

‘The undiscovered country, from whose bourn...’: Shakespeare and Conrad in Frederic Manning’s Great War

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On their way to the miraculous victory at Agincourt, Henry V’s men crossed the ground on which the battle of the Somme would be fought five centuries later. That Henry’s casualties were counted in scores on St. Crispin’s, 1415, and Douglas Haig’s in the tens of thousands even in the first hours of the Somme offensive of 1916 is the inescapable irony informing Frederic Manning’s *The Middle Parts of Fortune*. A special and compounded set of allusions makes Shakespeare’s presence important to this novel, which Ernest Hemingway made notorious by calling it the greatest work on men in combat ever written. In *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell noted that one needed only to mention Manning’s novel “to indicate the special presence of Shakespeare in English writing about the war” (198), but did not explain what he meant by such a comment. Edmund Blunden thought *The Middle Parts of Fortune* “an instance of new literature not at war with the centuries of thought, feeling, and form which had preceded it, but qualified for the attention of the coming race by the author’s deep regard for the creative past” (v.). Other readers have nodded at the Shakespeare/Manning connection: J. A. Van Zyl called the novel “almost Shakespearean in its apocalyptic vision linked to human observation” (54). Bernard Bergonzi found the bounty of epigraphs from Shakespeare indicative of Manning’s “desire to place the story on a universal plane” (191). No one, however, has an adequate discussion of the relations among Manning’s text and the various narratives and values which are, so to speak, sent forward through the breach opened by Manning’s explicit allusions to Shakespeare’s plays.

This essay works on the premise that Manning’s exploitation of Shakespeare is intended to elicit a superficial irony while ultimately maintaining a profound argument in defense of the idea that the myriad gone to slaughter

were each man a tragic hero. When read against the background of Shakespeare, *The Middle Parts of Fortune* suggests a greater continuity of values across the gulf of 1914-1918 than is usually assumed the case. It does so not merely through ironic and sincere use of epigraphs from Shakespeare, but also through the subterranean deployment of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. I contend that *The Middle Parts of Fortune* fields two antagonistic texts. The first use is explicit and traditionalist. The second refers us to a protomodernist skepticism and determinism, which Manning calls into question. Finally, this reading suggests that *The Middle Parts of Fortune* is not merely one of the major canonical works of Great War literature but ought to be included in any re-evaluation of modernism.

In a brief preface Manning tells readers that "the following pages are a record of experience on the Somme and Ancre fronts, with an interval behind the lines, during the latter half of the year 1916; and the events described in it actually happened; the characters are fictitious" (xxiii). There is good reason to fictionalize the men, for Manning's soldiers are coarse of speech, apt to slack off, and generally comport themselves in such a way that the novel was expurgated before being offered for commercial distribution as *Her Privates We*. They were not conventional heroes; indeed, Manning forewarns us, "their judgements were necessarily partial and prejudiced; but prejudices and partialities provide most of the driving force of life." As fictions, then, his soldiers can appear more nearly real, and as fictions they will more successfully resist the great leveling force of combat. The destruction of the complexities of character is in fact a recurrent theme in the novel:

There is nothing in war which is not in human nature; but the violence and passions of men become, in the aggregate, an impersonal and incalculable force, a blind and irrational movement of the collective will, which one cannot control, which one cannot understand, which one can only endure... (108-09)

Or, among many others:

It may have been a merely subjective impression, but it seemed that once they were in the front line, men lost a great

deal of their individuality; their characters, even their faces, seemed to become more uniform . . . (183)

Though the quotations might suggest a cerebral and distant narrator, they are not typical of the narrative voice. In fact, Manning's brief meditations on the dehumanization of soldiers appear as authorial intrusions against a background voice that privileges accuracy of description and the colloquial speech of the soldiers. More nearly typical of the narrative voice is this:

The boy on the firestep watched his front intently. The expectation that he would see something move, or a sudden flash there, became almost desire. But nothing moved. The world grew more and more still; the dark became thinner; soon they would stand to. He could see the remains of the building now, almost clearly. There was nothing there, nothing, the world was empty, hushed, awaiting dawn. And then, as he watched it less keenly, something from the skies smote that heap of rubble, the shadowy landscape in front of him blurred and danced, and a solid pillar of darkness rose into the air even before he heard the explosion, spreading out thicker at the top like an evil fungus; spread, and dissolved again, and the heap of rubble was no longer there. 'Christ!' said the boy. 'That were a good 'un.' (233)

And typical of the men's speech, this honest vulgarity:

'They don't care a fuck ow' us'ns live,' said little Martlow bitterly. "We're just 'umped an' bumped an' bugged about all over fuckin' France, while them as made the war sit at 'ome waggin' their bloody chins, an' sayin' what they'd'ave done if they was twenty years younger. Wish to Christ they was, an' us'ns might get some leaf an' go 'ome an' see our own folk once in a while. (49)

Finally, the purpose of this direct style is much the same as Siegfried Sassoon's gentle self-effacement in *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston* (1937) or Edmund Blunden's classicism in *Undertones of War* (1928). Though such

language is not dignified, it seeks to dignify the men through its honest portrayal of their experience.

The elusive Manning, who published his novel as Private 19022, his enlistment number, refused a commission at the beginning of the war. He was later convinced that it was the duty of his class to be officers and he took a commission. He kills his protagonist just as Bourne is about to do the same. On the face of it, Manning and his novel reject the values of class privilege and tradition in favor of a democratic and iconoclastic stance. Manning's original attitude confused the values of the combat officer with those of the general staff, whom Martlow lumps with non-combatants who "sit at 'ome waggin' their bloody chins"—superannuated soldiers, or the chairborne, in a more recent lingo. The combat officer was a different creature, aristocratic perhaps, but rarely malicious or contemptuous of his men, and so Manning's local strategies are intended to ennoble: against a background of anonymity and violence, vulgar men are preserved for the nobility of their commonplace brotherhood and the value of their individuality. In this sense, Manning/Bourne's preference for service as a private soldier constitutes a *prima facie* self-effacement. It does not represent a cowardly alienation of the self in the face of despair and the destruction of identity; rather, it acknowledges the necessity of placing the unifying consciousness of the narrator at the service of ex-combatants, all of whom were severely vulnerable to psychic and physical maiming. In this task, Manning turns to Shakespeare in search of a narrative ethics at once historicizing and conservationist.

The novel drew both of its titles from *Hamlet*¹; it leads off with Guildenstern's lament, "On fortune's cap we are not the very button. / . . . Then you live about her waist, or in the / middle of her favours / . . . 'Faith, her privates we"; each of the following chapters begins with another that provides an oblique instruction on how to read the pages that follow. Several epigraphs are drawn from *Henry V*, a play that, Samuel Hynes emphasizes (39), was widely performed during the war, and they tend to refer to the lot of common soldiers, men who in following Henry to the miraculous battle of Agincourt walked the Somme valley (see Keegan's map, 287). Thus the irony is not directed toward the men, who in Manning's view are the measure of the "happy few" who rose to Henry's challenge but who in 1916 are not given conditions conducive to triumph. Instead, the irony is directed toward the waste of their courage and it is heightened by the brutal descriptions of the conditions under

which men held to their humanity. The novel acknowledges and even at moments celebrates the fact that cowardice is our natural state, for in our nature we are affable individuals. By contrast, heroism requires the death of self, either in the absolute sense, or in the temporary psychological sense of putting aside one's impulse for self-preservation along with primal desires for warmth, comfort, and safety. The death of Bourne is one more instance of random slaughter, and is significant in that respect, but it also serves to explain Bourne's decision to enter officer training school. War ultimately requires radical self-effacement, for annihilation of self can only be resisted until duty compels one to renounce individual desire in favor of service.

The eighteen epigraphs are identified only as from Shakespeare, revealing Manning's confidence that his readers are sufficiently educated in English canon as not to need further guidance. Of the nineteen epigraphs, then, five are from *Henry V*, three each from *Hamlet* and *2 Henry IV*, two each from *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Lear*, and one each from *As You Like It*, *1 Henry IV*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Othello*. Chapter one begins with commoner Feeble's response to Falstaff in *2 Henry IV*: "By my troth, I care not; a man can die but once; we owe God a death . . . and let it go which way it will, he that dies this year is quit for the next" (3.2.238 passim), and so declares the cheerful fatalism of the enlisted man which is one of the central subjects of the novel.

Though most of the epigraphs are drawn from plays about war and leadership, one anomaly appears to be the epigraph to the tenth chapter, from *As You Like It*:

Do you pity him? no, he deserves no pity. Wilt thou love such a woman? What, to make thee an instrument and play false strains upon thee? Not to be endured! Well, go your way to her, for I see love hath made thee a tame snake, and say this to her: that if she love me, I charge her to love thee; if she will not, I will never have her unless thou entreat for her. If you be a true lover, hence, and not a word; for here comes more company. (4.3)

The chapter is a light-hearted romantic interlude in which Bourne finds himself suddenly tumescent while acting as a scribe and translator for a young French

woman who wishes him to write a letter to her British sweetheart. Thus, like others, the epigraph functions as an argument to the episode. Similarly, an epigraph from *Lear*—"I begin to find an idle and fond bondage in the oppression of aged tyranny, who sways not as it hath power but as it is suffered" (1.2)—leads off a chapter largely concerned with the cushiness of Bourne's posting to regimental headquarters as a clerk-typist. The lines succinctly express the resentment of combat soldiers toward *hors combat* staff. Like the lines from *As You Like It*, the epigraph from *Lear* is one of the few with humorous intent.

More nearly typical of the tone and tenor of epigraphs is the second quotation from *Lear* at the beginning of Chapter eleven, a statement of the paradox of long suffering: "Where is this straw, my fellow? / The art of our necessities is strange, / That can make vile things precious" (3.2). *Lear* is, by this point in the play, engaged in psychic struggle. He is aware of the extent to which he has been deprived of the assumptions which once defined his arrogance and ignorance. This epigraph generalizes about the way in which life *in extremis* alters the states of mind and the behavior of men, drawing them into an intimacy with wretchedness against which they intuitively take hold of any small promise of relief. Indeed, as the climactic show on the Ancre draws near, the epigraphs increasingly concern themselves with the psychopathology of fear and the mysterious solace of shared courage. Those to chapters fifteen and sixteen are both from the first scene of the fourth act of *Henry V*, in which Harry Le Roy moves among his men in disguise and hears soldier Bates say of the king "He may show what outward courage he will; but I believe as cold a night as 'tis, he could wish himself in Thames up to the neck; and so I would he were, and I by him, at all adventures, so we were quit here" (4.1.114 *passim*). Soon after, the king hears soldier Williams say "We see yonder the beginning of day, but I think we shall never see the end of it: . . . I am afeard there are few die well that die in battle" (4.1.143 *passim*). The penultimate epigraph continues the theme of waiting while returning to *Hamlet*: ". . . on their watch / In the dead vast [alt. waste] and middle of the night" (1.2.197-98). The last draws from the scene in *Hamlet* from which the novel derives its embracing epigraph: "Fortune? O, most true: she is a strumpet" (2.2.235-36), the Prince's lewdly punning acknowledgement that Guildenstern and Rosencrantz have drawn as their lot life in a place where they are most vulnerable to the pox and defecations of destiny, in brief, her middle parts.

Number and placement in the novel suggest that *Henry V* and *Hamlet* are the key texts; within *The Middle Parts of Fortune* direct allusions to the two plays mirror the personality and destiny of Bourne. Like Prince Hamlet, Bourne is intelligent, schooled, skeptical, vacillating, and given to solitary moodiness. By fortune he is nominated for leadership and action, but as with Henry it is not foregone that he is temperamentally suited to duty. By disposition he prefers inaction, and he is not one to shirk a call to carouse. The erosion of self-interest in the rush of circumstances obliges him to accept the lance corporal's stripes which are prelude to his transfer to officer training. Bourne would prefer to move among enlisted men as their equal, for in spite of his endowments and singularity, he shares the fatalism of Henry's men and would prefer anonymous irresponsibility to duty. Like Shakespeare's soldier Bates, he knows that if the king's "cause be wrong, our obedience to the king wipes the crime of it out of us" (4.1.133-34). Like Williams, he can reflect "if the cause be not good, the king himself hath a heavy reckoning to make; when all those legs and arms and heads, chopped off in battle, shall join together at the latter day, and cry all, 'We died at such a place'; some swearing, some crying for a surgeon, some upon their wives left poor behind them, some upon the debts they owe, some upon their children rawly left" (4.1.135 passim). *Hamlet* and *Henry V*, in other words, define a terrain of ambivalence on which cowardice faces off against duty and the obligations of command square off against the common soldier's submission to circumstance.

Shakespeare is a lucid guide through *The Middle Parts of Fortune*. Were he alone he would compass the values of Manning's novel and we would understand the novel's message as a refraction of Henry's outrage over the slaughter of the boys under the light of the Geneva Convention. Indeed, were the epigraphs all there is to the intertextual web of *The Middle Parts of Fortune*, they would convince us that the happy few, the band of brothers, at Agincourt were laughably lucky compared to the dejected masses at the Somme. The irony would be familiar, uncomplicated. However, an adequate reading of the novel can not emerge from a straightforward charting of the relations among several of Shakespeare's plays and Manning's narrative. A reading of *The Middle Parts of Fortune* must also account for a pervasive though oblique exploitation of allusions to a text famous for its indeterminacies and the unreliability of its narrator.

Nowhere does Manning clearly identify Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Nevertheless, the structure above ground is Shakespeare's purlieu; the saps and dugouts of the lower levels of *The Middle Parts of Fortune* are haunted by Conrad. The two authors constitute an axis of explicit and implicit allusions, of revealed sources and concealed referents, and demarcate a terrain that places consciousness, culture, and tradition at one extreme, and psyche, savagery, and dislocation at the other. Shakespeare gives us a means of understanding that is idealistic and rational. Impressionistic and irrational are Marlow's narration and mind, for Marlow's journey beyond the limits of civilization has left him with an automatic and absolute skepticism about principles and proofs, a dubiety that enforces a disbelief that what one sees actually happens.

The guess that *Heart of Darkness* inhabits *The Middle Parts of Fortune* is validated whenever Manning seeks language in which to express a sinister determinism. For example, Manning's narrator decides that for survivors of battle "the general effect was one of a recalcitrant acquiescence in the dispensations of an inscrutable providence" (39). The sentence compares to several of Marlow's orotundities: for example, his reaction to the jungle: "... the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention" (49); or his summary of the imperialist's "notion of an exotic Immensity ruled by an august Benevolence" (65). After recording his version of Conrad's "stillness on the face of the immensity" (*Heart of Darkness* 41), Manning continues:

In the last couple of days their whole psychological condition had changed: they had behind them no longer the moral impetus which thrust them into action, which carried them forward on a wave of emotional excitement, transfiguring all the circumstances of their life so that these could only be expressed in the terms of heroic tragedy, of some superhuman or even divine conflict with the powers of evil; all that tempest of excitement was spent, and they were now mere derelicts in a wrecked and dilapidated world, with sore and angry nerves sharpening their tempers, or shutting them up in a morose and sullen humour from which it was difficult to move them. (39)

The sentence could be inserted into *Heart of Darkness* almost without emendation. It strikingly resembles Marlow's decision, coming shortly upon the brooding of the implacable force:

Whether it meant war, peace, or prayer we could not tell. The dawns were heralded by the descent of a chill stillness; the woodcutters slept, their fires burned low; the snapping of a twig would make you start. We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and excessive toil. (50)

Replace woodcutters with sappers or pioneers, and one can think oneself not on the upper reaches of the Congo River, but at the edge of No Man's Land at stand-to, waiting for the shelling to begin.

In addition to stylistic and philosophical resonances, there are narrative details that verge on explicit allusions to *Heart of Darkness*, as when Bourne reflects on the value of a good pair of shoes, or in numerous brief proofs of misogyny. More pertinent is the broad philosophical subjectivism Manning temporarily shares with Conrad. In the author's preface Manning asserts that "prejudices and partialities provide most of the driving power of life" (xxiii). This is a concise expression of the first premise of impressionism, for it suggests the constant coloration of reality by temperament, and, secondarily, it recognizes the impossibility of knowing a truth more enduring than the ephemeral truth plain to perceiver in the moment of perception. Marlow tells his audience on the deck of the *Nellie* that "it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence" (42). He says that he likes work because in work is "the chance to find yourself. Your own reality—for yourself, not for others—what no other man can ever know. They can only see the mere show, and never can tell what it really means" (44). To make intelligible the task of getting the steamer up the Congo, or of taking one's readers upstream to the limit of human comprehension, he offers an analogy: "Imagine a blindfolded man set to drive a van over a bad road" (49).

Manning and Conrad agree that work can anesthetize. The autumn of 1916 has come on, cold and wet, as the men await the final push of the Battle of the Somme:

The strange thing was, that the greater the hardships [the men] had to endure, for wet and cold bring all kinds of attendant miseries in their train, the less they grumbled. They became a lot quieter, and more reserved in themselves, and yet the estaminets would be swept by roaring storms of song. It may have been a merely subjective impression, but it seemed that once they were in the front line, men lost a great deal of their individuality; their characters, even their faces, seemed to become more uniform; they worked better, the work seeming to take some of the strain off their minds, the strain of waiting. (183)

Hard upon this meditation on the dissolution of personality as the self retreats into work comes the single instance of the first person in *The Middle Parts of Fortune*:

Actually, though the pressure of external circumstances seemed to wipe our individuality, leaving little if any distinction between man and man, in himself each man become conscious of his own personality as of something very hard, and sharply defined against the background of other men, who remained merely generalized as 'the other'. The mystery of his own being increased for him enormously; and he had to explore that doubtful darkness alone, finding a foothold here, a handhold there, grasping one support after another and relinquishing it when it yielded, crumbling; the sudden menace of ruin, as it slid into the unsubstantial past, calling forth another effort, to gain another precarious respite. If a man could not be certain of himself, he could be certain of nothing. (183-84)

The sudden intervention of “our” acknowledges the presence of a collective subjectivity. It asserts the pertinence of ‘our’ experience as the touchstone of truth. Yet what follows the mere pronoun scarcely proposes that self amounts to solidity or defense against doubt. Rather, the master trope is of men, in muddy trenches under the constant menace of bombardment, whose one hope is to claw themselves upward out of the ceaseless erosion of scant safety; to survive artillery means facing communal annihilation going over the top into machine gun fire. In other words, the men have arrived at a shared psychic condition in which all individual differences, all personal characteristics, have become irrelevant.

In addition to pessimism and an admiration for the men who persist in “the affirmation of their own will in the face of death” (184), Manning’s novel draws from Conrad several purely technical derivations. There is a moment in the orderly room (55-56) when Bourne hears fragments of a conversation the full importance of which is lost on him, similar to Marlow’s first hearing of Kurtz at the downriver station. At other points, for example when he wishes to render sudden and incomprehensible violence, Manning employs progression effect to emphasize appearance and motion, then emotional impact, and only at last some reckoning of what really happened. The manner recalls in particular the first attack from the shore when Marlow understands little of what is happening because he must keep his gaze on the river ahead. Marlow’s flying sticks turn out to be arrows; Bourne’s German bombs turn out to be friendly fire, anti-aircraft shells that fall back to earth and explode in the middle of a company on parade.

Such subtle technical borrowings suggest that while Shakespeare stands before the curtain, announcing the consequence of each act, Conrad stands behind and mutters—he is passive, cynical, and irascible. They also suggest that Manning has pre-empted Conrad, and located the heart of darkness in Shakespeare’s “dead waste and middle of night,” now somewhere near Colincamps, Courcelles, and Serre in the valley of the Somme. To whom does the day belong? To Conrad, relentless ironies, and pessimism? Or to Shakespeare, unextinguishable humanism, and tragic vision? Interestingly, the answer can be partially found in what various readers have called the weaknesses of *The Middle Parts of Fortune*.

Several readers have been moved to moderate general admiration—even awe at the novel’s honesty and profundity—with concessions that

Manning's execution is not without faults. Trevor Wilson thought enough of *The Middle Parts of Fortune* to draw from it the title *The Myriad Faces of War*, a comprehensive study of the British experience of 1914-1918. Wilson, however, feels that "there are too many characters who are insufficiently delineated, and a few tedious episodes that appear to serve no purpose" (678). At its publication, the anonymous ex-officer who reviewed the novel for *TLS* called it "probably the best and honestest description of life in the ranks during the Great War," but noted that while "Bourne does not speak in the first person, the War is seen through his eyes," a point of view demarcation that means that "on the rare occasions when other men discuss him in his absence we feel that the author has momentarily lapsed from his high standard" (40): The same reviewer finds the chief fault a "lack of proportion" (40). J. A. Van Zyl was aware that key characters were introduced late, that the pace of development slackened at times, and noted that "the reader has to remind himself that the narrative is in the third person singular" but might be more accurately described as an "'apparent first-person' narration" (49), which of course creates a problem since the protagonist does not survive the story. Indeed, all of the quibbles seem to come down to this: while Manning's book may be read adequately within the paradigm of realistic war fiction, to confine oneself to the subgenre will tend to cast anomalies as blemishes. Perhaps *The Middle Parts of Fortune* ought to be read not merely in the context of Great War realism—that is to say in the company of R. H. Mottram's *The Spanish Farm Trilogy* (1924) or Maurice Genevoix's *Ceux de Quatorze* (1950)—but also as a particular or local response to the literary and cultural assumptions of modernism. This is unlikely if we glibly assume that the novel is correctly assigned—and confined—within the category of memorialist Great War prose, even the canon that includes Vera Brittain, Robert Graves, Georges Duhamel, Ernst Junger, John Dos Passos, and many others.

Remarkably, criticisms of Manning's novel sound much like T. S. Eliot's objection that Shakespeare left in *Hamlet* "superfluous and inconsistent scenes which even a hasty revision should have noticed" (765). One can well imagine Eliot saying of the enigmatic Bourne, rather than Hamlet, that the man "is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in excess of the facts as they appear," or that Bourne's "bafflement at the absence of objective equivalent to his feelings is a prolongation of the bafflement of his creator in the face of his artistic problem" (766). In other words, as an

authorial alter-ego, Bourne reflects Manning's own inability to make wholly coherent, or even intelligible, a set of experiences that threatens Shakespearean values and sureties. Manning may describe, report, and philosophize. Yet no matter how vivid, exact, or rigorous his language, the "objective correlative"—by which he might stimulate the feelings of abject terror, blood lust, and, above all, the complacency of men who daily face oblivion—eludes Manning, for there is no "set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion . . . such that . . . the emotion is immediately evoked" (766).

In other words, should we read *The Middle Parts of Fortune* under the sign of Eliot, shifting it out of the secondary category of realist war fiction to read it as a candidate for a major canonical text in the western tradition, instead of blemishes we would find failure. The bulky middle of the novel concerns itself with the 'superfluous' description of men temporarily removed from action, minor and indistinct characters proliferate, and moments of farce and vulgarity profane sacrifice. Manning fails in what 'ought' to be his aim, which is, as Eliot writes in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," "not to find new emotions, but to use the ordinary ones and, in working them up into poetry, to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all" (764). To find a satisfactory objective correlative would require Manning to take his readers into and across No Man's Land while exposing them to the [extra]ordinary emotions provoked by such a passage, and yet deliver them to some ineffable derivative of the emotional chemistry to which they have been subject.

To the extent that high modernist values shaped the canons of twentieth-century art, the similarity of *The Middle Parts of Fortune* to *Hamlet* in its perceived faults suggests that Manning knew that he was at odds with the literary fashions of his time. There is evidence that Manning was aware of modern currents; his pre-war poetry participates in the major movements of the Georgian period and his war poems are as conscious of the sudden dissonance of destruction as those of Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen; his *Scenes and Portraits* (1909, enlarged 1930) reveals an author adept at revitalizing ideas from authors as diverse as Epicurus and Saint Paul, Pascal and Pater, Plato and Carlyle. Before the war he contributed at least fifty-four anonymous reviews to *The Spectator* and afterwards wrote for *The Little Review*, found himself in the company of Eliot and Richard Aldington in *The*

Chapbook, and in the twenties contributed six reviews to Eliot's *Criterion* (See Kaiser Haq). Everything suggests that Manning was an alert reader as grounded in canon as any high modernist.

The novel offers an especially interesting clue to Manning's awareness of his novel's situation. Commentaries on *The Middle Parts of Fortune* identify the town of Bourne in Lincolnshire, in or near which Manning was long resident—especially during the novel's composition—as the source of his protagonist's name. That Bourne is only known by a family name further suggests both an act of modesty befitting his self-effacing nature and a desire on the author's part to make Bourne a surrogate for the experience of many. The explanation is correct but incomplete. If the name is originally a convenience, and if it becomes resonant by virtue of its similarity to borne, as a burden, it derives its greatest semantic force by its phonetic identity with bourne or bourn, a nearly archaic word meaning boundary or limit as of a field, or that limit toward which all endeavor is directed. The *OED* surmises that after seven instances in Shakespeare the word does not resurface in modern English until the eighteenth century, and then and thereafter the principal source of reference is the single use in *Hamlet*. It occurs, of course, in the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, in lines that Manning may well have quoted but chose to leave inexplicit:

Who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others we know not of? (3.1.76-82)

The answer is the ordinary soldier, who may not have the complexity of perception and the learning of Bourne, but whom Bourne resembles in that he prefers to "grunt and sweat" with them rather than stay in the cushy job as clerk or take a commission. Moreover, the reference clarifies why Bourne dies, and why his death in No Man's Land is his marker—for the word persists in modern French as *borne*, the stone boundary marker that delimits one terrain from the next. With Bourne, in other words, we go as far as we can. He bears

us to the point beyond which mortal experience cannot penetrate, both as a tragic figure and as a plain trooper. There can be no correlative for the experience beyond life, or beyond No Man's Land.

The lines also, in being concealed though clearly in mind, provide a point of union between Shakespeare and Conrad. Who is Kurtz if not the traveler who does not return from the undiscovered country, and who is Marlow if not the stoic of puzzled will who prefers to grunt and sweat? The tension between the explicit use of Shakespeare's several texts and the infiltration of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* means that *The Middle Parts of Fortune* should be read as derivative as concerns Shakespeare, and subversive as concerns Conrad. The novel draws on models that, though subject to the force of historical circumstance, simultaneously propose a re-investment in tradition and peculiarly modern revaluations of the key texts. Thus, the heroism of Henry's men, Henry's own rising to the call of kingship, and the tragedy of Hamlet's struggle between duty and skepticism are granted to Bourne and thousands of other individuals, ennobling and humanizing each for a moment before annihilation of consciousness and dissolution of body into mud.

By contrast, Conrad's ironizing and his pessimistic framing of large moral issues of colonialism are only the more ponderous because of the shift to the killing fields of Artois and Picardy where the imperial powers turned their malice on each other. The questions posed by a rush toward the limit of the undiscovered country are no longer confined and safe within the minds of an elite (for example, the four auditors on the *Nellie's* deck) who might bear the weight of the lesson privately and so discharge the duties of privilege. The Great War kept few secrets about horror and loss. "Here was the world's worst wound," Siegfried Sassoon says of the great gash of the western front in "On Passing the New Menin Gate" (1928). A heart of darkness visible to millions, its brooding significance has been imported home. Much is at stake. Should the Conradian vision become public and commonplace, it would obliterate the Shakespearean values. Then *The Middle Parts of Fortune* would have a brief message: Tommy Atkins, he dead.

For such reasons, *The Middle Parts of Fortune* does not argue for an iconoclastic revision of Shakespeare's premise that men can be grand and heroic when in the midst of the most frightening and dehumanizing circumstances. (Manning does not elicit Shakespeare in order to deconstruct him *sub specie* Conrad.) Instead, *The Middle Parts of Fortune* recognizes

that, in the five centuries since Agincourt, politics and machinery have raised the price and prolonged exposure to war. Wars occur whenever ‘civilized’ society tries to exceed the boundaries of everyday comfort and safety—that small compass Marlow intends by the policeman and the butcher around the corner, as opposed to “the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of . . . experience” (21), or the edge of the heart of darkness, in Manning the mud, corruption, and chaos of No Man’s Land. The novel does not ignore or diminish the crass motives, vast costs, and abject inhumanity of the Great War. Yet this is not to say that *The Middle Parts of Fortune* participates in the modernists’ ironizing of the past or the promotion of a post-apocalyptic cynicism. Rather, it compounds a paradox by proposing that no matter how large the slaughter or how nearly thorough the unselfing of soldiers, each man reiterates the heroism of Henry’s men and the tragedy of Hamlet. In other words, the apparent accuracy of Conrad’s vision serves to invigorate and enlarge rather than disperse and destroy the values Manning musters through Shakespeare. Human dignity proves an iota more resilient than the war is destructive: when all personality is gone, comradeship persists.

However absurd their predicament, however complete the darkness around them, the men among whom Bourne lives and dies are **not**, as are the members of Conrad’s Eldorado Exploring Expedition, “reckless without hardihood, greedy without audacity, and cruel without courage” (*HofD* 45). They are instead commonplace heroes, and they remain comrades who will in an instant go through hell for men whom they scarcely know because comradeship is “a kind of personal emotion, a kind of enthusiasm, in the old sense of the word” (*MPoF* 80). The old sense means possessed by a god, as when Henry says of his victory, “Take it, God, / For it is none but thine!” (4.8.113-14). Enthusiasm provokes Weeper Smart to carry his dead Bourne back to the trench, where he tells “his story incoherently, mixed with raving curses.” It also moves Sergeant-Major Tozer to say tenderly to Weeper, “Go down an’ get some ‘ot tea and rum, ol’ man. That’ll do you good.” And persists in Mr. Cross, who quietly reminds the sergeant, “We had better move on” (247), so strange is the art of necessity.

The persistent appeal to Shakespeare is a cry against the destruction of culture, and is also a way of asserting that the Great War is not unique except in scale. That “there are few die well that die in battle” is nothing new, for the underlying truth is paradox: to die a hero is to die without a self, for in

order to confront absolute violence with courage one must first renounce one's humanity. If one accepts that the modernist temper is characterized by the fragmentation of consciousness, the acceptance of the alienated condition of humanity, and the chaotic nature of experience, then Manning's narrative takes a conservationist and humanist position. As a former combatant, he has a different stake in the moral aftermath 1914-18 than noncombatant modernists. While his experience was more brutal and his life at greater direct risk than a non-combatant's, as survivor of combat, with an obviously greater chance of disillusionment, he had a greater chance to learn the inexpressible limits to which the human psyche can be punished before disintegrating.

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