter shortly after *The Return of the Soldier* was completed, excoriated West as a pessimist: "So far as I can make it out," he wrote, "I am constantly dismissing evil realisations from my mind. . . . You are—otherwise. You go out to get the fullest impression of any old black thing" (qtd. in Ray 80-81).

23. These quotations come from two letters from Wells to West held at the Beinecke Library at Yale; both are undated, but with reference to Hammond's *H. G. Wells Chronology* one can place the first as January 1915, and the second later in that year. My thanks to the Literary Executors of the Estate of H. G. Wells for permission to quote from these letters.

24. This last seems a wishful projection at best, unless we posit a final divergence between Britling and Wells; though Wells's public and private writings continued throughout the war to insist that the war was "waste,

disorder, disaster,” he never cringed from or disavowed the necessity for Britain’s involvement: “The Germans willed it. We Allies have but obeyed the German will for warfare because we could not do otherwise, we have taken up this simple game of shell delivery, and we are teaching them that we can play it better, in the hope that so we and the world may be freed from the German will-to-power and all its humiliating and disgusting consequences henceforth for ever. Europe now is no more than a household engaged in holding up and if possible overpowering a monomaniac member” (*War and the Future* 249, 325).

25. My reading here thus comes closer to Vincent Sherry’s notion of Wells as finally unable to “admit or possess” the diminishment of the liberal intellectual tradition (62).

26. J. R. Hammond attempts to boost Wells by using just such a framework, as if even modernism-by-association would automatically up his valuation (*H. G. Wells and the Modern Novel* ix).

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