On 5 August 1914 Henry James registered his shock that the preceding “treacherous years”, “during which we have supposed the world to be, with whatever abatement, gradually bettering”, had instead led to “this abyss of blood and darkness”. In refuting the claims to progress of capitalism, imperialism and industrialisation, the outbreak of war also proved false the values of the novel since the nineteenth century, of civilisation’s progress through individuals. James later pondered on this:

The subject-matter of one’s effort . . . has become itself utterly treacherous and false – its relation to reality utterly given away and smashed. Reality is a world that was to be capable of this – and how represent that horrific capability, historically latent, historically ahead of it? How on the other hand not represent it either – without putting into play mere fiddlesticks?

James set the writer an intimidating task: he must deal directly with the war, analyse how civilisation had led to it; otherwise his art was trivial. Resigned to the situation as “too tragic for any words”,1 he could only declare his affiliation to the British cause by naturalising in 1915.

A member of Lawrence’s younger generation of Modernists, Wyndham Lewis had attempted to identify with rising war fever in the 1914 issue of BLAST. As “primitive mercenaries in the Modern World” Lewis and his fellow contributors aimed to set up violent opposition as a mechanism of creativity; conflict was a means of generating the energy of inspiration, which was their “cause”. Yet despite the mechanical violence of the war mirroring the geometrical art of BLAST, it was tied to the one-sided cause of nationalism. Consequently in the “War Issue” of July 1915 Wyndham Lewis described how “BLAST finds itself surrounded by a multitude of
other Blasts of all sizes and descriptions. This puce-coloured cockleshell will, however, try to brave the waves of blood, for the serious mission it has on the other side of World-War.² Modernist art now lay outside the war, and could only hope to survive it as a bystander.

Lewis attempted to explain the problems of representing war: “Like the multitudes of drab and colourless uniforms – these in their turn covered with still more characterless mud – there is no room, in praising the soldiers, for anything but an abstract hymn.” At this early stage he retained the ambiguity whether there were simply too many acts of “brilliant daring” for the poet to comprehensively describe, or whether in the nature of the war, like “ant-fights”, there were none. He echoed Lord Kitchener’s outburst on first seeing trench warfare on the Western Front: “I don’t know what is to be done . . . this isn’t war.”³ It was a new form of warfare that British Military Command, and British artists, struggled to comprehend.

Furthermore, there was the issue of confused loyalty, which Lawrence was particularly subject to with his German wife Frieda. Brooke overcompensated for his attachment to Germany with an abstract English patriotism, while Graves pre-empted any accusations based on his German lineage by enlisting immediately. Charles Hamilton Sorley, while also volunteering, perhaps was closest to Lawrence in agonising over the moral right of each side, since his sojourn at the University of Jena had left him pro-German rather than British. For him the war was a tragic paradox of two equally legitimate cultures denying each other the right to exist.

Artists during the first year of war were challenged by this three-fold problem of how to analyse, describe and position themselves in relation to war. Lawrence at least had the advantage of witnessing modern militarism when he escaped from England with Frieda in 1913 to the German garrison town of Metz. This setting was crucial for the revolutionising of his art from the realism of Sons and Lovers to the internal exploration of characters, as in “The Prussian Officer” and “The Thorn in the Flesh”. In these short stories he analysed violence as a consequence of repressing erotic desire; he subsequently maintained on 21 September 1914 that “the war doesn’t alter my beliefs or visions” of the necessity to “get our sex right” (ii. 218).

A further development of this exploratory style can be found in a surviving fragment of the second version of The Rainbow, composed between August 1913 and January 1914. Ella, the prototype of Ursula Brangwen, and Rupert Birkin touch each other for the first time:

She crouched together on the floor, crying like some wild animal in pain, with a kind of mooing noise, very dreadful to hear, a