2

Wars and Rumours of Wars

Throughout the period from World War One to the present, war or the threat of war has never been far away. Already in 1915, Sigmund Freud was warning that the Great War ‘threatens to leave a legacy of embitterment that will make any renewal of those bonds impossible for a long time to come’;¹ and women writers were quick to be among those assessing the legacy which Freud foresaw. As early as 1922, in her novel *The Clash*, Storm Jameson writes:

The Peace conference sat in Paris. Liberty, with a bloody pate, stalked famished on the ice-bound Neva. Grand Dukes and generals ran about two hemispheres crying Murder, Revenge, and moved by the thought of so much suffering, the victors of the war blockaded Russia, so that Murder had to tighten his belt across his hollow stomach... Lord Weaverbridge groaned in travail and the new world was born, by the fecund will of one terrible old Frenchman and passionate lover of his country. He had faith only in the negation of faith and saw that an eyeless malice broods over the destiny of man. Lusts meaner than his, and greeds poorer, served him. Youth, that was to have swept the world, rotted unseen to manure it, or living, became absorbed in a search for excitement or bread. The old men did as they pleased.²

As the thirties progressed, the threat of fascism became ever clearer to those who turned their eyes to Europe. Literature was being put at the service of fascism in some quarters, echoing the thinking behind Marinetti’s Futurist Manifesto (1909), which had championed the ‘aggressive’ heritage of great literature, insisting that:

62
except in struggle there is no more beauty. No work without an
aggressive character can be a masterpiece…We will glorify war –
the world’s only hygiene – militarism, patriotism, the destructive
gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and
scorn for woman.3

Walter Benjamin responds to the fascist renewal of this claim in the
inter-war years, warning that:

Fascism…expects war to supply the artistic gratification of a sense
perception that has been changed by technology. This is evidently
the consummation of ‘l’art pour l’art’. Mankind, which in Homer’s
time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is
one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can
experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first
order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering
aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art.4

It is not surprising, therefore, that, as Maroula Joannou observes,
questions of gender were a secondary concern for many women, their
first priority being to defend democracy. Joannou quotes Hilary New-
itt’s assertion that ‘only under western democracy is it still possible for a
feminist movement to exist’;5 and this idea is reflected in such novels as
Naomi Mitchison’s We Have Been Warned (1935) and Storm Jameson’s In
the Second Year (1936), warning of fascism at home, and preeminently in
Katharine Burdekin’s Swastika Night (1937), transposing the legacy of
fascism into a future where women are caged breeders.

This opposition to fascism confuses another key issue of the inter-war
years, pacifism, a cause which was espoused by many women writers
in response to the carnage of World War One.6 Virginia Woolf, in Three
Guineas (1938), is of course the best-known advocate for opposition to
war; some, like Vera Brittain, continued to support pacifism through-
out World War Two.7 But the issue became more complex as the thirties
advanced, for the Spanish Civil War complicated the issue; opposition
to fascism was not always easy to accommodate with pacifism, and
many found their principles hard to maintain consistently. Rebecca
West, for instance, pours scorn on Naomi Mitchison in 1939 for
supporting the Spanish Civil War while opposing the coming conflict;8
and Storm Jameson lost Brittain’s friendship when she finally confessed
that she had ceased to support pacifism after the invasion of Czecho-
slovakia.