Although many of its usages now seem archaic to the point of quaintness, the First World War (called the Great War or simply The War until the outbreak of the Second necessitated a name-change) remains the prototype of modern wars. For one thing, it killed and wounded a great many people, over 37 million of them, in fact, more than three times the population of the state of Pennsylvania. It was also the first to make significant use of machine guns, and by the tens of thousands, as well as to feature barbed wire, steel helmets, tanks and flamethrowers, poison gas and gas masks, and fighter planes and aerial bombardment (1,413 people were killed in Zeppelin raids over England), and it was the first war to use the telephone to convey reports from the front lines to the rear and orders from the rear to the front, making possible the very "modern" assumption—i.e., skeptical and adversarial—that the staff doesn't know what's going on. This war also established unevadable conscription as the national means for waging war with mass armies, thus providing civilians with a novel insight, formerly limited to the military, into the experience of socially sanctioned murder. The result was a literature of shock and outrage, a product of horror impinging on optimism and innocence.

"Never such innocence again," writes Philip Larkin. He is thinking of the rush to the British recruiting stations in August 1914. England had not been in a major war for a century, and people were unaware of the potential effects of industrialism on an activity conceived largely in terms of cavalry, chivalry, and "honor." Most British and French expected the war to be over by Christmas 1914, and the men in the training camps were anxious to do their bit with enthusiasm and "pep." The novelty of escaping offices and classrooms for tents in the field and a boyish life of athleticism and good fellowship was a heady experience, and as Rupert Brooke stressed in his famous sonnet "Peace," at the outset the war seemed to offer an invigorating flight from a tired, cynical society. "I adore war," wrote the young poet Julian Grenfell. "It's like a big picnic... I've never been so well or happy." He went on to write about "joy of battle," but in 1915 he was killed at Ypres. In her poem
"Flower of Youth" Katharine Tynan sought optimistic solace in the idea that the war was making heaven a more wholesome and cheerful place, populating it now with clean and laughing lads.

At the beginning there was a great flux of social idealism. The Hun was to be severely punished for overrunning poor little Belgium, and Europe was to be redeemed from selfishness, cunning, and arbitrary force. As C. E. Montague remembered, "All the air was ringing with rousing assurances. France to he saved, Belgium righted, freedom and civilization rewon, a sour, soiled, crooked old world to be rid of bullies and crooks and reclaimed for straightness, decency, good-nature... . What a chance!" At the training camps

real, constitutional lazy fellows would buy little cram-books of drill out of their pay and sweat them up at night so as to get on the faster. Men warned for a guard next day would agree among themselves to get up an hour before the pre-dawn winter Reveille to practice among themselves the beautiful symbolic ritual of mounting guard in the hope of approaching the far-off, longed-for ideal of smartness, the passport to France.

Montague's words appear in his book significantly titled Disenchantment—published four years after the war. Those who had once been enchanted were now either dead, maimed, insane, or cynical. "The generous youth of the war... was pretty well gone... . The authentic flame... was as dead as the half-million of good fellows whom it had fired four years ago, whose credulous hearts the maggots were now eating under so many shining and streaming square miles of wet Flanders and Picardy."

It had all begun in June 1914, when Archduke Francis Ferdinand, heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, was assassinated in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, by a Serbian patriot fed up with Austrian domination of his country. Austria-Hungary used the occasion to pick a long-desired quarrel with Serbia and to issue an ultimatum that could only produce war. At this point the system of European alliances, negotiated over many decades, had to be honored: Russia came to the aid of Serbia, Britain hers with France. By October 1914, Turkey had joined the side of Germany and Austria-Hungary (the "Central Powers"). By the end of the year the notorious trench system was emplaced in Belgium and France, running 400 miles from its northern anchor at the North Sea to its southern end at the Swiss border, while in the east, another front developed along the Russian border with Austria-Hungary. Italy came in on the side of the Allies in 1915, opening a front against Austria. And in April 1917, the United States, exasperated by German sinking of its ships, joined the Allies, although it took many months for an American army to be assembled, supplied, trained, shipped to Europe, and installed in the line. The Americans arrived so late in the war that although they fought impressively and were generally credited with supplying the needed weight to win the war, they suffered only about one-tenth the casualties of the British, and more American soldiers died from influenza than from gas and bullets and shells.

Stalemate and attrition are terms inseparable from the memory of the First World War. Because massed, quick-firing artillery and machine guns employed by the thousands gave the defense an unprecedented advantage, both the Allies and the Central Powers found themselves virtual prisoners of their trenches for months on end. Indeed, from the winter of 1914 until the spring of 1918, the trench system seemed fixed, moving now and then a few hundred yards forward or back, on great occasions moving as much as a few miles. Theoretically it would have been possible to walk from the North Sea beaches all the way to the Alps entirely below ground, but actually the trench system was not absolutely continuous. It was broken here and there, with mere shell holes or fortified strong points serving as connecting links. A little more than half the Allied line was occupied by the French. The rest was British, consisting of about 800 battalions of some 1,000 men each. The two main concentrations of Allied strength were the Ypres Salient in Flanders and the Somme area in Picardy. These are the places most often recalled in these selections.

Ideally, there were three parallel lines of trenches facing the enemy, with the front-line trench fifty yards to a mile or so from its hostile counterpart across the way. Several yards behind the front-line trench was the support trench, and several yards behind that the reserve. These were "firing" trenches, connected by communication trenches running perpendicular. "Saps," shallower trenches, ran out into No Man's Land, giving access to forward observation and listening posts, as well as grenade ("bomb") throwing positions and machine gun nests. Coming up to the trenches from the rear, you might walk in a communication trench a mile or more long. It often began in a town and gradually deepened, and by the time it reached the reserve trench it would be eight feet deep. Into the sides of the trenches were dug "funk holes," where one or two men would crouch when shelling became particularly heavy. There were also deep dugouts, reached by crude stairways, used as officers' quarters and command posts. The floor of a well-constructed trench was covered with wooden Buckboards because the bottom of a trench was usually wet and the walls, always crumbling, had to be reinforced by sandbags, corrugated iron, or bundles of reeds. A trench was protected on the enemy side by copious entanglements of barbed wire, placed far enough out to prevent the enemy's crawling up to grenade-throwing range. The normal way of using the trenches was for a unit to
occupy the front trench for a week or so, then, replaced by fresh men
from the rear, to move back to the support trench, and so, after another
week, to the reserve. Then perhaps a few days in a battered town way
back, and then the sequence all over again.

British optimism and complacency guaranteed that their trenches
were especially miserable. As one soldier explained,

The whole conduct of our trench warfare seemed to be based on the
concept that we, the British, were not stopping in the trenches for long,
but were tarrying a while on the way to Berlin and that very soon we would
be chasing Jerry across country. The result, in the long term, meant that we
lived a mean and impoverished sort of existence in lousy scratch holes.

And lousy there is literal. The men’s hair and clothing bred colonies of
lice, which the delousing stations and baths behind the line, used when
the troops were at rest, repressed only temporarily. The trenches also
harbored millions of rats, which fed largely on the flesh of corpses. The
stench of rotting neat was everywhere, and you could smell the front
lines miles before you reached them. Remedies for this unpleasantness
were offered by the British instructions for military hygiene, issued after
the war had been in progress a while:

Treatment of Bodies Exposed in the Open which cannot be Buried or
Cremated. -Bodies in a state of putrefaction lying out in advance of
the trenches which cannot be buried or cremated owing to hostile fire, or
bodies uncovered in parapets of trenches where they have been hastily
buried, often give rise to considerable nuisance. They should be dealt with
in the following manner:-(i) Bodies in the Open. -Deodorants will be
found useful. The bodies may be sprayed with solution C, and if sufficient
water is available the clothes should be ripped up so that the solution may be
applied to the whole body, particularly in the region of the abdomen, or the
bodies can be covered with quick-lime....
(ii) Bodies in Malls of Trenches, tac.-Dead bodies and remains of ani-
mals in the sides and walls of trenches, mine craters, &c should be
treated with chloride of lime, quick-lime, or sprayed with oresol or solution
C and then isolated either by means of boarding inied in with earth and
chloride of lime or by sand bags soaked in heavy petroleum oil.

A day in a front-line trench, amid such phenomena as bodies sprayed
with solution C, began about an hour before first light—say, 4:30. This
was the moment for the invariable ritual of morning stand-to, when
everyone stared across No Man’s Land, weapon ready, and prepared to
repel attack. After the dawn danger had passed, the men stood down and
prepared breakfast in small groups, frying bacon and heating tea over
small, preferably smokeless fires. In British trenches the daily rum ration
of about two tablespoonsful was then doled out to each man. Before

attacking, when the troops would have to climb out of the trench on
ladders and cross No Man’s Land, larger doses would be vouchsafed.
One medical officer deposed after the war was over, “Had it not been for
the rum ration I do not think we should have won the war.”

During the day everyone stayed below the top of the trench and
cleaned weapons or repaired those parts of the trench damaged by the
night’s artillery fire. But when nighttime came the real work began.
Wiring parties went out in front to repair the wire and to install new
entanglements. Digging parties went forward in saps to extend them.
Carrying parties negotiated the communication trenches, bringing up
rations and ammunition and mail. All this night work was likely to be
illuminated suddenly by enemy flares, and it was often interrupted by
machine-gun and artillery fire. The British trenches, where this murder-
ous parody of the normal world of “work” was going on, were just sev-
enty miles from London, and the absurd proximity of the wartime
existence to real life was ironic and poignant, for one could breakfast in
the trenches and be back in London for dinner in the evening, and not
just dinner but dinner at a classy setting like one’s club or the Cafe
Royal. One officer, returned to the trenches after an evening spent at a
London musical show with his wife, commented: “Christ! ... I was at
Chu Chin Chow last night with my wife. Hard to believe, isn’t it? Hard
to believe. Impossible to believe. That other life, so near in time and
distance, was something led by different men. Two lives that bore no
relation to each other.”

But now and then trench routine would be dramatically violated by an
attempt at a large-scale advance. Most of these proved futile and disas-
trous, none more so than the battle of the Somme, which the British
fought from July to November 1916. Planned meticulously for over six
months—new railway lines were laid, masses of ammunition and sup-
plies were laid in, a seven-to-one superiority in troops was assured, the
German lines were deluged with a full week’s artillery fire from over
1,500 guns—the Somme attack had every reason to succeed. At 7:30 on
the morning of July 1, 1916, the attacking waves of eleven British divi-
sions left their trenches and, filled with hope, began walking, their rifles
at port arms, toward the German trenches. A minute later the machine-
gun units of the six German divisions facing them carried their weapons
upstairs from their deep dugouts and simply hosed down the attackers.
One astonished German machine-gunner recalled, “We were very sur-
prised to see them walking. We had never seen that before.... When
we started firing we just had to load and reload. They went down in their
hundreds. You didn’t have to aim, we just fired into them.” Of the
110,000 who attacked, 60,000 were killed or wounded before the day
was over. More than 20,000 lay dead between the lines, and it was days
before the wounded in No Man’s Land stopped crying out. The failure
of the attack seemed to encapsulate all the bizarre anomalies and frustra-
tions of the First World War. Trying to make sense of the events of July 1, 1916, Edmund Blunden concluded that the stalemate was hopeless, the war ridiculously static, triumphal breakthrough impossible. "By the end of the day," he wrote, "both sides had seen, in a sad scrawl of broken earth and murdered men, the answer to the question. No road. No thoroughfare. Neither race had won, nor could win, the War. The War had won, and would go on winning."

This sense of despair verging on the absurd became the dominant tone of the writing that emerged from the First World War. Among the troops, hatred for the kept and censored press was widespread, fueling anger that their friends and families at home had little idea of the horrors being enacted in their name. In public rhetoric like sermons and editorials, terms like gallant, steed, and warrior were still to be heard. The war was being mediated through the language of a dead chivalry rather than that of the new industrialized murder. "Pluck" was now irrelevant: the artillery shell found you whether you were brave or cowardly, and no amount of courage or swank kept the machine-gun bullet from going through you.

Of all writers, it can be assumed that poets are especially sensitive to the adequacy of language to register honest experience, and it was the poets of the Great War who protested most effectively against human debasement and verbal fraud. Perceiving that the protest on behalf of sense and humanity was largely the work of poets, Hemingway has reasoned that "poets are not arrested as quickly as prose writers would be if they wrote critically." Indeed, among the untutored, who may have dimly remembered the reputations of such as Oscar Wilde, Ernest Dowson, and Algernon Charles Swinburne, poets were regarded as dreamy, if not hopelessly effeminate or half-mad. When the young infantry officers Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon wanted to meet and talk about the poems they were writing, they did so secretly, since discussing such stuff was now irrelevant: the artillery shell found you whether you were brave or cowardly, and no amount of courage or swank kept the machine-gun bullet from going through you.

But to be effective as protest, poetry must be read, and by large numbers of people. The soldier poets of the First World War happened to write at a moment remarkably favorable to both the writing and reading of poetry. Both they and readers who were sophisticated assumed that major public awareness could find a lodging in lyric poetry. There was deep respect for literature in those days, and it was this respect that invited these young trench-horrified privates and junior officers like Isaac Rosenberg, Ivor Gurney, and Sassoon to couch their views of the war not in journalism, polemic pamphlets, or works of exposition and argument, but in poems.

And it's notable that while others, like Eliot and Pound and Joyce, were writing "experimentally," the poets of the First World War tended to write in a traditional style. An example is the way Wilfred Owen proceeds in his famous "Dulce et Decorum Est." What one encounters in the poem—the soldier choking to death in a gas attack, exhibited by Owen to shock some sentimental and ignorant stay-at-home "friend"—is so compelling and "modern" (in the nasty way) that it's easy to overlook the poem's nonmodern form. Owen writes it not in any novel style as a correlative of the novel message but in quite standard iambic-pentameter lines arranged in formal quatrains. Owen seems to eschew bolder modernisms because he wants desperately to communicate—not his technical cleverness but his point, and he knew he had to reach that well-bred literary audience he wanted to shock into a new understanding. These readers respected the appearance of order in poetry, and to convey news of disorder and scandal, he had to remain within a formal technique bespeaking traditional ideas of order. Indeed, a large part of the ironic effect of First World War poems, those dwelling on meaningless slaughters, fatuous errors, and appalling mess and hopelessness, results from their being conducted with so high a regard for order. Collapsing so seldom into the hysteria one might think appropriate, they remain conventional in means, and their conventionality doubly emphasizes the awfulness of what they convey. The British social habit of understatement was luckily available to suggest the method. It's curious that the anxieties of the trenches impelled the poets toward an apparently retrograde formalism, while safely at home, far from the carnage, Edgar Lee Masters, Hilda Doolittle, and Carl Sandburg were practicing writing poems without rhyme or meter. William Carlos Williams was freeing himself from inherited poetic forms, and Ezra Pound was finding rhyme largely irrelevant to the task of the Canto. Front-line mess and trauma seem to invite a compensatory reliance on form as a buttress.

Familiar by now, so familiar as to have attained the status of an instructive insight applicable to all modern wars, is the ironic "plot" described by events and emotions from 1914 to 1918. If the war began in jubilation and innocence, an ironic reversal to horror and disillusion was triggered first by the misadventure of Gallipoli, then by the battle of the Somme, and then by the battle of Passchendaele. As Joseph Cohen has noted in his biography of Isaac Rosenberg, Rupert Brooke’s death in 1915 could serve as an emblem of "the brave sacrifices of the young, but three years later, Rosenberg’s death—ten April Fool’s Day 1918—became the symbol of the futility of such sacrifices. As late as 1917, Edmund Blunden recalled,

there were still ... poets who kept something of the idealism of 1914 in their outlook and their poems. But 1917 was the Passchendaele year, and to me it seems that the Passchendaele drive was murder—only to the
troops but to their singing faiths and hopes. From then on the voice of those who found strength and interval enough merely for penning their visions was generally a cry.

In July 1917, Siegfried Sassoon issued his famous public statement in which he declared his refusal to serve any longer in the brutal, purposeless shambles the war had become. A month earlier, T. S. Eliot had sent the Nation "a letter lately received from a young officer...[who] entered the army directly from a Public School and began his service in the trenches before he was nineteen." The young officer, angry because no one at home seems sufficiently aware of the realities of the front, offers civilians

a picture of a leprous earth, scattered with the swollen and blackened corpses of hundreds of young men. The appalling stench of rotting carrion. . . . Mud like porridge, trenches like shallow and sloping cracks in the porridge-porridge that stinks in the sun. Swarms of flies and bluebottles clustering on pits of offal. Wounded men lying in the shell holes among the decaying corpses: helpless under the scorching sun and bitter nights, under repeated shelling. Men with bowels dropping out, lungs shot away, with blinded, smashed faces, or limbs blown into space. Men screaming and gibbering. Wounded men hanging in agony on the barbed wire, until a friendly spout of liquid fire shrivels them up like a fly in a candle.

"But these are only words," says the young officer, "and probably convey only a fraction of their meaning to the hearers. They shudder, and it is forgotten."

When the war finally ended, Sassoon, watching the hysterical flag-waving crowds celebrating in London, said: "It is a loathsome ending to the loathsome tragedy of the last four years." Sensitive observers knew now that winning is losing, and that "victory" is now as archaic a myth as "valor," and both as hollow as "glory." When four years after the Armistice the Treaty of Versailles was signed, Vera Brittain, whose brother and fiancé were both destroyed in France, couldn't even bring herself to read the text. As she says, "I was beginning already to suspect that my generation had been deceived, its young courage cynically exploited, its idealism betrayed, and I did not want to know the details of that betrayal." Sensing that the treaty simply invited a renewed war ("It is not peace," said Ferdinand Foch, "it is an armistice for twenty years"), Vera Brittain threw herself into pacifist agitation and saw her prophecies of nonsensical disaster fulfilled when the Second World War broke out in 1939