Memories and Representations of War

The Case of World War I and World War II

Edited by
Elena Lamberti and Vita Fortunati

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INTRODUCTION

ELENA LAMBERTI

Some preliminary remarks

For an individual, as well as for a nation, cultural memory is a complex and stratified entity strictly connected not only to the history and the experience of either the individual or the nation, but also to the way in which that very history and experience are read in time, individually and collectively. Each time, the past acquires new meanings and the same fact, even though it stays the same, is nevertheless shaped through remembrance; inevitably, it is juxtaposed to new backgrounds, to new biographies and to new recollections. We must therefore acknowledge that it is impossible to offer a final and absolute vision of the past, especially if the event to be recalled affects at once both the private and the public sphere of a heterogeneous community, as in the case of the memories of the two World Wars that constitute the topic of this collection of essays.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, the debate on the ontological status of various scholarly disciplines, the juxtaposition of macro and micro history, the questioning of the ideas of objectivity and subjectivity in the historiographic rendering, as well as in literature, have taught us all to be prudent observers and use the plural instead than the singular: no longer a unique memory, but many memories, many traces left by the same event which in time settle as sediment in the individual consciousness, as well as in the collective consciousness, and which are often – consciously or unconsciously – hidden or removed; traces that nevertheless stay and that suddenly or predictably re-emerge each time the historical, political or cultural picture changes.[1]

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[1] Jay Winter's most recent book *Remembering War: The Great War between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006) investigates precisely the complex interplay of war, memory and remembrance. In the various chapters, Winter discusses the "Practice of

Already in 1964, speculating on the reasons that had brought him to write his first novel on the Italian partisan war, Italo Calvino called memory "experience", and defined it as "the memory of the event plus the wound it has inflicted on you, plus the change which it has wrought in you and which has made you different".[2] Therefore, memory, especially the memory of painful events such as those investigated in this volume, is something complex by its very nature since it embeds much more than the single event: it embeds sensible traces, scars that stay and change for ever the identity of the individual and of the nation that remember. If, in addition, the memory of the historical event is conceived as the starting point from which to investigate also the strategies employed to mould a super-national macro-identity, such as, in our case, the identity of the "new Europe",[3] then it is inevitable not only to work out a much more complex set of speculations, but also to investigate the deeper meaning of the very process itself.

Today, it is the European Commission that encourages transnational forms of research, such as the European Thematic Network Projects, so to trigger communal speculations capable of bringing Europe together through the sciences and the humanities.[4] The underpinning educational project is very ambitious and also

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Remembrance", as well as the "Theatres of Memory" and he explores, in his final chapter, the "Memory Boom" which characterizes the twentieth century.

[2] Italo Calvino, *The Path to the Spiders Nest*, rev. edn, trans. Archibald Colquhoun and Rev. Martin Mclaughlin (New York: The Ecco Press, 2000), 29

[3] On this topic, see *European Memories of the Second World War*, eds Helmut Peitsch, Charles Burdett, and Claire Gorrara (Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 1998). Another interesting book, also investigating the origin of Europe and the relation with Islam is Massimo Cacciari, *Geofilosofia dell'Europa* (Milan: Adelphi, 2003).

[4] European Thematic Networks are projects co-sponsored by the EU programme in the field of education. Their goal is "to enhance quality and to define and develop a European dimension within a given academic discipline or study area, or as regards a topic of an interdisciplinary/multidisciplinary nature, or in other matters of common interest (such as university management, quality assurance etc.). This is achieved by means of co-operation between universities, university faculties or departments. Such co-operation should also involve academic associations, learned societies, professional bodies, other partners of socio-economic importance in the public or private sector and, where appropriate, student organizations. Co-operation within Thematic Networks is expected to lead to outcomes which will have a lasting and widespread impact on universities across Europe in the field concerned" (more at: www.socleoyouth.be).

somewhat dangerous: to promote new forms of research capable of overcoming traditional national boundaries is certainly a fundamental and a necessary input to work out new European educational standards, at once original and updated. Yet, at the same time, to pursue a shared European identity through new educational patterns risks bringing about some sort of homogenization and the melting of all differences that are a heritage to be preserved while unifying but not assimilating. For this reason the research project that has led to this book (the European Thematic Network Project ACUME, dedicated to the study of cultural memory in relation to the idea of European identity)[5] is grounded on the belief that the very term "European identity" is to be considered as an open and dynamic one, capable of re-negotiating itself by beginning with the establishment of a shared set of values that the scientific and the humanistic research can certainly help to work out. In this perspective, the European identity can be envisaged as the combination of multiple identities, from those rooted in the various national realities to those still in progress today. Hence a new understanding of historical processes within single nations can be acknowledged while also taking into consideration the

[5] The European Thematic Network ACUME brought together more than eighty European partner institutions, including universities and cultural association, and about fifteen non-European associate partners. The Network investigated the idea of "cultural memory" in European Countries, meaning by "Cultural Memory" a heritage that each nation has created over time in order to mould its own identity. In this perspective, "Cultural Memory" is built upon two different, yet complementary aspects that partners in the project investigated: remembrance (memory) and oblivion (amnesia). The project was characterized by an interdisciplinary methodology and by a comparative approach. The areas of research and teaching are the history of ideas; philosophy; literature and translation studies; anthropology (folklore and ethnographic studies) and social sciences; cultural studies (cinema, media, pop-cult) and gender studies; and the visual arts. The project included five fields of research: Cultural Amnesia; Bearing Witness; Places and memory; Oral and Written History; Foundation Texts and Mythologies. All partners co-operated to pursue the following goals – to address education trans-nationally; to encourage the active involvement of students; to encourage the active involvement of local professional, educational, vocational agencies and institutions; to assess curriculum innovation and develop new educational strategies at a European level; to promote the production of new teaching/ study material on the theme of "Cultural memory", such as WebPages; teaching modules both "traditional" and OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING; etc. (more online: www.lingue.unibo.it/acume).

impact that new waves of immigration to and from Europe are having on the definition of new social matrixes.

In such a context, the way the memories of the two World Wars have been readjusted each time in relation to the evolving international historical setting, plays a crucial role in the definition of ethical, political and economic issues that, in turn, underpin the making of the new Europe. As far as these memories are concerned, today the word "reconciliation" is becoming the fashionable word in trans-European conversations; and yet "reconciliation" is a word that does not mean to forget, it does not imply that we start it all again from what we have today, transforming what was before into a strategically conceived *tabula rasa*. On the contrary, the very act of reconciliation is a painful and difficult process that can be fully achieved only if we acknowledge first, as individuals and as groups, that the same land is inhabited by contrasting memories, and by divided memories.

First of all we have to question ourselves, we have to question who we are, both as individuals and as groups, within nations and across nations. In this light, the memories of the two World Wars can be perceived as fundamental crossroads revealing contested traces of the same event, and suggesting the need to acknowledge differences in the way we have been remembering those events, not only across Europe, but also within the same nation state. In this volume, the historian Alberto De Bernardi discusses precisely this issue: in his investigation of Italian memories of the First and Second World Wars, he discusses the very ideas of winners and losers in relation to the subjective perception of historical events that, in a very short span of time, changed the position of Italy during the war years and, consequently, also in the post-war periods. And it is easy to imagine similar complex situations for other European nations, especially today, several years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, with all the ensuing political, cultural and social consequences. Before 1989, Europe, but not only Europe, was not ready to question its memories of the war experiences (especially those related to the Second World War) because the various national identities (and the various national unities, even those artificially constructed or imposed) were based also on how people remembered the two World Wars: to historically question the act of remembering could then be dangerous or risky. Today it has become a conscious must.

Inevitably, to investigate the memories of the two World Wars means also to question the making of the twentieth century, the century that has brought to light a new idea of Europe. If, since the second post-war period, Europe has acquired well-defined institutional departments, from the cultural viewpoint Europe still remains an ideal project and a challenge. Today such a challenge is even more important, for it is played against a much more complex and entangled international background in which the definition of cultural identity affects the role and the function of the new Europe.

The research methodology

The contributors to this book belong to different yet complementary areas of research – history, literature, cinema, art history. They come from various national realities and discuss questions related to Italy, Britain, Germany, Poland, Spain, at times introducing a comparison between European and North American memories of the two World War experiences. These scholars are all guided by the same principle: to encourage the establishment of an interdisciplinary and trans-national dialogue in order to work out new approaches capable of integrating and acknowledging different or even opposing ways to perceive and interpret the same historical phenomenon – so to question "why is it?". They all agree that the two World Wars should be understood as complex and intertwined crossroads leading to the definition of the new European (and world) reality, and deeply pervading the making of the twentieth century.

Gertrude Stein had already explored such an idea in a book written between 1941 and 1943, *Wars I Have Seen*. Stein's book is perhaps a unique discussion of the intertwined historical and cultural legacy of the two world conflicts written well before historiography and cultural studies started to work along the same lines. The book succeeds in grasping complex social implications of a world which, at that time, was still very much in progress. Certainly, Stein's way of bearing witness differs from more rigorous historiographic discourses: it is built on metaphors and on the subjective rendering of a personal experience which is also a collective experience; it is further complicated by a truly modernist avant-garde rendering that aims to translate the author's conscious and unconscious observations through a constant juxtaposition of situations and fragmented sentences. Yet,

even this uneasy, artistic representation of real and traumatic events describing the daily life in occupied France, succeeds in grasping the deep meaning and the lasting impact of the two wars. Already in the very first pages, Stein points out that World War I was the event that had started to undo the nineteenth century, therefore triggering a process that World War II could not but bring to an end. In her pages, she grasps a truth that historians could acknowledge fully only several decades later.

Her speculations are developed by a constant juxtaposition of her observation of her present life in France, and of her past experience as a child and as a passionate reader of historical plays. In her recollection, past and present constantly overlap and work as a sort of speculative *fil rouge*:

> So as I say I know what it is to be any age now that there is a war and so remembering back is not only remembering but might be being…
>
> War is never fatal but always lost. Always lost. And as they all said this, they knew that they meant what they said. Always lost.
>
> And this brings me back to the time between eight and twelve when I read and read and in between I read all the historical plays of Shakespeare and all the other plays of Shakespeare and more and more this war of 1942-43 makes it like that…
>
> Dear Life life is strife Claribel used to say, but she did say dear life and in a way it is and she did say life is strife but it is.
>
> It was all that between babyhood and fourteen, and it was the nineteenth century babyhood and fourteen and the nineteenth century dies hard all centuries do that is why the last war to kill it is so long, it is still being killed now in 1942, the nineteenth century just as the eighteenth century took from the revolution to 1840 to kill, so the nineteenth century is taking from 1914 to 1943 to kill.[6]

Stein writes about her memories of war while writing about her own education, therefore juxtaposing public and private spheres; she creates a sort of symbolic path in which childhood (babyhood) and adolescence become keys to understand the complex meaning of the two war experiences, often in an unexpected way, but always in a very direct, unpleasant and hard way:

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[6] Gertrude Stein, *Wars I Have Seen* (New York: Brilliance Books, 1984), 11, 13 and 16.

> To-day, there was an airplane over our heads, and Victor, he is nineteenth, said I am afraid. And we said and why are you afraid, well he said the reason I am afraid, of course they are not dropping bombs on us. Of course not we said even if they are boches because this is no place to drop bombs. Of course not said Victor, but I am afraid. Why we said, Because they are kids who are going up in those Germans planes now, and you know what kids are, they do not know what to do and they might fall down and so drop down upon us. Now that is not legendary. That is uncertain but between babyhood and fourteen, why you are afraid and why you are glad and shy you are you, and why you play, and why you scream and then cry, all this however you think you can try, all this is legendary …
>
> This is what I mean when I say that between babyhood and fourteen it is a legend, anything and everything is what it can seem, and it does seem and there is nothing in between.
>
> Eating and vomiting and war, the end of between being a baby and fourteen, makes this be a scene. Any day and in every way this can be seen, eating and vomiting and war. In any way that eating is something that is to be done with or without stealing makes vomiting and war. And the end of babyhood to fourteen, makes this not a dream, but an awakening. When a baby eats and vomits it is not war. But when fourteen eats and vomits then it is a war.[7]

In Stein's writing, the acknowledgment that the ongoing war is changing both the history and the culture of those who are fighting or experiencing it for ever, therefore bringing to an end a process started as far as August 1914 (and well before), is rendered through images that juxtapose life histories and History and grasp the essence of a passage that could be fully understood only after 1945. To move from childhood to adolescence implies, at the same time, the awakening, that is the acknowledgement, and the malaise, that is the uncertainty, the fear and the trauma to learn, to feel, that individuals are marching towards a still unknown land that, in 1943, in the writer's mind is still marked as *Hic Sunt Leones*.

Yet it is an unknown land that between 1914 and 1945, and even more after the Second World War was nevertheless mapped through novels, short-stories, journals, letters, and even visually translated into now celebrated movies (from *The Big Parade*, 1925, to *Saving Private Ryan*, 1998); a series of fictional materials that, in time, have been

[7] *Ibid*., 24-25.

used also by historians and that, in the last decades of the twentieth century, have acquired a new heuristic potential. Towards the end of the 1970s, macro history started to acknowledge the role played by micro histories of the First and Second World Wars – including oral history and histories – in the understanding of the experiences of both wars, therefore acknowledging their relevance in approaching the recent past in spite of (or perhaps because of) their private dimension. Historians like George Mosse, Antonio Gibelli, Luisa Passerini, Jay Winter, Daniel Pick, Eric J. Leed, or literary scholars like Paul Fussells, Mario Isnenghi, are among those who have developed new lines of research open to new sources, and aiming to question the way we remember the two World Wars. Inevitably, these scholars had to take into consideration uneasy truths, as well as divided and conflicting memories that exploded when the cold war came to an end and the making of a new enlarged Europe started to be envisaged. As a consequence, at the turn of the millennium, the new historical and cultural setting has enabled the retrieval and finally the revelation of other memories of the two wars. These have often been conveyed through individual, artistic and literary traces that are now increasingly regarded as analogical mirrors for more complex memories, as well as ways to preserve, in time and despite censorship, uneasy memories often removed from public euphemisms and national myths and mythologies.

For instance, it is the case of the anti-rhetorical novels published towards the end of the 1920s in various national contexts – novels that have immediately given voice to the absurdity and nonsense of that world massacre, and to the ensuing private and collective traumas. Today, thanks to the historical surveys carried out in the last decades of the twentieth century, we know that the impressions and stories narrated by novelists such as Erich Maria Remarque, Ford Madox Ford, Henri Barbusse, or Ernest Hemingway often correspond, in fact, to the historical truth, as it has been hidden and preserved in historical documents too long forgotten, such as the records of psychiatric hospitals, or private letters and diaries. In this volume, the essays by historians Antonio Gibelli and Oliver Janz, recall the importance of investigating other sources, as well as the importance of micro-histories, since they help to bring into the foreground the collective mechanisms of construction (Janz) and deconstruction (Gibelli) of the myth of the war experience, often in contrast with the personal, traumatic experience of war in the trenches.

In the immediate after-war years, such a traumatic experience was consciously removed by all public discourses whose rhetoric ended by constructing a verbal ritual shared by families in private to give meaning to the death of their beloved ones and thereby allow them to process and survive their loss. The trauma removed from official rhetoric, stayed in the bodies and in the minds of many veterans forced into hospitals or protected by their families – a trauma which, in time, affected also the enlarged community, families, parents, widows, brothers, sisters, or simply friends, who had to mourn the loss of a beloved one *in absentia*, the body being often lost or buried on the battlefield, far from home. In this volume, Alberto Casadei introduces this theme through the investigation of some novels that help to assess the attempt to regain a meaning in a death which seemed to have lost all heroic connotations.

Hence, in the recent years, historians have used new sources and non-official documents (such as novels, diaries, works of art, case sheets, etc.) as objective correlatives to support new lines of research, and especially to retrieve evidence useful to further investigate the lasting impact of the two World Wars. If the First World War is now fully understood as the event that marked the passage from the old to the new century, the Second World War remains the event whose uneasy memories still affect the way we assess and interpret the reconstruction of individual and national identities after tragedies such as Auschwitz and Hiroshima. In Europe, the most obvious and complex case is certainly that of Germany, a defeated nation, for more than four decades split into two by history, and for a long time morally deprived of all right to talk about the war experience, and especially of the Holocaust – a nation forced to forget, to remove her tragic past in order to restart and to reshape herself.

But still, since the early 1950s German artists started to suggest the necessity of Germany facing up to its recent history (one thinks of the controversial works of Joseph Beuys and Anselm Kiefer). Later, especially after 1989, the reconstruction of Germany's renewed national identity moved precisely from the symbolic reconstruction of places of divided and painful memories, the same places already preserved in the provocative counter-memories of artists such as Jochen Gerz – discussed in this volume by the art historian Jonathan Kear particularly in the light of the recent debate accompanying the

opening of the new Holocaust memorial in Berlin. Kear discusses the uneasy tension between remembrance and oblivion through the investigation of paradoxical monuments, which are, in fact, "works of commemoration that commemorate their own absence and the memory of their own passing into oblivion".

Emblematically, the German case is at the core of many essays in this book: scholars often move from literary sources to question broader issues concerning the ethic of memory, as well as the ethic of oblivion in the German nation. Cesare Giacobazzi discusses Gunter Grass's *My Century*, emphasizing the way truth and fiction are constantly juxtaposed in all historical narratives and therefore acknowledging the complexity of the act of remembering. In particular, he underlines how each narrative bears witness not only to the historical fact *per se*, but also to its own historical context, as well as to the author's biography and ideology. Remarque's war is not Junger's war; similarly, in Grass's book, the reporters of World War II show

> the limits of their memory: war reporters are able to use only linguistic structures representing great military triumphs, imposing scenarios of victories and conquests. On the contrary, when they are asked to narrate a retreat, bombed and destroyed cities, dead people and devastations they cannot but take refuge in long and abstruse monologues in which everybody is alone with his own language and his own unconsciousness.[8]

Similarly, in an essay discussing the *Luftkrieg*, the aerial bombing of German cities by the allies, and the ensuing escape of survivors, Raul Calzoni retrieves other uneasy memories of the Second World War. He also addresses some painful and complex questions that the newly unified Germany was forced to face, acknowledging not only the best known tragic memories of the Nazi past, but also the less famous but not less traumatic memories of events removed or suspended because of historical contingencies (for instance, of the deportations of millions of people from eastern Germany, the *Vertreibung*). In particular, Calzoni investigates the historical and literary debate following the discussion of the ethical dimension of the "moral bombing" carried out by the Anglo-American allies: the

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[8] See page 113 in the present volume.

silence that, in Germany and until recent times, has characterized most narratives of the Second World War (a situation that has inevitably hindered all discussion on *Luftkrieg*) becomes here the emblem of the "removal of the problem at the level of national, collective consciousness".

In this book, we have placed a particular emphasis on some case studies we considered particularly useful in bringing to light uneasy questions, such as those contested memories already indicated. In particular, the instances of Italy and of Germany have offered an emblematic ground to further investigate the controversial and often painful idea of reconciliation. Moving often from the study of cultural memories of the two World Wars in these nations, we have become more and more convinced that to acknowledge the existence of these contested memories is the first step necessary to encourage the negotiation of a truly shared ethic of memory. Inevitably, to move on we must ask uneasy and troubled questions, collectively and individually: do winners and losers, victims and executioners, share the same right to remember? Are all executioners the same? Or can you distinguish among them? And is it ethical or moral to distinguish among them? And can you apply the same arguments to the winners? Are they all good? Needless to say, to ask these questions does not mean to revising history, it does not mean that one is a revisionist or, even worst, that one is denying or refusing to acknowledge what happened: the condemnation of Nazism cannot be questioned, the exterminations camps remain a shameful historical fact, and the dictators of the 1920s, 1930s and later, in Italy, in Germany, Spain, Portugal or the former USSR cannot be absolved. Similarly, the partisan wars must be remembered as founding experiences deeply pervaded by national and transnational values of freedom and independence. All these memories must stay as lasting and untouchable values. But this does not exempt us from the responsibility to remember also the shadows, to retrieve what, in time, has been removed, sometimes unconsciously, sometimes strategically. We have to face the uneasy debate on the dangers pervading the preservation of an idea of memory suffocated by ritual and detached from historical sense – the dangers embedded in a strictly codified, even sanctified, memory.

The essay by Roberto Bigazzi works along these lines, as it

discusses the editorial vicissitudes of Beppe Fenoglio's *Il partigiano Johnny* in relation to the case of Italian partisan war and the symbolic value nationally attached to the very idea of a war of Resistance. The author moves from mutilated literary sources in order to comment on sophisticated forms of censorship that, for decades, have prevented the acknowledgement of the existence of divided and conflicting memories that only today are beginning to emerge and cause uneasy controversies. Similarly, in her essay, Camila Lowe discusses a controversial film such as *Tras el Cristal* by Agustí Villaronga and speculates on the uneasy debate over how to remember and represent the horror of the Holocaust at a time when the very word is used not only to name an actual historical event, but also as a metaphor for the human horror:

> The need to remember surpasses the difficulties inherent to each form of representation. This need is usually linked to the assumption that not forgetting means not repeating. But this idea can be inverted, which is what occurs here [in the movie *Tras el Cristal*], leading us to the following question: can obsessive memory also lead to perpetuation?

The first results

Most of the scholars engaged in this volume met at an international symposium organized by European Thematic Network Project Acume in September 2003 in Bologna, dedicated to the theme "Memories and Representations of Wars: a Comparison between World War I and World War II". Other scholars joined the research group later on, when the first results started to be promoted and disseminated. If there are limits in the areas covered by the essays we present here, these are due in part to the original genesis of the research group, and in part to the fact that this volume is to be considered as a first result of a work still in progress: its major task is to trigger a new line of research which can help to assess the cultural, political and social heritage of the two World Wars in Europe, moving from the new potentialities now offered by memory studies.

In recent years, the study of cultural memory has encouraged a renewed methodology of investigation that has led to very interesting results in the case of traumatic events whose memories bear a lasting

impact on both collective and individual consciousness.[9] In our case, the focus on specific case studies has helped us to explore the complex meaning related to the persistence of contested memories of the two wars. In addition to the cross-readings of memories of World Wars I and II carried out with a particular emphasis on emblematic national realities (such as Germany and Italy), we have also encouraged the discussion of themes related to the rituals of war memories, therefore addressing the questions of sacralization and of commemoration (but also of oblivion) of the war experience. Finally, we have started to explore the crucial role played, during the twentieth century, by the mediators of memory (especially cinema), moving from the assumption that they can both construct and deconstruct cultural memories: they have contributed to mould a shared understanding of the historical event, therefore encouraging the making of a collective and unified memory; but they have also in time succeeded in exploring uneasy themes, triggering debate and unmasking contested memories.

The overall picture that emerges from our interdisciplinary approach, which investigates war memories taking into account different types of sources, constitutes a useful point of departure to work out a comparative investigation of the two wars and to speculate on the historical, cultural and social impact that the memories of these two events have had on the moulding of a renewed idea of Europe. Moving from this background, Astrid Erll discusses various European war novels to show how literature can become a fundamental heuristic tool to define, mould and retrieve trans-national memories, in turn underpinning the making of new social matrixes. Similarly, in her contribution Vita Fortunati suggests that anti-rhetorical war novels are particularly useful to work out differences between the two conflicts, and to speculate on the socio-political orders characterizing the two post-war periods. The anti-rhetorical war novels written in the 1920s by European writers who fought are, in fact, linked by some patterns that transcend the writer's nationality and cultural identity, and which force a shared knowledge and understanding of the event: they bear

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[9] See *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory*, eds Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (London and New York: Routledge, 2003); and *Regimes of Memory*, eds Susannah Radstone and Katharine Hodgkin (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

witness to the making of a new epoch, to the fact that after the First World War the world could never be the same again. In this respect, these novels, as well as those written by American writers in the same period, become token of a passage, objective correlatives of situations and feelings that, today, historians themselves acknowledge as shared facts and truths.

Novels by Barbusse, Remarque, Hemingway, Dos Passos or Ford translate a reality deranged by the first World War and present a deep malaise rendered through a literary form which refuses all traditional rhetoric of celebration and sacralization of the war experience, no matter what the author's nationality may be. Nor does it matter if life in the trenches is recounted by someone on the winning or on the losing side because what all these writers tell us is that all humankind was defeated by the First World War: there were no winners or losers. All these writers deplore the disillusionment, the end of an age, and the full acknowledgment of a new barbarism that had grown within civilization itself – the new idea of progress brought devastating technological support to a war logic evermore inhuman and savage. Soldiers fighting in the different trenches are all equally victims, compared to troglodytes (Barbusse) or to servomechanisms of a powerful war machine (Dos Passos). In each case, these writers fully acknowledge a passage, the making of a new world characterized by new values and a new logic. As Hemingway points out in one of the most celebrated passages in *A Farewell to Arms*: "abstract words such as glory, honour, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates."[10]

In the popular imagination, the matter-of-factness of the event will for ever mark daily life as it stays in the new names given to old squares and streets, therefore fixing in the collective memory the passage from before to after the war. For this reason, the study of the new topography of the 1920s becomes a precious strategy to understand not only the impact of the First World War on people's consciousness, but also on the various strategies that each nation employed to consolidate the traditional myth of national identity and unity – a myth that had been seriously compromised by a war perceived as useless, foolish and unbearably long. As the historian Roberto Balzani reveals, in the post-war period after 1918, war

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[10] Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (London: Arrow Books, 1994), 165.

geography and war genealogy are united and bear witness to a clear political design to re-establish national identity, whereas, after 1945 such an association slowly loses its original meaning and the new urban topography reveals how the traces of the past become weaker and weaker, and how collective memory is then shaped around new myths determined by a renewed historical context.

In respect to World War I, other themes discussed in most anti-rhetorical war novels reveal a surprisingly clear perception of the historical phenomenon, confirmed by historiography only some years later. All the young characters denounce how they have been betrayed by their fathers, their teachers, their politicians; in these novels, the fight between generations acquires a sort of epical dimension and is often turned into the brutal fight between the individual and the community. The matter-of-factness of the experience brings disillusion, undermines the myth and forces each individual to a moral, ethical and physical pilgrimage that was not prevented by nor follows an inner drive, but forced by the circumstances. As pointed out by Paul Fussells, this idea of pilgrimage characterizes most First World War narratives that, following a religious or epic tradition, are built upon three major movements: the training, the initiation and the shocking acknowledgement of what the real war is, an awareness that no longer confirms the original myth, but instead turns it upside-down.[11] The passage between before and after the war reveals an existential vacuum, demolishes all creeds and brings to the fore the degeneration associated with new values underpinning the new materialistic society. Most writers insist on the absurdity of the war and, in particular, they denounce the emotional manipulation of volunteers and recruits, who were forced to hate and to kill without knowing or understanding why.

All novels suggest that the moulding of the enemy is a necessity imposed by the establishment that teaches soldiers how to hate: the school of hate can count on old traditional educational models (Remarque), and on new forms of communication (Dos Passos). The encounter with the real enemy, which in these novels often takes place in no man's land, is the moment that reveals the process of dehumanization. From that moment, the face of the enemy, until then

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[11] See Paul Fussell, "Threes", in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 125-30.

denied or covered by the uniform or a helmet, is no longer a monstrous face, but becomes the mirror reflecting one's own face, therefore revealing that all soldiers share the same condition and are all victims of an overwhelming system. The trauma induced by such revelation is always terrible, and often unbearable. These writers, no matter if they fought for the winners or the losers, reveal something which is even more terrible and uneasy to accept: they tell us that the process of barbarism and of dehumanization will not end with the war because it is a condition that belongs to modern man. Not many years later, Auschwitz will become the extreme epilogue to that process of rationalization of slaughter, carefully analysed by Daniel Pick,[12] the apex of the new contemporary barbarism, itself the dark-side of progress and technology, a point of no return. Already after the First World War, individuals could not but perceive their own world through their war experiences: Hemingway's veterans, Remarque's soldiers on leave are among the first to describe their old cities using war metaphors, images of death that derive from the trench experience. There are no possible escapes: pessimism is hyperbolic, no hope is left, all redemption is forbidden and even those who survive are doomed to be living dead. T.S. Eliot's zombies in *The Waste Land*, Ezra Pound's "old bitch[es] gone in the teeth" ("*Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*", V), as well as the mass production of human caricatures, the annihilation of the self, the disillusionment replacing the myth of the war experience, are the recurrent themes of most narrative published in the years between the two World Wars. All together, these sad images reveal the trauma of the process of understanding and form a rhetorical set of samples that can already be found in the private letters and in the diaries of the veterans, of the soldiers fighting in the trenches.

In relation to memories and representations of World War I, what really surprises us is not just the differences between various national realities and identities (and yet this does not mean that they should be neglected or forgotten), but the clear gap opposing private and public memories of that very event: soon after the First World War the various establishments tried to retrieve and preserve a rhetoric that private memories (reflected also in the anti-rhetorical war novels) questioned and deconstructed. A return to normality is signalled by

[12] See Daniel Pick, *War Machine: The Rationalisation of Slaughter in the Modern Age* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993).

new commemorative rituals that, as George Mosse has shown, are built in a very sophisticated way, starting precisely from the new dynamics characterizing the new mass society: the celebration of the Unknown Warrior, spectacular parades and official ceremonies are all strategies adopted to reconcile nations within their own borders. They become paradoxical forms of remembrance, built upon painful oblivions, upon the negation of the uselessness of the massacre or, better, upon its sacralization. However, in spite of the need to forget, the awareness of the passage was nevertheless preserved and novels such as *All Quiet on the Western Front*, or *A Farewell to Arms* became popular across nations and somehow prevented nations from forgetting (and in this process the movies based on these novels played an important role, too). It does not surprise us if today these anti-rhetorical novels are often quoted also by historians in their works: literature is used to bear witness, it helps to let people grasp the deeper meaning of a traumatic experience hidden in documents now released from previous historical and cultural censorship.

As is well known, the international scenario became more complex after the First World War, and the new role played by the United States started to determine a new European order. Even in this case, as I discuss in my essay, literature offers an interesting viewpoint, as it helps to enlighten the new international relations, both for the years between the two World Wars and the post-1945 period. Concerning the period after the First War, a good example is offered by the Spanish Civil War, here recalled by Arancha Aranzazu Usandizaga, who retrieves several reports and narratives by female writers in order to prove how they were able to grasp the complexity of the various Spanish fronts, well before historiography (and especially male historiography) got in on the act: European and American female writers who took part in the Spanish Civil War have often refused simply to repeat some of the generally accepted interpretative clichés that have contributed to turn that event into a sacred myth, limiting our historical reading and understanding of it.[13]

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[13] Even in this case, it is important to acknowledge that it was only after Franco's death that Spain could start to face the question of her own divided and conflicting memories, and therefore trying to overcome the ideological rigidity that, given the drama of the political situation and of the dictatorship, had become a form of defence of a still denied freedom.

In regard to the Second World War, in contrast with what happened in respect to the First War, one has to notice the great variety of viewpoints offered by novels written in the second half of the twentieth century. The extent of the variety induces us to think not just of one war experience (as in the case of the war in the trenches), but of many wars, fought along different fronts and for different reasons, depending on the nations involved: all questions left suspended by the First World War and never settled during the Versailles negotiations created different expectations even within the same national borders and exploded in the course of the Second World War.[14] If trench warfare is what makes the First World War a unique war, the Second War offers many different fronts: partisan war in Italy and in France; aerial bombing in Germany and England; war in the Pacific; the extermination camps and the Holocaust in Europe, as well as the dislocation camps for "alien enemies" in North America and in Canada (another example of neglected memories that literature has contributed to retrieve). It was indeed a total war, but there is no unique shared experience, since several different questions are involved – which contributes to the sedimentation of contested memories.

In this case, novels bear witness not only to the various geographical and more tangible realities of the new conflict, but also to the various ideological positions that often divided combatants fighting within the same national borders. The editorial vicissitudes of the works of Beppe Fenoglio and Italo Calvino on the war of resistance in Italy, offer a clear example of the way memories of that war were conditioned by the evolving historical context, and in particular by the consolidation of the Cold War, which soon after the Second World War forced all nations and individuals to take a precise side and quickly. The contrast between the messy partisan brigade and the officially accepted portrayal of partisan heroes, as described by a very young Calvino in his novel *The Path to the Spiders' Nest* (1946), had somehow to be dismissed, and the book neglected (that is, no longer published) until the mid 1960s. Calvino, by that time a well known writer *engagé*, republished his first novel only in 1964, adding a revealing Introduction in which he discussed the meaning of bearing witness to such a trauma, as well as the ideological implications

[14] See Margaret Macmillan, *Paris 1919: Six Months that Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2001).

pervading each approach to cultural memory. His choice and his Introduction help to reveal the lights and shades of the second post-war period which have had a lasting impact even on the definition of Europe: Eastern or Western Europe, Communism or Capitalism, free trade or state economy, private property or welfare. Therefore, in the 1960s, to remember and to question the very act of remembering the war experience and the post-war climate was often turned into a political tool in order to support or to oppose new causes, new struggles, new wars (consider, for instance, other novels such as Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*).

Since 1945 and up to the 1960s, the memories of the recent war functioned in the making of the two Europes, and therefore of the new world order: in the same years, American movies and Italian and French neo-realist cinema played a crucial role in the crystallization of a European and a Western memory that often, as Sara Pesce recalls in her essay, was built more on the basis of the imagery offered by this new powerful mediator of memory (cinema), than on historical archives. The role played by movies is so crucial that cinema is often defined as a fundamental iconographic archive of modern memory. Movies are often labelled as "immortal", and leave lasting marks on individual and collective memories. Such an adjective immediately underlines the fact that movies, especially those which bear witness to a real historical event (such as the two World Wars), transcend the fact and survive it. Witnesses, men and women who fought and experienced the war, die, but movies stay and continue to make you see what it was in a way that, in the course of time, technology has rendered even more "true", "trustable" and "faithful".

But what is the impact of these artificial forms of memory on the definition of private and national identities? These forms are designed to bear witness to a traumatic historical event, and yet they are also the product of imagination and translate the war experience into more or less codified images that can be easily recognized and accepted, perceived as true, by the audience – images that unavoidably are built upon a conscious process of selection of available materials, sources, evidences, viewpoints, memories. In addition, we are compelled to ask where shall we trace the boundary (both ethical and objective) between the memory of the war experience and the spectacle of the same experience (cinema being considered principally a means of

entertainment)? What is the agenda underpinning all productions of war movies? And does that change in relation to History? And how is it that in recent years the movie factories have felt the need to promote movies dedicated not only to the two World Wars, but also to the inter-war years (not only in Hollywood, but also in Europe, as in the works by Enzo Monteleone or Ken Loach)? It would be reassuring to think that the new interest in these two world conflicts and their relevant historical contexts originates from a renewed need to find a new ethic in the very act of bearing witness to such a lasting trauma. Perhaps this new concern indicates a will to question the entangled cause and course of events which, in turn, can lead to the acknowledgment of more complex scenarios still affecting the twenty-first century – a will to question that should not lead to unhistorical, outrageous and shameful revisionisms, but to a true understanding of co-existing contested memories. Yet, as Sara Pesce shows in her essay, even an important work such as *Saving Private Ryan* by Spielberg is not immune from objective restrictions pertaining to both the genre and the medium – war movies – when used to convey memory: even *Save Privates Ryan* reveals its debt to a movie genealogy “made in USA” which has been playing (and still does play) a major role in the definition of all cultural maps, even in Europe.

Hence, the memory of fundamental events, which are increasingly distant in time, is inevitably linked not only to the questions of sources, documents, witnesses, but also to the questions of genre, forms and medium used to render these sources, documents and testimony: historiography, literature, cinema are different media, they use different languages and must always take into account the (ontological and historical) limits embedded in both the discipline, and the art, since these limits constantly shift, depending on the complex system that contains (and performs) them. In this regard, the case of Polish director Andrzej Wajda, in this volume recalled by Gabriella Imposti, is significant: after having fought, while still very young, for the Armia Krajowa (the Polish liberation army), Wajda directed several movies on the experience of the Second World War, in time offering different viewpoints also in relation to the evolving political actuality in both Western and Eastern Europe. In 1957 he directed *Kanal*, the dramatic rendering of the failed war of resistance of partisans in Warsaw; in 1958 *Ashes and Diamonds* focused on the civil war that ensued in Poland at the end of World War II, which was followed by Soviet domination; ten years later he directed another

film on the question of anti-Semitism in Poland (*Samson*, 1961). More recently, in the 1990s, he challenged another controversial issue related to Polish collective memory, the Holocaust, offering a complex and much debated viewpoint in *Korczak*. In the course of time, for Wajda the Second World War has become a sort of *leitmotiv* embedding both memories and understanding of Polish national and private identities. It is a painful *leitmotiv* that is used not only to remember but also to question much more entangled historical, political and social issues affecting Europe today and the making of Polish national identity.

As was suggested earlier, the fresh interest in the two World Wars, turned into new literary and movie trends and supported by a new historiographic impulse (which has led not only to a wide range of new scholarly books, but also to whole sets of historical serials and documentaries on TV), also raises questions of spectacle and entertainment. It forces us to take into account also the uneasy ideas of desire, excitement and even pleasure linked to the war experience and, even more, to the increasing demand for works and programmes about war. These are uneasy issues that nevertheless pervade both memory and rendering of the war experience which Max Saunders takes into account in his essay, where he speculates on the relation connecting the process of sacralization of memory, desire, and the sense of guilt. These are conditions related to our own subjectivity that must be acknowledged and juxtaposed in order to investigate and understand the role played by the war experience in the making of a cultural memory – cultural memory that transcends the individual and becomes a foundation for the nation. In Saunders' essay, the autobiographical works of Mary Borden (1886-1968), a woman active during both World Wars, running mobile war hospitals in France and Northern Africa, are used to convey a series of speculations on the ambiguous interlacing of horror, pleasure and remembering. These works also enable us to retrace the recent debate on the rhetoric of commemoration, including Shoshana Felman's argument about the significance of testimony, Peter Novick's controversial thesis about the sacralization of the Holocaust, and Art Spiegelman's representation of 11 September 2001.

In the second half of the twentieth century the act of remembering therefore is complicated by meta-speculations on the very act itself, by

the questioning of the very idea of testimony, and by the crisis affecting most ontological statutes. In this regard, it is important to recall also the role played by gender studies, as they have forced us to reconsider all established canons, including the writing of historical novels on war. In particular, in this volume there are essays that insist on the deep impact that the two World Wars had on women's social, political and artistic history. Annamaria Lamarra and Daniela Fortezza not only offer examples of the new roles of women in the everyday reality of war, but they comment on the new awareness of the female world that the two wars forced on well-established patriarchal society. During wartime, women had to take sides, they had to decide if they wanted to support that specific war and why. This was a decision that caused lasting divisions in the women's movement and revealed fissures and differences among women themselves, not to speak of the deceived expectations and of the disillusionment that often followed the end of both wars. Once again, literature offers a wide spectrum of the various emotions, feelings and thoughts pervading the world of women, therefore grasping the complexity of the evolving reality. To female writers, the war experience suggested, at once, bewilderment and a will to face a new reality, a new way of being in a world which, in turn, was also shifting. The development of new writing techniques became a powerful tool for all explorations: writing became a strategy to elaborate the subjective trauma, but also to theorize new ways to be women, individuals and groups.

The essays in this book do not complete the picture, and the research group involved is aware of omissions (for instance, testimonies from France, from countries of the former USSR or the former Yugoslavia whose contribution to the assessment of contested memories is to be encouraged). To learn to remember is a work in progress and the goal of the scholars involved is precisely to start and encourage collaboration along new patterns: to enhance networking across disciplines in the humanities has become a necessity and a fascinating challenge, though not an easy one. As has been proved by the variety of approaches, the themes discussed in this volume are many and complex ones. They confirm that the experiences of two World Wars that have deeply marked both Europe and the rest of the world are still perceived as crucial moments for the definition of the national, cultural and political models characterizing our own lives.

From this perspective, to investigate the forms of remembrance related to the First and Second World Wars and to realize how these

two dramatic cataclysms remain as painful scars conditioning our own national and individual identities can become a way to try to explore what could be possible scenarios for our new Europe. Such an investigation should enhance a sense of understanding based not on blind forgiveness, but on a much needed, even though difficult and painful, acknowledgment of responsibilities, shadows and still existing differences – to remember, not to claim vengeance, but to learn to agree on what we no longer want to feel, to be and to accept as Europeans; to remember, in order to trigger dialogue among scholars, artists and politicians. It is an undertaking that implies new responsibilities and forces us all to act (or at least to try to act) in the vanguard, to be prepared to open up our own theoretical territories and, most important, to be willing to listen truly and deeply.

This is the real goal behind this book: to acknowledge the complexity of the observation and the complexity of the act of listening. The uneasy debate within each nation and across nations carried out through a thematic interdisciplinary comparison can become the first step enabling us to grasp and point out crucial, suspended, neglected or forgotten issues of more recent European and world history, as well as the values that unite us. And the act of remembering, as well as the willingness to bear witness to painful questions through a humanistic understanding that implies respect and dignity for all human beings and national identities, differences and traditions, is the first of these values.

PART I

CROSS-READINGS OF WORLD WAR I AND WORLD WAR II

WARS WE HAVE SEEN: LITERATURE AS A MEDIUM OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY IN THE "AGE OF EXTREMES"

ASTRID ERLL

The myriad faces of war and remembering

How to remember a war? Wars are events of national history, traumatic and dangerous, perhaps boring or exhilarating, experiences for those who do the fighting, cause of fear and mourning within families, and the focus of bitter contestation between opposing ideological groups. In the "short twentieth century", an "age of extremes" (Eric Hobsbawm),[1] which saw two World Wars and many other military conflicts, ranging from the Spanish Civil War to Vietnam and Iraq, the proverbial "myriad faces of war"[2] have been represented by countless forms, media and practices which can be subsumed under the term "collective memory" – reaching from the recall of individual lived-through experience and conversation among veterans to political speeches, monuments, rituals, and historiography.

For a literary historian involved in cultural memory studies,[3] there is not only the question of how the plethora of events and experiences that come to be called a "war" are re-presented within the complex framework of collective memory; what is also and more specifically

[1] Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*, (London: Michael Joseph, 1994).

[2] Trevor Wilson, *The Myriad Faces of War: Britain and the Great War, 1914-1918*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986).

[3] I use the term "cultural memory studies" to denote all those approaches which are engaged with the relationship between culture (as a semiotic system with a mental, a material, and a social aspect) and collective memory (in a broad sense, as defined in the second part of this essay). For the semiotic definition of culture, see Roland Posner, "What is Culture? Toward a Semiotic Explication of Anthropological Concepts", in *The Nature of Culture*, ed. W.A. Koch (Bochum: Brockmeyer, 1989). See also the handbook *Cultural Memory Studies: An Interdisciplinary and International Handbook*, eds Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter 2008).

of interest, is an understanding of the role that literature – a similarly multifaceted phenomenon as far as forms, genres, contents, meanings and ideologies are concerned – plays in such processes of collective remembering.[4] A short outline of concepts that aim at a deeper comprehension of "literature as a *medium* of collective memory" is the goal of this essay. Most examples will be drawn from literature of the First World War, especially from the popular novels that appeared during the War Fiction Boom (1928-1930) in Germany and Great Britain.

Collective and collected memory

"Collective memory" is a multifarious notion. Media, practices and structures as diverse as myth, monuments, historiography, ritual, conversational remembering, configurations of cultural knowledge, and neuronal networks are nowadays subsumed under this wide umbrella term. Because of its intricacy, collective memory has been a highly controversial issue ever since its very conception in Maurice Halbwachs' studies.[5] Just as his contemporary Marc Bloch accused Halbwachs of simply transferring concepts from individual psychology to the level of the collective,[6] today's scholars keep challenging the notion of collective memory, for example by proposing that with "myth", "tradition", and "individual memory" being well-established concepts, there is no need for "collective memory" as a further, and often misleading, addition to the existing repertoire of terms.[7] What they overlook, of course, is that it is exactly this umbrella quality of the term "collective memory" which helps us see the relations (sometimes functional, sometimes analogical,

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[4] For a general overview over the intersections of literature and cultural memory, see Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, "Where Literature and Memory Meet: Towards a Systematic Approach to the Concepts of Memory in Literary Studies", in *Literature, Literary History, and Cultural Memory*, ed. Herbert Grabes, REAL – Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature 21 (Tübingen: Narr, 2005), 265-98.

[5] See Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed., trans., and with an Introduction by Lewis A. Coser (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

[6] See Marc Bloch, "Mémoire collective, tradition et coutume", *Revue de Synthèse Historique*, 40 (1925), 73-83.

[7] See Noa Gedi and Yigal Elam, "Collective Memory – What Is It?", *History and Memory: Studies in Representation of the Past*, VIII/1 (1996), 30-50.

sometimes metaphorical) between such phenomena as, for example, ancient myths and the personal recollection of recent experience, and which enables disciplines as diverse as psychology, history, sociology, theology, and literary studies to engage in a stimulating dialogue.[8]

Still, some distinctions have to be made, in order to avoid unnecessary confusion within this broad field of cultural memory studies. One of the most crucial of these distinctions is probably that which Jeffrey Olick has recently drawn our attention to: collective memory has two aspects, that of "collec*ted*" and that of "collec*tive* memory" in a narrower sense: "two radically different concepts of culture are involved here, one that sees culture as a subjective category of meanings contained in people's minds versus one that sees culture as patterns of publicly available symbols objectified in society."[9]

The term "collected memory" refers to biological memory. It draws attention to the fact that no memory is ever purely individual, but always inherently shaped by collective contexts: from the people we live with and from the media we use, we gather (or "collect") schemata which help us recall the past and encode new experience. Our memories are often triggered as well as shaped by external factors – ranging from conversation among friends to books and to places. In short, we remember in socio-cultural contexts. It is especially within oral history and social psychology that collective memory is understood according to this first aspect of the term.[10] Both of these disciplines have always been very much interested in war memories. In search of collected memory, especially the veterans and civilians of the Second World War as well as the survivors of Nazi terror have been interviewed during the last three decades – in order to add new sources to conventional historiography or as a means of understanding the actual processes of remembering in a social context.

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[8] For an overview of interdisciplinary concepts of cultural memory studies and an outline of approaches to memory within literary studies, see Astrid Erll, *Kollektives Gedächtnis und Erinnerungskulturen: Eine Einführung* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2005).

[9] Jeffrey K. Olick, "Collective Memory: The Two Cultures", *Sociological Theory*, XVII/3 (1999), 333-48.

[10] See, for example, *Kontexte und Kulturen des Erinnerns: Maurice Halbwachs und das Paradigma des kollektiven Gedächtnisses*, eds Gerals Echterhoff and Martin Saar (Konstanz: UVK, 2002); Harald Welzer, *Das kommunikative Gedächtnis: Eine Theorie der Erinnerung* (Munich: Beck, 2002).

The term "collective memory" (in the narrower sense), on the other hand, refers to the symbolic order, the media, social institutions and practices, by which social groups construct a shared past. "Memory", here, is used metaphorically. Societies do not remember literally; but much of what is done to reconstruct a shared past bears some resemblance to the processes of individual memory, such as the selectivity and perspective inherent in the creation of versions of the past according to present knowledge and needs. In the fields of sociology and history much research has been done with regard to this second aspect of collective memory, the most influential concept being Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire*. Some of the most interesting approaches for the study of war memory are found in Samuel Hynes' *A War Imagined* and in Jay Winter's *Sites of Memory*.[11]

The two forms of collective memory can be distinguished from each other on an analytical level;[12] however, they exert their power in cultures of memory only by interacting, through the interplay of the levels of the individual and the collective. There is no such thing as pre-cultural individual memory; but neither is there a Collective Memory (with capital letters) that is detached from individuals, embodied only in media and institutions. Just as socio-cultural contexts shape individual memories, a "memory" which is represented by media and institutions must be actualized by individuals, by members of a community of remembrance, who may be conceived of as "*points de vue*"[13] on shared notions of the past. Without such actualizations, monuments, ritual, and books are nothing but dead material, failing to have any impact in cultures of memory. Although both levels interact continually, they do not necessarily interact

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[11] *Les lieux de mémoire*, I: *La République*; II: *La Nation*; III: *La France*, ed. Pierre Nora (Paris: Gallimard, 1984, 1986 and 1992); Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: The Bodley Head, 1990); Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995). Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975) is more interested in the dimension of collected memory.

[12] Within the framework of systems theory, Elena Esposito has drawn a similar distinction between the levels of the psychic and the social. See Elena Esposito, *Soziales Vergessen, Formen und Medien des Gedächtnisses der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2002).

[13] See Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*.

smoothly. Throughout the twentieth century, the task of remembering wars has proved a difficult issue in cultures of memory. Tensions arise usually within the three or four decades after the end of a war, when its witnesses are still alive and claim – with all the authority of the eye-witness – that their version of the past is the only proper one. Official practices of remembrance can clash considerably with the individual memories each witness retains, as the many and still ongoing debates in Germany about the Nazi regime and the Holocaust have shown.[14]

Witnessing war in media cultures

Media are of paramount importance with regard to both forms of collective remembering. There is neither collective nor collected memory without media, because collective remembering is based on communication – no matter if oral, scriptural or via the internet. (It is this basic assumption that enables all constructivist models of collective memory – Halbwachs', Aby Warburg's, Pierre Nora's or Jan and Aleida Assmann's, whatever their implications and differences may be – to eschew notions of racial memory.) Media are important agents of transformation between the two levels of collective memory: personal memories can assume social relevance only when they are medially externalized. Soldiers' war experiences, for example, are usually articulated in oral discourse and circulated within families and groups of comrades. Attempts to turn such experiences into an element of even greater configurations of collective memory must be based on other media, with a greater range of distribution. After the First World War, letters from the front were published,[15] and memoirs commissioned. Nowadays, certain TV formats have developed which present interviews with witnesses of war and thus fix and widely disseminate orally articulated memories.

Understanding such witnesses' memories (as told, written, or presented in TV interviews) as collected memory may guard us from

[14] See Aleida Assmann, *Ute Frevert, Geschichtsvergessenheit – Geschichtsversessenheit: Vom Umgang mit deutschen Vergangenheiten nach 1945* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1999).

[15] See Laurence Housman, *War Letters of Fallen Englishmen* (London: Gollancz 1930); Philipp Witkop, *Kriegsbriefe gefallener Studenten* (1915) (Munich: Müller, 5th edn, 1928).

the pitfalls of the illusion that witnesses can provide us (or, as a matter of fact, themselves) with an unmediated insight into the past. There is no such thing as a "testimony of a past as it was", but only "testimonies of a past as experienced and remembered in social contexts". Individual memories are retrospective constructs. Remembering always takes place in the present, and is merely a re-presentation of the past, never the past itself. Even though cognitive psychologists usually refrain from all too radical constructivist notions by maintaining that certain memory traces ("engrams") of the original experience remain in our brain, Endel Tulving has, with his concept of "ecphory", hinted at the fact that these traces must always be combined with the "retrieval cues" to be found in present contexts, in order to become actual memories.[16] Memories are therefore syntheses of engrams and cues, of past and present.[17] The crucial role of cues, such as the kinds of questions that are posed by the interviewer, but also audience-oriented communication on the part of the remembering person him or herself – that is, the fact that the articulation of memories is adapted to the knowledge, assumptions, preferences, etc. of the assumed listeners and readers – are evidence of the fact that complex social interaction is actually at play even when we expect individual memories.[18]

In addition, each act of witnessing takes place within "media cultures". War experience is already pre-formed by media representations of war, and such representations will also lead later recall along certain paths. Witnesses' ideas about the First World War were shaped by existing war memorials, history books read at school, elements of material culture (like tin soldiers) and visual culture (like postcards sent home from the front), journalistic texts, and later, powerfully, war films (such as the documentary *Ypres*, 1925, with its

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[16] See Endel Tulving, *Elements of Episodic Memory* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1983).

[17] See Daniel Schacter, *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past* (New York: Basic Books, 1996). The cue combines with the engram to yield a new, emergent entity – the recollective experience of the rememberer – that differs from either its constituents.

[18] For approaches to collective memory from the field of social psychology, see Gerald Echterhoff, "Das Außen des Erinnerns", in *Medien des kollektiven Gedächtnisses. Konstruktivität – Historizität – Kulturspezifität*, eds Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, in collaboration with Hanne Birk, Birgit Neumann and Patrick Schmidt (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2004), 61-82.

scene of soldiers "going over the top", which, although entirely staged, has nevertheless become a standard scene in the British imagination of what the First World War "was like"). Those media provide "skeleton maps" of experiencing and remembering a war – schemata, frames, and patterns of narration, which are always, as Frederic Bartlett showed as early as 1932 in *Remembering*,[19] culture-specific paradigms.[20]

Literature as a medium of collective memory

Literature is one of these media of collective memory. What kind of influence can it exert in cultures of memory? The role of literary forms and fictions (in the medium of texts, films, theatre performances, radio plays, etc.) as a means of making the past accessible to the collective imagination cannot be overrated: the popular adventure novels which emerge after each war, theatre plays such as Sherriff's *Journey's End* (perhaps not surprisingly restaged during the London theatre season of 2004), war films like Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) or *Apocalypse Now* (1979), and testimonial Holocaust writing, from Primo Levi to Imre Kertész, have succeeded in reaching larger parts of society than academic circles generally credit with an interest in literature.

The decision to use literature as a symbolic system to represent the past, however, is a decision for a certain mode of remembering. Since the evolution of the modern system of literary communication in the eighteenth century, literary acts of remembering preclude certain approaches to the past, while others are made available. Literature as a medium of collective memory will not convey the exact data of a historical chronicle. Nor will it follow the conventions of other symbolic systems, like law, myth, or religion, and express juridical principles, unequivocal norms or transcendental truths. However, as a form of "elaborate inter-discourse",[21] literature can draw on elements

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[19] Frederic C. Bartlett, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1932).

[20] The new series *Media and Cultural Memory / Medien und kulturelle Erinnerung* (gen. editors Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, Berlin/New York: de Gruyter) is devoted to the role of media in cultures of memory.

[21] See Jürgen Link, "Literaturanalyse als Interdiskursanalyse: Am Beispiel des Ursprungs literarischer Symbolik in der Kollektivsymbolik", in *Diskurstheorien und*

of these neighbouring symbol systems and “orchestrate”[22] them within a single text. When compared to other media of collective memory, literature displays certain privileges as well as certain restrictions.[23] But while difference is the important factor for an understanding of the relation between literature and other media of collective memory, the relation between literature and processes of collective remembering at large is rather one of similarity: both literature and memory make use of narrative structures, conventionalized genres and semantically charged forms in order to produce meaningful versions of the past. [24] Certain processes, like selection and narrative configuration, are at the basis of almost every act of remembering. It is because of the fact that such narrative, constructive, even poetic, operations are trans-medial phenomena in cultures of memory, that literature, the “world-making”-medium[25] par excellence, can become a powerful vehicle of collective remembering.

How does a literary text turn into a medium of collective memory? There is a simple answer to this question: by being read. An appreciation of literature’s powerful role in cultures of memory entails a reception-oriented and functional approach to literary works.[26] With this in mind, literature can be conceived as a medium on both levels of collective remembering: a medium of a. collective and of b. collected memory.

Literaturwissenschaft, eds Jürgen Fohrmann and Harro Müller (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988), 284-307.

[22] See Michail M Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981).

[23] See Ansgar Nünnning, *Von Historischer Fiktion zu Historiographischer Metafiktion*, 2 vols (Trier: WVT, 1995).

[24] That certain tropes, plots and genres can be found in historiography as well as in literature is shown by Hayden White in *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1973).

[25] See Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett 1978).

[26] Aleida Assmann maintains that it is a frame of reception which turns a “literary text” into a “cultural text” (that is, a medium of Cultural Memory). See Aleida, Assmann, “Was sind kulturelle Texte?”, in *Literaturkanon – Medienereignis – kultureller Text: Formen interkultureller Kommunikation und Übersetzung*, ed. Andreas Poltermann (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1995), 232-44.

a. Literature as a medium of collective memory

In order to become a medium of collective memory, an integral part of a society's medial and institutional modelling of the past, literature must not only be read, but also be read in wide circles of society. Some of the typical processes associated with turning literature into a medium of collective memory are successful marketing strategies, which lead to more copies of a book being printed, their public discussion (such as in book reviews and letters to the editor), a consideration of the works in literary histories and finally their inclusion in school syllabuses.

Of all war novels written in the twentieth century, it is probably Erich Maria Remarque's *Im Westen Nichts Neues* (1929; *All Quiet on the Western Front*, 1929) that provides the most fascinating insights into what literature can actually do in cultures of memory. With the reception of Remarque's hugely successful novel (some critics maintain that only the Bible has seen a higher circulation) three important functions of literature as a medium of collective memory become discernible: circulation, storage and cue.

1. Circulation: Literary fictions are media that can represent the past and circulate versions of shared experience in cultures of memory. Time and again, literary works have become integral parts of current collective discourses about war. This can be fittingly exemplified by the "War Fiction Boom": towards the end of the 1920s, literary markets all over Europe and in the USA saw a great influx of "war books" – fictional and semi-autobiographical literary writings about the experience of the First World War. Next to Remarque's novel, some of the best known war books are Henri Barbusse's *Le Feu* (1916), Ernst Jünger's *In Stahlgewittern* (1920), Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), and Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930).[27] Not only were

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[27] For comparative perspectives on the literature of the First World War, see Astrid Erll, *Gedächtnisromane: Literatur über den Ersten Weltkrieg als Medium englischer und deutscher Erinnerungskulturen in den 1920er Jahren* (Trier: WVT, 2003); Astrid Erll, "The Great War Remembered: The Rhetoric of Collective Memory in Ford Madox Ford's *Parade's End* and Arnold Zweig's *Der Streit um den Sergeanten Grischa*", in *Fictions of Memory* (Journal for the Study of British Cultures, X/1, 2003), 49-75; *Intimate Enemies: English and German Literary Reactions to the Great War 1914-1918*, eds Franz K. Stanzel and Martin Löschnigg (Heidelberg: Winter

these books read in wide circles of the societies that had taken part in the war; they were also hotly discussed. The War Fiction Boom generated a "War Books Controversy", an embittered debate about the truth of literary representations of war. This controversy is captured in writings like Douglas Jerrold's *The Lie about War* (1930), Jean Norton Cru's *Témoins* (1929), and Herbert Cysarz' *Zur Geistesgeschichte des Weltkriegs* (1931). Already the titles of these pamphlets and scholarly discussions give us a clue to the questions that lie at the heart of the War Books Controversy: does testimonial writing (in several degrees of fictionality) convey the true picture of war? Or does war literature lie, that is, represent the past in ways conceived as false by the community of remembering?

The controversy about the truth of the war books hints at one important fact: the fact that literature as a medium of collective memory tends to be read in a referential way. But that does not imply a confusion of symbolic systems on the part of the readers; they do not mistake the novel for historiography, or the sermon for a literary poem. Whenever literature is turned into a medium of collective memory, however, it tends to be related to the symbolic order and the narratives that have been established in a culture of memory. Literature as a medium of collective memory must fit in with existing images and narratives, be adaptable – and in this respect truthful.

2. Storage: Literature encodes and retains information over long time spans. Literary versions of the past can be actualized by later generations – with all the possible distortions, of course, that are typical of communicative processes. Today, Remarque's novel is used in history classes at school in order to convey an image of the First World War. Many other war novels, however, are forgotten. Who reads Ludwig Renn, Frederic Manning, Adrienne Thomas or C.H. Montague today? The memorial function of their war novels continued during the 1920s: they served a generation of witnesses of war as media of remembering a shared past. Today, however, they form a part of the medial archives of memory, and are of interest only to literary historians.

1993); Trudi Tate, *Modernism, History and the First World War* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1998); *The First World War in Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Holger Klein (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1978).

3. Cue: Finally, literary works can function as what psychologists call “retrieval cues”. In their sheer materiality, or as an object of discourse, literary works can trigger memories. Even those who have never read Remarque’s novel tend to associate something with it: the disillusionment of the “lost generation”, a bitter critique of war, or even pacifism (which, when one actually reads the novel, is not there at all, the protagonist Paul Bäumer being only a disillusioned, yet ideologically undecided soldier). Media of collective memory generally, and with regard to their cue-function specifically, are to a large extent subject to idiosyncratic readings, to actualizations according to the knowledge and needs of particular cultures of memory.

b. Literature as a medium of “collected memory”

In important ways, literature also pre-forms and influences that which we understand as our individual access to the past. It is a medium of collected memory. Psychologists draw a distinction between several systems of human memory. One of these distinctions – between a semantic and an episodic-autobiographic memory system, introduced by Endel Tulving in the 1970s – can help provide some insights into the various ways in which literature shapes memory.

Semantic memory contains conceptual and factual knowledge (“the Earth is round”). Episodic memory allows us to recall the personal incidents that uniquely define our lives (“my first day at school”).[28] Episodic memories are experienced as a “mental time travel”, a way of “reliving” the past.[29] Therefore, the subjective experience connected with the episodic memory system is one of remembering, whereas we experience recall from the semantic memory system as knowing. Narrative turns episodic memories into autobiographic memory.

Literature as a medium that influences semantic memory points to the other side of what was said earlier. It is the result of individual actualizations of literary texts, which may or may not be media of collective memory. Literary works feed our imagination of a past we

[28] See Daniel Schacter, *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).
[29] See Tulving, *Elements of Episodic Memory*, 127.

have not witnessed, a past we only know about. For many British people today the First World War, in its heroic and in its victimizing dimension, is captured in the verse of Rupert Brooke ("If I should die, think only this of me: / That there's some corner of a foreign field / That is for ever England": "The Soldier", 1914) or, for that matter, in those by Siegfried Sassoon ("I see them in foul dug-outs, gnawed by rats, / And in the ruined trenches, lashed with rain": "Dreamers", 1917). Such individual readings of literary works as media of collective memory can be in tune with official readings, but need not necessarily be.

Probably more disconcerting is the fact that literature has access to those memories which we would consider the most personal, intimate, and also truthful of all: our private memories of first-hand past experience, as reconstructed within the episodic-autobiographic memory system. In an important essay on "the influence of cultural paradigms on traumatic testimony", Paul Fussell has drawn our attention to the fact that personal memories of traumatic war experience are always culture-specific, and often have their sources in literary representations rather than in the realities of war.[30] He shows how "cultural paradigms" – such as the pastoral tradition in England, or the tradition of gothic and grotesque literature in Germany – can pre-form our experience and influence recall. His conclusion: not only literature is made out of literature, but also life – the way it is experienced and remembered – seems to be made out of literature.

Recent research has provided us with more instances of the power of literary forms and fictions as media of collected memory. Joanna Bourke, for example, records in her *Intimate History of Killing*: "Even in Grenada in 1983, American soldiers charged into battle playing Wagner, in imitation of Robert Duvall, the brigade commander in *Apocalypse Now* (1979)."[31] Apart from the fact that this anecdote gives ample evidence as to the impact of anti-war films, it shows how

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[30] See Paul Fussell, "Der Einfluß kultureller Paradigmen auf die literarische Wiedergabe traumatischer Erfahrung", in *Kriegserlebnis: Der Erste Weltkrieg in der literarischen Gestaltung und symbolischen Deutung der Nationen*, ed. Klaus Vondung (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1980), 175-87. See also Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*.

[31] Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-face Killing in Twentieth-Century Warfare* (London: Granta, 1999), 28.

literary-aesthetic images of war actually pre-figure war experience. Nobody goes to war without certain images, plots, stereotypes – cultural paradigms, if you like – of what war is like. It is always the *Wars I Have Seen* (Gertrude Stein, 1945) that prefigures to a certain extent the war which I am actually going to see.[32]

Another example shows how the literary imagination of the First World War became a model for personal memories of the Second World War: in his interviews with German World War II veterans, the social psychologist Harald Welzer realized that some of the stories told to him seemed to resemble scenes from the movie *All Quiet on the Western Front*, which was made in the USA in 1930 (and banned in Germany shortly after its appearance, because the political climate had turned anti-pacifist). Novels and film provide the slots and templates with which we can shape pre-narrative, often chaotic experience. Welzer thinks it rather “probable that we all have added elements and episodes to our life stories, which other persons – fictive and real ones – have experienced, and not we ourselves”.[33] If one considers that episodic memory is characterized by the “rememberer’s belief that the memory is a more or less true replica of the original event”,[34] it becomes clear what is at stake with the insight into the influence of fictional representations on our “collected memory”.

The memorial power of forms: representing the past

The past is not given; it must be re-constructed and re-presented. Thus, our memories (collective as well as collected) of past events can vary to a great degree. This holds true not only for what is remembered (facts, data), but also for how it is remembered, that is, for the quality and meaning the past assumes. There are different modes of remembering the past. A war, as any other event, can be remembered as a mythic event (“the war as apocalypse”), as part of political history (the First World War as “*the* great seminal catastrophe” of the twentieth century[35]), as a traumatic experience

[32] Gertrude Stein, *Wars I Have Seen* (London: Batsford, 1945).

[33] Harald Welzer, *Das kommunikative Gedächtnis: Eine Theorie der Erinnerung*, (Munich: Beck, 2002), 186 (my translation).

[34] Tulving, *Elements of Episodic Memory*, 127.

[35] George Frost Kennan, *The Decline of Bismarck’s European Order: Franco-Russian Relations, 1875-1890* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1979), 3 (author’s own emphasis).

("the horror of the trenches, of shells, fire etc."), as a part of family history ("the war my great-uncle served in"), as a focus of bitter contestation ("the war which was waged by the old generation, by the fascists, by men")

Such modes of remembering are closely linked to modes of representation. Changes in media and in forms of representation may effect changes in the kind of memory we retain of the past. With regard to the medium of the war novel I have therefore distinguished four modes of literary remembering: the experiential, the monumental, the antagonistic and the reflexive mode.[36] How these modes are interpreted by actual readers, of course, cannot be predicted; but certain kinds of literary representations seem to bear an affinity to different modes of collective remembering, and thus one may risk some hypotheses on the potential memorial power, or effects, of literary forms.

Experiential modes are constituted by literary forms that represent the past as lived-through experience. Therefore they are closely connected with what Aleida and Jan Assmann call "communicative memory"[37] and with its main source: the episodic-autobiographical memories of witnesses. Acts and the specific qualities of witnessing war can be staged in literary texts by autodiegetic and I-as-witness narration (as in Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, 1930), by internal focalization (as in Ford Madox Ford's *Parade's*

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[36] Compare, for example, Astrid Erll, "Reading Literature as Collective Texts: German and English War Novels of the 1920s as Media of Cultural and Communicative Memory", in *Anglistentag München 2003: Proceedings*, eds Christoph Bode, Sebastian Domsch and Hans Sauer (Trier: WVT 2004), 335-54; Astrid Erll, "Re-writing as Re-visioning: Modes of Representing the 'Indian Mutiny' in British Literature, 1857 to 2000", in *Literature and the Production of Cultural Memory*, eds Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney, *EJES (European Journal of English Studies)*, X/2 (2006), 163-85.

[37] See Jan Assmann, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity", *New German Critique*, 65 (1995), 126: "For us the concept of 'communicative memory' includes those varieties of collective memory that are based exclusively on everyday communications." From this frame of collective remembering, Jan Assmann distinguishes "the Cultural Memory": "The concept of cultural memory comprises that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose 'cultivation' serves to stabilize and convey that society's self-image. Upon such collective knowledge, for the most part (but not exclusively) of the past, each group bases its awareness of unity and particularity" (132).

End, 1924-28), by a very detailed presentation of everyday life in the past (Barthes' *effet de réel* as an *effet de mémoire*) and by the representation of sociolect (for example, soldiers' slang, as in Frederic Manning's *The Middle Parts of Fortune*, 1929).

Monumental modes are constituted by literary forms of representation that resemble representations of the past within the framework of the Cultural Memory.[38] Especially the symbolic systems of history, religion and myth are closely linked to the Cultural Memory. War novels, which intertextually draw on national historiography, the Bible or ancient mythology, for example, are more often than not concerned with creating "monumental effects". Books like Jospeh Magnus Wehner's *Sieben vor Verdun* (1930) syncretistically intermingle religious symbolism with Germanic and Greek mythology and fierce racism. By comparing the German soldiers to figures of mythology (as in Ernst Jünger's *In Stahlgewittern*, 1920) the broad temporal horizon of the Cultural Memory is intertextually opened up and the First World War can be understood and located within a mythical framework. But monumental modes do not necessarily have to serve nationalist or racist ends, just as the Cultural Memory can have peaceful rather than bellicose implications. In Edmund Blunden's *Undertones of War* (1929), with the reference to the pastoral genre, the war is located within a literary and cultural tradition reaching back to Theocritus, Virgil, Spenser, Milton, and Romanticism. Pastoral paradigms in Blunden's war memoirs help to understand peacefulness and innocence as part of a specific English national character.

Literary forms that help to maintain one version of the past and reject another constitute an antagonistic mode. Negative stereotyping (such as calling the Germans "the Hun" or "beasts" in the initial

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[38] Communicative memory and "the Cultural Memory" are, according to Jan Assmann, different ways of collective remembering, different "uses of the past". Both serve to constitute "social autobiographies". The representation and meaning of the past differs according to the mode of remembering employed. An historical event like the First World War, the Second World War, Vietnam or 9/11 can be remembered according to both frames: it can be understood as a significant part of national history, but it can also be remembered as an event which was experienced within and had effects on small social groups, and was woven into the autobiographies of their members. On the same topic, see also: Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*, (München: C. H. Beck, 1999).

English First World War poetry) is the most obvious technique of establishing an antagonistic mode. More elaborate is the resort to biased perspective structures: only the memories of a certain group are presented to be right, while those versions articulated by members of conflicting cultures of memory are deconstructed as false (Richard Aldington's *Death of a Hero*, 1929). The resort to we-narration may underscore this claim (see Remarque's *Im Westen Nichts Neues*, 1929, or Helen Zenna Smith's *Not so quiet …*, 1930).

Literature always allows its readers both a first and a second-order observation. It gives us the illusion of glimpsing the past (in an experiential, monumental, or antagonistic way) and is – often at the same time – a major medium of critical reflection upon such processes of representation. Literature is a medium that simultaneously builds and observes memory. Prominent "reflexive modes" are constituted by forms which draw attention to processes and problems of remembering, such as by explicit narrative comments on the workings of memory (as in H.M. Tomlinson's *All Our Yesterdays*, 1930), the juxtaposition of different versions of the past (as in Edlef Koeppen's *Heeresberricht*, 1930), or – jumping to the literature remembering World War II – by highly experimental forms, like the inversion of chronology in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) as a means to represent the bombardment of Dresden.

Wars literature has made us see

The narratological categories presented here constitute modes, not genres. There is, for example, no such thing as a "monumental novel" *per se*, because without an experiential mode to go along with it, it would be unreadable. There is also no pure reflexivity, or otherwise the literary text would turn into an academic tract on the workings of cultural memory (like this text). Instead, the power of literature as a medium of collective memory is based on the interaction among different modes of representing the past in one single literary work. Remarque's antagonistic mode draws its power and the legitimacy of its claims from the fact that it is based on an experiential mode: "I was there, and thus I know who our enemies are." Koeppen's *Heeresbericht* is highly reflexive and even analytical in order to underpin its bitter critique of the war his protagonist has to live through, thus combining reflexive, antagonistic, and experiential

modes. English ex-soldier poets especially, like Blunden, Robert Graves and Sassoon, succeed at combining experiential and monumental modes artfully. They present the experience of war and locate it within the framework of English traditions in a way that was extremely difficult for German authors at the time. Those who opposed war (such as Remarque and Koeppen) seemed to find no pacifist tradition to reach back to. Those, on the other hand, who emphatically embraced war (Werner Beumelburg, Jünger, Wehner) tended to resort to myth in such an intense way that their accounts of war ran the danger of becoming stripped of experientiality.

The different representations of war according to various modes of remembering are literary offers to cultures of memory. In order to function as media of collective memory war novels must be read, their modes be actualized. As the impact of war literature in the 1920s is so well documented, it can be said with certainty that literature did function as a medium of collective memory. In what ways exactly literary works exert their power can never be said; but an analysis of literary forms can provide some hints as to the potential effects in cultures of memory.

It is surely an apt expression of the generations who have lived through the "age of extremes" to choose *Wars I Have Seen* as the title of their autobiographical writing, as did Gertrude Stein (1945). Her (not entirely unproblematic) musings written during the Second World War in France stand for the presence of war in the twentieth century. Interestingly, Stein highlights the dimension of "wars imagined", as "there was history, and there were historical novels and so there was in a way war all the time".[39] Shakespeare's *Henry VI*, *Gulliver's Travels*, Kipling's novels, E.E. Cumming's *The Enormous Room* constitute, next to her actual witnessing of Second World War, the "wars she has seen". It is this connection between individual witnessing or knowledge of war and the formal resources of collective memory, that are created as well as mediated by literary texts, into which this essay has attempted to provide some insight.

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[39] Stein, *Wars I Have Seen*, 3.

WRITING AS TESTIMONY IN THE EUROPEAN NARRATIVE AFTER THE FIRST AND SECOND WORLD WARS

VITA FORTUNATI

> And in thousands years – Berecche thinks – this atrocious war, that now is filling the whole world with horror, will shrink into a few lines in the great history of men; there will be no trace of all these common little stories, of all these thousands and thousands of unknown human beings that right now disappear routed by it …. Nobody will know. Who, even now, knows all the little, innumerable stories, one for each soul of millions and millions of men, who are facing each other to kill one the other …. What will be left of the war diaries tomorrow? …. No: this is not a great war; this will be a great slaughter. It cannot be a great war because there was no great ideal to start and support it.[1]

I will begin with a reflection on the meaning of the two terms from the title of my essay: "war writing" and "testimony". In the etymology of the word "testimony" and the verb "to testify" there are also semantic connections with the terms "to think", "to remember" and "to be worried or concerned". Testimonial writing then is always bound up with the question of the ethics of whoever bears testimony. For, in order to report what someone has witnessed, that person must remember, comprehend and search out the truth within the event.

We can see then that writing as testimony is connected to recollection, to the memory. The subject – the writer – takes the

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[1] Luigi Pirandello, *Berecche and the War* (1914), trans. and intr. by Julie Dashwood, Hull Italian Texts (Market Harborough: Troubador, 2000), 117.

responsibility to choose, to select, to mould the unformed mass of memories. At this point you could say that there exists an equivalence between the role of the writer, and that of the anthropologist and the historian. In 1962, Lévi-Strauss had already perceived how much of the work of the historian – which consists of choosing, eliminating, labelling, ordering and sieving – is closely aligned with the methods of the anthropologist and with those of the writer, particularly when he dealing with the memory. Lévi-Strauss wrote:

> Mais ils se ferment ainsi la porte de la connaissance de l'homme: toute recherche ethnographique a son principe dans des "confessions" écrite ou inavouée …. par conséquent, le fait historique n'est pas plus donné que les autres ; c'est l'historien, ou l'agent du devenir historique, qui le constitue par abstraction, et comme sous la menace d'une régression à l'infini …. de ce point de vue aussi, l'historien et l'agent historique choisissent, tranchement et découpent, car une histoire vraiment totale les confronterait au chaos.[2]

Ultimately the research methods involve a painstaking reconstruction, a temporal readjustment and a complicated spatial remodelling.

Addressing this point in her seminal work on cultural memory, Aleida Assman underlines the difference between "memory" and "remembrance". The first indicates "the mnemic fact", or you might say, the "knowledge" of the fact, whereas the second always involves the subject, and the subjective experience. Therefore, testimonial writing can be closely connected not only with the autobiographical experience of the writer, but also with the complex and difficult process of remembrance, which implies an emotional participation intimately connected to the mind as well as to the body.[3]

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[2] Claude Lévy-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage* (Paris: Plon, 2007), 297-306: "But in this way they shut the door to the knowledge of man: all ethnographic research is founded on written or unavowed 'confessions' …. subsequently, the historical fact is no more a significant datum than the others, it is the historian, or the actor in the historical process, who creates it through an abstraction, and almost as if acting under the threat of an endless regression …. it is also from this perspective that the historian and the actor in historical process choose, cancel, and underline, because a really complete history would result in chaos" (my translation).

[3] See Aleida Assmann, *Erinerungräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnissen*, Munich: C.H. Becj'sche Verlagsbuchhanlung, 1999 (my translation

Another aspect which renders testimonial writing highly problematic is the interlacing, the dialectic tension between the search for truth and the awareness of the difficulty in achieving it, as the one who bears witness is implicitly or explicitly aware that the testimony is in any case always partial.[4] It is a dialectic born of the necessity to create a distance between the subject who experiences the event and the moment of its transcription, which is a distance both temporal and psychological, as demonstrated by the many temporal devices used by novelists. The writing then can be seen as a kind of therapy, and, although it is an attempt to dominate something inexpressible, it is however, the only instrument available to the author.

If these considerations are valid for any kind of testimonial writing, what are the particular characteristics when the event being witnessed is a war? Studying the European novels of the First World War, I was able to confirm the hypothesis, present in many of the cultural historical books on the war, that writers, for the first time, were finding it difficult to witness and then write about the war experience. An exemplary illustration of this point is the declaration of Henry James, a writer who knew all about the subtle nuances of language, on the inadequacy of words to describe something as ferocious and brutal as war:

> While confronting all this, to use the words that are available to us is now as difficult as facing our own thoughts. War has worn out words; they have worn out, weakened, deteriorated.[5]

Confronted with the massacre of the First World War – a war that saw millions of young lives sacrificed to militarism, as witnessed in the disfigured faces of the soldiers in the photography of Ernst Friedrich in his book *War Against War!* (1924) – words fail, or in any case, the written word is incapable of fully expressing the horror of all that occurred. This dialectic tension between the willingness to bear witness and the painful awareness that the medium is insufficient,

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from the Italian edition, trans by S. Paparelli, *Ricordare: Forme e mutamenti nella memoria culturale* [Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002], 29).

[4] See Massimo Lollini, *Il vuoto della forma: Scrittura, testimonianza e verità* (Genoa: Marietti, 2001).

[5] Henry James quoted in Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 21.

becomes even more tragic when one remembers how many pacifist and anti-militarist writers decided to take part in the war precisely because the idea that literature could contain all of life was in crisis.

Writers like Ford Madox Ford, Henry Barbusse and Renato Serra expressed in their works this tragic conflict between art and life. The action becomes inseparable from their role as writers and witnesses. It is as if in order to write about war, one is existentially obliged to have fought. The ethical responsibility of the act of writing is connected to the fact of having participated directly in a war they did not believe in, because it was useless and paradoxical. The act of participating in a war, as it is very clear in the novel and public declarations of Barbusse, seems to be a necessary prerequisite of writing about war: one must share in the suffering in order to bear witness, and the act of writing becomes a bitter denunciation, a battle against ideological falsehoods. Barbusse, an anti-militarist and pacifist writer, enlisted at the outbreak of the war and fought on the front line as an ordinary soldier. In his letters and in his declarations in the press, he explained the motives for taking part in a war he considered evil.

He enlisted not only in order to experience the immense suffering of the weakest participants of the war, but also because for him, the war was, above all, a social war. Therefore, *Le Feu* was conceived as an eye-witness testimony of the truth, set against the ideological manipulation of the pro-war propaganda press, and a testimony of solidarity with the soldiers at the front, those belonging to the poorest classes. Barbusse wrote:

> Voulez-vous me compter parmi les socialistes anti-militaristes qui s'engagent volontairement pour la présente guerre? .… Cette guerre est une guerre sociale qui fera faire un grand pas – peut-être le pas définitif – à notre cause. Elle est dirigée contre nos ennemis infâmes de toujours: le militarisme et l'impérialisme, le Sabre, la Botte, et j'ajouterai: la Couronne.[6]

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[6] "Lettre au directeur de L'Humanité" (9 August 1914) in the Preface by Jean Relinger to Henri Barbusse, *Le Feu* suivi des *Carnets de Guerre d'Henri Barbusse* (Paris: Flammarion, 1996), 3: "Will you please include me in the vast numbers of anti-militaristic socialists, who volunteer to join the army. This is a social war that will give the final push to our cause. It is the revolt against our long-term enemies: militarism and imperialism, the sword and the boot and, may I add, the crown" (my translation).

The ethical responsibility is, however, inevitably accompanied by the awareness that the reporter of the facts is always working under a process of reconstruction and a manipulation of reality. The cultural history books of the First World War which have taken into consideration both high and low historical sources (I am referring above all to Paul Fussell, Jay Winter, Antonio Gibelli and Samuel Hynes), have highlighted one aspect which is at the centre of the novels of that war: the interchangeability of reality and representation, literature and life, imagination and the actually lived experience.

The extreme ferocity and vastness of the global conflict gave rise for the first time to the alarming problem of the "theatricality of war". Fussell remembers the First World War as so inhuman that perhaps, paradoxically, one could bear witness to it and reconstruct it only through means of fiction. The First World War was such an incommensurable event, such a liminal experience that one could only bear it by pretending one was acting, playing a part in a drama:

> It is thus the very hazard of military situations that turns them theatrical. And it is their utter un-thinkableness: it is impossible for a participant to believe that he is taking part in such murderous proceedings in his own character. The whole thing is too grossly farcical, perverse, cruel, and absurd to be credited as a form of "real life".[7]

In the sixth chapter of his book, Fussell uses the metaphor of a theatre in order to highlight this disturbing relationship between reality and fiction, a metaphor Pirandello had already used in his novella *Berecche and the War*. In this novella, the protagonist has an illusory relationship with the war, much like when he was a child watching the adults arguing about the Franco-Prussian war before a map covered with tiny flags attached with pins.

Written war testimony presupposes a distance, not merely a temporal distance, but also a psychological, existential distance. In First World War narrative there is a sense of estrangement with respect to the reality of the author's surroundings: it is the traumatic experience of the veteran, which one senses above all in Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, a sense of desolation, mistrust,

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[7] Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1965), 192.

separation from home, from those that have not seen No-man's Land, that terrible spectral space separating the trenches of the enemy, an area of absolute devastation where the soldiers' corpses would accumulate for days. In the work of Remarque and Ford, trench warfare is a liminal experience, with the identity of the soldier completely destabilized by the constant presence of death and above all, of dead bodies – an experience which has a profound transforming effect.

The war has come to be perceived as a kind of watershed between before and after. In his book, *Blasting and Bombardiering* (1937), Wyndham Lewis expressed the feeling as follows:

> … the war is such a tremendous landmark that locally it imposes itself on our computation of time like the birth of Christ. We say 'pre-war' and 'post-war', rather as we say 'B.C.' or 'A.D.'[8]

Despite the differences in the novels I have chosen (Barbusse's *Under Fire*, 1917; Ford's *Parade's End*, 1924-28; Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, 1929) – namely differences in various national contexts and literary and cultural traditions – there are some notable similarities. The first of which is the confirmation of the awareness on the part of these authors that the War produced profound anthropological mutations and transformations.

Cultural studies of the War have all highlighted how the First World War was a "workshop", to borrow from Gibelli's emblematic title (*L'officina della guerra*, namely *The Workshop of War*), of modernity towards destruction. Remarque analysed the psychological drama of trench warfare in great depth. He noted that it produced in soldiers complex psychological reactions, the most common of which was connected to a new conception of time, caused by immobility and fear of death. Remaining immobile in the trenches, in daily contact with death and the dead, produced a kind of fixation on the present.

The central character of *All Quiet on the Western Front* tragically suffers from this new existential condition, this "suspended time" in which there is no longer access to the past, nor to the future, and the character, having no sense of history, becomes disorientated. Also in

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[8] Wyndham Lewis, *Blasting and Bombardiering* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1937), 1

Barbusse's novel the condition of waiting, of the passivity of the soldiers in the trenches is underlined – at war, one is always waiting:

> On est devenu des machines à attendre.
>
> Pour le moment, c'est la soupe qu'on attend. Après, ce seront les lettres. Mais chaque chose en son temps : lorsqu'on en aura fini avec la soupe, on songera aux lettres. Ensuite, on se mettra à attendre autre chose.[9]

This loss of identity translates into a dreamlike, surreal kind of writing where, as in the case of Barbusse, the language is rich with apocalyptic and infernal imagery. The stark winter landscapes that form the background of the exhausting marches of the soldiers, as described by Barbusse, are enveloped in a dreamlike, almost unreal atmosphere – as are the descriptions of the wounded and mutilated bodies in the trenches, descriptions that no longer relate to the naturalistic tradition of Émile Zola. Instead, the detailed deformation of the features of faces disfigured by bombs brings to mind the German Expressionist paintings in which not only are we faced with the grotesque and the absurd, but also with an atmosphere that is haunting and apocalyptic:

> Où sont les tranchée?
>
> On voit des lacs, et, entre ces lacs, des lignes d'eau laiteuse et stagnante.
>
> Il y a plus d'eau encore qu'on n'avait cru. L'eau a tout pris ; elle s'est répandue partout, et la prédiction des hommes de la nuit s'est réalisée : il n'y a plus de tranchées, ces canaux ce sont les tranchées ensevelies. L'inondation est universelle. Le champ de bataille ne dort pas, il est mort.[10]

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[9] Henry Barbusse, *Le Feu (Journal d'une escouade)* (Paris: Flammarion, 1917), 20: "We have become waiting machines. At present, what we are waiting for is mess. Then, it will be the letters. But each thing at the right time: when mess is over, we'll think of the letters. Then, we will prepare to wait for something else" (my translation).

[10] *Ibid*., 350: "Where are the trenches? You can see lakes, and between than you can see lines of milky and stagnant water. There was more water than we could imagine, it has invaded everything, it has spread around and the prophecy made by men at night has become true: there are no more trenches; these channels stand for the buried trenches. It is a Deluge. The battlefield is not sleeping: it's dead" (my translation).

New war writing then is seen to be in tune with the experimentation of the twentieth-century European avant-garde. The Great War happened in the wake of the beginning of Modernity and in the following passage (as Kerr so masterfully underlined in the chapter entitled "The Cubist War") the new tactics and military strategies and the terrible new equipment of war were fundamentally another manifestation, not only of the new conception of time and space, but also of the space-time experimentation of cubist paintings. In her essay on Picasso, Gertrude Stein wrote:

> Really the composition of this war, 1914-1918, was not the composition of all previous wars, the composition was not a composition in which there was one man in the centre, surrounded by a lot of other men but a composition that had neither a beginning nor an end, a composition of which one corner was as important as another corner, in fact the composition of cubism.[11]

This new perception of reality, multi-faceted, erratic, prismatic, is a characteristic of Ford's tetralogy, particularly the second and third volumes, *No More Parades* and *A Man Could Stand Up*. Although Ford opted for a third-person narrator, nevertheless his is not a traditional omniscient narration, but rather an uncertain voice that records the fragments of experience of decentralized subjects trying to express the inexpressible experience of the front through a continuous refraction of that which they hear, that which they see and that which they must do.

At the beginning of the novel *No More Parades*, Ford describes the barracks at Rouen as half geometric, half ramshackle, a space in which the deafening sound of weapons recalls the bitter dissonance of the music of Stravinsky:

> When you came in the space was desultory, rectangular, warm after the drip of the winter night, and transfused with a brown-orange dust that was light. It was shaped like the house of a child draws. Three groups of brown limbs spotted with brass took dim high-lights from shafts that came from a bucket pierced with holes, filled with incandescent coke and covered in with a sheet of iron in the shape of a funnel. Two men, as if hierarchically smaller, crouched on the floor

[11] *Gertrude Stein on Picasso*, ed. Edward Burns (New York: Liveright, 1970), 17-18.

> beside the brazier; four, two at each of the hut, drooped over tables in attitudes of extreme indifference.[12]

Through his interesting and experimental use of language, Ford suggests the noise of the new weaponry (grenades, bombs, machine guns) and the rolling, deafening uproar, juxtaposed with a spectral silence, intensifying the readers' perception of such an erratic, fragmented experience.

In passages by Barbusse also there are similar references to such a disconcerting vision of the landscape after battle, where trunks of trees are mixed with scraps of flesh:

> Les grands peupliers de bordure sont fracassés, les troncs déchiquetés ; à un endroit, c'est une colonnade énorme d'arbres cassés …. Les balles qui écorchaient la terre par raies droites en soulevant de minces nuages linéaires, trouaient, labouraient les corps rigidement collés au sol, cassaient les membres raides, s'enfonçaient dans des faces blafardes et vidées, crevaient, avec des éclaboussements, des yeux liquéfies et on voyait sous la rafale se remuer un peu et se déranger par endroits la file des morts.[13]

In comparing the testimonial writing of the two wars, it is important to look again at the differences noted by George Mosse in his famous volume on war.[14] The First War was a war of position, a slow trench-based war, in which the exhausting experience of the single subject is central, while the Second was a war of movement, which also involved the civilian population. The myth of the war experience is therefore of less concern, and it seems that what prevails is a greater awareness of the reflections of personal testimony as an act of writing.

Of the two examples I have chosen to examine this difference, the first by Italo Calvino focuses on the Partisan War in Italy, and the

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[12] Ford Madox Ford, *Parade's End* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1977), 291.

[13] Barbusse, *Le Feu*, 222 and 237: "The tall poplars, running along the road are shattered, the trunks lacerated, in one place, it's a huge colonnade of broken trees …. The bullets that flayed the earth by straight glancing rays, lifting slim linear clouds, pierced, carved the stiff bodies stuck to the ground, broke the rigid limbs, dug into the pale and empty faces, burst, with explosions, into the liquefied eyes, and one saw, under the battering, the line of the dead move and budge slightly (my translation).

[14] George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memories of the World Wars* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990).

other by Primo Levi, concerns the events of the Holocaust. They are two examples of eyewitness accounts that illustrate two defining moments of the Second World War, where again the act of writing and the responsibility of the writer are brought into the foreground.

In the 1964 Preface to *The Path to the Spiders' Nest*, written in 1946, Calvino explains to his detractors why he chose an indirect way, a "negative way", to bear witness to the Resistance; a strategy that for Calvino was not neo-realist but neo-expressionist, ready to deliberately deform the faces of his fellow partisans. In doing so, Calvino is in harmony with his desire to deconstruct the myth of the Resistance, a desire that had already been in place immediately after the war. In choosing the point of view of Pin, the poor street urchin and brother of a prostitute, Calvino creates an effect of estrangement, a marginal perception of the Resistance and of those people and actions that would become, in Italian culture and popular imagination, real icons. In his Preface, Calvino repeats that every time one acts as witness, as actor in a historical epoch, one feels possessed by "a special responsibility".[15]

As opposed to those who glorify a "hagiographic and edulcorated Resistance", Calvino chooses "the negative way", presenting a ramshackle body of troops, poor and with little awareness of what they were doing there. Calvino underlines however, that in this Lumpenproletariat there is "an elementary impulse of human rescue, an impulse that made them a hundred thousand times better than you, that made them active forces of history such as you could never dream of being".[16] The responsibility of Calvino's testimony consists in the belief that within this elemental drive are the seeds for the future reconstruction of Italy, after the Second World War. The anti-rhetoric testimony of the Italian Resistance highlights the profound difference in the political climates after the two wars. If the novels produced after the First World War are dominated by a sense of distrust and defeat, those produced after the Second contain the will to reconstruct the cultural and scientific heritage that the regime had destroyed.

In the writing of the Second World War the myth of war experience was less in evidence, but in Calvino, and also in Fenoglio,

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[15] Italo Calvino, *The Path to Nest of Spiders*, Preface by the author, trans. William Weaver (New York: Ecco Press, 1976), 11.
[16] *Ibid*., 14.

a feeling of anti-rhetoric coexists with a sense of the epic, founded on the oral memories of the partisan stories. This is a complex area, and the historians are still arguing as to whether the Resistance was really a popular movement or not. In this sense the testimony of Calvino is very clear.

The story of the Resistance has epic and adventurous elements, and the partisan war was its first myth of initiation. In the ninth chapter of *The Path to the Spiders' Nest*, Calvino expresses his political ideas, and explains how he sees the war as one that has eliminated all class distinctions, a war where intellectuals fight alongside labourers and farmers. And it is no accident that when retracing the origins of this book, Calvino cited Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* as a great example of the anti-rhetoric epic in which men who are socially and culturally diverse come together to fight for the same ideals.

Calvino's *Memory of a Battle*, written in 1974, about thirty years after the experience, serves to illustrate the tension between the will to bear witness to the experience of war and the difficulty of actually writing about it. This testimony, from the point of view of a soldier, confirms the partisan war as a founding experience in Calvino's route to becoming a writer. It is a short story that illustrates perfectly the problems involved with remembrance.

In preparing this story, it is clear how deeply layered the writing was, both because it is rich in reflections on the processes of memory, and because there are long passages in which the writer tries to reconstruct the political and military context of the Battle of Baiardo. And in this sense, the work of the writer can again be connected to the selection process of anthropologists and historians in the reconstruction of events through memory:

> … memory is a frayed fibre, it's discontinuous, torn between myself now and myself in the past. Communication is broken, and as I cannot see a future myself at the other end of the thread, in the same way I cannot distinguish myself outside the present moment where I am blocked, walled in, and no matter how much I lean back and forth, all I can see are strangers.[17]

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[17] Italo Calvino, *Il racconto di una* battaglia (Milan: Mondadori, 1992), 1206 (my translation since this passage is not in the final text of the story and consequently not in the English translation: it appears as an Appendix in the Italian edition).

In this story Calvino always operates on two levels, the ethical level and the formal level. The emphasis is on the present, and in this sense it is interesting to note the uninterrupted use of the present tense, which seeks to cancel out the temporal distance and create a breathless stream of memories, as if the approach of memories follows the movements of the soldiers marching towards their goal.

Calvino seeks to remember his experience as a partisan, but he realizes the difficulty involved in this process, for within his memory there are sunken layers of official history that nullify the memory. In an attempt to recreate these memories, to order and select, it becomes clear to Calvino that he no longer possesses the past in its fullness, but only small pieces. Memory is compared to sand, something formless, which only emerges gradually and in grains, and upon these grains the story is constructed.

The first part of the story is characterized by imagery related to water and sand, to suggest to the reader the fluidity of memory. Memories are layered like sand beneath a torrent. Like sand, they shift and are gradually broken down, so that only some grains, only some memories can come together and relive in the writing:

> It's not true that I've forgotten everything, the memories are still there, hidden in the grey tangle of the brain, in the damp bed of sand deposited on the bottom of the stream of thought: assuming it's true, that is, that every grain of this mental sand preserves a moment of our lives fixed in such a way that it can never be erased yet buried under billions and billions of other grains.[18]

The problematic nature of memory and of the act of writing continues throughout the story, and it is the core of the novella when Calvino remembers the body of his dead friend, Cardù. This is the image that is now connected forever to the erratic and unstable processes of the memory:

> The night of the dead man in the enemy village watched over by the living who no longer know who is living and who is dead. My own night as I search for my comrades in the mountains to have them

[18] Italo Calvino, "Memories of a Battle", in *The Road to San Giovanni*, trans. Tim Parks (London: Jonathan Cape, 1993), 77.

> tell me if I have won or if I have lost. The distance that separates that night then from the night I'm writing in now. The sense of everything appearing and disappearing.[19]

I would like to conclude with a reference to Levi's *If This Is a Man* published in 1958 but begun as a series of notes while he was in Auschwitz. In the chapter "The Drowned and the Saved" Levi asks himself if "it is good and worthwhile leaving some testimony of this exceptional, liminal human condition". The various writings of the survivors go on asking the same disquieting question: if such an unthinkable experience could be translated into language. Words fail to render such a trauma because words belong to everyone, thus they are not able to encompass the experience of those who were subjected to such tremendous physical pain. Nor are they able to describe this tearing wound of memory.

The last two decades we have witnessed controversial debates on the inadequacy of language and the ethical responsibility of those who write on the Shoah. I would like to focus on two aspects of Levi's book: the first is that his writing as a testimony does not originate from the need to find a rational explanation for an experience that in its extreme nature overcomes rationality itself. Rather, Levi is driven by an impulse, a pathological need to be listened to and understood. The second aspect is that Levi experiences the terrible existential condition of those who survive the Nazi camps. While going through the pages of his text, characterized by a concise style, the reader is struck by Levi's sense of solitude and anguish, and above all by his impelling need to justify his condition to those who have not come back from the concentration camps.

Therefore writing becomes the need to bear witness to those who have not returned. The "drowned" are the real and whole witnesses of Shoa: "drowned, they crowd my memory with their faceless presence, and if only I could enclose in an image the whole evil of our time, I would choose this image, with which I am familiar: a thin man, with a leaning forehead and bent shoulders, on whose face and eyes no trace of thought can be read."[20] As Lyotard points out, although Levi is aware of the paradoxical condition of memory and trauma because of

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[19] *Ibid*., 89.
[20] Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo* (Milan: Mondadori, 2002), 93 (my translation).

its resistance to any sense of signification, nonetheless he writes. Out of his testimony an undeletable memory is made, a warning against the horrors of new conflicts to come.

MEMORY AND REPRESSION: PSYCHIATRIC SOURCES AND THE HISTORY OF MODERN WARS

ANTONIO GIBELLI

> The war has produced a phenomenon so singular that any material on the subject should be gathered with care. Future historians will need to find material which has already been collected. And, as far as the psychology of our soldiers is concerned, this study and collection of material must be undertaken straightaway.[1]

Modern wars and psychiatric emergencies

The concept of total war, which is now commonly applied (but in slightly differing degrees) to both the First and Second World Wars, is first mentioned in the context of the American Civil War and the Russo-Japanese War of the beginning of the twentieth century. Total war also encompasses the phenomenon of psychiatric emergencies, that is different types of mental disturbances of varying degrees of seriousness (involving symptoms such as total or partial amnesia, contractures, deaf-mutism, tremors) which have increasingly come to affect combatants and, in certain cases, civilians, variously caught up in the throes of war. This has brought about a radical change in traditional medical nosographic, diagnostic and therapeutic systems, requiring armies to introduce organizational innovations to deal with the problem.

Although in the past there had been, in Italy as elsewhere, a few sporadic observations and medical studies on the psychological sufferings, behavioural disturbances, lack of adaptation to discipline,

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[1] A. Gemelli, *Il nostro soldato: Saggi di psicologia militare* (Milan: Treves, 1917), 3.

and cases of suicide amongst soldiers, a degree of continuity was only achieved in studies of nostalgia or *Heimweh.* This phenomenon was first reported occurring among Swiss mercenaries in the seventeenth century by Dr Johannes Hofer. His studies were later developed by other writers, and appeared in French medical literature of the Napoleonic era (when soldiers of various nationalities were sent to fight for long periods in the most distant reaches of Europe), and again during the nineteenth century.[2] It was also the subject of an eighteenth-century debate on whether to leave barracks open, as was the custom, to members of a soldier's family, including women and children, as a way of preventing separation from causing demoralization and low spirits.[3] To a large extent nostalgia was the mental pathology that affected soldiers in pre-modern eras. It was during the 1914-1918 war, the first to be based on mass mobilization, exceptionally powerful artillery, prolonged immobilizing trench warfare, and highly efficient and persuasive moral and material coercion by the state, that new pathologies made their appearance on a huge scale, confounding specialists by their scope and unpredictability.

If we are to seek a precedent, this may be found in the psychiatric observations made after great natural catastrophes, such as earthquakes, and natural-technological disasters, such as shipwrecks (made more awesome and destructive due to the size of ships during the steam age), to which World War I historians (and before them,

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[2] On nostalgia, see Delia Frigessi Castelnuovo and Michele Risso, *A mezza parete: Emigrazione, nostalgia, malattia mentale* (Turin: Einaudi, 1982), a history of nostalgia from the time of Hofer to the present day; Eric Leed, *No Man's Land* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979), 164; G. Rosen, "Nostalgia: A 'Forgotten' Psychological Disorder", *Psychological Medicine*, V/4 (1975), 340-54, which quotes several cases of nostalgia during the American Civil War and examines the French experience, highlighting a renewed interest in the phenomenon after the First World War and in reference to the conditions of prisoners and detainees in concentration camps (340). As regards Napoleonic sources, see D.F.N. Guerbois, "Essai sur la nostalgie, appelée vulgairement mal du pays", in *Dictionaire de science medicales* (Paris: Panckoucke, 1819), XXXVI, 265-81; H. Rey, *Nostalgie*, in *Nouveaou Dictionaire de medecine et chirurgie practique* (Paris 1877), XXIV (which includes an extremely detailed French bibliography from 1802 to 1874).

[3] See Sabina Loriga, "La prova militare", in *Storia dei giovani*, II. *L'età contemporanea*, eds Giovanni Levi and Jean Claude Schmitt (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1994), 22-25.

scholars of the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese war) not infrequently referred. Further proof of the huge scale of the new war was that it called to mind – as much for psychiatrists as for artists – events such as the Messina earthquake of 1908 or the sinking of the Titanic in 1912 (both depicted by the German painter Max Beckmann, who painted a piece in 1915 on the devastating effects of explosions entitled *L'obus*, and who later suffered from a serious form of depression caused by his experiences as an assistant in military hospitals).[4] A military psychiatric alarm first sounded during the Russo-Japanese war, when a large number of cases (2,000) were reported for the first time, as a result of the traumatic and disastrous effects the fighting had on Russian troops in the Far East. News of these events, published in Russian and French journals, rapidly spread to the entire international scientific community, sparking off an etiologic, preventive, therapeutic and organizational debate, which was to become a burning issue by the end of the first year of the Great War. From then on, "war psychiatry" became a subject to be studied practically everywhere and almost all armies started setting up progressively larger psychiatric units, which were given increasingly

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[4] On the Beckmann case, see Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), 164-67, and Philippe Dagen, *Le silence des peintres* (Paris: Fayard, 1996), 228-36. Psychiatric literature between the Russo-Japanese War and the First World War makes constant comparisons between modern war and great catastrophes such as earthquakes and shipwrecks. There are references to the sinking of warships, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions in an often quoted passage from the Russian psychiatrist, Paul Jacoby, in a letter to his French colleague Lacassague, published in 1904 in the Archives d'Anthropologie Criminelle: it was quoted by other French psychiatrists (Granjux, Régis) in the journal *Le Caducée* in 1904, and by the Italians, P. Consiglio and L. Pellacani (who referred to the Messina and the 1915 Avezzano earthquakes, both in southern Italy), and L. Bennati. The Messina earthquake was also the subject of a much-debated study on hysteria by Babinski in 1918. References to the sinking of the Petropavlosk in Port Arthur are found in an article by the Russian psychiatrist Wladyczko, published originally in *Voenno-medicinskij Zurnal* (*Journal of Military Medicine*). References to the sinking of the battleship Jena and the steamship Provence in other studies appeared in *Le Caducée*, in 1907, in *La clinique*, the same year, and in *Revue neurologique*, in 1917. It is interesting to note that a 1915 Italian war propaganda film was shot in the Avezzano area where there had been an earthquake in January of the same year.

greater responsibilities and duties.[5] Psychoanalysts, too, starting with the founder of the new science, took an active part in the debate, after the widespread appearance of psychiatric emergencies caused by the wars and the clinical and moral problem of how to treat cases.

Shell shock in memoirs, literature, cinema

After the First World War, numerous examples of shell-shocked soldiers can be found in memoirs, literature and the cinema, both in Italy and other countries. References to madness as a widespread consequence of the traumatic experience of being on the front are frequent in Italian war memoirs (as for example Attilio Frescura), English war poetry (Wilfred Owen) and French narratives (Celine immediately comes to mind).[6] The figure of the soldier who loses his memory as a result of the traumas of war became quite a familiar figure in the popular imagination of the 1920s and 30s. It was the subject of a novel by the English writer Rebecca West, *The Return of the Soldier*, which was made into a film. On his return from the front, a soldier fails to recognize his wife or home, but can remember a love

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[5] On this subject, readers are referred to my book *L'officina della Guerra: La grande Guerra e le trasformazioni del mondo mentale* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2nd edn, 1998).

[6] Attilio Frescura's *Diario di un imboscato*, first published in 1919 and quickly followed by numerous other editions which attempted to remove some of the cruder passages, contained numerous references to extreme cases of denial, self-punishment and madness in soldiers (the 1981 Mursia edition was the first since the 1930 reprint; references to the phenomenon of madness are found on pages 179 and 181). The war experiences of Wilfred Owen are well known from Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975). Of special interest for our purposes are Owen's war poems, especially "Mental Cases". In Celine's *Voyage au but de la nuit*, which I quoted at length in my book *L'officina della guerra*, Doctor Bestombes says: "War ... has provided us with unique instruments to examine the nervous system and has revealed to us the secrets of the human spirit! We will now be occupied for centuries poring over these recent pathological revelations; centuries of passionate study lie ahead ... let's be frank about it …. Until now, we could only guess at the emotional and spiritual wealth of man! But now, thanks to the war, we have it! …. We can begin to understand, albeit as a result of a painful rupture, but which for science has been decisive and providential, of man's intimate being!" Considering the vast scale and the novelty represented by the pathological phenomena caused by the war and the increasingly important role played by psychiatrists, Bestombes' enthusiasm seems fully justified.

he had in his youth.[7] This loss of personal memory can also be understood in terms of the great bewilderment caused by the speed and magnitude of the changes taking place in the world, which war had then speeded up and made irreversible.

Even a Fascist propaganda film such as Giovacchino Forzano's *Camicia nera* (*Black Shirt*, 1933) opens with the story of an Italian blacksmith fighting in France, who is captured by the Germans and loses his memory. He regains his memory and identity only at the end of the war when some sharp-thinking German psychiatrists play the national anthem to him. The story seems to point to the dual image of death and resurrection as the keystone to Italian history from 1914 to 1922 (a central theme in Fascist propaganda, much used by the regime's historians). The plot, however, is not implausible, since cases of people regaining their memory on hearing familiar music are reported in medical literature on war trauma.

The story of another soldier who lost his memory, but this time as an act of deception, made its sensational appearance on the Italian social and legal scene with the case of the "Smemorato di Collegno" (the amnesiac of Collegno), which held the public in sway between the 1920s and 30s, and inspired such works as the play *Come tu mi vuoi* by Pirandello, the 1962 film *Lo smemorato di Collegno* with Totò, and Sciascia's book *Il teatro della memoria*, 1981. The basic outline of the story is as follows: having been caught stealing from Turin's Jewish cemetery, a man declared that he had lost his memory – not an infrequent occurrence during the war and immediate post-war years, affecting soldiers that had abandoned the front in a state of confusion and were found wandering the streets, dirty and dishevelled, to be then taken to psychiatric hospitals. The story made the newspaper headlines, and coverage in the popular weekly *Domenica del Corriere* (*Chi lo conosce?*, – "Who Knows Him?" – 6 February 1927) sparked off a campaign to identify the man, which ended when a rich widow from Verona recognized him as her husband, who had never returned from the front. She persisted in her conviction even after the outcome of two trials (held in 1929 in Turin and in 1931 in Florence) identified the amnesiac as the printer and ex-convict Mario Bruneri, who had previously been arrested several times for fraud.

[7] Rebecca West (the pen-name of Cecily Isabel Fairfield) wrote the novel, her first, in 1918. The film *The Return of the Soldier* (1981) starred Glenda Jackson.

Literary interest in the incident clearly lies in the possibility of dual or even multiple identities. For historians, it is interesting for two interconnected reasons. Firstly, it is set against a background that indirectly evokes the huge problems faced by Europe in coming to terms with the issue of mourning in the decade following the end of the great catastrophe (lately the subject of numerous historical studies).[8] The woman's stubborn attitude can be seen as a strong inner desire to avoid acceptance of the loss. Secondly, it confirms the widespread presence, in the post-war social landscape, of the shell-shocked soldier that had lost track of his own identity while crossing the "no man's land" of the war and of the public's familiarity with the subject.[9] It can be surmised, in the absence of more detailed studies, that the very idea of interpreting this role came to the impostor by way of that familiarity.

Memory and repression

In subjective terms, the trauma suffered by soldiers was generally lacerating and caused a conflict in which the need to forget was equal to and sometimes stronger than the desire to remember and share their experiences, which also seemed in some ways unspeakable. This type of repression can most clearly be seen in Nazi extermination camp survivors and their conduct for a certain period of time after the end of the Second World War. The testimonies of the survivors of this traumatic experience, who were so distraught that they were sometimes committed to mental institutions and subjected to

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[8] The following are just some of the most important: Jay Winter devoted an entire book to the issue in *Sites of Memory*, which examines, amongst other things, the theme of the "return of the dead", taken from Abel Gance's famous film *J'accuse*, and spiritualism, a widespread practice in post-war Europe; Stephane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker examined the topic in a section of their three-part book devoted to the most recent developments in French and European historiography of the Great War, *14-18 retrouver la Guerre* (Paris: Gallimar, 2000); Italy has produced an important bibliographical study of First World War obituary pamphlets, which were published in great numbers during and after the war: *Non omnis moriar: Gli opuscoli di necrologio per i caduti italiani nella grande guerra. Bibliografia analitica*, eds Fabrizio Dolci and Oliver Janz (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2003); Janz, who wrote an introduction to the book (*Monumenti di carta: Le pubblicazioni in memoria dei caduti della prima guerra mondiale*), is about to publish an overall study of the topic (see also his essay in this collection).

[9] See Jean-Yves Le Naour, *Le soldat inconnu vivant* (Paris: Hachette, 2002).

psychiatric treatment, come across as unique yet elusive documents of the extreme character of modern wars: like a fairground mirror that reflects, but also deforms experiences. This casts a doubt on the relationship between historians and their sources and induces us to meditate once again on its far from linear or neutral nature.

A question of methodology arises here, incidentally posed by Carlo Ginzburg, in regard the relevance for historiography of the testimony of individuals belonging to the lower classes. "There is no escaping the culture of one's class and of the times one lives in", Ginzburg wrote in *Il formaggio e i vermi* about a character in his story and the extent to which he could be described as an "uncommon" man, "except by entering into a state of delirium and lack of communication".[10] This would seem to imply that by departing from their historical and social context and entering a totally arbitrary dimension, the testimonies of "madmen" lose their historical relevance. However, I feel these testimonies are entirely valid as historical sources. Legitimate traces can be found in delirium, hallucinations, dreams or where communication has broken down, is denied or absent. Despite (or perhaps because of) the efforts of psychiatric sciences to transform suffering into illness, an attempt could be made to read their sufferings through their illnesses, and thus the personal, psychological and cultural history of the combatants in the first mass technological war.

I could provide many examples of this assumption, but since space is limited, and I have gone into this aspect at length in other studies, I shall concentrate on a case published in German psychiatric literature in 1919. Though previously examined in another context, it is of particular relevance here. It concerns a soldier suffering from loss of memory and symptoms of infantile regression who was picked up at a first-aid medication site after an explosion. In a state of confusion and uncertainty, he started asking everyone he met where he could get some potatoes: "Where are you Gustav?", he would ask anxiously, calling for his younger brother:

> "What's happening? Where's this music coming from? Is it fireworks? We were supposed to get the potatoes. Dad will get cross. I

[10] Carlo Ginzburg, *Il formaggio e i vermi* (Turin: Einaudi, 1976), 20. Ginzburg wished to stress that an extreme case can also be representative.

> wonder where Gustav has got to. Perhaps he's gone to see the fireworks."

In the following exchange, the doctor shows him his medical records, that diagnose nervous shock, and asks him:

> "What's this?"
> "It's my coop card."
> "But isn't there a war going on?"
> "War? Ah yes! I know a general store with that name."
> "What's this you are wearing?"
> "It's my new grey summer suit."
> "With buttons on its sleeves?"
> (Looking at the buttons) "I wonder what all these buttons are here for. I have to go and get some potatoes."

This apparently incongruous behaviour and the answers he gives show the great effort he is making to try and escape the unacceptable present and take refuge in his childhood, reinterpreting everything about his present condition from within this distant context (and repressing any dismaying elements). The medical records become his coop card, "War" is the name of a general store, the explosions are fireworks, the uniform is a summer suit and the buttons are inexplicable. Taken like this, the soldier's "delirium" is perfectly readable. It reveals a clear need for protection and an impulse to escape from everything around him. His hysteria is perhaps his response – a last resort or maybe the only one he is capable of – to the brutal experience he has been forced into by an extremely forceful coercive and disciplinary system as well as an exceptionally powerful and penetrating system of persuasion.[11]

According to psychiatrists, regression into childlike states, going back to a time before reaching adult maturity, is a frequent occurrence in traumatized soldiers. Italian medical literature and war memoirs provide numerous examples. A contemporary journal describes the case of a corporal who had been buried by debris after an explosion and taken for psychiatric observation:

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[11] The case in question is quoted from Bruna Bianchi, "L'isteria come fuga", in *Scampare la guerra*, ed. Lucio Fabi (Gorizia: Ronchi dei Legionari, 1994), Chapter 1.

> As soon as he sees the doctor he claps the hands and rejoices like a child. He often does the same when he sees the assistant and the nurses, to whom he is extremely attached. He no longer thinks of his family or children. He spends the day lying on the grass playing frivolous games.[12]

Shell-shocked soldiers often seem to want to take refuge in childlike behaviour and memories, almost as a way of fleeing the unbearable experiences of the present. A nurse gives this account of her meeting with a patient:

> The greatest welcome I received on my return was from the only wounded soldier left, Antonio, an unfortunate boy whose bodily injuries caused him to lose his mind and power of speech. He was so overjoyed when he saw me that I was moved, and no sooner did I go up to him than he took my hands and kissed them over and over again, constantly repeating "happy, happy". He is getting better day by day and we have him taken out into the garden to enjoy the sun, which makes him happy.[13]

The compulsion to remember

The relationship between memory and oblivion in strongly destabilizing experiences can also produce other reactions, such as the compulsion to relive a traumatic event, which becomes a sort of immovable watershed in one's memory. Since war marks a break in life (the terms "trauma" and "fracture" may also allude to this), as well as history, splitting them in half, it needs to be continuously relived. As Paul Fussell points out, there are English writers who constantly reworked their experiences of the trenches in their memories and literary works, as if it were impossible to leave them behind. For them, as for Siegfried Sassoon, "remembering the war became what amounts to a lifetime's activity".[14] For others, the experience of the war became a benchmark for all others. Those who had gone through the war could only transmit their feelings to those

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[12] A. Ghillini, "Successioni sindromiche da scoppio di granata", in *Rassegna di studi psichiatrici* (1918-1919), 10. See also Gibelli, *L'officina della guerra*, 129.
[13] *The Letters of Adele Reverdy*, ALSP (Genoa: Archivio Ligure di Scrittura Popolare): letter of 3 August 1916.
[14] Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 118.

who had not when they were united through the occurrence of events that were in some way similar. According to Leed, an initial process of repression was followed by a flood of memories when a new destabilizing situation set in with the Great Depression of 1929, which bridged the gap between civilians and war veterans.[15]

The traumatic nature of the experience of death in the Great War was also due to the unprecedented scale on which it was fought, the fact that so many bodies had disappeared without trace and, conversely, that many of the fallen were unrecognizable and could not be identified, and finally the shocking realization that, as in all wars but for the first time on such a scale, the ratio between young people and adults, children and parents was inverted in the death toll. As Herodotus had said, in war it is not the children who bury their fathers, but the fathers who bury their children.[16] All of this made the problem of recovering and returning the bodies of the fallen an extremely delicate, complex and difficult issue, which led European countries to introduce special legislation and mobilize considerable organizational and financial resources at the end of the war.[17] As well as serving purposes linked to the political management of mourning, the intense activity of monument building that followed, which was on such an unprecedented scale as to leave an indelible mark on the European landscape, was also inspired by this immense collective trauma.

It could well have been these factors that lay at the basis of an extraordinary case of memory and mourning, which concerned the death of a soldier in 1916 and the preservation of his correspondence. A little time ago, an old friend of mine, who knew about my interest in collecting letters of soldiers of the Great War, presented me with an entire collection written by a distant relative, his grandmother's

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[15] Leed, *No Man's Land*, 191-92.

[16] The truth of the statement, printed on the cover of a school notebook, caused such an outcry that all copies were confiscated in 1918. See Antonio Fiori, *Il filtro deformante: La censura sulla stampa durante la prima guerra mondiale* (Rome: Istituto storico italiano per l'età moderna e contemporanea, 2001), 385.

[17] The issue, which inspired Bertrand Tavernier's excellent film *La vie et rien d'autre*, was the subject of a doctoral thesis by Bèatrix Pau-Eyries, recently debated at Montpellier University. It is a wide-ranging well-documented study that makes a comparative analysis of French and Italian experiences: *Le transfert des corps des militaires de la Grande Guerre: Etudes comparée France-Italie 1914-1939*.

brother, a farmer from Piedmont who died in 1916 fighting in the Carso, and whose body was never found. It was not the volume of the collection that was extraordinary, although quite large (almost two hundred letters), but another two circumstances that the donor was able to recall. The first, to which he was an indirect witness, concerned his grandmother. Distraught at the news of the death of her young brother, she had made a symbolic gesture to recover his lost remains, going from one farmhouse to another to collect all the letters that her brother had sent to relatives and friends, which accounts for the size of the collection and its relative completeness. In a certain sense, collecting the soldier's body of works and the survival of his memory through it was the result of a bereavement process carried out by his sister – a gesture to compensate for the literal disappearance of the dead man's real body.

The second circumstance, which is perhaps even more extraordinary, concerned the dead soldier's niece (the donor's mother), who was just a year old at the time of the bereavement. Although suffering from Alzheimer's disease and no longer capable of remembering or recognizing anything, not even her husband's grave, she managed to retrace, driven by a mysterious resolve, a plaque dedicated to her dead uncle next to a tree in the local memorial park, where she had been taken as a child to contemplate with awe and grief the presence of an absent body. We can imagine the child's bewilderment in the virtual assimilation of her dead relative to a tree. We may suppose that it was precisely this, the absence of a body, that made the event so difficult to accept but which also fixed itself in her memory to such an extent as to resist the devastations of illness.

But let us read the experience in the witness's own words:

> In those long dark winter days, my confused mother continued to live between the lifeless desert of her memory and the unpredictable agitations of deliria.
>
> When I arrived in the first week of February, Alzheimer's was taking its final toll.
>
> It was then that, on a dull cold afternoon, I accompanied her for the last time to the cemetery.
>
> In an effort to awaken her recollections, I led her to the marble tombstones lined up on the ground, then along the arcaded walls filled

> with burial niches bearing names, photographs and dates, and finally the more spacious monumental chapels ….
>
> But for my mother these tombs, names and photographs were mute. In a low voice, as if in a daze, she kept repeating: “How do you know so much? I don’t … I don’t.”
>
> When we left the cemetery, lucidity and memory suddenly returned to her.
>
> She whispered: “Let’s go and see my uncle …” This time it was she who took the lead, pressing against my arm to turn left into Viale della Rimembranza.
>
> Forty-two giant lime trees lined both sides of a pebble path. At the foot of each there lay a small granite memorial stone. On the flat top a bronze plaque bore the faintly legible name of a soldier that had died in the First World War.
>
> Guided by a deep-rooted instinct, tottering unsteadily and uncertainly along the path of similar looking stones, she managed to find the one that belonged to Giovanni Panattaro, my grandmother’s brother, who had died in the Carso at the age of twenty-four in November 1916. At that time my mother was just over a year old.
>
> I was astonished and disturbed by the mysterious and unexpected persistence of that single thread of memory.[18]

Through the workings of the mind, the trauma of war affects the dimension of time, and, in a way, brings it to a standstill. This case perfectly illustrates the words of two French historians on the impact the Great War has continued to have on the memory of the twentieth century and up to the present, and indeed for historiography itself: “The European and worldwide scope of the Great War, the fact that it was so drawn-out, and its immense and long undervalued importance for the whole twentieth century, have made it an emblematic case for reflection on what the stuff of history is really about – the weight of the dead on the living.”[19]

Psychiatric sources

Examples of phenomena such as these, and similar ones, are present in great numbers in psychiatric sources. Though still classified as belonging to the realms of the “sciences of normality” and their

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[18] Pino Ferraris, letter accompanying his donation of the letters of Giovanni Panattaro to the ALSP (Genoa: Archivio Ligure di Scrittura Popolare) (my translation).

[19] Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, *14-18 retrouver la Guerre*, xxvii.

variations, their significance seems central not only to a history of mental illnesses, but also a cultural history of the Great War and modern wars in general – large-scale collective experiences filled with extreme events. In addition to various types of subjective testimony from traumatized soldiers (including oral accounts and private correspondence – often deemed of clinical relevance and thus preserved in hospital records rather than being sent), many other sources may be considered, such as the writings of psychiatrists and data produced by the public system. There is an enormous amount of scientific and clinical material contained in contemporary publications (medical, medico-legal, psychological, anthropological and psychiatric journals), especially at the time of the Great War, which makes numerous references to the phenomena under discussion. Then there are the medical records of psychiatric hospitals, which, while emphasizing clinical and administrative aspects, preserve the case histories of individuals affected by illnesses. In the past twenty years, the use of sources such as these has enabled historians to reveal unknown and forgotten aspects of the war, demonstrated by the vast amount of literature available.[20] Only in such a way, by going back to the language of clinical records, has historiography been able to re-acquire an aspect of the war that had only been glimpsed in narrative works or surrealistic representations – war as a great biological event, a horrifying large-scale spectacle of decomposition, contamination, and bodily and mental devastation.[21]

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[20] Even a brief outline would be impossible here. Suffice it to say that Eric Leed's notes in a chapter of *No Man's Land* on the issue probably represent the first historiographical approach to the theme of psychiatric sources. In Italy, impetus was given to the subject by an essay written by myself in 1980, and Bruna Bianchi, whose extremely thorough studies are now partly collected in the book *La Follia e la fuga: Nevrosi di guerra, diserzione e disobbedienza nell'esercito italiano 1915-1918* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2001). European historiography began to examine the issue after a call for renewed study by the international centre of Peronne, where a conference was held in 1998 (some of the papers are quoted in *Choc traumatique et histoire culturelle*, a volume already mentioned). Very recently the first organic work on "war lunatics" has been published in the UK, rich with references to clinic and human cases: Peter Barnham, *Forgotten Lunatics of the Great War* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004).

[21] I am thinking, in particular, of the works of Otto Dix, especially a series of 1924 etchings entitled *Der Krieg*. The grisly details depicted in one of these, entitled

Beyond the First World War

If the Great War may be regarded as the first modern conflict to produce large-scale psychiatric emergencies, subsequent history, right up to our own days, provides numerous cases, variations and developments of this phenomenon. The character and scale of the problem have changed just as war has changed, especially with the accentuation of its totalizing aspect.

Without delving into more recent developments (like the Vietnam War or the Gulf wars, which brought into play startling new developments in destructive technology affecting the relationship between the threat of death and killing the enemy), another fundamental stage of the process certainly came about during the Second World War. It was then that war really became total, in that it also became ubiquitous and impossible to escape from. There were two reasons for this. Firstly, war operations made deeper and deeper inroads into the physical and mental terrains, removing the distinction between battlefront and internal front, combatants and civilians, men and women. This was due mainly to the aerial bombardment of towns and cities that were not on the frontline (something that had first been seen between the two wars, in Spain and Africa, through the action of the German and Italian air forces respectively); secondly, the Nazi and Japanese practice of mass deportation and extermination of entire populations on a previously unknown scale in Europe and Asia (a precedent may be found in the extermination of the Armenians by the Turks and, to a degree, the internment of civilians in various countries during the First World War).

Psychiatric emergencies ceased to be a problem that was specific to combatant armies, as it seemed to be during the Great War, but affected entire populations and groups of people who had no direct involvement in the fighting except as hapless victims. To give just one example, the fear of bombardments, accompanied by the unmistakable and terrifying sound of sirens, is indelibly marked in the memories of entire generations, as is testified in numerous sources (including letters written by ordinary people), and characterized in different ways

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Transplantation, seems to rival clinical photographs of face surgery carried out on disfigured soldiers in operating theatres.

pathologies that were observed in civilians during the war and post-war period, as shown in various surveys and studies.[22]

Terror, suffering, violence, humiliation and injustice became even more widespread during the Second World War in Europe and Asia, affecting great masses of people without distinction of age or sex, including children. This phenomenon took its most extreme form, also in terms of mental trauma (and even more so in terms of memory and repression), in the Nazi extermination camps, about which we now have such a huge amount of literature and to which any approach is so complex that it has come to be treated as a separate subject. In fact, concentration camp experiences produced such profound wounds in survivors that they were impossible to heal in many cases, causing serious identity crises, and making the act of remembering highly problematic. Victims often felt that the latter was an obligation it was impossible to fulfil. It was the sign of a permanent laceration in the fabric of human experience, and a problem that, in some ways, historiography previously had never had to face.[23]

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[22] Literature on the experience of bombardments is now very extensive and represents an important chapter in the history of collective experiences during the Second World War. See A. Marwick, “L’impact de la deuxiéme guerre mondiale sur le britanniques”, *Revue d’histoire de la deuxiéme guerre mondiale*, XXIII/90 (April 1973), 47-61; J. Konvitz, “Représentations urbaines et bombardements stratégiques, 1914-1945”, *Annales ESC*, 4 (1989), 823-47. In Italy, an updated review appears in the notes to the chapter “La morte che viene dal cielo”, in Gloria Chianese, *Quando uscimmo nei rifugi*’*: Il mezzogiorno tra guerra e dopoguerra (1943-46)* (Florence: Carocci, 2004). Regarding the effects of the bombardments on mental health, see Paolo Sorcinelli, *La follia della guerra* (Milan: Angeli, 1992). However, we do not yet have, in Italy as elsewhere, a wide-ranging systematic analysis of psychiatric sources, as we do for the First World War.

[23] On the unspeakable nature of these extreme experiences, see Giorgio Agamben, *Quel che resta di Auschwitz: L’archivio e il testimone* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1998), which, quoting extensively from Primo Levi, highlights an issue of great methodological importance, which can also be applied to the subject of this paper. When the boundary between the human and the inhuman is crossed, testimony becomes impossible, and so this source, as far as historiography is concerned, is lost: “the ‘real’ witnesses, the ‘integral’ witnesses, are those that neither produced, nor could have produced, any testimony, the ones who ‘touched rock bottom’, the Muslims and those living on the fringes of society. The survivors, like pseudo witnesses, speak for them, by proxy: they give testimony to a missing testimony” (31-32).

The World Wars and the History of Italy: Public, Shared and Disputed Memories

Alberto De Bernardi

World Wars I and II and "the special case" of Italy

Historiography has long warned us against the use of the often uncritical exception/exceptionality category, borrowed directly from that of the German *Sonderweg*,[1] in order to explain the differences and the singular nature of many parts of Italian history compared to other European or Western historical experiences. Italy, especially present-day Italy, has not always been a "special case", to which various explanatory models cannot be applied, that is to say those models used for other nation states regarding industrialization and modernization, the formation of political systems and public institutions as well as cultures and collective mentalities. When the subject under discussion is world wars, however, it is hard not to fall back once again on this old paradigm, since the significant factors that distinguish Italy from all the other countries involved in those conflicts cannot be ignored even if the subject is approached in an impromptu way.

The first of these differences is the fact that Italy joined the wars after they had broken out, thus failing to respect the commitments undertaken according to the international treaties in which it was involved. Therefore the country passed from being in a neutral position, in which it was obliged to disregard those precise commitments to the states with which it was allied, to being a belligerent power. This in itself does not entirely explain the difference: another distinguishing element is needed. Italy entered and left both the world wars as part of an alliance different from the one to which it belonged when the wars broke out. During its brief period of neutrality in the First World War, Italy broke with the Triple Alliance

[1] For the term "Sonderweg", see the online review of David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley's *The Peculiarities of German History* (New York: Oxford UP, 1984): http://userwww.sfsu.edu/~epf/1998/andrews.html.

and went to war on the same side as its old adversaries – France, Russia and Great Britain. Italy started the Second World War as a pillar of the Rome-Berlin Axis and finished it on the side of the Anglo-American and Soviet "Allies".

This last factor, which for various reasons is even more complex, had the consequence that immediately after these conflicts Italy found itself divided as to how the results of the military operations were judged and perceived: the question of whether Italy was in the winners' or the losers' camp was uncertain and controversial both after the Great War and the Second World War. The question was particularly unsettling after the latter conflict. The fall of Fascism in the summer of 1943 marked the end of the "Fascist war" in which Italy was to be counted among the losers, and those Italians who had believed in the regime's imperial mirage and had seen military defeat and the armistice as a tragedy felt themselves to be the losers. In this way the idea of a defeated Italy took shape in the very heart of the nation, as it witnessed with dismay the death of the homeland of totalitarianism. During that same fraught period, however, there had appeared a democratic and anti-fascist Italy, which had rejected Fascist "patriotism", though often suffering great hardship, and had hoped that Nazi-Fascism would be defeated. Another Italy was forged in the resistance alongside the Allies, an Italy which, in a paradox that historical research cannot help revealing, welcomed the winners enthusiastically and saw those who bombed its own cities, killing thousands of its own people, as "liberators"; an Italy which pushed for another patriotic war, in which a new idea of nationhood took hold, and which made Italians feel somehow like winners, although the 1947 peace treaties did little to foster much in the way of easy optimism.

As far as the First World War is concerned, the controversy as to whether Italy was a winner or a loser follows a different path, since there is no doubt that Italy is to be counted among the winners from a military point of view. Yet it is equally true that as soon as the war ended, the government's decision to promote the idea of an incomplete victory – favoured for political ends by the radical nationalist interventionism factions – caused the general public to doubt what had seemed an undisputed victory and paved the way for the political and social upheavals common to the defeated countries.

This was "the Italy of Vittorio Veneto", abandoned by the liberal ruling class and rejected by the Socialists who had been against the war, which had become the ideological banner of the growing Fascist movement. Thus the victory did not create national cohesion, nor did it lead to any idea of a shared homeland, as the interventionists had hoped; instead it shattered identities, leaving liberals, Socialists and Catholics helpless in the face of the construction of a totalitarian state that was imposed by the strength of Mussolini's radical nationalism.

Patriotism and totalitarianism

Let us examine the various factors more closely, and try to shed some light on the implications they may have for the question of identity and their repercussions on cultural memory. The first question to ask is why Italy followed such a chequered and contradictory path while these events were taking place, causing the fractures in its subsequent identity.

Christophe Charle has given valuable assistance in finding a way through this knotty problem in his recent study of the "imperial societies" – France, Germany and Great Britain, dominant in Europe and in the world for the first half of the twentieth century – by pointing out how their global power essentially came from the fact that virtually all the people in these countries, by now urbanized, shared "a national ideal based on a shared language and culture transmitted through a universal educational system".[2] The processes of development that had contributed to the success of the modern nation-state between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had scarcely touched Italy, which then found itself among those states that could not withstand the impact of the wars the three imperial societies had started in order to achieve continental and world hegemony. These states were literally smashed or dismantled, still unable to rebuild themselves in a stable and solid manner after following tortuous paths.

The three points of view that I have chosen to deal with the questions set out in the title of this brief essay have their roots precisely in the fact that Italy, a "backward" nation, had very little of those political and social resources enjoyed by countries where a national ideal was broadly shared, the result of a fully launched

[2] Christophe Charle, *La crise des sociétés imperiales* (Paris: Seuil, 2001), 17 (my translation).

modernization process. This factor made it difficult for Italy to be a part of the fight for hegemony among the imperial states which dominated the first half of the twentieth century and which was the essence of the process that Nolte has referred to as the European civil war.[3]

In the light of these considerations let us now examine both of Italy's deferred entries into the world wars. In the First World War the liberal ruling class and the Socialist movement's initial choice of neutrality was opposed by interventionist Italy, which, far from being a homogeneous group, was characterized by a democratic movement, keen to complete the Risorgimento and make Italy one of the great European democracies, and a radical nationalistic faction, which was convinced that the war would launch Italy as a great imperialistic power and transform the "Italian race" into a conquering power.

As Alfredo Rocco, one of the leaders of Italian nationalism, wrote, "the races that are numerous and fertile are intrepid and expansive, and they advance and conquer. The Italian race is expanding too; it is throwing off the shackles that bind it to the homeland and is advancing."[4] The elements that united the interventionist faction were radical criticism of Giolittian "transformism", combined with a lack of trust in liberal parliament, and the conviction that the war would be a revolutionary event, able to modify *ab imis* the structures as well as political and social dynamics of the country.

The war was seen as a chance to achieve a radical change of regime, which in turn was understood as being an indispensable step on the way to overcoming that backwardness not only in Italy's socio-economic development, but also in building its identity as a nation. This dichotomy between neutralism and interventionism reshaped all the Italian political groups and reorganized political memberships as it cut across liberal, Catholic and above all, workers' movements, not only by following the traditional dichotomy of reformists/maximalists,

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[3] See the second edition of Ernst Nolte's *Der europäische Bürgerkrieg 1917-1945: Nationalsozialismus und Bolschewismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Propyläen-Verlag, 1987).

[4] See Alfredo Rocco, "Che cosa è il nazionalismo e che cosa vogliono i nazionalisti, opuscolo pubblicato in Padova nel 1914 a cura di quella Associazione nazionalista", in *Scritti e discorsi politici: La lotta nazionale della vigilia e durante la guerra, (1913-1918)* (Milan: Giuffrè, 1938), 69-89 (my translation).

but also by creating rifts within all the factions. Bissolati the interventionist broke with the rest of the reformist faction, but there were similar ruptures on the radical side – prime examples being Mussolini, the interventionist experience of the entire wing of revolutionary socialism, or the young Togliatti. The democratic group, in which men such as Salvemini or the young Nenni, a Republican at that time, were active, was also torn by these divisions. The Catholic political world was fractured too, combining the intransigent extreme right in the neutralist camp, which saw the war as the tragic result of atheist modernity, and the extreme left under Miglioli, which was opposed to the war because of innate pacifism and in solidarity with the working world, which in turn was opposed by the interventionism of the Christian Democratic League of Father Agostino Gemelli, the future founder of the Catholic university and the future instigator of clerical Fascism.

The move from neutrality to intervention led to a real landslide in the Italian political system, marked above all by the central importance of the mass mobilization taking place. The "glorious days" of 1915 that pushed Italy into the war saw one of the biggest mass mobilizations in Italian history, and here modern democracy or the processes of modern democratization could clearly be seen. They made the Italian entry into the war seem like a revolutionary break, which was not the case for the other European countries involved. Italian intervention was viewed as a collective baptism against the scroungers and the bootlickers of the old Italy represented by Giolitti and Turati – as D'Annunzio called them in his famous speech on 13 May of that year in Rome, a speech that was political, idealistic and generational, and was a presage of the birth not only of Mussolini's new Italy, but also that of Salvemini, Nenni, Gobetti and Togliatti. Prezzolini, the founder of *La Voce*, captured this historical moment of change perfectly the following day when he wrote about the "glorious days":

> Those who have not realized that this week has been revolutionary have no sense of history. It is not always necessary to have barricades, corpses and the guillotine to make a revolution. It is sufficient to break the legal system. This week was not legal.[5]

[5] Giuseppe Prezzolini, *La Voce*, 14 May 1913, Florence (my translation).

Thus joining the war divided the country and this division was to remain both in the collective memory and the political sphere in the immediate post-war period. As a result, the country's victory, instead of strengthening the political institutions, sent them headlong into an irreversible crisis. In countries such as France and Great Britain this crisis sped up the integration between a national ideal and democracy, contradictory though that might be, but in Italy the outcome of such a crisis was the transformation of patriotism into a totalitarian myth. Yet Italy's late entry into the Second World War cannot be attributed solely to the state of unreadiness evoked by Mussolini on the eve of the invasion of Poland, since Italy's decision to be "non-belligerent" disguised serious rifts between public opinion and Fascism, between the Nazi-Fascist war and Italian society, and between the Italians and the myth of the war experience that Fascism had been nurturing for over twenty years.

It also covered up serious divisions between "pro-Germans" and "anti-Nazis" in the regime's hierarchy, and even more so between those who promoted the war as an opportunity for a political purification that would free Fascism from a growing conservatism – in order to restore the idea of revolution and the myth of Fascism as a totalitarian project that could totally transform Italian society and build a "new Italy" that was to be imperial, anti-bourgeois, proletarian and racist – and those who, together with most of the high military officers and industrialists, believed that fighting the war on Hitler's side was suicidal madness. Finally, it laid bare the limitations and contradictions of the mythical "steel pact" because of the imbalance between the military and political forces of the two parties and in particular, due to the unresolved conflict between Nazism's hegemonic myth, which aimed at a Europe entirely subjugated by Berlin's totalitarian power and included no effective or equal role for Italy, and the vision of European relations nurtured by Fascism since the outbreak of hostilities.

In a Europe of nation-states, Italy had to concentrate on military campaigns limited to Africa and the Balkans in order to satisfy its desire to become a great colonial power. There was no place in this vision for a total war between democracy and totalitarianism for world dominion, since, political rhetoric notwithstanding, Italy had not

become an "imperial society" and neither had it overcome its backwardness nor internal rifts.

The decision to move from non-belligerence to armed intervention was mainly a political calculation, in which what Stanley G. Payne has stressed as Mussolini's two usual attitudes towards Hitler, "fear and envy",[6] were joined together, thus generating a conviction that Italy could conduct a parallel war in the last act of the European civil war, mixed with a fear that this very independence could be defended better if Italy were victorious in the conflict and a calculation of the economic and political advantages that would be guaranteed by taking part in a war that had already been won.

The historical paradox is that the regime which owed its initial good luck to having opted for intervention and thoroughly exploited the political tactic of morally condemning the neutralism espoused by liberalism and socialism, now found itself in the same *impasse*, which prevented it not only from redeeming Italy's reputation as "the whore of Europe", an epithet earned in 1914, but also from avoiding a new but equally negative reputation as a profiteering regime, only capable of stabbing its adversaries in the back after they had been defeated, and ready for military action only when protected by its powerful ally.

Therefore here too the decision to go to war did nothing to rally the country around the Fascist cause; instead, it highlighted the seriousness of the social and ideological rifts in Fascism, which were certainly not attributable to the contrast between Fascism and anti-Fascism, and between totalitarianism and democracy, but rather to the unresolved problems in the regime's construction. These profoundly influenced the running of the war and from the end of 1942 onwards fuelled spasmodic attempts to negotiate peace or to find an honourable way out of the war, to the point of suggesting that the alliances might be overturned.

The extent, therefore, to which wartime events and their tragic epilogue create transient and divided memories cannot be ignored. This happens independently of the fact that such memories undergo divisions as a result of changing alliances, rendered deeper and more serious by the degree of ideology underpinning the wars, especially the World Wars, of the twentieth century, in which opposing views of

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[6] Stanley G. Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914-1945* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 383.

the world are at play. From this point of view, it is quite clear that changing from the Triple Alliance's side to the Triple Entente in the First World War meant changing sides from conservatism to revolution, from absolute monarchy to democracy and from the élites to the masses. The move from the alliance with Hitler to the alliance with the Allies, which was even more complex, presupposes even more painful breaks, not only between Fascism and anti-Fascism of course, but also between dictatorship and democracy, and totalitarianism and a free world: ideals to which many individuals embraced wholeheartedly.

We now come to the third point to be considered, which is the question of deciding who the winners and losers were. Sernaglia's prayer, which D'Annunzio wrote up in the *Corriere della Sera* two or three days before the conferences at Versailles were concluded, contained these words:

> Oh victory of ours, you shall not be disfigured; no one can bend your knees or clip your feathers. Where are you running to? Where are you flying?[7]

In this way the political myth of the "disfigured victory" began to be constructed which, as was mentioned earlier, was based on that sense of wounded patriotism, which in turn gave rise to the radical nationalism that would then become an integral part of Fascism. However, such a myth was also a sign of something much deeper, namely the nation's inability to see itself as a victorious country, but rather to place itself metaphorically among the losers. The "Poet" went on to say a year later:

> Which nation is more truly victorious than Italy? And yet we are not winners, we are losers. We are more defeated than the Prussians.

It should be remembered that this was not only D'Annunzio's or Mussolini's conviction; for a short but crucial period it determined foreign policy for Sonnino and Salandra, who used the image of a "mutilated victory" as an opportunity to give a nationalistic and

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[7] Gabriele D'Annunzio, "Vittoria nostra non sarai mutilata", *Corriere della Sera*, 24 October 1918 (my translation).

imperialistic edge to the division of the spoils carried out by the losers at Versailles after the war had ended.

From this point of view, the end of the Second World War accentuated this problem, giving rise to disturbing scenarios here, too. In 1943 Italy was a defeated country. Another semi-victorious Italy was born, this time as a co-belligerent of the Anglo-Americans. Fascism was defeated but the winner was anti-Fascism, a dramatic ambiguity which would blow up in Italy's face in 1947 when it was time to face up to the consequences of the war. Italy lost territories and lost its modest colonial empire, becoming a democracy under surveillance. The situation was certainly not as devastating as it was in Japan, where the Constitution was written by the occupying Americans or in Germany, which was carved into two states and as late as 1948 still had no geo-political identity. Italy was a united country, but because it was halfway between the winners and the losers – whilst it had a rather uncomfortable position geo-politically speaking – it was at least allowed to write its own Constitution and establish an independent political system, though within the framework of the system of alliances being made at that time. This process might have worked at a political level or at the level of international relations and geopolitics, but it did not work as far as the national mentality was concerned.

As the writer Corrado Alvaro noticed regarding the suffering produced by changing sides:

> Italians who believed Radio London, hoped for defeat and did everything they could to bring it about and yet had sons who were away in Africa, in the Balkans and in Russia. There can be nothing more tragic than this: seeing your own children as if they were fighting for another country, welcoming a soldier home on leave and then switching on Radio London and being told to desert and rebel and predict defeat, watching your country's soldiers march by on parade and seeing how they are already defeated; watching cities and residential districts being bombed and justifying the enemy, finding excuses for the misfired shots that had destroyed houses and goods and people's lives, and seeing widows and orphans and the mothers of the fallen as futile sufferings and sacrifices. There is enough material here to paint one of the most tragic pictures of moral madness ever to be suffered by people under a dictatorship.

Alvaro's words highlighted the subjective element of these processes and how deep they dug into people's memories and consciences.

The "mutilated victory" and a divided nation

It is quite clear that this homogeneity between the dynamics generated in the civil conscience of the Italians as a result of the two World Wars is also affected by the objective differences that characterized the two conflicts, referring to their different intensity as "total wars".

The Great War was not experienced by everyone; it was a soldier's war. Whilst it is true that behind the lines civilians suffered enormous social costs, they did not fight and they did not see the war, they only heard it from the survivors and from the limited news sources. The Second World War was everybody's war, not only because the new military technology shattered every distinction between fields of combat and neutral areas, but also because the power of mass communication meant that everyone knew what was happening. Trench warfare, in which millions of men faced one other without seeing their enemy and were relentlessly massacred was already a form of total war. It was also already the "bellum internicinum" that Kant had discussed, since it had already gone beyond the rules of the rights of war of modern tradition, thus becoming a total war. But only soldiers were wiped out. This was the "cannon fodder" generation of 1914: the young men who were bound together by a collective destiny, suffered this terrible trauma and were powerless to change things. Only the soldiers lived through the drama of trench warfare and wrote prolifically about what they had seen, some, such as Celine and Junger, creating great literary works.

There are basically two principal and opposing themes to be found in these writings. On the one hand, the war was a dreadful disillusion, an incomprehensible period of slaughter that destroyed all perception and the meaning of life, and changed the relationship between men and their experiences. On the other hand it was a new Gestalt, something that would, according to Junger contribute to the founding of a new humanity, of regenerating people, leading to the regeneration of nations. This ideal was fostered by the new élites created by the war; these were the assault troops, the shock troops and the soldiers from the special corps who embodied this new kind of man, born from the war's new Gestalt.

Bottai, who would later become one of the great leaders of Fascism, was originally a Futurist and sympathized with this intellectual movement. He wrote that:

> The "shock troops" were not a "speciality" of the army, but rather an ideal category of the Italian people, who after fighting a war had discovered new talents which soon became integrated into their way of life …. Those battalions were in any case a characteristic expression of political will. Was it volunteering then? Yes, but the question needs to be clearly understood. This was a new kind of volunteering, which displayed a political conscience that was unusual in those days .... This was no vague desire to go to war; but if there was a war to be fought, then it had to be fought in a certain way. One might call it a trend in volunteering ….[8]

Immediately after the war these two different schools of thought rapidly assumed the role of two different political options, which in Italy not only took on definite social aspects but also became part of the social and political divisions produced by the rift between neutralism and interventionism. The former gave rise to the revolutionary "defeatism" that developed during the war and found its point of reference in the Russian revolution. "To do as they do in Russia" meant leaving the front, transforming the war into a revolution, and trying to bring about the final showdown between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. "Defeatism" became a condemnation of the war. It put the war on trial, especially after the publication of the committee of inquiry's report on Caporetto, in July 1919, which revealed massacres that could have been avoided, disorganization and mistakes, all of which had created a tragedy within the greater tragedy.

What was the aim of putting the war on trial? To try and heal the rifts that the war had created in the collective identity and thus in some way overcome its collapse by exalting peace as a superior value and an effective means of regeneration. Peace was put forward as the only instrument available for rebuilding the nation's identity. It was undoubtedly a weak myth, because there was a huge group of survivors who were unable to see themselves, *sic et simpliciter*, in this

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[8] Giuseppe Bottai, *Scritti* (Bologna: Cappelli, 1965), 58 (my translation).

trial, since, as Levi Strauss teaches, myths work all very well if they are simple, that is if they allow contradictions to be reconciled and our complex relationship with reality to be alleviated in an easy way. In order for the myth of peace to be effective though, it would have had to go through various stages of development which assumed that the idea of revolution would be abandoned and replaced by a Wilsonian approach, seen as the only way to achieve peace between nations and a feeling of collective safety in a democratic setting. However, apart from a few minority groups, this trend was alien to the political culture of almost all the European political élites, both right and left wing: Versailles only marked the end of the war, not the definition of a post-war peace, as a young Keynes noted in his famous memoirs regarding his time spent there accompanying Lloyd George.

When the war in question is a long one, it is the latter which prevails; the idea of the new Gestalt, and the myth of the war experience, as it was revived and reshuffled by the radical nationalists, at that time had an enormous aggregative power, as it combined a sense of mourning with an exaltation of the warrior, the soldier and of war, thus winning over public opinion to the side of the victorious soldiers and the army. Obviously this takes on even greater intensity in a defeated country; in fact this was rather the case in Germany than in England or France. It is from this point of view that the idea of the "mutilated victory" reveals its meaning and political power, having "invented" a mental context in which the process of uniting public opinion around the myth of the dead soldier and a nation at war, especially within the lower middle and middle classes, worked perfectly. In this way a collective memory was formed for the soldiers, and also for those who had not been at the front, but felt they had been "at war" and shared the same ideals.

The "mutilated victory" was the first great political myth able to hold together what Antonio Gramsci called the "national" class, which was the Italian bourgeoisie. Violence was very much a part of this process, and this factor, according to Mosse's teachings, was a constitutive and integral part of the "brutalizing of politics", caused by the presence of war in society which was then willing to accept as legitimate everything that the whole nineteenth-century civil tradition had removed from the public sphere: the use of force as a means of creating the area for political conflict.

Contested memories of World War II

A simplified definition of the Second World War might be the Great War to the umpteenth degree, especially because, as we have noted previously, it crossed over the nominal barriers that had separated combatants from civilians between 1914 and 1918.

The Second World War was experienced by everyone: soldiers in uniform and civilian populations. The clearest difference was, however, that in some countries it was above all a huge civil war, in which there were not only conflicts between nations but also racial wars, and conflicts between fellow citizens – that is to say civil wars in the real sense of the word – wars between ideas and values. This kind of ideological and multiple conflict has the effect of multiplying memories, which was particularly the case in Italy due to the rifts and changes in its society analysed in the previous pages.

There was a great build-up of soldiers' memories in Italy, uncondensed, and which at first were homogenous, then heterogeneous, since after 1943 soldiers were fighting on different fronts: there were the memories of the defeated, of those who were deported, of those who saw their houses destroyed and their cities bombed by the "Allies" and those who saw their villages burned down when the Blackshirts and the Nazis carried out reprisals. There were also the memories of the partisans, of those who took up arms in the name of "liberty" and, at the same time, there were the memories of the Fascists and the collaborationists; there were the mixed memories of the southern Italians, whose experience of a multiplicity of wars and conflicts was far more complex than that of the central and northern Italians. Finally, there were the memories of the Italy that did not choose, the "grey zone", as Pavone called it in his book on the morality of the Resistance.[9] These were quite diverse memories, which not only remained separate for a long time, but were also characterized by deep antagonisms: these were divided and mutually hostile memories.

This accumulation of memories was left untouched, since democracy and peace, in a nation shattered not only by the war but also by the crumbling of the collective identity provided by twenty years of totalitarian nationalism, were unable to help heal the deep

[9] Claudio Pavone, *Una guerra civile: Saggio storico sulla moralità nella Resistenza* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1995).

wounds left by a war unequalled in its aporia and complexity. The only possible way of dealing with such grievous wounds was to bury them in oblivion, so that they would sink into the past. The great difficulties that Primo Levi had in publishing his first books about his experience in the concentration camps perfectly illustrate the historical meaning of this phenomenon.

In order to be able to "get along together" it was necessary to forget the "tragedies" of the war: to forget seeing the concentration camps and not rebelling against them or realizing what they were, forget having lived in them; it was necessary to forget all the violence in whatever form it had taken, including the civil war that had taken place and shattered even the strongest identities and loyalties. This twisting of history gave rise to the myth of "national reconciliation", present in Togliatti and De Gasperi's Italy, in De Gaulle's France and in Adenauer's Germany. This myth flourished not because of any intrinsic strength but because with the start of the new "cold" war in 1947, not only were Europe's loyalties shifted, preventing it from coming to terms with its Nazi-Fascist past, but also because the "miraculous" economic recovery in course filled the people of Europe, including the Italians, with hope for a totally unexpected level of affluence. The new myths of mass consumption played their part in pushing away the painful memories of a past that had been forgotten too quickly.

Nevertheless, these memories that had been repressed but not overcome are still there. Memories that are not rethought remain concealed, and when they are denied by the "official versions" of the recent past, they work subconsciously, shaping individual and group identities. It is hardly surprising then that at the end of the Cold War those same memories re-emerged just as divided as they had been fifty years earlier, unable to find either a context in which they can be revised or any reasons sufficiently shared by those who experienced or produced them to make living together in mutual recognition possible. The end of the twentieth century was the end of the century of the "total wars", but the problem of how to build a cultural memory has remained compromised, especially in a country like Italy.

URBAN TOPONYMY, CULTURAL MEMORY AND THE WORLD WARS

ROBERTO BALZANI

The history of street names has become fashionable in Italy in recent years. When Daniel Milo's work on *Nom des rues*[1] appeared in 1986 in the *Lieux de mémoire* edited by Pierre Nora, Italian historiography had yet to produce anything significant on the subject. Almost twenty years later, as a result of an enlargement of the traditional sources of political and diplomatic history, the scenario is enhanced by different, interesting contributions, especially at a local level.[2] Interest in urban toponymy has been sustained by the fact that it is pleasant subject, usually interdisciplinary, political and diplomatic in a general sense, yet still fairly light. It is appropriate for brilliant research as well as dissemination. It should be treated with caution, however. I believe toponymy *per se* cannot aspire to complex interpretations. It is useful in comparisons, and above all in supporting a pre-established research project. But if proposed by itself, it risks being too obvious or tautological. It is clear that the political use of street names, in particular in transition phases between one regime and another, or in the wake of dramatic events such as the World Wars, springs from a process of nationalism and serves as an instrument of political mass

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[1] Daniel Milo, "Le nom des rues", in *Les lieux de mémoire: II. La Nation*, ed. Pierre Nora (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), 283-315.

[2] See, for a first approach, Sergio Raffaelli, "I nomi delle vie", in *I luoghi della memoria: Simboli e miti dell'Italia unita*, ed. Mario Isnenghi (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1998), 215-42. Local studies include: Barbara Bracco, "Tendenze educative e istanze politiche della classe dirigente milanese: i luoghi dell'identità nazionale nella toponomastica del capoluogo lombardo dall'Unità alla grande guerra", in *Riforme e istituzioni fra Otto e Novecento*, eds Luigi Cavazzoli and Carlo G. Lacaita (Manduria, Rome and Bari: Piero Lacaita Editore, 2002), 395-426; S. Martinelli, "Dal sacro al profano: Aspetti di trasformazione odonomastica a fine Ottocento", in *I volti della città: Politica, simboli, rituali ad Arezzo in età contemporanea*, ed. Massimo Baioni (Arezzo: Le Balze, 2002), 53-67.

communication. However, it is also true that studying the removal of certain names, the greater frequency of some or the local use of others, does not appear to further real progress in historiography other than providing entertaining anecdotes.

The situation changes when toponymy is used as a penetrating source capable of revealing profound attitudes to culture and identity, which a search based on traditional testimony misses. An example is the extensive literature on Italian municipal history around the turn of the twentieth century. The pioneering studies of Ernesto Ragioni show us that initially it was mostly reconstructed around biased representations provided by the political groups directly involved, through newspapers and leaflets, in which the contents of archives were used as control documents.[3] Research was later fine-tuned, and through documents from municipal offices and prefectures, it has been possible to reveal many details of a world which is much more complex and ambiguous than political factions, bound to simplify and polarize positions, are willing to admit.[4]

Beyond any personal considerations, it is clear that democratic administrations addressed the public in fairly consistent ways with regard to symbolic references (Garibaldi, Mazzini, attitudes towards the Unification of Italy, etc.), and all that pertaining to planned objectives (higher land taxes, broader access to education, and later, extension of municipal services and control). Toponymy, apparently homogeneous in such contexts, can probe to find deeper, less obvious information. Why? Because, if we consider the change in street names in this period, we realize that cultural ramifications were often separated from purely nationalistic dynamics and tended to modify different forms of patriotism through underlying structures of memory or literary/erudite models created prior to unification and left hidden, overwhelmed by the invasiveness and power of the issue of independence.

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[3] An emblematic case is Ernesto Ragionieri, *Un comune socialista: Sesto Fiorentino* (Rome: Rinascita, 1953).

[4] Some of the most successful examples in the region of Emilia-Romagna: Aurelio Alaimo, *L'organizzazione della città: Amministrazione e politica urbana a Bologna dopo l'Unità (1859-1889)* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1990); Carlotta Sorba, *L'eredità delle mura: Un caso di municipalismo democratico (Parma 1889-1914)* (Venice: Marsilio, 1993); Alberto Ferraboschi, *Borghesia e potere civico a Reggio Emilia nella seconda metà dell'Ottocento (1859-1889)* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2003).

When religious street names were changed to non-religious ones, a common practice in Italy after 1870, one community might take into consideration its medieval heritage, another its Roman tradition and yet another the pre-existing name, albeit surviving as a fragment devoid of meaning. We must also keep in mind the distinctly topographical aspects and speed of changes, that is, the intensity of the work carried out by administrative officials. Designating streets or squares after a recently deceased giant of the unified country (as happened, for example, when Victor Emanuel II or Garibaldi died) was one thing. The conscious alteration of the symbolic urban network, instead, was a massive, veritable re-naming project of most of the empty areas that distinguish and connect urban areas. Furthermore, changing the names of a historic centre had a particular meaning attached to it, different from giving new names to zones still under development.

A comparison of the similar cases of the cities of Ravenna, Forlì and Imola between the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries – municipalities often supported by comparable political-administrative majorities between 1900 and 1914 – demonstrates the different cultural memories at work in the three contexts. In Forlì, the iconoclastic fury of the radical-Republicans in power led to the change of 46-47% of the street names in the historic centre in a single four-year period (1887-90). The new names were inspired mostly by democratic martyrs and local medieval tradition, in homage to the dual themes – national and neo-municipal – galvanizing the governing class.[5] Strong, tangible anti-clericalism was also present, although used with a certain degree of refinement. Consider the religious street name "San Martino", painlessly changed to a secular one through the transformation of a nearby street into "Solferino"; or the respect shown for the original name, revisited with a historical twist, such as the convent of St Caterina, renamed the "Caterina Sforza" barracks after the religious congregation was disbanded and the building taken over by the military.

The example of Forli, however, is rather isolated. In quintessentially taciturn Ravenna, the ancient city found in catalogues of modern cities, the variations in street names were much more

[5] Roberto Balzani, *Aurelio Saffi e la crisi della sinistra romantica (1882-1887)* (Rome: dell'Ateneo, 1988), 86-89 and 156-57.

selective and problematic, aimed at altering as little as possible the symbolic framework of references stabilized through the work of Corrado Ricci.[6] In Imola, the homeland of municipal socialism, they decided to change the names of the streets only much later, around 1911; and even then, there are a few surprises when leafing through a book of authentic or imaginary genealogies of popular parties of the era. There was much more of the Risorgimento, much more of the Middle Ages, than the collective culture of socialist Andrea Costa's heirs leads us to think.[7] To understand such apparent contradictions, it is useful to remember that teachers and librarians, both unsung and eminent supporters of local patriotism, were often in charge of re-naming projects. Despite their progressive politics, they generally had a Carduccian background. In cases where political guidance was stronger, they tended to sacrifice their natural propensity for erudition to the pre-eminence of national glory. In other situations, where inspiration for the operation derived from generic anti-clericalism, the threshold of ideological orthodoxy was lowered, and new possibilities provided for references to events or personalities that had been lying in oblivion for centuries.

Let us digress for a moment on Carducci. The "bard" of the "Third Italy" did not favour the changes in the slightest. "This Commission" – he wrote in April 1891, as President of the History of the Fatherland Commission:

> in a note n. 140 of 28 May 1877, submitted to the Municipal Administration [of Bologna] some considerations which it thought reasonable, to ensure that the change of street names in our city does not offend our patriotic tradition, often entrusted to topographical designations. These considerations were only, unfortunately, partially taken into account; so that we now see many precious memories substituted by insignificant names or inspired by praiseworthy yet inopportunely evoked sentiments. Following the same concept of conservation of city memories, some of which are glorious, and all interesting, the Commission of the History of the Fatherland in the

[6] G. Buonsanto, "Evoluzione della toponomastica urbana fra Ottocento e Novecento", in *Ravenna Studi e Ricerche*, 1999, II, 143-54; Corrado Ricci, *Guida di Ravenna* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1923).

[7] Roberto Balzani, "Verso la piazza "patriottica"", in *Imola, il comune, le piazze*, eds Massimo Montanari and Tiziana Lazzari (Imola: La Mandragora, 2003), 356-57.

> session of last 14 December decided to declare to this honourable Delegation, how little justification there would be to remove the name of San Felice from a street which with this title illuminates the history of Bologna as well as important manuscripts and documents.

Carducci did not disapprove of the patriot after whom they wanted to name the historic street of the regional capital. Aurelio Saffi, who had died a year earlier, had actually been a good friend of his; yet, he hoped that "such recognition takes place in another major street in a new part of town".[8] He did not win out. In the end, the administration decided to eliminate Via San Felice.

There are almost no works on the history of how streets were named during the period of the great transformation at the turn of the last century. There is a tendency, certainly the easiest one, to use the frequency of denominations or re-denominations as an indicator of fairly widespread political-cultural choices. It is a legitimate operation, to be sure, but it does not allow for an in-depth study going beyond the superficial level on which an analysis is done in merely quantitative and, I would add, morphological terms. Yet, naming a street after Garibaldi did not signify, in Umbertine Italy, universal obedience to an instilled reflex. In many cases, certainly, the patriotic-celebratory aspect prevailed; but there are others in which Garibaldi's name was still provocative, or at least could be used as such. There are still others, such as the clear example of the small Adriatic town of Cesenatico, in which the General became a sort of lay patron saint simply for having passed through the place during his daring retreat from Rome in the summer of 1849.

The liberal phase, referring in a technical sense to the period marked by an explicit rejection of the central role of the political system in regulating affairs, leaving them up to the arbitrary choices of local communities, was followed by a period of reflection. The state at this time started actively looking after its own cultural heritage, both ancient and recent. It did this through the first laws protecting antiquities and the national artistic heritage between 1902 and 1909. To this must be added, between 1890 and 1911, a series of *ad hoc* royal decrees establishing memorial sites significant for the

[8] Giosuè Carducci, *Edizione nazionale delle opere: Lettere* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1968), XXII, 238-29 (my translation).

most recent political identity of the country: the Cairoli family cemetery in Groppello and the Garibaldi estate in Caprera (1890 and 1907); Giacomo Leopardi's tomb (1897); Giuseppe Verdi's birthplace (1901); the rock of Quarto (1909); the house in which Mazzini died (1910); Cavour's tomb in Santena and various sites figuring in Pisacane's adventure (1911).[9] It will be observed that it is the names of these "heroes" which we find most often in street names. The period in which symbols could be freely relegated to the outskirts of a town, depending on opportunities and local sensibilities, thus came to an end when the existence of national monuments recognized and certified a hierarchy among the myriad figures in the national pantheon. For the time being, however, urban space was not yet directly affected by this normalization, although there were also those in favour of stemming the iconoclasm habitually practised by towns in the name of progress.

Corrado Ricci, for example, about a year before his appointment to Director General of Fine Arts and the Artistic Heritage, wrote in the authoritative *Giornale d'Italia* in September 1905:

> Two of the many signs that a taste for art and respect for history are, in our times, much less deeply rooted and elevated than what a great number of what we will call "cultivated" people believe, is evident in the ease with which modern statues are erected in ancient squares and new names given to old streets. And it seems so much worse, and something that should be fought, because it is often the artists themselves who lend themselves to the first misdeed, just to see their work placed in the highest honour, and the historians to the second, just for the sake of seeing their opinions and choices prevail.

He continues:

> They are very presumptuous to expect "via Toledo" in Naples to be called "via Roma"; that in Bologna the "Mercato di mezzo" should be called "via Rizzoli"; that in the old cities the names of small municipal glories and certain barely remembered dates, should substitute ancient designations, consecrated by history and habit, often famous or notable for some singular event or building or family or craft and

[9] Luigi Parpagliolo, *Codice delle antichità e degli oggetti di arte* (Rome: Loescher, 1913), II, 27-32.

> usually made attractive by the gentility of their attributes …. Certainly no one can reasonably oppose the conferral of modern celebrated names on new streets. But removing the old ones from old streets is an obstacle to historical work and at times changes the special character of certain cities, because, while today we find *Corsi* "Vittorio Emanuele" or "Cavour" or "Roma or "Torino" everywhere, in the past, instead, the fact that every city had places with particular names added to their distinctiveness.[10]

Ricci was only able to make his point of view prevail after the veritable symbolic glut produced by the First World War. At first, the government itself tended to immediately monumentalize the heroism of peasant infantrymen, giving orders that the testimony of combatants end up in local museums dedicated to the Risorgimento. Yet shrewd exponents of political liberalism were well aware that the only concrete source of cultural memory available for an injection of varying dosages of national values was this fertile world of deep urban or regional roots, intentionally revisited by the various governing classes with myth-creating goals. It is no coincidence that, as of August 1915, Paolo Boselli, president of the National Committee for the History of the Risorgimento, distributed a bulletin in which he asked municipalities to set up a large "collection of testimony and historical documents on the current Italian-Austrian war": not only official acts, but also private diaries, visual material, popular songs, and data on civilian assistance.[11] The pieces to be sent to Rome were to be carefully selected to avoid inundating the premises of the Committee with the same useless piles of cartridge clips or ammunition pouches. Many minor or minimal local testimonies were therefore excluded, to wind up, in accordance with the wishes of the main seat, in museums of the Risorgimento which willing, patriotic municipalities starting creating towards the end of the nineteenth century.[12] Museology was applied to the Great War, the first case in

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[10] Corrado Ricci, "Piazze vecchie e monumenti nuovi", *Il Giornale d'Italia*, 28 September 1905 (my translation).

[11] Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione: Comitato Nazionale per la Storia del Risorgimento, *Raccolta di testimonianze e di documenti storici sull'attuale Guerra Italo-Austriaca* (Rome: Stab. Tip. C. Colombo, 1915), printed memorandum, npn.

[12] See, on this subject, Umberto Levra, *Fare gli italiani: Memoria e celebrazione del Risorgimento* (Turin: Comitato di Torino dell'Istituto per la Storia del Risorgimento

the history of Italy, contemporaneously with the events themselves.[13] And it was the townships, the provincial authorities, that became protagonists through the sacralization of the war experience, elevated from the start to the highest expression of national commitment. Thirdly, the decision to use the museums of the Risorgimento as a means for the collection and display of documents, making an ideologically skewed view of the intervention in World War I seem completely natural, also led to an embryonic standardization of the many myths on the origin of the unified state developed locally. The latter often served to give a veneer of rhetorical legitimacy to the aspirations of a vacuous and ambitious group of notables, rather than being a pedagogical project imposed or planned within the heart of the political system.

Matters, however, were not so simple. The war dragged on and the number of deaths surpassed the toll of a few thousand predicted in 1915. Consequently, a purely liberal management of the symbolic resource of the fallen appeared more and more inopportune. The grass roots patriotism produced by a homogeneous élite of the Risorgimento no longer worked, and caused, as we mentioned previously, an incredible rhetorical surfeit of medals, mementoes, epitaphs and designations. There was a spontaneous deluge of rites of grief in the country.[14] The state only began to react late in the game, around 1920-1921. First it organized the national commemoration on 4 November 1921, when the body of the "unknown soldier" was transferred to the

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italiano, 1992); Massimo Baioni, *La "religione della patria": Musei e istituti del culto risorgimentale (1884-1918)* (Quinto di Trevis: Pagus, 1994).

[13] Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione: Comitato Nazionale per la Storia del Risorgimento, *Raccolta di testimonianze*, 1915, npn.

[14] C. Canal, "La retorica della morte: I monumenti ai caduti della Grande guerra", *Rivista di storia contemporanea*, 4 (1982), 659-69; Renato Monteleone, Pino Sarasini, "I monumenti italiani ai caduti della Grande Guerra", in *La Grande Guerra: Esperienza, memoria, immagini*, eds Diego Leoni and Camillo Zadra (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1986), 631-32. See also A. Prost, "Les monuments aux morts: Culte républicain? Culte civique? Culte patriotique?", in *Les lieux de mémoire*, I, *La République*, ed. Pierre Nora (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), 195-225; George L. Mosse, *Le guerre mondiali: Dalla tragedia al mito dei caduti* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1990); Emilio Gentile, *Il culto del littorio: La sacralizzazione della politica nell'Italia fascista* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1994); Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995).

Victor Emanuel Monument in Rome.[15] From that moment on, urban centres become a veritable battlefield, and the debate over collating the remembrances of the dead of the Great War would be one of the Trojan horses used by the nationalist Fascist faction to set themselves up as legitimate heirs to those who fought in the trenches from 1915-18. Institutions soon lost control of the celebratory flood caused by the extraordinary scope of the "heroic" phenomenon. The latter tended to overwhelm even the modest cultural memory of the Risorgimento. There was thus a need for precise regulations to avoid an indiscriminate use of street names for patriotic-political purposes.

Ricci began thinking about it in 1905, as we have seen, but it was only between 1923 and 1927 that he managed to effectively conclude, with the collaboration of Minister Luigi Federzoni, an artistic-philological restoration of traditional street toponymy. The law passed in 1927 prevented changes in the streets of the historic centres and established the principle of "new names for new streets". Those who had died less than ten years previously were excluded (meaning that, in 1927, war heroes would be included in any case), except for members of the royal family and those who had died for the "national cause" (that is, Fascists). The authorization of the prefect or under-prefect was also required, in consultation with the local societies dealing with history and patriotic commemorations.[16]

The restoration was not automatically retroactive, which signified in most cases a conservation of the symbolic imprint of the Umbertine and Giolittian *Italietta*. On the other hand, as the period was marked by a rise in the urban population, there was no dearth of new planned areas where the required criteria could be applied, and the cult of honouring the dead given free rein.

Leaving aside the detailed analyses that have just been recommended, let us try to give an overview of the impact of the Great War on Italian street names. There are various examples, and the designations can be grouped on the basis of three fundamental criteria. Firstly, geographical names among which the most prevalent

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[15] Vito Labita, "Il Milite ignoto: Dalle trincee all'Altare della patria", in *Gli occhi di Alessandro: Potere sovrano e sacralità del corpo da Alessandro Magno a Ceausescu*, eds Sergio Bertelli and Cristiano Grottanelli (Florence: Ponte alle Grazie, 1990), 120-53.

[16] Raffaelli, "I nomi delle vie", 225-29.

are Piave, Isonzo, Monte Grappa, Monte Nero, Trento, Trieste. Secondly, names of local heroes: the appropriation of the symbolic resources provided by the new "martyrs" is, for Fascism, a strategic objective. Some of these heroes are elevated to national status (from Cesare Battisti to Filippo Corridoni, above all for the effects of posthumous legitimacy on the anarchist-union circle close to Mussolini, and Nazario Sauro). In many places whole districts, mostly new, were created to dedicate them to gold medal winners.[17] Thirdly, the war leaders: Diaz, the Duke of Aosta and just a few others.

Of the three groups, the second appears to be the most ephemeral, as its emotional-psychological impact dried up in the span of a generation. The names of gold medal winners quickly lost significance by the time of the Second World War, although they are "untouchables". Diaz quickly became one of the "fathers of the homeland", as a result of the news bulletin about the victory, copied in almost all the barracks of the realm and often memorized by primary school students. But it is the geographical names that have suffered the oddest fate, as they were often inserted in districts dedicated to the most attractive and significant sites of the Bel Paese. Sixty years later, the name "Piave" sounds less and less like a victorious battle and more and more like a normal watercourse of the North.[18] The most representative example of this is the current street names in Rome, where we find Piazza Dalmazia, Piazza Trento, Corso Trieste in sequence, with Via Tagliamento nearby. All would be apparently in tune with the usual patriotic vocabulary, if the cross streets were not called Via Reno, Via Lambro and Via Clitunno. The symbolic grid of streets around Piazza Mazzini in the Vittoria district, however, is still intact: Oslavia, Bainsizza, Timavo and Corridoni.

The Second World War had less impact on street names. The war was lost, and it was a product of Fascist policies to boot. Patriotic fervour tended to focus on remembering the Resistance, while shying away from the war itself. This is demonstrated by the dearth of names of battles or sites. An exception is "Stalingrado" in Bologna, one of

[17] To understand the scope of the remembrance of war heroes in Italy, see *Non onsis moriar: Gli opuscoli di necrologio per i caduti italiani nella Grande Guerra. Bibliografia analitica*, eds Fabrizio Dolci and Oliver Janz (Rome: Ed. di Storia e Letteratura, 2003).

[18] Fortunato Minniti, *Il Piave* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2000).

the few cases of the commemoration of a defeat. There is no Via El Alamein or Capo Matapan in Rome, which we find, however, in Milan, although relegated towards the Comasina district. There is also a street there named after Bir Hacheim, while Via Cefalonia shows up as a cross street of Via Sapri, enabling martyrs of the Risorgimento and military martyrs of the Resistence to shake hands. There are references to the "heroes" of the war of Liberation, in a rather traditional framework, typical of post-World War I martyrology. They are less extensive areas from a topographical point of view and thus also less numerous. As can be expected, names like "Partigiano" and "Resistenza" dominate.

What conclusions can we draw from this brief discussion? First of all, the post-Unification period, followed by the intense albeit brief interlude after 1918, seems to be the most productive one for studying the history of street naming. Post-World War II urbanization and the need to produce a continual flow of names visibly alters the political-patriotic or historical-pedagogical imprint still in vogue in the first decades of the century and somewhat bureaucratizes the issue of designating streets and squares. Streets and stamps share the same fate. Up to the 1950s there was still a cultural policy visible in the precise choices of subjects for both. Subsequently, the instruments of the first attempt at politicization, the poor ones based on patriotic ceremonies and primary school teachers, quickly lost appeal in favour of the new means of mass communication. They were overwhelmed by the radio, cinema, TV and magazines.

The designation "Mt Ortigara" can seem as curious today as that of "Francisco Ferrer" already did decades ago (he was a symbol for secular and liberal pedagogy, assassinated in Spain in far-off 1909, and immediately became a martyr for the radical-socialist governing coalitions of early twentieth-century Europe). His name still survives in the historic centre of Spoleto. In this case, toponymy can be studied like a deposit of symbolic-ideological sediments. It develops by layers, through progressive additions or also removals and substitutions. Even without knowing anything about the local politics of Spoleto, it is not difficult to imagine that at the end of the first decade of the last century, the ancient urban centre was dominated by anti-clerical council majorities.

We must then take into consideration the waves of names on a national level – such as Diaz and Battisti after the Great War – and the numerous local interpolations. The local interpolations are the first to lose their pathos, because they are the ones that have more trouble keeping their place in cultural memory, that is in that period of the past which has been ritualized and stereotyped by authorities or social groups for collective consumption.[19] Since what is remembered socially is only what is often repeated, it is unlikely that gold medal winners or resistance fighters – except for special cases – can hope to avoid the black hole that devours space in the hard disk of cultural memory to make room for new data. They survive on city maps, because changing street names is a difficult, seldom undertaken bureaucratic procedure. It does not signify, however, that the names have any place in citizens' conceptual maps.[20]

The big names remain, brought to the fore by nationalistic waves, but with the passage of time they have also lost a great deal of their political-symbolic relevance. Most of them are now banal, having been turned into logos or the brand names of patriotism. Their use in schools allows them to survive at that level with a minimum of dignity. Iconoclastic symbols no longer provoke anyone: neither the many Guglielmo Oberdans scattered among the streets of Italy, nor Stalingrado in Bologna, nor Francisco Ferrer in Spoleto. And, above all, the Great War ends up as a surrogate atlas, its names having mutated into more aseptic and non-evaluative toponyms. This, at least, appears to be the current state of affairs. Not that the situation elsewhere is much different. If one opens a map of the Paris *métro,* and reads the names of the stations it is immediately clear how few references there are to the First and Second World Wars (less than ten), when compared to those connected to the dazzling Empires, both first and second, or the epoch of the *Ville Lumière* – a sign, perhaps, of a rejection of memories so painful that they required a public silence. There are no streets named after "Ypres" or "Chemin des dames" in the French capital; "Verdun" is modestly used and even "Marne" does not fare much better. This does not mean that there is

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[19] Aleida Assmann, *Ricordare: Forme e mutamenti della memoria culturale* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002).

[20] Eviatar Zerubavel, *Mappe del tempo: Memoria collettiva e costruzione sociale del passato* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2005).

no room for remembrance. It lies elsewhere, in museums or war cemeteries. It is a choice that runs counter to the easy pedagogy of street names, which obviously opens up another series of problems.

CONTAMINATED MEMORY IN GÜNTER GRASS' *MY CENTURY*: LITERARY AND JOURNALISTIC ACCOUNTS OF WAR

CESARE GIACOBAZZI

We all know that nobody could be, although they would like to be, completely honest when telling the events of their own past. Individual stories, as opposed to collective history, do not need to be always or wholly true. Heroes, saints, navigators, hunters, libertines, philanthropists, eremites, and all those who can finally claim past glorious actions that are hardly documented, generally receive great sympathy from those who listen to their tales. Autobiographies, and biographies as well, are not, on the whole, expected to be proven by documents. Instead, we want them to be interesting and peculiar, worthy to be narrated for many reasons which do not necessarily depend on the simple fact of being events that really took place. In fact, readers' expectations rely more on pleasure than on truth, or, at best, more on suggestions than on information. Would anybody pay much attention to the true and well-documented report of a common, trivially repetitive, life?

On the contrary, our attitude towards the collective past is, or pretends to be, soberly more strict and more demanding. For this reason, those who narrate, for example, some war events, no matter if they are writers or journalists, must certainly tell the truth and must not lie. We would find it odd, or indeed annoying or even ideologically and ethically blameworthy, if a writer or a war reporter made us believe that the atomic bomb ended the First World War, or that Stalingrad was the field of a great, tragic victory of the *Wehrmacht*'s sixth army. A historical novel, like a war report, must provide us with a true account, we think, and must be worthy of our careful attention, of our well-documented historical knowledge.

Günter Grass's novel *My Century*[1] makes us understand that things are not exactly like that, that our attitude towards historical narration in general, and in particular towards the narration of war events, is not so strict and rigorous. Indeed rigour and strictness are masks that we use to conceal the complexity and the ambiguity which characterize our reader's faces: masks that endorse the image of ourselves we would like to have, but which do not necessarily correspond to our real selves. Actually, as Grass suggests, we are very indulgent and not at all so critical of the illusions of historical representation, whether it is delivered in the form of documentaries, fiction or journalistic reports. As a matter of fact, while we focus our attention on some details we consider to be absolutely relevant, at the same time we forget many others equally important. We are very sensitive to some sensational lies and we find pleasure in unveiling them. And yet, it is precisely when we claim to be firm supporters of the historical truth, that we nevertheless passively accept other lies, errors and fantasies which are sensational as well. The reading of *My Century* could therefore teach us that the truth we are interested in is always very incomplete and that our ideal of historical truth, of "sticking to facts", as well as of honesty, is somehow incomplete: it focuses on certain aspects, which are not always the most relevant, and it disregards others which could be, instead, the most relevant in raising questions concerning not only our past, but mainly our present.

A quite recent example of our partiality can be found in the media scandal that occurred in the first Gulf War[2] in 1991. The great emotion and also the general raising of consciousness in front of the images of a dying seagull, completely covered in oil, has quickly been replaced by a general ethic impact of a different nature: how dare the operator re-create reality on a cinematographic set? What contempt for all professional deontology induced to present as real what is in fact only a mere representation of reality?

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[1] All references from Günter Grass, *My Century*, trans. Michael Henry Heim, (London: Faber and Faber, 1999).

[2] In Grass' book, the story for 1991 is dedicated to the First Gulf War. Already from the very first lines it is possible to understand that the theme of media-induced representation of war is the leading one: "You do not see any dead people. All you see are wobbly gun sights and hits. Bull's-eyes supposedly. It's like a game …" (*My Century*, 246).

I am not interested here in digging out the reasons pervading this moral position – they certainly exist and could be brought against those who support different ethical priorities. For the moment, we can also put aside all speculations of a more philosophical nature, reminding us that any reality can be grasped only through its representation. Instead, what is interesting to ask here is, when we display an ethical sensibility towards the norm of authenticity, to what precisely are we ethically indifferent? In this perspective, it is legitimate to ask why the same ethical rigour was not displayed towards military censorship hiding from public attention what it alone considered to be inappropriate. Do you not think that to select some events and to exclude some others produces a representation of reality that is as fictional? Therefore, which among the various fictional representations helps us to better understand what happened in the First Gulf War? It is curious that there was a moral rebellion against an emblematic image that could have raised questions of what was actually taking place, whereas we spent hours simply watching a screen showing images broadcast by an unmoving CNN camera aimed at night-time Baghdad. Perhaps, we could venture to wonder if such an interest in a greenish screen crossed from time to time by stripes of light was due rather to the fact that it recalled a videogame than to a real desire to watch and understand the reality of war.

The chapters of *My Century* referring to the First World War (this work gives an account of a hundred tales, one for every year of the last century, each narrated in turn by a different narrator) have two main characters, the writers Ernst Jünger and Erich Maria Remarque. They meet in Zurich in the middle of the 1960s following an invitation of an important Swiss weapon manufacturer, and, together with a young lady who stimulates and records their war memories, they visit the better-known places in Zurich. In these highly refined restaurants, while eating delicious food and drinking excellent wine, they tell of the tragic and bloody war episodes they have witnessed. This striking contrast – the opposition between the reality represented and the reality in which the representation is set – seems to be a hint to readers, suggesting that they have to take into consideration not only the object but also the subject and the context of the representation. In other words, they must be aware of the fact that a narration always implies a narrator, and that the tale takes place in an established

context. As a matter of fact, the novels by Jünger and Remarque – *The Storm of Steel* and *All Quiet on the Western Front* – seem to be completely homogenous to their authors: one could even say that they pick up the contingent and peculiar aspects of their authors' temper and language. In vaguely philosophical terms, it could be argued that the object and the subject of the literary work are blended, the one belonging inseparably to the other. Whereas Jünger's memories are steeped in the same war rhetoric that can be found in his novels, praising the comradely spirit of soldiers, their willingness to accomplish the extreme sacrifice, and representing war as a wonderful work of art, Remarque's memories stress his pacifist spirit and his attention to the tragic individual fate of those who died in the conflict. If the literary work and its author are so closely intertwined, then this means that the former is strictly shaped according to the epochal and cognitive position of the latter: each author selects its characters in his own way, so much so that the same object – that is, the war event – is made to appear the same only to a certain extent. Actually, in Jünger's works, the perspective from above – a perspective blind to the individual fate that aims at perceiving the major universal themes such as heroism, martyrdom, the inexorability and the fascination of the supreme laws of human nature – turns the First World War into a representation which only slightly resembles Remarque's. Remarque's perspective is, in fact, from below: it catches everyday and trivial actions of soldiers, their continuous and often useless efforts not only to survive, but simply to preserve at least a semblance of humanity in circumstances that seem to enhance only the cruellest aspects of human beings.

In this sense, it could be said, after Nietzsche, that the two writers are imprisoned in their own language: the representation of their memories is confined within the communicative and expressive possibilities offered by the linguistic structures of their novels. This language outlines the horizon of their memory; it establishes the limits of their representative and mnemonic possibilities. For example, in spite of his old age, Jünger reveals an exceptional ability to remember the technological aspects of war materials. He is still able to repeat with great easiness a huge quantity of technical terms, including the most unusual ones, when describing hand grenades, bayonets, armoured vehicles, military equipment and so on. However, it is

precisely when he displays his wide mnemonic performance that he also unveils his forgetfulness, thereby revealing where his mind fails: he does not remember the dreadful daily pain of soldiers, their tragic and pervading experience of death and destruction. The triumph of his mental faculties appears to be tacitly but indissolubly accompanied by their greatest failure: he remembers all about the war materials but nothing about the soldiers who fought, all about the technological achievements but nothing about the physical and moral brutishness induced by their use.

The representation of war in Jünger, as reproduced in Grass' work, shows the limits of memory and the partiality of its narration; at the same time, it allows the reader to perceive the presence of a concealed subtext beside the explicit one, therefore leading first of all to an aesthetic consideration. The clearness and transparency of the narrative representation (it is not by chance that both writers mutually praise the clarity and the plasticity of their novels[3]) is obtained to the detriment of a simplification and schematization that underlines the autonomy, the ontological difference, of the tale as compared to the true war. All the aspects of the disorder, chaos and irrationality of the war experience are brought under the order of a plastic representation that is coherent and meaningful. The alienation of reason and the incommensurable mortal and destructive power of war are translated into tales that convey a familiar, known and encouraging image of the war itself, as it is indissolubly connected to their life and their language, to their way of talking and communicating. In this manner, war is brought back, crystallized in their memory through continuously repeated linguistic images, which are so static that they never change in relation to time, contingency and experience. To this extent, another war taking place in the actuality of the narrative setting – the Vietnam War – is narrated by Jünger and Remarque exactly in the same way as the First World War, using the same narrative and communicative structures.

The above consideration can offer the reader a key to the reading and understanding of the narration of war: the major aspects to which one has to pay attention are those that are forgotten by the two "witnesses of an era" (as the two old writers are described by their

[3] *Ibid.*, 43-45.

young interviewer[4]). It is precisely what is left behind while remembering – this is the lesson we have to learn – that wants and waits to be remembered.

The consciousness of the failure of memory even when – as for Jünger and Remarque – it seems to triumph, can encourage a more careful reading of the ideological implications of war narrative. In particular, it leads to acknowledging how to credit historians with the quality of documentary objectivity and ideological neutrality is in fact the result of a certain loosening of the critical faculties of the readers. The accurate description of materials and events, or the use of technical-scientific terms, does not necessarily mean the narrator does not also convey his point of view nor that he does not have a particular view, implying an ideological bias. It is precisely what a narrator omits, what he does not see, that bears witness to precise choices of great political and moral relevance. Thus it is not difficult to find in Jünger's apparent objectivity the implicit acceptance of militarism and of the ideological horizon that it implies. The fact that he does not see, or that he forgets, the meaning of daily war service for a soldier is, in fact, the result of a precise and chosen interpretation which produces a given representation of reality, possessing unmistakable ethical and ideological effects. This consideration can also provide the reader with an indication of how to read and ideologically understand war narration: what is worthy to be thought is precisely the thought which is not expressed in the written text, that is the thought that still asks and waits to be thought.

In *My Century*, narrative attitudes and memory activities similar to those of Jünger and Remarque are also displayed by the main characters of the tales dedicated to the Second World War. Even though in this case they are war reporters, journalists, their tales are not free from the contamination of fictional elements, nor are they less detached from experience than the tales narrated by the two writers. However, censorship is not the only aspect setting limits to their freedom to narrate: they too are imprisoned in their own language, in the narrations that have crystallized their memories. In particular their memory seems to be trapped within the narrow space of narrative and ideological frames that delimited the war reports as they were

[4] *Ibid*., 33.

conceived in the journals supporting Nazism for which they wrote, *Adler* and *Signal*.

Nazism and its dreadful ideology survive, even though not explicitly – although this sometimes happens (as in case of a famous journalist who also achieved a successful career during the West German Republic) – as linguistic structures, as a viewpoint for the narration, as a point of departure of all remembrance – that is as a possibility for both memory and oblivion. Both the recollection and the narration of the war events are, in fact, shaped according to the heroic narrations of Nazi journals, which also shape their communicative functions. In other words, war reporters know and remember only what they wrote and not what they had in fact lived, seen and heard, nor what had been experienced by other people. Their memory keeps and reproduces only the images they themselves have created for Nazi propaganda and now they are the unconscious victims of their own deception.

There is very important evidence revealing such limits in their narrative horizon and the related limits of their memory: war reporters are able to use only linguistic structures representing great military triumphs, imposing scenarios of victories and conquests. On the contrary, when they are asked to narrate a retreat, bombed and destroyed cities, dead people and devastations they cannot but take refuge in long and abstruse monologues in which everybody is alone with his own language and his own unconsciousness.

The glaring bias of war reporters unveils how their remembrance is contaminated and unmasks their being unaware of the blindness and of the silence pervading it. They do not acknowledge, nor do they want to acknowledge, the linguistic prison in which they are confined; a prison that prevents them from freeing their own words in order to narrate the military and ideological defeat of Nazism, to render the horrors of war. The silence and the emptiness of their memories are fed and filled by narrative structures that clearly display both what they are leaving out and the deceptive foundation that supports them. In fact, they can elaborate important war strategies which, according to them, would have brought Germany to victory, or which would have changed the progress of war. It is not by chance that the narrator – a reporter who, unlike the others, has always focused his attention

on the tragic reality of soldiers – mockingly defines his former colleagues as "fireside strategists".[5]

The unprecedented lack of consciousness in these war reporters, their manifest silence, become linguistic attitudes and forms of memory which claim to imagine how history could have been; these reporters even act as if they might be able to rewrite history itself. As a matter of fact, they narrate history through if-clauses: if Hitler had not given some victories to the British; if the Russian campaign had begun a few months earlier, and so on. The use of this grammatical structure underlines that their memory is confined to a mere, autonomous linguistic existence. It does not keep and does not reproduce what has in fact happened: instead it envisages what could have happened if the historical events had taken the course outlined by Nazi propaganda, the same propaganda they had helped create. As a consequence, both the language and the recollection clearly shape a reality that exists only if based on their tragic ideological illusion, which is only made of words, and which is completely detached from real experience.

In this way, the idea that oblivion points out exactly what should be remembered is made evident in one of the most tragically suggestive chapters of *My Century* – that covering 1943, which recalls the bloody repression of the rebellion of the Warsaw ghetto. Its uncanny effect does not come from, at least not only comes from, the event represented, but it derives from the fact that such an event is narrated from a tragically unconscious perspective: the recollection is carried out by a photographer who has been entrusted by the party leader Stropp to take photographs of the event which, in the Nazi's view, was meant to bear witness to a heroic action of the SS. In fact, despite Stropp and the photographer's intention, those pictures cannot but document the brutish and bloody aggression brought against badly armed men, women, old people and children. However, the most terrible aspect of this chapter comes from the unawareness of the photographer who complains that he had never received any royalties for his photographs, printed in millions of copies and circulated all over the world. Unlike more recent and certainly well-deserving movies – such as, for example Roman Polansky's *The Pianist,* in

[5] *Ibid*., 103.

which all the horror is fully captured in the immanence of the representative forms – Grass' work is characterized by the unspeakable silence which accompanies both the memory and the representation of those tragic events. Then it is possible to say that the unwritten texts, the concealed tales which so clearly underpin the more explicit narration – the never written historiographic chronicle and those aspects of the events which have never been grasped or which have been forgotten – constitute the most important, the most significant part of Grass' work, the one deserving the greatest attention.

As a matter of fact, in *My Century* it is frequently possible to find textual signals that teach the reader to approach the narrative along these lines. Small events, apparently unrelated to the narrative theme, or in any case marginal events, can instead take on an allegorical value that forces the reader to look for the implicit text, for a meaning which is simultaneously hidden and shown by the plasticity of the narrated events. The image ending the chapter *1943*, central to those dedicated to the Second World War which are narrated by war reporters now gathered on the island of Sylt, in northern Germany, acquires a clear symbolic function that must be rendered into a narrative form, into thought, into an ideological structure.

One of the reporters – the one who, unlike all the others, used to write from the point of view of the "poor men on the battle front" and whose chronicles had never been published in *Adler* – is walking on the sea shore in winter time, struggling against the wind and collecting shells for his children.[6] This character, whose walking is contrasted with a force that makes his stroll more difficult – an image that, like the image of the shell, also recurs in Grass' graphic works – can allegorically recall the struggle against the persistence of memories imprisoned in linguistic structures which are independent of the experience and which, therefore, must be also made "to walk". Therefore the allegorical form expresses the need to make the historical narration dynamic and open notwithstanding all the pressures that bring it back to being static, closed and unchangeable boundaries. The shell also can be interpreted as a symbol of the worn remains of the past whose life and voice, now lost, must be constantly

[6] *Ibid.*, 110.

re-established by the act of reading or remembering: an act that cannot rely upon the presence of what once was, but only upon its trace – an absence that recalls it implicitly and indefinably.

If the vagueness pervading the historical narration in *My Century*, together with the uncertainty of the reality it describes and of the knowledge it conveys, weakens its propositional content, at the same time this reinforces its communicative function: it strengthens the demand on the reader to constantly re-create both the memory and the tale, to acknowledge the dynamism of its being. If it is true that, when narrating, it is not possible to set oneself free from schematizations, from the prison of language or from the biases of the narration, it is nevertheless possible each time to acknowledge these limits. In other words, if memory cannot bring the presence of the past back to us, since it is contaminated by the same linguistic and ideological structures that activate it, it is at least possible to unveil its limits so that they can be perceived, approached and investigated. Thus, the critical discovery of the contaminations of memory – like that made possible by the reading of *My Century* – does not require a cognitive position freer than others, or less entangled by the language used to express it. On the contrary, it requires the acknowledgment of this limit and finds in the historical narration the place in which this limit expresses itself most clearly. In fact, even when the narrator expresses an ethical and cognitive position closer to the reader's – as for example in the case of Remarque – the immobility of representative structures that are always repeated no matter which reality is being represented, is nevertheless stressed: as was previously mentioned, both in the case of the First World War and of the Vietnam War, Remarque chooses and underlines always the same aspects of the reality of war.

The history the writer represents, understands and explains can be only that confined within the limits of his own memory and of his own representation. Therefore, any narration – even one which seems to be more reliable than others – can be perceived through what implicitly accompanies it, through the untold intention waiting to be unveiled by the reader, through the hidden text lying beyond the written one. In this way it is not difficult to see in the repeated representation of the cruellest and most gruesome aspects of the trench war, in the choice of the most brutish and bloody events, an aesthetic expression of pain

aimed to shock the reader and to make him feel an emotion. It is not by chance that in some passages of the chapters on the First World War in Grass' book – the chapters in which Remarque and Jünger are the main characters – there are allusions to the editorial success of Remarque's novels. In contrast, Jünger's laughter opposed to Remarque's seriousness, can be understood to reveal to the reader how the former is aware of the jolly and quiet aspect of narration, of its autonomy – an aspect that seems to invite the reader not to take such a representation too seriously, and to unveil its disengaged and illusory aspects.

However, it is necessary to point out that the critical discovery of implicit statements that can contradict explicit attitudes, as well as the consciousness of the complexity and of the communicative importance of the implicit aspects, does not necessarily imply the negation of the represented reality. To find textual dimensions that are not immediately perceived cannot mean we should be blind to the evidence of facts. In this sense, the discovery of partiality in Remarque's war representation, as well as an important ethical aspect such as the aesthetic transposition of suffering and death, do not question the truth of the inhuman aspects of wars, and do not cancel the truthfulness of the representation. The acknowledgment of the complexity of a fictional text and the discovery of hidden texts should not necessarily lead to ideological disengagement and ethical indifference. If this happens, then this is not the fault of the fictional text, but of the reader. The attitude of the reader, to be truly critical, should acquire a pervasive and irreversible quality that never rests, not even when the reader finds a representation he agrees with and with which he can easily identify. After all, to question where other people stand is a relatively easy task. It is more difficult, but certainly more useful, to continually question what is assumed to be already established, and, therefore, also to constantly question ourselves.

My Century employs almost a hundred narrators, all of them narrating history in their own way; and yet, the book does not depict the limitedness and the subjective partiality of the historical representation in order to outline an ideal narration that cannot be proved to be partial, subjective and contingent. Even what seems to be a positive model should be unveiled in its inadequacy and in its ambiguity – as it is in the case of Remarque's novel, and also in the

case of the “miserable chronicles” never published in *Adler*, written by the war reporter acting as the storyteller in the chapters about the Second World War. As a matter of fact, there is no possibility of establishing linguistic and narrative structures that are able to render an uncontaminated memory: only a reader who carefully acknowledges and changes into new narrations his own and other people’s hidden texts, that is a reader who wants to catch the blindness and the forgetfulness which unavoidably accompany those narrations, has the opportunity to free historical narration from the prison of language, and to give it back to the dynamism and vitality of being. Thus, Grass’ work does not simply provide a representation of the historical past that corrects, replaces or enriches those already existing, but also shows the epistemological roots from which it germinates and suggests a strategy for us to become critical readers

My Century constitutes an invitation to take into consideration a fact that seems to escape most readers of historical works: the fact that the reader is not confronting history but a narration of history. And if there is a narration, there is also a narrator who contaminates the historical representation, setting it within the frame determined by his or her own subjective, epochal and ideological position.

THE EXPERIENCE OF WAR AND THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN US NARRATIVES OF WORLD WAR I AND WORLD WAR II

ELENA LAMBERTI

> So it goes.
> Those were vile people in both [Sodom and Gomorrah], as is well known. The world was better off without them.
> And Lot's wife, of course, was told not to look back where all those people and their homes had been. But she *did* look back, and I love her for that, because it was so human.
> So she was turned to a pillar of salt. So it goes.
> People aren't supposed to look back. I'm certainly not going to do it anymore.
> I've finished my war book now. The next one I write is going to be fun.
> This one is a failure, and had to be, since it was written by a pillar of salt.[1]

Looking back is "so human". Yet, people "are not supposed to look back". In a few lines, the similitude built by Kurt Vonnegut identifies the complexity of remembering and writing about the experience of war, of destruction: remembering is a human action, memory deeply belongs to man, but remembering can also be a painful, complex, difficult act, that overwhelms the actor, and turns him/her to a pillar of salt. Yet man keeps remembering, bearing witness to the experience of war; critical studies have reminded us that it is, at the same time a necessity, an obsession, and a responsibility.[2] And so it was, too, for Vonnegut, American writer of German origins, who wanted to bear witness to, to narrate the bombing of Dresden during World War II. For more than twenty years, though, he was unable to do so:

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[1] Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five or The Children's Crusades: A Duty Dance with Death* (1969) (London: Vintage, 2000), 1.
[2] See, among others, Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1999).

> When I got home from the Second World War twenty-three years ago, I thought it would be easy for me to write about the destruction of Dresden, since all I would have to do would be to report what I had seen. And I thought, too, that it would be a masterpiece or at least make me a lot of money, since the subject was so big.
>
> But not many words about Dresden came from my mind then – not enough of them to make a book, anyway.[3]

So, obsessed by the necessity of writing his book on Dresden, Vonnegut tells us, in his stunning Introduction, that he has searched for someone who could help him to remember, another war veteran (the topic of the alienated war vet, who can only really communicate with other veterans and not with the rest of the world, is a *leitmotiv* present in US narrative since the end of World War I). And he confesses that he has behaved just like Lot's wife: he has turned back and looked at the places where all those people used to be, with all of their houses. His gaze is both physical and mental: the mediated gaze of memories, of memory itself, so to speak, and a direct gaze, consequence of a new journey taking him back, after years, to Dresden.

But it is still not sufficient, it is not enough to turn back, he must also find a way of translating memory into writing. How does one communicate the experience of war in narrative form? What words must one use to define, in a story, the pain, the horror, the absurdity of the experience? At the beginning Vonnegut does not know, he cannot find the words: the best sketch of his memories is symbolic, coloured lines on the back side of a roll of wall-paper, a different colour for every situation, for every event, for every emotion – just coloured traces on a piece of wallpaper. Traces, nonetheless, that overlap other, wholly visible, traces left on the character by the direct experience of war, left also, at the same time, by the obsession complementary to his impulse to turn round: Vonnegut's body changes constantly, thin during the war, plump after VE day, it thins again the moment he decides to finish writing his famous book on Dresden. Amnesia and memory are in turn revealed and recalled by the hero's own body – a crucial element onto which his own identity and individuality as a person capable of deeply human acts in a story that has very little humanity. And, in a wider sense, Vonnegut's body becomes

[3] Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, 2.

emblematically the body of the USA, living the war, the post-war years, changing, transforming itself, forgetting, remembering, waging new wars. The single individual's identity becomes, in this way, the reflection of the wider national identity, at the same time private body and public body, and the evidence transcends the memories of the specific episode and becomes a moment for reflection – through the staging of memories – on war in a wider sense, on present events and on the reasons they have been brought about.

I have focused on this important novel by Kurt Vonnegut because I think that a reflection on *Slaughterhouse-Five* can help define a few functional guidelines for a comparative reading of American narrative during and about World War I and World War II, some more closely linked to America itself, others having a wider scope, centred on the new way of writing about war proposed by western literature since the end of the First World War. In the celebrative war novel genre, the experience of war is, as a matter of fact, told to confirm the mythical quality of war experience.[4] It is a type of writing that has a precise connective function. It does not simply try to recall war, but it also and above all must confirm the inevitability of war, reassure the reader of the worthiness of the experience, giving it meaning and a moral, national, cultural justification. The rhetoric of war writing keeps everything inside a social and moral framework that gives tragedy a certain sense, because it is contained on a track that transcends it. If this rhetoric is lacking, the whole construction falls and, inevitably, not only is the identity of the war witness in jeopardy, but also the collective identity of the social group that this same rhetoric bound together. The anti-rhetorical novels of the first post-war period reveal this very crisis, and, in this way, force on the reader to reflect on the fact that, after this very war, the world, and those who inhabit it, are going to be different.

American authors, similarly to European ones, will feel the need to bear witness to war and will admit the difficulties in finding a voice to give to it, because this new war annuls all preceding categories of identification, makes language lose its meaning. They will produce a formal reconsideration that will be in debt to the new avant-gardes, and to the new forms of communication. This last is a very important

[4] On this theme, see George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memories of the World Wars* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990).

element, particularly if put in relation to the fact that many American authors who eventually wrote novels on war came to Europe as war correspondents. New Journalism, radio transmission, photography and, later, cinema start being the tools that characterize the new way in which war is described and have an impact on the new narrative forms. A great deal has already been said about Hemingway's reportage narrative technique, on Dos Passos' mediatic collages, but also on the impact that cinema has had on war narrative.

In the first place, compared to what is specific to the memory of the war experience in an American context, it is interesting to recall the chronology of the most famous war novels, all of which do not celebrate the war experience and were written by authors who actually took part in the war, or at least were direct witnesses to it. From this point of view one can observe that, as regards World War I, the pace of memory is reasonably in synchrony with that of other European writers, but American authors are amongst the first to offer a direct testimony of war: *One Man Initiation* and *Three Soldiers* by John Dos Passos were published in 1920 and 1922 respectively, E.E. Cummings' *The Enormous Room* in 1922 and amongst Ernest Hemingway's earliest short stories collected in *In Our Time* between 1923 and 1924, many are already linked to his recent war experience. The pace of memory is quicker than for European authors (there are exceptions, of course, Barbusse and Dorgelet, for example, come to mind).

In dealing with novels on World War I, and about a search for national identity, I would like to distinguish further between Americans and Europeans, not only relatively to the pace of memory, but also to the use and modes of remembering and writing about war, in this very short period of time: in particular, it is important to underline that taking part in the war played a major function in the creation of the new American society's identity. For this interpretation, the concept of "American identity" is here proposed as a generalization, meaning simply the action of the American nation against the background of an international context, which in turn is itself changing. Consequently, it is proposed simply in relation to the role and function of the American model in that time span. Bringing fiction into such a context, one has to consider that there are the novels that describe the war directly (such as *Three Soldiers, The*

Enormous Rooms, A Farewell to Arms), and those that in the very same period use the war simply as a backdrop, functional to the description of the new American social context (for instance, *Manhattan Transfer* by John Dos Passos, 1925, or *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, 1925).

To reflect on the theme of the war experience and the search for an American identity and, consequentially, to reflect on the new balance of power emerging in those years between Europe and the US, it is perhaps those very novels that keep the war in the background, not the fore, that are more helpful. These novels use the memory of war experience in a very interesting way, reading it as a sort of line to define the new American reality: America changes during World War I, and also "because of it". The war in the trenches is not recalled, but the war is discernible through indirect descriptions, headlines quoted by the characters, testimonials offered in dialogues between them, flash backs. As the war follows its course, these new Americans live their daily lives: from that moment onwards, the war experience that touches Americans, too, but is never fought on American territory, will be the backdrop of their daily lives. In this sense, the most representative novel is Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer*: the three sections of which follow the rhythm of the events that will bring about a war climate, the war, and the post-war years. Therefore, in these novels, the war experience transcends the single characters comprehension of the event, and the memory of the conflict becomes the way to demonstrate that even on such an experience one can build a new American identity. (The US would emerge from World War I as creditor nation and would sign, with Germany, separate agreements, as it would with each of its allies.)

As regards the pace of remembrance, World War II American narrative seems to be equally interesting. It is possible to identify at least two strong waves in the conversion of memories of the war into narrative, which can be juxtaposed to two different historical moments undergone by the American wider context, with interesting results. The first wave, that could be defined as the heroic or epic phase, is the one that comprehends the works usually defined "novels of command" (such as Norman Mailer, *The Naked and the Dead*, 1949; James Gould Cozzens, *Guard of Honor*, 1948; James Jones, *From Here to Eternity*, 1951), characterized by a traditional rendering of the

war experience, and a forceful vision of the American war machine, not necessarily a favourable one, but certainly in concurrence with the new identity of the US as superpower (ethics or critical reflections on war do not affect the description of a powerful machine, capable of dominating – the various writers offer different viewpoints on the reason for this).

The second wave is the one that, after the heroic or epic phase of 1945-1951, retrieves the experimental character and offers interpretative keys that are closer to those already used for the novels following World War I (such as, for instance, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, 1961; Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, 1969; Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, 1973, although the last must be read rather differently, since its author, unlike all the other authors here discussed, had no direct experience of the war). In these writers' works, formal search probably performs a double function: a political one, to denounce and protest the powers that be, and a more ethical one, linked to the responsibility of remembering and writing down the experience of war. As the American nation is involved in new wars that are decidedly awkward and harshly contested both domestically and abroad, in the western block itself (the lately finished Korean War, Vietnam, the various skirmishes related to the Cold War), experimenting formally helps to deconstruct, to dismantle by means of a new, juxtaposing, paradoxical way of writing the experience of war seen simply as a strategy for solving international problems.

Yet this paradoxical narrative, the formal game, black humour are all narrative strategies that help to avoid the feeling of the inexpressibility of horror. In those years, the question of the "tellability" of horror is at the centre of reflections on the new forms of literature then emerging, such as that dealing with the Holocaust, just as it is at the centre of the debate on an overwhelming and renewed media show offering the horrors of the latest wars in real time on TV and movie reportages and photos. The modesty connected with the inexpressibility of horror clashes with the responsibility of bearing witness, and with the ethical necessity of telling, of remembering; while the experimental form offers a useful and original instrument to avoid the obstacle in the framework of a realistic narration now under scrutiny, so as not to renounce the possibility of remembering, denouncing and underscoring the madness and the pain

(a typical example of this is *Slaughterhouse-Five*, that combines writing about and remembering the war experience with science fiction).

However, I feel that reflecting on American narrative in the aftermath of the First and Second World Wars cannot be dissociated from a wider reflection on the American nation and its collective image of the war myth as a founding myth of the United States. I am aware that this might seem a decisively hard and radical statement, if not a biased one; nevertheless, it is undeniable that the great myth of the origin of the American nation, the Frontier myth is double faced, or at the very least, ambiguous, connected to an idea of conquest that in time has become the epitome of a certain American model (the constant search for new frontiers in various fields). Therefore, the frontier myth can be seen not only as a simple taste for adventure (as enacted and exalted in many heroic epics, both in literature and in the cinema), but also as the conquest of new territories to the disadvantage of the people already there, and all this in the name of an ideal of freedom, civilization, democracy. ("So it goes", as Vonnegut would say.)

The twentieth century brought about a new reading, an actual deconstruction of this founding myth in the very heart of America herself. In particular, in the second half of the twentieth century the voices of Native Americans have grown strong enough to bring a different testimony, to remember in a different way what, in the western imagination, has been seen as the great adventure of how the West was won – a myth that has been translated into powerful literary and artistic clichés (in which good and evil are always clearly distinguishable; a hero always comes to the rescue at the very last minute; and there is a decisive duel, man to man, that settles the final account, and so on), which repeat themselves also in a whole set of traditional cinematographic readings (epic or heroic) associated with the two World Wars.[5]

The subject of war remains a leitmotiv that accompanies the building of the American nation (as it does the building, in the Eastern and in the Western hemispheres, of other nations), with new emphasis, a symphonic crescendo, from the second half of the nineteenth century

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[5] On this topic, see the essay by Sara Pesce in this present volume.

onwards (from the Civil War, to the Hispano-American War, to the two World Wars, and so on to the latter twentieth-century conflicts). It is during this lapse of time that the experience of war can be read as a red line that closely and disturbingly knits together the various phases of the economic, social and political development of the United States, regularly recorded (in turns acclaimed or condemned) by narrative. It is the Civil War in particular that strikes the American collective imagination and that marks the beginning of the building of a new American identity.

From this perspective, the new American narrative of and about the war that develops in the early twentieth century owes much to Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1894), centred on the American Civil War. Even though Crane did not take part in the Civil War, nor did he witness it, his novel becomes a milestone of the new American narrative, an example of a formal exploration that has been exalted by European critics such as Ford Madox Ford and Joseph Conrad, for example, but a text that especially fixes in the American collective imagination a new founding myth (another war myth). This text is even more important on other grounds, inasmuch it starts a new way of telling the war experience: Crane's realism, very much in tune with O'Sullivan's photographic rendering of the American Civil War, distances war writing from the celebrative or heroic epic of the previous tradition and begins to suggest a new canon that will have a striking influence on the works of successive American writers, such as Gertrude Stein and Hemingway – writers who, reading this very book, will confer a new status on the Civil War, defining it as the first modern war, an authentic war, already comparable to the two World Wars.

This is the case of Gertrude Stein, who writes during World War II:

> The American civil war was the prototype of all the wars the two big wars that I have completely lived. Also the American civil war ….
>
> Of course there were Indian wars naturally there was no cinema then but if there had been, Indian wars would have been like that, although one could not know people who had been in them and could see them the real Indians on the stage and there was Fenimore Cooper

> they were not real wars, not as real as some English wars in history and certainly not as real as the American civil war. A very real war.[6]

The experience of war is thus central both for the building of the American nation and for its imagery. And often writing about war entails for the authors themselves a choice of position regarding the American nation and its role in the new national and international scenarios. It is particularly in the aftermath of World War II that narration of the experience of warfare became an oblique strategy and that the new novels of war and about war became, more than they had ever been, *Bildungsroman* and question-raising novels.

A representative case in point is Gertrude Stein's *Wars That I Have Seen* (published in 1945), from which I have already quoted a passage, a composition that is difficult to pigeonhole as a narrative genre: being a diary, a biography and an essay, the life and education of the writer follow the rhythm of the chronology of the various wars, actually lived through and witnessed (the Hispano-American War, World War I and World War II) or mediated through other narrative sources (the American Civil War described by Crane, back to Shakespeare's historical dramas). And, together with her autobiographical reflection, the war experience is used by the author as a paradigm to record epochal changes, new lifestyles, new national characteristics and to take sides, albeit indirectly. Stein's reflections regarding the two World Wars, concentrated essentially on World War II, since the book was written during this last conflict, concur with modern reflections common to men of letters and historians: World War I, conceived of or envisaged as a nineteenth-century war, ignites the mechanism that will eventually kill that very century and is, then, a war that starts, brutally and radically, an epochal change which only ends with World War II.

In Stein's memory, the two World Wars are deeply connected and are seen as closing one cycle and opening another: "the nineteenth century dies hard all centuries do that is why the last war to kill it is so long, it is still being killed now in 1942, the nineteenth century just as the eighteenth century took from the revolution to 1840 to kill, so the nineteenth century is taking from 1914 to 1943 to kill."[7] Writing

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[6] Gertrude Stein, *Wars I Have Seen* (New York: Brilliance Books, 1984), 8-9.
[7] *Ibid*., 16.

novels of and about war has then not only a literary meaning, but a political and historical one, too. And this is another aspect interesting in the American context, that is, the historical-political value of writing connected each time to changes in the American nation.

I would like to recall that in the specific cases of World War I and World War II, American narrative of and about war has been interpreted by critics chiefly assessing the two conflicts as separate entities. Reflections attempting in a systematic way to cross-examine the two events are still rare. Stanley Cooperman has proposed an interesting reflection on how, after World War II, in America, critical consideration on literary works from the post-World War I years was clearly conditioned by the contingencies of the current historical period: the feeling of defeat and the existentialist void manifested in many of those works did not go down well with the needs of the new American superpower:

> The existence of a legitimate external cause prompted renewed attacks upon 'negation' and 'defeatism' of the earlier writers; a necessary global conflict made the antiwar bias of the early books seem in retrospect stylistically shrill and morally irresponsible. Recent critics, certainly, have often attacked the 'negation' of World War I fiction from their own historical perspective, judging according to political and military necessities which simply did not exist in the previous conflict.[8]

From a methodological perspective, at this point, it seems important to try to define possible paradigms of comparison, that is try to identify a reading consistent with my working hypothesis. As I have stated, the first criterion was choosing works that were not typical genre works by authors that actually did take part or witness one or the other of the World Wars (Stein is, of course, an important author, although she was not a combatant, because she traverses both wars, linking the memory of the two different experiences in one volume of memoirs and often offers interpretative points and bonding agents). To enable our scrutiny to cross from one war to the other, I think that it is indispensable to make good use of Cooperman's observation, and to avoid mechanically applying interpretative schemes that are suitable

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[8] Stanley Cooperman, *World War 1 and the American Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), 195.

for one period to the other. It is thus essential, for a cross-reading of the novels, to recall the different role played by the United States in the first and in the second conflicts, and relate these narratives to the different ways in which America, in 1917 and in 1941 entered the fray. And this is because it is in between those very years that American reality and its international agenda change, as has recently been pointed out again by Giuseppe Mammarella: "It is after all true that the American involvement in World War I was episodic, while the role played in World War II was part of a great hegemonic design that has continued for all the second part of the last century, aiming at confirming itself in the present one."[9]

Between the first and the second entry of America into the war, international balances changed and, at the same time, the United States gained a different determination and awareness of its role, to the point that the isolationist tensions that postponed its entrance into the first conflict, albeit not wholly deadened, did not stop the US in the aftermath of World War I from acquiring for itself and recognizing a strong responsibility on the international stage. This is a role that will become ever more explicit after World War II, that will be stressed in the novels belonging to the new military epoch (1945-1951), not to mention all the cinematographic productions built round this new American model or myth, and that will be critically confronted by the novelists of the 1960s, although it is already latently perceived in the antiheroic novels following World War I.

Many of the protagonists of World War I novels have surnames that distinctly reveal their European origins. And one must bear in mind that at the time of World War I, the very presence of different European groups on the American territory was one of factors that help to delay the entry of America into the war and made public opinion lean towards a neutral position; although, as many historians have clearly demonstrated, this neutrality did not go hand in hand with true impartiality. Accordingly, even though America's European roots were to play a role in the rhetoric of intervention, both in the First and in the Second Wars, already in the novels published soon after 1918 the image is presented of an American army formed of soldiers of European ascendance, but fighting first and foremost for America. It is

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[9] Giuseppe Mammarella, *Destini incrociati: Europa e Stati Uniti 1900-2003* (Rome and Bari: Editori Laterza, 2003), v (my translation).

an army that, consequently, follows types of logic that transcend (although they do not exclude) the more humane values of solidarity and brotherhood. In this sense, Italo Calvino's reading of Hemingway is very enlightening:

> Of course, the way of taking part in a war described by Hemingway isn't Tolstoy's, nor another author's, Stephen Crane, a small American classic he was particularly fond of. This is war in distant lands, seen with a stranger's detached eye; Hemingway prefigures the spirit of the American soldier in Europe.
>
> If the bard of English imperialism, Kipling, still had a definite bond to a country, so that his own India becomes another motherland, for Hemingway (who, differently from Kipling, did not want to "sing" anything, but simply to report facts and things), there is the spirit of America plunging into the world without a real reason, following the thrust of its expanding economy.[10]

According to this logic, travelling round the world often coincides with a combat experience, despite the new international organizations and agreements between nations (for instance, the Briand-Kellogg pact of 1928).[11] Even in the most epic novels connected with the war experience, those written from the very end of World War II up to the early 1950s, the description of the unyielding and cruel military hierarchy becomes a pretext for critical reflections on the powerful American war machine, an increasing tangible reality in the latter twentieth century (a critical reflection that does not appear in the film adaptations of the same novels, or, at least, seldom appears. The role played by film productions in distorting memories of the experience of war is exemplarily described in the bitter comment expressed by Mary, the wife of the veteran friend of Kurt Vonnegut, and stated in his Introduction to *Slaughterhouse-Five*).[12]

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[10] Italo Calvino, "Hemingway and Ourselves", in *Why Read the Classics?* (London: Vintage Classics, 1978).

[11] See Maldwin A. Jones, *The Limits of Liberty: American History 1607-1980* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1983), ch. XXIV.

[12] Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, 11: "'You were babies in the war – like the one upstairs!' I nodded that this was true. We had been foolish virgins in the war, right at the end of childhood. 'But you're not going to write it that way, are you.' This wasn't a question. It was an accusation. 'I – I don't know', I said. 'Well, I know,' she said. 'You'll pretend you were men instead of babies, and you'll be played in the movies by Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some of those other glamorous, war-loving, dirty

The different role of the United States (a power of great potential after World War I, the Western superpower at the end of World War II) is also enhanced by their different way of bearing witness to and recounting, in a narrative key, the experiences of the two World Wars: the separate peace agreements, the uncertainties and subjective standpoints of individuals trying to find a reason or an underlying logic to war's cruelty in the narrations of Hemingway, Dos Passos or Cummings give way to the choral visions of post-World War II narrative, where the hero is no longer an anti-hero (the vet, the deserter, the political revolutionary), but the commander, the commanding officer, often presented as tyrant, as a negative hero, who nevertheless has no doubts about acting according to the logic of war, because there are reasons and responsibilities that go beyond subjectivity and in any case are needed if a certain order is to be kept. War is indeed a nasty job, a dirty job, but it must be done, in any case one must assume one's responsibility for it and, often, war logic and experience in charge of combat (even when it is linked to a defeat, as in the case of General Cummings, in *The Naked and the Dead*) is connected to the idea of political power and command (military careers are often seen as a necessary step to political ones, or comparable to the type of responsibility there entailed).

The heroic stage of the American war novel following World War II and linked to the image of America as a superpower ends with the new wars of the end of the twentieth century. The authors who, having experienced it, will go back to confronting it in their work, will challenge this new identity. And, even considering the differences due to the context and forms of experimentation, I think that one can find in these novels, patterns of reflection similar to those already seen in post-World War I novels, although there is a stronger awareness of the reasons underlying the war, reread in the light of new American *realpolitik*. War is now not only a horrible action, but also a way of being in the modern world, and destruction and massacres have by now become customary scenarios.

Hemingway had already understood this. Calvino wrote that Hemingway's greatness really consists in having understood and having voiced an uncomfortable truth, that is that even if one does not

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old men. And war will look just wonderful, so we'll have a lot more of them. And they'll be fought by babies like the babies upstairs.'"

take part in or sympathize with a massacre, one has to admit that massacre has become “contemporary man’s natural scenario”. According to Calvino, Hemingway’s great intuition was in perceiving war as “the most truthful image, as the normal reality of the bourgeois world in the imperialistic age”. “So it goes”, as Vonnegut would say, hoping that there will always be someone willing to look back to enhance understanding and bear witness to human stupidity.

“STRANGE GROWTHS”: THE WORLD WARS AS AGENTS AND MARKERS OF CHANGE IN WOMEN’S WRITING

DANIELA FORTEZZA

Still embedded in our cultural memory, the two World Wars have inspired an inexhaustible literary production which has preserved their memory, yet also at times “banalised or mythologised”[1] them. Women’s contribution to this literature is considerable, as a recent anthology, *Women’s Writing on the First World War* proves.[2] This work explores the literary aspect of an area whose complexity was already revealed in the essay “The Feminine at the Front”,[3] which investigates cultural, social and psychological changes produced by World War I and the subsequent redefinition of the roles attributed to the two sexes.

While these two works have provided a precious reference framework, the focus of this study, which intends to analyse the effects produced by the World Wars on women’s writing, was suggested by the “Author’s Postscript” to the *The Demon Lover and Other Stories*.[4] In the postscript Elizabeth Bowen[5] analyses,

[1] Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London: Oxford UP, 1975), ix.

[2] Agnes Cardinal, Dorothy Goldman, Judith Hattawayeds, *Women’s Writing on the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999).

[3] Jenny Plastow, “The Feminine at the Front”, in *Ford Madox Ford and “The Republic of Letters”*, eds Vita Fortunati and Elena Lamberti (Bologna: Clueb, 2002).

[4] Elizabeth Bowen, *The Demon Lover and Other Stories* (1945; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966).

[5] Elizabeth Bowen (1899-1973), descendant of an aristocratic Protestant Anglo-Irish family, spent her childhood at Bowen’s Court, the family residence in Cork County. At the age of seven, she moved to Kent in England, where at Downe House School she met Rose Macaulay, who introduced her to literary figures such as Aldous Huxley, Edith Sitwell and Walter de la Mare. She returned to Dublin in 1917, where she worked for some time as a nurse, helping soldiers suffering from shell shock. When the war was over, she went back to England and after a restless period in which she travelled a great deal, she began writing. In 1923, after publishing her first collection of stories, *Encounters*, she married Alan Cameron, who would become

retrospectively, the psychological pressure accompanying the writing of her stories, forcing her to adopt and, thus, be aware of a "strange shift" in her narrative style. What follows is, then, an exploration of how writers such as Bowen and before her, Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf – linked by their pressing concerns with aesthetics – recorded and translated their experience of the war into narratives.

As the title of my essay implies, the final objective of my contribution is to cast light not only on the emotional impact of war and the climate of the post-war period, but also on the changes – thematic, structural and linguistic – which left their mark on the writings of the three artists during and after their experience of one or both World Wars. When the United Kingdom entered the war in August 1914, Woolf was thirty-two years old, Mansfield twenty-five, and Bowen only fifteen. On 3 September 1939, the day the radio announced that the United Kingdom was once again at war, Mansfield had been dead for some years, Woolf was working on her last novel, *Between the Acts*, and Bowen had already published *The Death of the Heart* (1938), and four collections of short stories.

The passage from the "Postscript" which deserves the most attention, since it can serve as a key to understanding not only

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"Secretary for Education", in Oxford. Dividing her time between Oxford and London, she formed friendships with a circle of intellectuals, including Evelyn Waugh and Anthony Powell, kept up contact with various members of the Bloomsbury Group, and became popular not only for her books but also for the parties in her Chelsea flat. For many years she sought, without much success, the friendship of Virginia Woolf. After 1950 she spent long periods in the United States, teaching at different universities. In 1959 she sold the family estate and settled down for good at Old Headington, Kent. Apart from being awarded the CBE (1948), she also received two honorary degrees, from Trinity College in Dublin (1949) and the University of Oxford (1956). Considered by many critics, including Hermione Lee, an excellent artist, unjustly undestimated, and deserving to be included in the great Jamesian tradition (see *Elizabeth Bowen: An Estimation,* London and New York: Vision, and Barnes and Noble, 1981), between 1923 and 1973, Bowen wrote ten novels (the most praised, *The Heat of the Day*, 1948; the last *Eva Trout*, 1969), eighty stories, a family history (*Bowen's Court,* London: Longmans Green, 1942), various non-fiction works, and numerous pieces of literary criticism, including the well-known and often anthologized, "Notes On Writing a Novel" (in Elizabeth Bowen, *Collected Impressions*, New York: Alfred Knopf, 1950).

Bowen's stories, but also some of Mansfield's and Woolf's works,[6] is the following:

> These are all wartime, none of them *war* stories. There are no accounts of war action even as I knew it – for instance, air raids. Only one character – in 'Mysterious Kor' – is a soldier; and he only appears as a homeless wanderer round a city. These are, more, studies of climate, war-climate, and of the **strange growths** it raised. I see war (or should I say feel war?) more as a territory than as a page of history: of its impersonal active historic side I have, I find, not written. Arguably, **writers are** always slightly **abnormal** people: certainly, in so called 'normal' times my sense of the abnormal has been very acute. In war this feeling of slight differentiation was suspended: I felt one with, and just like, everyone else. Sometimes I hardly knew where I stopped and somebody else began. The violent destruction of solid things, the explosion of the illusion that prestige, power and permanence attach to bulk and weight, left **all of us**, equally, heady and disembodied. Walls went down; and **we** felt, if not knew, each other. **We** all lived in a state of lucid abnormality.[7]

While the underlined words and concepts mark, as we will soon see, the terms of a narrative strategy used in specific ways in her stories, those in bold type lead to more general considerations that are useful for understanding the condition of the artist in wartime. It has often been observed and analysed, above all by those who unite a conviction that art should have a moral function with aesthetic preoccupations, that the condition of the artist in peacetime has a tinge of "abnormality" with respect to ordinary people.[8]

In light of their abnormal powers of observation, writers perceive and re-create aspects of reality which too often escape the reader, immersed in the normality of daily life. In wartime, vice versa, where daily life is turned upside down, even ordinary people find that, despite themselves, they are living in a condition of shared alertness and lucidity. "We all lived", observed Bowen, "in a state of lucid

[6] The stories "The Fly" and "Six Years After" by Katherine Mansfield, and the novels *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs Dalloway* and *Between the Acts* by VirginiaWoolf.

[7] Bowen, *The Demon Lover and Other Stories*, 197 (bold type and underlining have been added by the author).

[8] I am thinking, for example, of the beginning of the celebrated "Why the Novel matters" by D.H. Lawrence, as well as Allen Tate's essay, "The Man of Letters in the Modern World".

abnormality". The "strange effects", or better, "strange growths" to which Bowen alludes, correspond to the change in perspective, as well as in tone, and linguistic and narrative choices, wrought by the awareness of a new condition of "collective abnormality", of which the writer is a medium and spokesperson:

> During the war I lived as a civilian and as a writer, with every pore open; I lived so many lives, and, still more lived among the packed repercussions of so many thousands of other lives, all under stress, that I see now it would have been impossibile to have been writing only one book. I want my novel [*The Heat of the Day*, 1949] which deals with this same time, to be enormously comprehensive. But a novel must have a form; and, for the form's sake, one has always to make relentless exclusions. Had it not been for my from-time-to-time promises to write stories, much that had been pressing against the door might have remained pressing against it in vain. I do not feel I 'invented' anything I wrote. It seems to me that during the war the overcharged subconsciousnesses of everybody overflowed and merged. It is because the general subconsciousness saturates these stories that they have an authority nothing to do with me.[9]

We are then left with the other words which I put in bold type in the passage quoted previously, the "we" and "all of us", which in the last four lines predominate over the various "I"s repeated in the preceding lines. It seems to me that this shift from the first person singular to the first person plural, subsequent to the "violent destruction of solid things" wreaked by the war, marks, in the author's intent, an awareness of the limits and relative irrelevance of writing which is too egocentric and prone to offer a personal vision of the world. The latter, to be inclusive, ends up inevitably excluding details in favour of the general. Therefore the traumatic event of the war, like other natural cataclysms (earthquakes, hurricanes, etc.), can paradoxically become a catalyst of change in a positive way. It can bring individuals closer, bring about an opening towards others and encourage interpersonal communication. It can induce a writer to perform an act of intellectual humility, that of sacrificing perfection of form and the rendering of a personal view. This is achieved by taking in disjointed fragments and details of others' experiences without submitting them to any aesthetic transformation, which would run the

[9] Bowen, *The Demon Lover and Other Stories*, 196-97.

risk of altering their authority. It is no coincidence that the reiteration of the plural prounoun "we" follows a series of connotations of war: "destruction … explosion … disembodied … walls … down."

The positive interpretation of the expression "strange growths" is confirmed in the final part of the "Postscript", in which Bowen first repeats the same concept when using the term "germination", and then, without disavowing them in the least, becomes aware of the formal "discontinuity" of her wartime stories", and tries to imagine how they would be judged after "twenty, forty, or sixty years":

> In wartime, even in Britain, much has been germinating. What, I do not know – who does yet know? – but I felt the '**germination**'; and feel it here and there, in these stories now that I read them through. These are received impressions of happening things; impressions that stored themselves up and acquired force without being analysed or considered. These, as wartime stories, are at least contemporary – twenty, forty, sixty years hence they may be found negligible as art. This discontinuous writing, nominally 'inventive', is the only diary I have kept …. I cannot answer for much that is in these stories, except to say that I know they are all true – true to the general life that was in me at the time …. You cannot *render*, you can only embrace – if it means embracing to a suffocating point – something vast that is happening right on top of you …. I have isolated, I have made for the particular, spot-lighting faces or cutting out gestures that are not even the faces or gestures of great sufferers … though I criticize these stories now, afterwards, intellectually, I cannot criticize their content. They are the particular. But through the particular, in wartime, I felt the high-voltage current of the general pass.[10]

I believe that even today these stories still have a high aesthetic as well as documentary value. Certainly, forty years on, the critics' view of *The Demon Lover and Other Stories* has been extremely laudatory; I am not only referring to Hermione Lee, but also Walter Allen, who defined them as "one of the enduring literary monuments to the Second World War";[11] Valerie Shaw,[12] and others as well.

Some have been repeatedly defined as "ghost stories", and one of them, the most internationally famous, has appeared in numerous

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[10] *Ibid*., 202-203 (the bold type is mine).
[11] Walter Allen, *The Short Story in English* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 256-61.
[12] Valerie Shaw, *The Short Story: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York: Longman, 1983).

anthologies dedicated to fantasy literature. I am referring to the "The Demon Lover", which in the Italian edition became "Incubo d'amore" ("Love Nightmare"), while the collection was entitled *Spettri del Tempo di Guerra* (*Wartime Ghosts*). Actually, "ghost story" is an inaccurate definition. Reading the "Postscript" helps us appreciate that there are no real ghosts in Bowen's stories: at the most, they are hallucinations which can be interpreted as an unconscious protective resource on the part of the characters, because "life, mechanized by the controls of wartime, and emotionally torn and impoverished by changes, had to complete itself in *some* way".[13]

In this strain, in the "Postscript", Bowen recollected that in wartime London, apart from herself, many people she knew had "strange deep intense dreams", and she believed that nocturnal dreams and daytime fantasies, which people who were previously down-to-earth consoled themselves with, were a sort of compensation, a way of stemming what, with great effectiveness, she defined as a "desiccation" of daily life. She writes:

> The outsize World War news was stupefying …. What was happening was out of all proportion to our faculties for knowing, thinking and checking up. The circumstances under which ordinary British people lived … were preposterous … self-expression in small ways stopped …. Planning fun, going places, choosing and buyings things, dressing yourself up. All that stopped …. Any little remaining choices and pleasures shot into new proportion and new value: people paid big money for little bunches of flowers. Literature of the Resistance has been steadily coming in from France. I wonder whether in a sense all wartime writing is not resistance writing?…. The search for indestructible landmarks in a destructible world led many down strange paths. The attachment to these when they had been found produced small worlds-within-worlds of hallucination – in most cases, saving hallucination. Writers followed the paths they saw or felt people treading and described those little dear saving illusory worlds. I have done both in *The Demon Lover* stories. You may say that these resistance-fantasies are in themselves frightening. I can only say that one counteracts fear by fear, stress by stress.[14]

[13] Bowen, *The Demon Lover and Other Stories*, 198.
[14] *Ibid*., 199-200.

"In the Square", the story that opens the collection, was written in the summer of 1941, in a period without air raids shortly after the invasion of Russia. The heroine of the narrative, in a clever play of contrasts, is a middle-aged hostess who deludes herself into thinking that she can maintain a social model typical of pre-war London. But the vacuous courtesy with which she receives the friend who comes to visit her jars with the spectral appearance of the drawing room, echoed by the equally spectral aspect of the square facing the house. The square is strangely illuminated by the sun, though it is almost twilight, since some houses on one side of it were razed by the bombing. What the visitor sees is an extinct scene linked to a past that is no longer there, and a metaphor of the inevitable sense of disorientation which occurs when landmarks hitherto considered indestructible are suddenly missing. Yet, reading more closely, the breach can also be interpreted as a new metaphorical angle, through which Bowen sees and sets to represent wartime London.

In "The Demon Lover", the most horrifying and disquieting story, another middle-aged woman – who has moved to the country with her family – returns to her London home to retrieve some objects. Having been uninhabitated for some time, the house seems to her to be pervaded by a sinister atmosphere: "Dead air came out to meet her as she went in … the piano having gone away to be stored, had left what looked like claw-marks on its part of the parquet … and, the only ventilation being the chimney, the whole drawing-room smelled of the cold hearth."[15] Feeling uneasy, in a place which no longer seems familiar, Mrs Drover is overwhelmed by the urgent need to get away as soon as possible, completely unaware that she is trapped in a ghostly appointment with her first "fiancé", who died in the Great War.

But while getting ready to leave, she sees an envelope addressed to her on the hallway table. It has that day's date on it, but no stamp. In a matter of minutes and in a dramatic crescendo, her uneasiness increases to terror when she reads the contents of the letter: the demand to keep an old, long-forgotten date. The sender is, in fact, the soldier with whom the protagonist, little more than an adolescent, had had a brief romance before he left for the front. After he got her to promise to wait for him, the two young people made a sort of mock

[15] *Ibid.*, 82-83.

appointment. But he never came back and she married another man. Overcome by fear, Mrs Drover hurries to close up the house, stops a passing taxi, and after getting in, is allowed only momentary relief. When the taxi takes a different direction from the one requested, and upon her asking for an explanation the taxi driver turns around, she discovers, to her horror, that the man has the face of the dead young soldier: "Mrs Drover's mouth hung open for some seconds before she could issue her first scream. After that she continued to scream freely and to beat with her gloved hands on the glass all round as the taxi, accelerating without mercy, made off with her into the hinterland of deserted streets."[16] This ending, using a cinematographic fade-out technique, closes a masterly story, where the past violently invades the estranged present, which, having lost its usual surroundings, has produced a sense of inexpressible disorientation.

The last of Bowen's stories, which is worth lingering over, before adding a few comments on the effect produced by the wars on the writings of Mansfield and Woolf, is "Mysterious Kôr", the final tale and, in the opinion of many, the most successful and complex. In the first part there is a young couple, Pepita and Arthur, a soldier on leave, who wander about a ghostly London, illuminated by the moon, which appears to the young woman like "mysterious Kôr" – the abiding city, abandoned thousands of years ago, forsaken and without history – evoked in the sonnet "She" by Andrew Lang. The most memorable part is the dialogue in the opening scene, where Pepita, after having recited some verses of the sonnet, tries to involve Arthur in a visionary game whose goal is the ghost city of Kôr, seen as the only possible alternative to the sense of physical, psychological and emotional deprivation caused by the war. It must be stressed that Pepita's re-reading of the sonnet is a free and personal one, through which to express disenchantment and profound scepticism about the outcome of the war and future scenarios she foresees, above all for the young:

> 'What it tries to say doesn't matter: I see what it makes me see… *The world is disenchanted*, it goes on. That was what set me of hating civilization.'
>
> 'Well cheer up,' he said; 'there isn't much of it left.'

[16] *Ibid*., 89-90.

> 'Oh, yes, I cheered up some time ago. This war shows we've by no means come to the end. If you can blow whole places out of existence, you can blow whole places into it. I don't see why not. They say we can't say what's come out since the bombing started. By the time we've come to the end, Kôr may be the only city left: the abiding city.'[17]

There is a second dialogue in the last part of the story, this time between Arthur and Callie, the friend with whom Pepita shares her flat. To Callie, who has just confessed to him that she has never had a boyfriend, Arthur says:

> I'm not sure in one way that you're not better off. I can see there's not so much in it for a girl these days. It makes me feel cruel the way I unsettle her: I don't know how much it's me myself or how much it's something the matter that I can't help. How are any of us to know how things could have been? They forget war's not just only war; it's years out of people's lives that they've never had before and won't have again.[18]

In their blunt simplicity, Arthur's words reiterate Pepita's more serious and abstract arguments, giving them a tremendously concrete value. It is also worth noting the answerless question,"How many of us know how things could have gone?", which marks the shift in attention from the personal sphere to the collective one and yet introduces a powerful accusation aimed at those who did not know how to prevent that war as well as other conflicts. It is no coincidence that Katherine Mansfield had already put the same question and same accusation into the mouth of another soldier victim of the First World War in the unfinished story "Six Years After".

Bowen's story closes atmospherically at the first light of dawn, when "the moon's power over London and the imagination had now declined", and the lens of the author goes back (ideally) to focus on the two young women, paradigms of different attitudes, but both victims of the same catastrophe. Callie, disillusioned and still trembling from what Arthur said, for whom "the loss of her own mysterious expectation, of her love for love, was a small thing beside the war's total of unlived lives", and Pepita who even in her sleep continues her visionary game and dreams the only dream possible,

[17] *Ibid*., 180-81.
[18] *Ibid*., 192.

that "of which Arthur had been the source, of which Arthur was not the end …. He was the password, but not the answer: it was to Kôr's finality that she turned."[19]

In contrast to Elizabeth Bowen's stories, the fragments "Six Years After" and "The Fly"[20] – the only pieces of Katherine Mansfield's work that reflect the emotional effect produced by the war experience after the event[21]– present a re-processing of trauma and mourning which is highly individualistic. However, despite their openly autobiographical mould,[22] both, albeit to different degrees, offer an account of a personal experience in artistically speaking highly complex terms.

"The Fly", which has justifiably been interpreted as "a startling antiwar story [written] to express her outrage at the sacrifice of a generation of sons by their fathers, the architects of the war",[23] is a realistic narrative dealing with the process of mourning and memory, using rough language and a tone hovering between cynical and

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[19] *Ibid*., 194-95.

[20] Katherine Mansfield, *The Collected Short Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984).

[21] "The Fly", finished 20 February 1922, and published in *Nation and Atheneum*, on 18 March of the same year, was written in three weeks in the same Parisian hotel in which Mansfield, four years earlier, had lived through the traumatic experience of the most devastating bombing to strike the city. By contrast, "Six Years After" was begun three months earlier than the "The Fly", but was left unfinished and published for the first time in the Alfred A.Knopf edition of 1937. It is interesting to note that both for Mansfield and Woolf, the emotional impact of the war had germinated, on an artistic level, only after a few years had passed. In Mansfield's case, this germination was the result of an aesthetic search pursued with profound awareness. See, for example, her letter of 10 November 1919 (*Katherine Mansfield's Letters to John Middleton Murry, 1913-1922*, London: Constable, 1951, 380-81), written in the heat of the moment after reading Virginia Woolf's *Night and Day*: "I don't like it …. My private opinion is that it is a lie in the soul. The war never has been: that is what its message is … the novel can't just leave the war out. There *must* have been a change of heart …. I feel in the *profoundest* sense that nothing can ever be the same – that, as artists, we are traitors if we feel otherwise: we have to take it into account and find new expressions, new moulds for our new thoughts and feelings … we have to face our war… our whole strength depends upon our facing things. I mean facing them without any reservation or restraints."

[22] Katherine's brother, Leslie Beachamp, died on 22 October 1915, about six years before to the writing of the two stories.

[23] *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, eds Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (New York: W.W.Norton, 1985), 1462-63.

sardonic. It is one those stories which, once read, cannot immediately be put aside, as often happens with some of Chekhov's stories. The reason behind the complexity of the final effect lies in the dual key to interpretation it lends itself to. There is an act of individual cruelty induced by the pressing need to close with a bereavement which the protagonist – an anonymous successful businessman, identified by the name Bossie – has not been able to come to terms with, and at the same time an implicit shriek of pain against the corruption of modern society – metaphorically represented by the impeccable modern furnishings of his office – a society that claims it is pursuing wealth and progress to give a better future to its children, but does not hesitate to sacrifice them when the continuity of the system is threatened.

Yet it is constructed around a truly simple plot. Two aging friends, who both lost a son at the front, in Belgium, six years previously, meet in the office of one of the two men, "Bossie", who is still almost too energetic and active. Despite the death of his son, he has been able to carry on with a flourishing business, of which he is very proud. The younger of the two, Woodifield, instead, retired early due to deteriorating health brought on by the pain of his son's death. When their chat has almost come to an end, "old Woodifield" is reminded of what he wanted to say from the beginning, but could not quite remember. His daughters had recently been to Belgium to visit their brother's grave and by chance also saw the grave of Bossie's son. Not noticing that his friend is silent, Woodifield goes off on a detailed and pathetic account, garnished with comments about the speculation that businesses adjacent to the war cemeteries carry out with respect to the relatives of the dead men. Alone once again, Bossie relives the trauma he suffered upon the loss of his son, and remembers the things he said back then:

> Time… he had told everybody, could make no difference. Other men perhaps might recover, might live their loss down, but not he. How was it possible? His boy was an only son. Ever since his birth the boss had worked at building up this business for him; it had no other meaning if it was not for the boy.[24]

[24] Mansfield, *The Collected Short Stories*, 416.

Unable to come to grips with his lies, he waits for tears which refuse to come. Then, forced to take his eyes off the photo of his son which seems almost hostile to him, he notices by chance that a fly has just fallen into his "wide inkpot", and is trying "feebly, but desperately to clamber out again". At this point a macabre game between the man and the fly begins. Bossie takes the fly out of the ink and shakes it on to a piece of blotting paper and waits for the fly to clean itself. He is then inspired to see to what point the fly will find the energy to survive. He inundates it with ink again and waits until it cleans itself, then repeats the same action until, the third time, the insect lies inert, dead on the blotting paper.

If the starting point of the story, like its development, seem easy and immediately comprehensible, its narrative framework is actually the result of simplifying a complexity, which few writers can achieve in such a natural and effective way. In just a few sentences, without resorting to any descriptions of physical or psychological characteristics, Woodifield and Bossie come to life through a series of narrative fragments that record gestures, actions, thoughts, but above all broken speech – brusque, rough, with nuances which are at times comical, ridiculous, or pathetic in turn. The ending, in which Bossie having finished the game with the insect sinks first into a sudden state of desperation – induced, one can surmise, by an illumination deliberately left unsaid – and then after having thrown the fly into the wastebasket, forgets what he was thinking about before, is a masterpiece of succinctness and skill in exploiting the symbolic value of the unspoken.

"The Fly" is an intriguing story, recently rediscovered by critics,[25] who have correctly observed that the complexity of the symbolic value of the fly is to be interpreted as the memory of a personal bereavement, as well as collective, which the protagonist – and in a certain sense even Woodifield, who delegated to his daughters the duty of visiting his son's grave – refuses to preserve. Amnesia then is the equivalent of escape and a refusal to accept one's own responsibilities: "While Woodifield interiorized and somatized the

[25] See F.W. Bateson and B. Shahevitch, "Katherine Mansfield's 'The Fly': A Critical Exercise", in *The Critical Response to Katherine Mansfied.*, ed. Jan Pilditch (Westport: Greenwood P., 1996), 123-24; and also M. Ascari, in a footnote of *Il Nido delle Colombe*, ed. Maurizio Ascari (Venice: Marsilio, 2002), 199-202.

sense of death, the boss – despite all his statements to the contrary – exorcized and removed his own pain, by pouring it out onto the world around him, through a search for power that had almost sadistic undertones." [26]

There is no doubt that the choice of subject matter of this story is to be attributed to the effect of the war experience on the writer. It may appear more difficult, however, to evaluate the formal changes linked to that choice, since though what most critics agree on is true – that Mansfield would not have left us any truly typical story, precisely because change is a standard feature of all her works – it becomes almost impossible to decipher structural and linguistic changes determined by the choice of war as subject. I believe it is no coincidence that a useful suggestion on this matter comes from Elizabeth Bowen herself:

> Each idea for a story had inherent within it its own shape … that shape it was for her to perceive, then outline … sometimes the external picture came to her first …. She uses no literary shock tactics …. Words had but one appeal for her, that of speakingness …. She was to evolve from noun, verb, adjective, a marvellously sensory notation; nonetheless, she stayed subject to prose discipline. And her style, when the story context requires, can be curt, decisive, factual. It is a style generated by subject and tuned to mood.[27]

"Curt", "decisive", "factual" are, in fact, the adjectives most suitable for underlining some characteristics which in this story are more marked than in those written in the same period or earlier – realism and concreteness of scenes; sentences which are dry, nervous and fragmented or else lacking syntactic anomalies; the immediate, direct, rough speech of the characters. Just as correct is the observation about the tone – somewhere in between cynical and sardonic – which reflects a state of mind varying from uneasiness to horror when faced with the observation of the spiritual aridity which a trauma can lead to, as if love, the only feeling according to Murry[28] able to save mankind, were also "desiccated".

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[26] See *Il Nido delle Colombe*, Ascari, 210 (my translation).

[27] "Stories by Katherine Mansfield", in Elizabeth Bowen, *Afterthought: Pieces about Writing* (Chatham: Longmans, 1962), 58-60.

[28] See *Katherine Mansfield's Letters to John Middleton Murry, 1913-1922*, 80.

In the very same year in which “The Fly” came out, Virginia Woolf wrote and published a novel marking a new direction in her literary career. *Jacobs Room*[29] pulls apart the conventional plot and presents a deliberately fragmented meditation on the life and death of Jacob Flanders who, like her beloved brother Thoby, seemed to be the heir to that solid patriarchal culture represented by institutions such as Cambridge and Oxford.

Up to what point the war experience contributed to an experimental shift, unexpected after the conventionalism of *Night and Day* (which so outraged Mansfield), is difficult to say, but one cannot exclude that, in that phase of her existence, the new model of writing served to buffer the impact with such a thorny subject. In all her narration, the words “war” and “soldier” are studiously avoided and the only terms which inequivocably allude to the war – “cannons”, “explosions”, “fight”, and “fatherland” – are only in the final part of the penultimate chapter. In any case, what we want to stress here is that, although there was no direct link between World War I and Thoby’s death (who died of typhoid fever during a holiday in Greece), Woolf, just like Mansfield, only starts working out the trauma of the First World War in 1922. She faces it again, more explicitly, three years later with *Mrs Dalloway*,[30] but the novel which best demonstrates the effect produced by the war on her writing is conceived much later, when the trauma of the First World War overlaps that of the beginning of the Second.

Between the Acts[31] is the product of a period in which Woolf was acutely aware of the delicate state of her health. She had recently finished *Three Guineas* (1938), from which one can infer her conviction that there was a strong link between the highly patriarchal structures of Western countries and that of the Nazi regime. Therefore, it is not surprising that when German planes began to fly across the skies of Sussex over Rodmell, anxiety about her health was joined by that concerning the salvation of society.[32] The novel, which was originally going to be called *Pointz Hall*, was begun in the autumn of 1938 and was still being revised when Virginia committed her desperate act of suicide.

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[29] Virginia Woolf, *Jacob’s Room* (Richmond: Hogarth Press, 1922).
[30] Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (Richmond: Hogarth Press, 1925).
[31] Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (1941; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974).
[32] See *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, 1318.

Pointz Hall is the name of the place providing the setting for the story, the residence of a refined upper-middle-class family whose members represent the contradictions of a society hovering between rural civilization and bourgeois modernity, on the eve of a devastating war. It is here that the amateur artist and director, Miss La Trobe, organizes and directs a historical pageant put on by the people of the village in the park of Pointz Hall, on a summer afternoon of 1939. The cultivated, ambitious subject of the performance, which plans to reconstruct the history of England from the time of Chaucer up to the 1930s, is in ironic contrast with its aim of raising money to install a modern electrical system in the local church.

The pageant, which the novel revolves around, leaves the audience perplexed rather than satisfied, as they struggle to make some sense out of it – especially the last scene, called "Present time. Ourselves." What Miss La Trobe, a spokeswoman for Virginia Woolf's plea, expects out of the spectators, and, it is implied, from the readers, is an awareness of the terms of their own historical memory, without which it is impossible to create a future. It is too important a challenge for her not to use every possible means of expression, to the point that for her last book the author does not hesitate to retrieve some expedients of realism, with narrative passages and descriptions alternating with the dialogues and many opportunities provided for the perceptions of various characters, who thanks to the plentiful free indirect discourse, seem brilliantly convincing and concrete.

On a formal level, there is another aspect we cannot ignore and which has a fundamental function regarding the message the manuscript is meant to convey to us. I am referring to the language, which is initially relaxed, almost lazy, elegant, and syntactically irreproachable, until it gradually takes on a rhythm which becomes more and more nervous, excited, disorderly and broken. There are various pages that only record shreds of conversation, interrupted sentences and suspended questions. There are numerous examples, which all contribute to a sense of a fragmented and confused collective conscience. The spectators of the play seem oblivious to it, until they are confronted with the last scene, "The Present". Its sound-track consists of strident, unrecognizable tunes which disturb the audience, still unaware of the surprise Miss La Trobe has in store for them. The climax comes when the actors appear on stage, each

holding a mirror turned towards the audience. After a few minutes of confusion, an anonymous voice through the megaphone gives a farewell speech which, apart from being an explicit accusation towards all those who hide behind hypocritical respectability, unloading responsability for the evils of the world onto others, also alludes to the war: "Consider the gun slayers, bombdroppers here or there. They do openly what we do furtively."[33] Another sinister allusion to the war is embedded right in the middle of Reverend Streatfield's speech when, while commenting on the meaning of the play, the word he is saying is literally cut in two (on the page as well) by the roar of twelve aeroplanes "in perfect formation like a flight of wild duck",[34] crossing the sky above Pointz Hall.

We could go on, but I believe that the observations made up to now show us what the impact of the war led to germinate in Virginia Woolf's writing. *Between the Acts* is a masterpiece that, I believe, has not been appreciated as much as it deserves, perhaps because it is considered less experimental than previous works. I like to think that personal involvement, certainly very powerful, drove Woolf, like Bowen, to deviate from her aesthetic path, not only to render, but also to embrace something too vast that was happening right over her.

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[33] Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 130.
[34] *Ibid*., 134.

WAR IN WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE AND WRITING

ANNAMARIA LAMARRA

In studies dealing with the history of mentalities, the reconstruction of the sentimental life of a nation has for some time occupied a privileged position. The private side of a nation at a dramatic moment in its history, for example, has become very important when analysing the two World Wars, as can be seen in the references to sources and documents previously considered almost exclusively as the prerogative of their respective category of origin – biography, autobiography, letters or memoirs. It is precisely the choice of texts on war from the point of view of ordinary people and individual citizens that has once again underlined specific gender differences. From this perspective, the material under consideration shows the extent to which war creates radical problems regarding the relationship of individuals with the "symbolic order" in which they have grown up; at the same time it demonstrates just how much more complex and contradictory such a relationship may become in the case of women, especially when the traditional categories of war become dramatically more complicated:

> … the latest studies show how the Second World War, with the disappearance of the distinction between the military and the home fronts, between the risks for soldiers and for civilians, and with its nature of "total war" – in the sense that it totally intrudes upon everyone's daily life – changed the lives of women as much as it changed those of men in that in the absence of men, women had to bear all the responsibility for the survival not only of their own families but also of society at large.[1]

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[1] Anna Rossi-Doria, "L'avvento del voto alle donne in Italia", in *Desiderio e diritto di cittadinanza: Le italiane e il voto*, ed. Maria Antonietta Selvaggio (Palermo: La Luna Saggia, 1997), 26 (my translation).

"Total war", with all its connotations, ended up imposing equality for all in the face of the horror threatening to envelop men and women. In the interpretation of female historians and researchers of gender issues, the need to respond as individuals and as a community to the danger threatening the homeland led to the apparent negation of the traditional view of opposing male and female positions, replaced by an active-passive dichotomy[2] on the basis of which each person's commitment and the responsibility undertaken could be judged.

However, as it has been observed on more than one occasion, this shift in viewpoint had the connotations of a political strategy that was indispensable at a time when national unity came first but was later negated in the second post-War period, as usually happens in countries involved in a conflict. In Great Britain, for example, the important roles played by women during World War II, did not give rise to a similar presence on the political stage. Official history has often drawn a veil over female participation in the war, presenting women "as occasional guests in a historical event that did not belong to them, where normality and the norm referred to the actions of men".[3]

The second post-War period has demonstrated once again that admission to a level of equality in the symbolic order of things may not be a definitive victory but only a momentary meeting of interests that has never thoroughly upset the perceived male/female dichotomy on which patriarchal thought is constructed. We need only think of the many female stereotypes adapted to war propaganda, often presenting an abstract concept of womanhood and femininity used as a symbol of a nation under threat:

> In time of war, an abstract notion of woman symbolises the nation under threat …. The female body is used in propaganda as a virginal territory upon which the brutality of the enemy may be inscribed.[4]

And the theme of the female body – "the place to which the soldier returns from the wars",[5] according to a recurrent image in the

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[2] See Gill Plain, *Women's Fiction of the Second World War: Gender, Power and Resistance* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1996), 20.

[3] *Donne e uomini nelle guerre mondiali*, ed. Anna Bravo (Bari: Laterza, 1991), v-vi (my translation).

[4] Plain, *Women's Fiction of the Second World War*, ix.

collective imagination – also reappeared in the common symbol of the corruption and wickedness that threatened the country at war. The flipside of the coin, as far as women are concerned, is that in traditional iconography, the spy who induces a soldier to betray his country inevitably has the beautiful face of Eve. World War II propaganda never stopped reminding women that it was impossible for them to ignore their bodies, "because many women are now in uniform, it doesn't mean that they should abandon their femininity and charm. On the contrary, men expect them to be just as attractive as ever."[6]

So this momentary meeting of interests that in Great Britain in 1941 established compulsory national service for women, expected and obliged them to temporarily take on an "appearance of masculinity" to behave like men but, at the same time not to forget their role in a patriarchal society. Therefore there was a confirmation and reinforcement of the roles and functions that official history often helped to emphasize. As many observed in Italy, "the 'women of the Resistance' were still 'wives and mothers' tied to their homes, capable of doing two jobs, having two duties and if no-one actually spoke about two deaths it was really only because in this world, people – even women – can only die once".[7]

But if, as gender studies tend to agree, the achievement of equality in the symbolic order of things that war seems to guarantee for women is only superficial, it is nevertheless true that wartime events significantly influenced women's road to emancipation. In Great Britain, in particular during the Second World War, widespread female participation in various aspects of the war strategy – in enemy territories as well as at home – cannot simply be seen as the mechanical consequence of the new scenarios that, to a greater or lesser extent, involved everyone. The change that contributed in a

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[5] Jane Walzer and Michael Vaughan Rees, *Women in Wartime: The Role of Women's Magazines 1939-1945* (London: Macdonald Optima, 1987), 99.

[6] "The female body has been the place where men return from wars and ideas. It has also been the place where men ran from, a horrible mirror for a confused world" (Alessandra Bocchetti, *Cosa vuole una donna* [Milan: La Tartaruga edizioni, 1995], 27 [my translation]).

[7] Franca Pieroni Bortolotti, *Le donne della Resistenza antifascista e la questione femminile in Emilia Romagna: 1943-1945* (Milan: Vangelista, 1978), 9-10 (my translation).

determining way to the involvement of women in political institutions had actually begun much earlier and was set in motion by the women's emancipation movement.

During the World War I, women's enormous capacity for manual and political work in munitions factories as well as in hospitals or mines had already greatly impressed public opinion and political institutions. In a declaration to the House of Commons, Sir Herbert Asquith – who had been one of the most stubborn opponents to the suffragette movement – said:

> They fill our munitions factories; they have aided in the most effective way in the prosecution of the war …. when the war comes to an end, and when those abnormal conditions have to be revised, and when the process of industrial reconstruction has to be set on foot, have not the women a special claim to be heard on the many questions which will arise directly affecting their interests?[8]

In Great Britain, conflict as a school for more important female roles was clearly visible during the First World War and for the first time the stereotype that traditionally associates women with peace was undermined.

It was the most authoritative of suffragettes, Emmeline Pankhurst, who started an unprecedented collaboration between the women's movement and the institutions against which they had been demonstrating for years. On 10 August 1914, addressing the militants of the Women's Social and Political Union that she chaired, Mrs Pankhurst said:

> What is the use of fighting for a vote if we have not got a country to vote in? With that patriotism which has nerved women to endure torture in prison for the national good, we ardently desire that our country shall be victorious.[9]

With these words, she announced the suspension of militant action during wartime and thus effectively signed an armistice between her movement and the political powers of the day. For its part, the government, which in August 1914 had released many "right-to-vote"

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[8] Quoted in M.G. Fawcett, *The Women's Victory and After* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1920), 133.

[9] Quoted in Antonia Raeburn, *Militant Suffragettes* (London: New English Library, 1974), 256.

militants from prison, requested the active commitment of the female population, asking Emmeline Pankhurst to organize women's participation in necessary wartime activities. Enthusiasm for the "Call to Women", issued by Mrs Pankhurst, was to become a decisive factor in winning the vote in 1918.

The extraordinary female response, recognized by Asquith and many eminent observers, did not however succeed in masking a problem – further exacerbated during the World War II – and recognized at that time by many women who disassociated themselves from Mrs Pankhurst's policies (preferring in 1915 the flags of the "Women's International League for Peace and Freedom"),[10] which decades later would once again interest female historians and researchers looking at gender issues. Women's road to direct democracy and the right to citizenship was the result of an enlargement of "social motherhood" that introduced into the politics of war personal values and skills until then seen only within the family. After World War II, however, this did not bring about any changes in the framework of rights and duties of the male citizen. It was precisely this politicization of women's traditional roles, which emerged even more clearly in the Second World War, that led many women historians and researchers of gender issues to interpret the wartime era as a phase in which the otherness of women in relation to the dominant culture was put to one side and not compensated by a status of equality in the post-war years.

This is certainly a complex question, involving fields that have not been sufficiently investigated because the necessary texts and materials are not well known, but they do show the extent to which the experiences of that period marked the progress of women perhaps more significantly than is generally recognized. Despite the fact that many female activities could be read as a sort of extension of an obligation imposed by a patriarchal society to protect and care for others, the emphasis on motherhood has often overshadowed an underestimated and important change whereby the tasks traditionally assigned to women were seen more in terms of civil ethics rather than

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[10] The group was an offshoot of the *Women's Social and Political Union*, founded by Mrs Pankhurst in 1903.

as natural destiny;[11] and this changeover was not without consequences.

Women's many wartime activities gained importance: work in the mobile kitchens set up in precarious conditions in areas destroyed by the bombs to feed those who had lost everything; digging under the rubble; fighting the fires caused by the raids; assisting at the reception centres for the numerous evacuees forced to leave their homes (elderly people and children to be re-housed in completely new surroundings) or at the entertainment clubs for the troops. An enormous amount of work was done by an extraordinary number of women. This type of commitment, which was better known than other forms of wartime activities more usually done by men – as in the case of women pilots – was also a decisive factor in bringing out in many women a repressed desire for full citizenship status, in which the public-private dichotomy would no longer confirm their exclusion.

In the context of obligations towards their endangered country at a time when there was a general emphasis on citizenship as a duty involving everyone, housewives, teachers, domestic staff and ordinary women emerged from the small corner of life that had enclosed their existence, rediscovering by means of commitment as a social ethic, rights that had never been enjoyed as such and from which flowed a new and unexpected image of themselves and their desire to live life fully.

At the precise moment when there was an unprecedented meeting of the female self and the world, women were compulsorily drafted into war service for the first time ever in Great Britain. It was an extraordinary occurrence that raised doubts and concerns in public opinion and which encouraged myriad women to take up their pens and describe their discovery of a different self, emerging from the din of the war and the upsetting of customary processes of their inner being that had always been rooted in their conscience. For all women, the war related to them in a particular way, as emerged from their stories and memoirs:

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[11] See Paola Gaiotti de Biase, "Da una cittadinanza all'altra. Il duplice protagonismo delle donne cattoliche", in *Il dilemma della cittadinanza: Diritti e doveri delle donne*, eds Gabriella Bonacchi and Angela Groppi (Bari: Laterza, 1993), 128-66.

Thursday, 28 August 1941

There was a ring and Mrs Thompson, our canteen head was at the door. She wants me to give an afternoon and\or evening as advisory cook …. Mrs Diss, who has taken over as head of WVS, had sent her. It's what I have always wanted to do – I am realising more each day what a knack of dodging and cooking and managing I possess, and my careful economics are things to pass on, not hide as I used to! …. When she had gone out, my husband said, 'You know, you amaze me really, when I think of the wretched health you had just before the war, and how long it took you to recover from that nervous breakdown'. I said, 'Well, I'm in the rhythm now, instead of always fighting against things' – but stopped when I saw the hurt, surprised look on his face. He never realises – and never could – that the years when I had to sit quiet and always do everything he liked, and never the things he did not, were slavery years of mind and body.

Friday 3 October 1941

They are a grand lot on my shift at the canteen. They say, 'Just tell us what to do and we will do it,' and then scurry and hurry round. I'm very lucky to have such good helpers. I've shown one woman how to make potato cakes, and another says she is going to practise making waffles at home, ready for next Friday …. It is childish of me, I know, but it gives me such a warm feeling to find I've anything people want. I've not a lot to give, and I do so like giving.

Saturday 5 December 1942

I thought of other little changes, both in myself and friends. Of our slaphappy way of 'doing the bits that showed most', making beds soon after rising, without the turning and airing we once thought so needful: now, in my rush out on two mornings a week, they are lucky to be straightened. I saw pillow-slips and towels, even underclothes, scrutinised to see if they were *quite* soiled – or would they do another day, or week? I saw myself putting on a dress, working all day at the Centre and then having neither time nor energy to change when I got in – just a quick wash, and a house-dress in a gay print, as I cooked tea. I thought of a stack of dirty crocks to tackle after tea, of pictures and furniture that were once polished every week, and now got done when I had the time. I wondered if people would *ever* go back to the

> old ways. I cannot see women settling to trivial ways – women who have done worthwhile things.[12]

The diary of Nella Last, a Lancashire housewife, is a good example of what "social motherhood" meant for this woman who, like many others, was not used to valuing herself very highly. It gave women the right to full citizenship. The pages of Nella Last's diary provide glimpses of themes that we are still reflecting on today, for example, the interference of the obligations of equality with the traditional female duties that legitimized, then as now, "a way of being a citizen that is not the same as it is for men and therefore marginalized".[13]

Nevertheless, Nella Last's conversation with herself highlights a truth that emerges in many important moments in the history of women: each and every time together with other women and because of other women, they gain more authority in ways that help them all recognize themselves in one another. Married and single women, with past lives similar to that of Nella Last, managed in those years to extricate themselves from a kind of marginalization that had always threatened them, thanks to something that the war brought out and which has often been neglected when analysing women's experience. In measuring themselves against the new demands made on them, the many women who had to start on a previously unheard of adventure became mediators of reality. This expression of a kind of female authority was not just a replica of traditional authority as they still had no social power in the patriarchal order, but it was nevertheless recognized and accepted. In particular actually doing things under the guidance of other women was an experience that changed the sense that a woman had of herself and her way of living her life. As Alessandra Bocchetti recalls, "female authority is in the order of a truth earned and not a space won".[14] And, as Nella commented: "I cannot see women settling to trivial ways – women who have done worthwhile things."

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[12] Nella Last, *Nella Last's War: A Mother's Diary (1939-1945*) (Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1981). All the quotations in this essay are taken from *Hearts Undefeated*, ed. Jenny Hartley (London, Virago, 1995), 143-44, and 189.

[13] Biase, "Da una cittadinanza all'altra: Il duplice protagonismo delle donne cattoliche", 158 (my translation).

[14] See Bocchetti, *Cosa vuole una donna*, 256 (my translation).

It was a new way of moving around in the world that meant leaving behind the prepared script that had managed to deprive the many Nellas in history of exercising a power understood as "the capacity of taking part in a discourse on which action and the right to be heard depend":[15]

> At 3.30 I awoke suddenly, my eyes rimmed and my head dull. I was troubled with uncertainty. Was it I who was going to dress up in a conductor's uniform, run down to the tram depot in the blackout, shout 'Fares please', punch tickets, and chaff other conductresses in a canteen? Was this woman in navy blue myself? There must be two 'I's: the original 'I' is a married suburban woman who once studied botany in a university college, speaks with a southern intonation, confines herself to her house, and belongs to the petit bourgeoisie. She must have indulged in a burst of dichotomy and procreated another 'I' – an aggressive woman in uniform who sharply orders people about, has swear words and lewd jokes thrown at her, works amid rush and noise, fumbles and stumbles about in the blackout, and has filthy hands and a grimy neck.[16]

> One of the clearest impressions I have of those early days is of the exhilarating feeling on waking up each morning, *longing for* what the day would bring forth. For five years life had been a matter of just getting through the day as best one could; rations, mending, fuel restrictions, queues …. Now that was all a thing of the past; there was very little waiting about … instead there was a permanent rush, activity, a job to be done under my nose, here in the boats; a question of ropes, tillers, judgment of eye and hand, movement, novelty and excitement.
>
> For it *was* exciting – it was thrilling and I was enjoying every second of it, even though I was being clumsy and ignorant and inefficient. It was all new: sights, sounds, people, drill, clothes, food … the whole pattern had changed and I felt as though *an enormous double window had been flung open*, allowing me to breathe in great gulps of fresh air, while away in the distance a huge and unknown country lay at my feet.

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[15] Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988), 14.

[16] Zelma Katin, *"Clippie": The Autobiography of a War Time Conductress* (London: John Grifford, 1944), 10.

> Another thing, which other housewives will perhaps understand, was the perfectly blissful sensation of being bossed about by someone else, for a change! Thinking for the family all day and every day in war-time left you more exhausted than you knew, till you got away from it ….
>
> Have I made it plain what a wonderful job this was, what a superb piece of escapism, while yet doing war-work? …. I went home for a week's leave at the end of this trip feeling as if a tornado had blown through my body and mind, tearing away all the cobwebs with which I had been hung for years, and leaving me revitalised and vibrating with life and new hope …. What the outside world could not see were the pictures in my mind, which will always be there; the warmth in my heart which comes from feeling that you fit into something: the delight in using my whole body to do my job and not only my feet and hands; the comradeship that I had found, the comradeship of people all doing the same difficult work and sharing the same hardships; and finally, the pleasure of resting my tired body in the knowledge that soon I should be going back to start it all once more.[17]

As these quotations reveal, Zelma Katin and Susan Woolfitt, the first a bus conductress and the second a transporter of war materials along the English canals, narrate the war from a viewpoint that is both a commentary on and a condemnation of the female condition.

As in many other cases, their stories focused on what remained hidden in the folds of history and memories still structured in a male way. With a frequency that is the leitmotiv of female war literature, at the heart of the narrative there are elements that have long been neglected by official histories and only in recent times have entered into the history of how people thought, of their mind-sets, and which they may have written without being aware of it: the relationship between the private and public spheres, changes in social relations, the thousand rivulets that became part of the process of adapting to the war. In their stories, the unreal silence of a London threatened by air raids, the disturbing sight of a city that was being turned into a desert, emptied of human beings, and of life that went underground into the shelters where individuals were trying to reconstruct an image of the world that had been taken away from them, all represent a memory that is "not partial … but, on the contrary, is precious for the

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[17] Susan Woolfitt, *Idle Women* (1947): this particular passage from *Hearts Undefeated*, 157-58 (my italics).

reconstruction of a story that is genuinely general, that is, with a wealth of differences and subtleties present in real society".[18] It is interesting to observe the influence on female writing of this general history, seen as a history of fathers and fathering, as observed by Gertrude Stein:

> There is too much fathering going on just now and there is no doubt about it fathers are depressing. Everybody nowadays is a father, there is father Mussolini and father Hitler and father Roosevelt and father Stalin and father Trotsky and father Lewis and father Blum and father Franco is just commencing now and there are so many ready to be one.[19]

Reflecting on the history created by a society of fathers, many women writers narrated the war from the perspective of those who were affected personally as many others were, but in a less spectacular way compared with the many protagonists of that official history. In Gertrude Stein's *Wars I Have Seen* (1945), war is shown to the reader through the eyes of a young man in his twenties, a gardener in the writer's household; the baker's son deported to a concentration camp; an acquaintance who had been "sent to work in Germany"; and by people encountered by chance:

> A farmer on a hill said of the Germans, do not say that it had to do with their leaders, they are people whose fate it is to always choose a man whom they force to lead them in a direction in which they do not want to go.
>
> This same person on this same hill was saying, it was safer a thunderstorm and we were talking about it together. Yes he said it is like them to call it a thunder and lightening war. Thunder and lightening a storm of thunder and lightening can cause a fair amount of damage and frightens you enormously but leaves nothing else behind it, no after-effect at all.[20]

The nervous and elliptical modernist writing of the American author gathered, on a page, a stream of consciousness, momentary associations of memories and fragments of speech, that in their discontinuous flow tell us how this disjointed scene of the world may

[18] *Scritture femminili e Storia*, ed. Laura Guidi (Naples: Clio Press, 2004), 9.
[19] Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937; London: Virago, 1985), 113.
[20] Gertrude Stein, *Wars I Have Seen* (New York: Random House, 1945), 9-10.

create a story that is continually tangled up in itself, continually interrupted and taken up again, as in a jigsaw puzzle whose pieces have been lost. Hers is a wartime story and not a war story, a distinction in narrative structure uniting many women's writings noted by Elizabeth Bowen in the Preface to one of her works:

> [They are] all wartime [stories], none of them war stories. There are no accounts of war action, even as I knew it – for instance, air raids …. These are, more, studies of climate, war climate, and of the strange growths it raised. I see war (or should I say feel war?) more as a territory than as a page of history: of its impersonal active historic side I have, I find, not written.[21]

These are therefore stories about a climate of war and its strange "growths" which imposed themselves on the narratives of many women writers.

The case of the English writer Stevie Smith's *Over the Frontier* (1938) is emblematic, a particularly revealing example that has been unjustly neglected among war narratives. In *Over the Frontier*, by means of a narrative register that has much in common with the stylistic choices of Gertrude Stein, the fragmentary technique prevails over the idea of totality that has abandoned reality and that the novel can no longer capture. Pompey, the protagonist and narrative voice, under the pretext of a failed love affair, goes to Germany in the period just before the outbreak of the Second World War and is drawn into a spy story. But the frontier she crosses and the places that form the background to the first-person narrative voice are Kafkaesque spaces, places where nothing happens and where the waiting for something that will not be told to the readers dominates. It is no accident that it is a castle where Pompey and her friend Josephine must face the nightmare of the impending war. It is an improbable place where unconnected and fragmentary things happen.

As in a nightmare, the story proceeds in ellipses, with dislocated meanings and the rapid appearance of characters alongside Pompey, including the friend accompanying her to the mysterious Tom who involves her in a war story destined to remain untold. The impossibility of grasping the thread of one's life at a time in which nothing can be related to the past or is identifiable through the eyes of

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[21] Elizabeth Bowen, *Collected Impressions* (London: Longman, 1950), 48.

the past, makes the story an improbable rhetorical ghost that cannot be captured in the succession of episodes, which have no links to place them in an identifying framework. The protagonist's long monologue also decrees the death of the well-constructed novel, the expression of a bygone age,[22] a process started in the first years of the century to which World War I contributed in a relevant way. For the English writer, the reality of the war, that had already broken out on the Continent with Hitler's occupation first of the Rhineland (1936) and then of Austria (1938), means producing the absurd as a constituent part of human experience that empties narrative forms, or nanny's tales, as Musil called them, with a beginning, a middle and an end.

The story of the narrative voice that uncoils, twists itself, and becomes entangled, continually losing the thread and then finding it again might be read as a reflex of the intellectual political climate and anxieties of the period. Pompey asks herself and the reader about her country, her history and the ideology that this history has produced and the way in which it has contributed to forming the individual and the perception that a person has of him or herself:

> In England there is no national ideology, or not one that is formed, to be carried through, to be expressed in a word, as in Germany it is expressed and impressed, with what of an original pure intention we cannot know, with what a calamity in event we know too well.
>
> And upon this side of the frontier it marches with the enemy, it informs their dotty heroism. But we shall win, we shall win. We have the arms and the money, the mercenaries and the riff-raff of many armies. Death to the dotty idealisms, death to all ideologies; death upon the flying bullet that has been paid for; death from the bent form of the hired soldier; death upon the wind from the north …. I grind my teeth to think of Germany and her infection of arrogance and weakness and cruelty that has spread to our own particular enemy, has set on foot this abominable war, has brought us all to this pass, and me to a hatred that is not without guilt, is not, is not a pure flame of altruism; ah, hatred is never this, is always rather to make use of this grand altruistic feeling, to bring a head in ourselves all that there is in us of a hatred and fury upon a less convenient truth. [23]

[22] Stein said that the First World War killed the nineteenth century and the Second World War consolidated this irreversible process (see Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography*, 1985, 16).

[23] Stevie Smith, *Over the Frontier* (1938; London: Virago Press, 1985), 255-56.

There are numerous comments in the text on the particular enemy that threatens everyone from within his or her own being, an interior fascism, as it appears to the protagonist that the war risks bringing out alongside the desire to cultivate death that has always been part of the history of humankind.

"Ah is not this the quintessence of our invention that the God of our Hope must suffer to be surveyed in a shameful death, to be worshipped so much only in the suffering he endured, his lineaments unknown except in torment?":[24] even this ironic comment on he who holds the fate of the world in his hands is included without a break in the endless chattering of the narrative voice through thoughts that come and go, that do not need to be ordered since only the disordered compilation of thoughts and emotions can narrate the experience of man being divorced from his own life.

Pompey's long digression shows the extent to which a thought that is organized in sentences and in sequences had become extraneous to the mind that was thinking it; an ocean of thoughts remains below the surface of the conscious mind, chased away by the haunting closeness of death that removes any need to think such thoughts:

> And first Josephine was talking about Mussolini and how much better the trains are running in Italy now, for when she was last over there I get the impression they never ran at all, but only strolled about looking to find a nice place for a lie-down and a good sleep. And then she is getting rather cross about Abyssinia. And so here I must point out to her, but just to be so annoying for poor Josephine I must say: But do not be so cross with Mussolini because certainly it is through him and through this African adventure of his that has for him had a successful outcome, it is through this that we without one stroke of war now have Egypt, again within our hands in such a way as she has not been in our hands since the war, and no offence no offence to anyone at all, that this grand piece of arrangement has made us again the master of Egypt, with the Nile for our river and the whole vast darkness of middle Africa to link up maybe with our east African dependencies – oh so charming is this word dependency, how fascinating I find it.[25]

[24] *Ibid.*, 263.
[25] *Ibid.*, 155.

Anticipating Stein's style of writing, Stevie Smith's novel fills the spaces left blank in war stories, filling them in the same way as the American writer by questioning the words and thoughts on war that are formed and broken up in search of some meaning, a meaning to imprint on literature as well as on life:

> … so many thoughts, crested and predatory, coming rolling up alongside, and behind them out to sea a whole ocean of thoughts to come rolling and slithering up the beach of consciousness. Oh there will perhaps not be time for all the thoughts, all that great wilderness of thought, coming rolling up from the deep deep sea.[26]

[26] *Ibid.*, 44-45.

“I HEAR SOUNDS OF SPAIN”: FOREIGN WOMEN WRITERS AND THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

ARANCHA ARÁNZAZU USANDIZAGA

The literature inspired by the Spanish Civil War has been remarkable. The first anthologies of war poetry appeared as early as 1939, and the memory of the Civil War has always continued to live in the British and American imaginations. Yet in the many anthologies and texts of Spanish War writing and in the many critical and historical studies of the texts, very few have collected the considerable material written by women on the Civil War and even fewer have seriously discussed their work. For the first time, as late as 1986, in his second collection of Spanish War writing, *Spanish Front: Writers on the Civil War*, Valentine Cunningham devoted fifty pages of his volume of more than three hundred pages to the writing of women.[1] It is necessary to read women’s texts about the Spanish War to realize the huge neglect that the writing of foreign women has suffered. Indeed many women from all over the world went to Spain during the Civil War; among them many English-speaking women who wrote most interestingly about their experiences and impressions. Some of them even joined the troops and fought at the fronts in the first four months of the war, the period in which the Spanish Republican Government allowed women to actually join in the fighting. Indeed the first foreigner to die in Spain was a British woman, the sculptor Felicia Brown.

After the important changes achieved by women in Europe and the USA as a consequence of World War I,[2] the Thirties were seriously challenging women’s post-war hopes for professional and personal improvement. As a consequence of the economic depression affecting most Western countries since 1929, international politics had become

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[1] Valentine Cunningham, *Spanish Front: Writers on the Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986).

[2] Sandra M. Gilbert, “Soldier’s Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women, and the Great War”, *Signs*, VIII/3 (Spring 1983), 422-50.

intensely complicated by the menace of totalitarian ideologies; and in particular, after 1933, by the increasing power of Fascism. This confused scenario offered some advantages to international Communism, which extended its target of influence in the West from the proletariat to the intellectuals. Due to the Depression and the incompetence of democratic governments to improve the situation, many Western intellectuals saw in Communism a hope and a possible way out of current difficulties. The English translation of Lenin's *Literature and Revolution* in 1928 further helped to assure intellectuals of the Russian Revolution's respect for literary experimentation and creative freedom. Events in the Soviet Union under Stalin were proving the contrary, but Western intellectuals scarcely had access to the necessary information.

Women's desire for improvement was considerably affected by the circumstances, and though the Left seemed to offer a greater consideration for the problems of women, the general need of so many other people was thought to be far more urgent than feminine liberation. Many women intellectuals approached the Left in Britain and the USA, and many continued to write about the social and political events even though their writing was usually marginal. A considerable number of women took great interest in helping the Spanish Republic during the Spanish Civil War.[3] Although there were even some women who backed the insurgents, only a few went to Spain and wrote about their experience, and most foreign women writers sympathized with the Spanish Left.

But there were several other reasons for women's participation in the Spanish Civil War. To many foreign women writers the War became an opportunity to collaborate in an accepted and prestigious action; a chance to undertake a personal and political adventure in the hope of re-establishing democratic truth, but simultaneously of submitting themselves to unknown experiences in the desire of proving and knowing themselves. Yet as Robert Stradling indicates in

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[3] See Robert Schulman, *The Power of Political Art: The 1930s Literary Left Reconsidered* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Charlotte Nekola and Paula Rabinowitz, *Writing Red* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1998).

his recent study,[4] very few foreigners, men or women, who went and fought in Spain knew the country and the political problems that had led to the Civil War, and their writing has contributed to the creation of what he calls the "Myth of Spain", a somewhat inaccurate picture of the actual historical circumstances and events. What Stradling demonstrates is that most foreigners projected their own personal and political anxieties and ideas over the War, and continued to read the country in an habitual Romantic tradition, a tradition clearly colonialist and imperialist in its approach, somewhat similar to what Edward Said defines as "orientalism". What remains most interesting in the War texts written by some foreign women is their response to the challenge of encountering a country very far removed from the fantasy they had expected. In political terms, when faced with the true ambiguities of the Spanish scenario, some of the writers proved capable of recognizing their own misconceptions and of admitting their disorientation.

According to Leah Manning who visited Spain several times during the War, as soon as the British government agreed on its policy of non-intervention in Spain in August 1936, some MPs who were against the decision, and among them the few women who had been elected to Parliament, met in an adjacent room and organized the important initiative that was to help and support the Spanish Republic in everything except the sending of weapons. The ultimate responsibility for the many charities and help that was immediately started all over England for Spain was given to a woman, Katherine Atholl, Duchess of Atholl, a member of the Conservative Party, who worked closely during the war years with Members of Parliament with other beliefs and political orientation in her desire to help the legitimate Spanish Republican Government. Though she only visited Spain once with the first British delegation of MPs that travelled to Spain, her effort was outstanding in many ways. In 1938 she published *Searchlight on Spain*, the first political study of the War and an acute interpretation of the events happening in Spain in the context of international politics. Atholl's commitment to the Spanish War eventually forced her to give up her seat in Parliament as a result of her radical disagreement with the Government's policy towards Spain.

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[4] Robert Stradling, *History and Legend: Writing the International Brigades* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003).

In her memoir, *A Life for Education*, Leah Manning describes her pioneering work in the field of education, offers a detailed description of the history of the Labour party and provides valuable information about her work for Spain during the Civil War.[5] Having inherited the tradition of social work from her Unitarian grandmother, she studied to be a schoolteacher at Cambridge at the Homerton Teacher Training College and soon joined the National Union of Teachers (NUT). In 1929 she became its president, and in 1931 she was elected as a Labour MP, a position she lost after only a short time. She was again elected in 1945 and remained in Parliament until 1950.

Manning was one of the few foreigners who had been to Spain before the Civil War, and in 1935 had even published a book about it, *What I Saw in Spain*.[6] During the Thirties she had approached the British Communist Party and was actually in Russia when the Spanish War broke out. She immediately returned to England and with the help of friends was able to travel to Spain. This first journey, during which she managed to visit Alvarez del Vayo, the Spanish minister for External Affairs, was dangerous and brief, and she returned to England with the hope of convincing the British Government to support Republican Spain – something that did not happen. Her other missions in Spain were more successful. In 1937 she was responsible for sending several thousand Basque children from Bilbao to England by boat before the city fell to the insurgents. Her main work had been to travel from city to city in the United Kingdom holding public meetings and raising funds for Spain as well as convincing young men to enlist in the International Brigades clandestinely sent to Spain from several countries after September 1936.

There was also Charlotte Haldane, the author of *Truth Will Out*, an informative and important autobiography that includes her experience in Spain, and who was connected to the British Communist Party.[7] Married to a well-known scientist at Cambridge, J.B. Haldane, and already an established writer in 1936, the author had been to Spain before the Civil War and had published several widely read articles about the country.[8] As a result she was immediately asked to

[5] Leah Manning, *A Life for Education* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1970).
[6] Leah Manning, *What I Saw in Spain* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1935).
[7] Charlotte Haldane, *Truth Will Out* (London: Right Book Club, 1949).
[8] She was a regular correspondent of *The Daily Epress* and the *New Statesman*.

collaborate with the Communist Party in helping Republican Spain. Her first four-month commitment was in Paris where she was in charge of receiving the young clandestine, British volunteers, destined to fight in Spain. The young volunteers travelled to France by bus pretending to be tourists, were organized and given instructions in Paris, and were immediately sent to Spain through the Pyrenees. Charlotte Haldane went to Spain on several occasions during the Civil War, visiting the fronts and meeting both Spanish and other foreign politicians. But as the war proceeded, she slowly discovered manipulation, abuses and open treason among the Communists, and she became increasingly critical of Communism and of the Left.

The war attracted famous women Anarchists, such as Mary Low and Emma Goldman who went to Spain and wrote about the War. Low was a young Surrealist poet who travelled to Spain with her lover Juan Breá as soon as the Civil War broke out. They both collaborated in writing a remarkable book, *The Red Spanish Notebook: The First Six Months of the Revolution and the Civil War*, each signing the chapters they had written.[9] They arrived in Barcelona a few days after the beginning of the war, settled in the city's Anarchist headquarters, and helped in the party's political and military organization. Low describes the singular atmosphere of the city in the hands of the Anarchists: the persecution of those belonging to the bourgeois classes, the sudden desire of some women to take part in the political and military scenario, and the heroism of many, some of them foreigners fighting for a cause they believed in. She provides a narrative of scenes and events that represent ideas and beliefs, such as the persecution she witnessed in the centre of the city of a car full of well-to-do Catalans, trying to escape from the city, who were shot dead by the Anarchists. At the same time, she also gives amusing accounts of women lying to their husbands and fathers about their whereabouts by saying they were at cooking or sewing lessons, when they had really been to military instruction courses.

Yet Low is extremely concerned with the subjection of women in Spain particularly among members of the Left. Her account of the death at the front of a German Jewish anarchist, Putz, is very moving and symbolizes the tragic waste of a talented and beautiful young

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[9] Mary Low and Juan Breá, *The Red Spanish Notebook: The First Six Months of the Revolution and the Civil War* (London: Martin Secker and Warburg, 1937).

woman. But Low is at her best when explaining her return to France. In their Romantic belief in Anarchism, she cannot accept the negotiations of the Spanish Anarchists with Communists and their decision to take part in the Government, and decides to leave six months after her arrival. When she reaches the frontier the policeman finds the extraordinary revolver she had used in Spain and which, not wanting to leave it behind, she has now hidden in her clothes. In the end she decides to send her revolver to a Spanish friend in Barcelona, but her reluctance to give up the weapon once again proves her Romantic attachment to the Civil War.

Only a few women decided to join the insurgents and write about them. One of the most interesting women to have been politically committed to the rebel cause was Florence Farmborough. Farmborough who broadcasted news from Nationalist Spain during the Civil War for British radio, published her interpretation of the War and her record of events in *Life and People in National Spain*,[10] in which she insists on the mistaken interpretation and false news newspapers in Britain were publishing about the War at the time. Farmborough's passionate defence of the insurgents arose out her terrible experiences on the Eastern front during the First World War. As a young woman, Farmborough had gone to Russia to look after the children of a Russian doctor in St Petersburg. When the War broke out she had become a nurse at the front and had been through the terrible Revolution in 1917. Already living in Spain in 1936 because of her health problems, her hatred of Communism led her to closely collaborate with the rebel cause and to passionately write in their favour.

Other accounts of women favourable to the rebels are less interesting – such as Eleonora Tennant's narrative of her quick visit to Spain in *Spanish Journey: Personal Experiences of the Spanish Civil War*.[11] Adamantly favourable to the rebels, she describes what she wishes to see rather than what she actually was able to see. Consequently, her text is dominated by idealization and prejudices of little literary or historical value. But those who made the Spanish Civil

[10] Florence Farmborough, *Life and People in National Spain* (Lanham: Sheed and Ward, 1938).
[11] Eleonora Tennant, *Spanish Journey: Personal Experiences of the Spanish Civil War* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1936).

War better known to English-speaking readers at the time were not only politically committed women but already established writers who becoming interested in the War, and were inspired by what they saw in Spain to give an account of their impressions and responses.

Such a writer was Gamel Woolsey, who published *Death's Other Kingdom* in 1939, her account of the first six months of the war.[12] When the War started Woolsey had been living with her husband Gerald Brenan for several years in Spain, in a house and a village very close to Málaga that she feels and describes almost as paradise. But as the Civil War begins to be felt in her village and in Málaga, Woolsey's reflections about it become increasing analytical. The reason for her exceptionally acute vision may have to do with the fact she already knew the country very well, spoke the language and had read its literature, but perhaps was also aided by her husband's excellent knowledge of Spanish history and politics. Though initially Romantic in her perception of the country and its people, the war forces Woolsey to develop a personal perspective independent of traditional idealizing and impoverishing approaches, and helps her to understand the social and political circumstances underlying the War. Though initially enjoying the privilege of her position as a foreigner belonging to what she considered to be a superior culture and country, Woolsey ends up by understanding and profoundly sympathizing not only with her Spanish friends but also with her servants' most intimate dramas and difficulties.

What characterizes and distinguishes the literature of the Spanish Civil War is the fact that so many excellent writers, poets, and intellectuals, men and women, chose to write about it. The first two British women writers to arrive in Spain three weeks after the War broke out, were Sylvia Townsend Warner and the poet Valentine Ackland. Though they were both connected at the time with the Communist Party, they could not wait for the party's orders in their intense desire to help the Spanish Republic. They rented a car, travelled to Spain and became the first foreign ambulance drivers. The International Brigades began to arrive in late September 1936. The country and the war inspired both authors to write some excellent poetry, articles for periodicals, and in Warner's case, to write short

[12] Gamel Woolsey, *Death's Other Kingdom* (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1939).

stories as well a novel, *After the Death of Don Juan* on the subject of Spain.[13] They both returned to Spain in July 1937 as members of the British delegation to participate in the International Writers Conference organized by Pablo Neruda and Nancy Cunard in Madrid and Valencia.

Like most foreigners Warner and Ackland idealize Spain and the Republic in their journalism, yet their poetry and Warner's fiction about Spain are remarkably full of compassion and understanding. In poems such as "Journey to Barcelona", "Waiting at Cerbere" or "Benicasim", Warner demonstrates how profoundly the war has affected her, and sees the colours, the smells and sights of the country deeply subverted by a terrible tragedy. The same can be remarked in Acklands' "From Badajoz to Dorset", in which the poet can hear in the Dorset wind the tragic sounds of war originating in remote Badajoz. Warner published several short stories inspired by the Civil War: "The Red Carnation" is perhaps the most experimental in that she writes from the perspective of an innocent German Fascist soldier who is sent to fight for the insurgents in Spain and must slowly awaken to the horrors of their cause and of his destiny in Spain.[14]

The British poet Nancy Cunard became intensely involved in the Spanish Civil War. She spent long periods during the war in Spain: she learnt the language with such proficiency that she translated Spanish poetry into English, and persistently wrote about it. Cunard lived at the time in France and had established a small printing press in her home. With the help of the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, Cunard thought out a famous questionnaire she sent to hundreds of intellectuals all over the world asking them to declare what their political position was in relation to the Spanish Civil War. The answers, mostly favourable to the Republic, were published in the July 1937 issue of *Left Review*.

But the author's most interesting literary contribution to the war was the articles she wrote after the war for *The Manchester Guardian* on behalf of the thousands of Spanish refugees stranded in southern France. The refugees had started to arrive in huge numbers before the fall of Barcelona in January 1938, and they continued to arrive

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[13] Sylvia Townsend Warner, *After the Death of Don Juan* (New York: Viking, 1938).
[14] See Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1982).

uninterruptedly until the end of the Civil War. But very few had the time and energy to think about them at a time when the eyes of the world had ceased to focus on Spain and on the tragic ending of the War, for by then Hitler's aggressive policies had opened up another major area of crisis in Central Europe. Very few intellectuals followed the Spanish refugees into France and denounced the terrible conditions in which they lived. Some women writers and social workers did, and made a huge effort to improve their lives. Cunard is one of them, and her articles, "A Whole Landscape Moving" (7 February 1939), "The Refugees from Perpignan" (8 February 1939), "The Soldiers Leave Their Battlefields Behind" (9 February 1939), were a rarity that *The Manchester Guardian* published immediately.

Naturally the war was widely discussed in America. Not only did volunteer troops arrive – the Lincoln Brigade – to help Republican Spain, but many observers and intellectuals as well. Among them many women nurses, social workers, besides intellectuals. One of the American writers to have been most influenced by the war was Martha Gellhorn, whose journey to Spain could not have been less promising. An ambitious and extremely beautiful young writer at the time, with a couple of short stories already published, in 1936 Gellhorn was in search of a solid professional and personal path. More immediately, she travelled to Spain in pursuit of Ernest Hemingway, who had been given the assignment to report from Spain for an American news agency. Gellhorn joined him in Madrid in the famous Hotel Florida, the place foreign reporters and visitors chose to stay at during the Civil War and went with him to visit the fronts as well as the different sights of war. In her memoir of the Spanish war she collected in *The Face of War*, Gellhorn candidly explains how she had managed to enter Spain only because a friend of hers in America, the editor of *Collier's*, had given her a letter confirming she was one of their reporters.

Though she had never intended to write war reports, she confesses that a gentleman friend and writer, most probably Hemingway, encouraged her to write about the war and send her articles to *Collier's*. When she received the third article with her name on the masthead, she concluded that "once on the masthead, I was evidently

a war correspondent".[15] After Spain, Gellhorn never stopped reporting and was to become the most devoted and probably the best woman war correspondent in English. She reported on all the wars taking place in the world during the twentieth century, including the first Gulf War by which time she was over eighty. But she learnt her trade in Spain where she managed to find a radically original speech. Her war reports rarely discuss political events or military actions. Her focus is on the effects of war upon ordinary people who try to continue to lead ordinary lives in the midst of war; her ability is remarkable, and her writing became powerfully moving. She managed to marry Hemingway after the Spanish Civil War, although their marriage did not last long. She seemed to forget Hemingway quite easily but what she could never forget was the Spanish Civil War, to the extent that it became the central subject of her writing, both journalistic and fictional, for many years.

Like Cunard, Gellhorn did not abandon the Spanish refugees after the War. As late as 1945 she still went back to visit them and to write about them. One of her most powerful reports she ever wrote about the war, "The Undefeated",[16] was written on one of her later visits to the Spanish refugees in southern France. Spain is present in many of the short stories she published in her collection of essays, *The Heart of Another* (1941). The characters in her novel, *A Stricken Field* (1944) are also connected with the Spanish War, and several stories in her 1958 collection of stories, *Two by Two*, continue to be about her experiences during the Spanish Civil War.[17]

Many other American writers went to Spain during the Civil War – one of them Josephine Herbst, who had written Socialist novels and was a regular contributor to *New Masses*. Her visit to Spain inspired some of the most penetrating and honest written material on the Civil War, although it was not published until 1991 in *The Starched Blue Sky of Spain and Other Memoirs*, a collection of her autobiographical writing. Intensely influenced by the Left during the Thirties, like many other foreigners, Herbst went to Spain with very specific ideas about the country and the war and with the standard interpretations provided

[15] Martha Gellhorn, *The Face of War* (New York: Atlantic Monthly, 1988), 16.
[16] Martha Gellhorn, "The Undefeated", in *The Heart of Another*, ed. Alvah Bessie (New York: Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, 1952), 435-41.
[17] Martha Gellhorn, *A Stricken Field* (London, Virago Modern Classics, 1986).

by the Left. But what she found in Spain was an unexpected situation and very far from simple: "What was wanted was black or white …. But it may have seemed to me that what I brought back was too appallingly diffuse."[18] Profoundly disillusioned with the procedures of the Left in Republican Spain, on her return to America, it became impossible for her to write in the expected terms, and she had to wait a long time to be able to come to terms with her experience.

Though she can provide no clear answers, Herbst is one of the few foreigners to ask herself why she had gone to Spain: "The unknown is dear to us, and contrary to opinion, security is not the heart's true desire."[19] Initially Herbst joined the group of foreigners at the Hotel Florida in Madrid, though she managed to visit different cities and towns, as well as hospitals and fronts. She was in Barcelona in May 1937 when Communists fought Anarchists, and she has interesting things to say about that tragic episode. Yet her greatest discovery takes place in the trenches where she sees and talks to the actual soldiers who are facing danger and death. The author realizes their humanity, their vulnerability, and above all she discovers their speech, the only language of truth she has heard in the Spanish War. Her penetration and compassion are extraordinary and help her understand a very alien and complex war. In the end it is the Spanish women, particularly the old women, who must bear the suffering of loss and of hard work, who earn her respect. Her text proves an exceptionally insightful understanding of herself and of the events taking place in Spain.

The New York writers Lillian Hellman and Dorothy Parker visited Spain during the Civil War. Hellman devotes Chapter 8 of her autobiography, *An Unfinished Woman* (1969), to her experiences there that had deeply moved her.[20] Her text describes her stay in Madrid, and like other authors she tries to convey the extraordinary impression of contemplating the effects of bombing on a city. She tells of her return to Paris by train. The author shares her compartment with a young French journalist who must return because his serious lung disease. In the long hours the journey lasts they both discover their

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[18] Josephine Herbst, *The Starched Blue Sky of Spain and Other Memoirs* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 131.
[19] *Ibid*., 132.
[20] Lillian Hellman, *An Unfinished Woman* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1999).

shared passion for Republican Spain. Hellman is deeply moved by the young man because when they arrive in Paris the young man's death proves his extraordinary heroism in risking his life for the cause he believed in.

Upon her return from Spain, Dorothy Parker, renowned for her wit, confirmed that what she had seen in Madrid had been one of the few things that had managed to make her lose her sense of humour. She was indeed so affected by the suffering she witnessed that on returning to America and while the war lasted, she devoted a great deal of her time and energy to helping to relieve the situation. Although she always felt shy when having to speak in public, she travelled from city to city, took part in meetings, and constantly gave speeches to secure financial help for the Spanish Republic. But she also wrote about her experience of the war and one of her best stories, "Soldiers of the Republic", is devoted to it.[21] It is obviously an autobiographical tale in which two young foreign women sit in a café on a Sunday afternoon in Valencia. Since the café is full, a group of soldiers on leave asks them to be allowed to share their table. Though the girls know very little Spanish they manage to communicate with the soldiers and to understand their stories. The soldiers obviously need to talk about their lives and the families they have not seen for many months. One of them is particularly worried. His wife has written to him from France not complaining about the food but saying she is very anxious because she has no thread with which to darn her children's clothes. When the girls get up and go to pay for their coffee, the waiter lets them know that the soldiers have already taken care of their payment. Parker catches the atmosphere of the café as well as the moods of her characters in this very convincing story.

Many poets in Britain, the USA, and Canada were profoundly moved by the war. Muriel Rukeyser, another American writer of the Left, was in Spain covering the Olympic Games that were being held in Barcelona as a counter to the Games in Berlin being hosted by Hitler. She arrived a few weeks before the Civil War broke out and then remained in the city only another five days when she and most foreigners were evacuated by ship to Sete, a town in southern France. In spite of her short experience of war, it made a huge impression on

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[21] Dorothy Parker, "Soldiers of the Republic", in *The Heart of Spain*, ed. Alvah Bessie (New York: Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, 1952), 190-94.

her, and while travelling to France she wrote a long and memorable epic poem, "Mediterranean", in which she experimentally integrates the Spanish War in the international context. The poem further allows the poet to develop a new poetics that will justify the poet's need to integrate the powerful aesthetic and experimental impulse of the Modernist literary movement as well as express a political commitment inspired by the social conditions created by the Depression of the 1930s.

Other poets never went to Spain but they had much to say about the Civil War. Such is the case of Edna St Vincent Millay who wrote such tragic poems as "Say That We Saw Spain Die", or "From a Town in a State of Siege".[22] By the time these poems were written, it was becoming clear that Republican Spain was losing the War. Dorothy Livesay and several other Canadian women poets wrote excellent and tragic poetry remembering the many Canadian volunteers who were fighting as well as those who had fallen in Spain.

Not much was known about the large number of foreign women who went to Spain during the war as nurses and social workers until 1986 when Jim Fyrth published his important study, *The Signal Was Spain: The Aid Spain Movement in Britain 1936-1939*,[23] that reveals the size and the importance of the help organized in Britain during the war mostly to help the Spanish Republic. Fyrth discusses the work done for Spain by Katherine Atholl, Eleanor Rathbone, Leah Manning, Ellen Wilkinson, Dr Audrey Russell, Dr Janet Vaughan, Francesca Wilson, Isabel Brown, Lady Violet Bonham-Carter, Aileen Palmer, Margot Miller and many others. Women's presence is particularly relevant in the SMAC (Spanish Medical Aid Committee), that is to say, in the strictly medical section of the programme. Fyrth describes the huge number of women who participated, and pays homage to their devotion and heroism.

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[22] Edna St Vincent Millay, *Collected Lyrics of Edna St Vincent Millay* (New York: Harper, 1943), 370 and 191.

[23] Jim Fyrth, *The Signal Was Spain: The Spanish Aid Movement in Britain, 1936-39* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1986).

PART II

WORLD WAR I AND WORLD WAR II: SACRALIZATION, COMMEMORATION, IMAGINATION, SILENCE

War Literature, Bearing Witness, and the Problem of Sacralization: Trauma and Desire in the Writing of Mary Borden and Others

MAX SAUNDERS

"Nothing like commemorating an event to help you forget it": so writes Art Spiegelman, best known as the creator of *Maus*, the comic-book version of the Holocaust. It comes from what was first published as an occasional strip in the *London Review of Books* following the attacks of September 11th 2001, called "In the Shadow of No Towers". This comment was made for the second anniversary on 11 September 2003.[1] His immediate target is what he calls "the bombardment of kitsch" in the commemoration ceremony on the first anniversary. But his mode of representing the event, and the fact that he, whose work is so strongly associated with the Holocaust, chooses to represent it, is revealing in other ways too.

How can "No Towers" cast a shadow? Our immediate response to Spiegelman's title is presumably to take it as meaning that the absence of one of the key landmarks of the New York skyline is something New Yorkers, or Americans generally, cannot forget. And that the event of their destruction has cast its shadow on us all. But this shadow is the shadow of there not being a shadow any more – a shadow of no shadow. A shadow is the absence of light, so the shadow of no towers is the absence of an absence. That is to say, there is a double negative implied in Spiegelman's formula, which might suggest to us that we are in the presence, if that is the word, of negation or denial. The following essay will consider representations of war in the light, or under the shadow, of these ideas; and ask: what is it that our commemorations of war might be trying to make us forget?

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[1] *London Review of Books*, 11 September 2003, 20-21. The series has subsequently been collected into a book, *In the Shadow of No Towers* (London: Viking, 2004).

One way of thinking about Cultural Memory is to see it as memories we do not actually have as individuals. You fought in World War II and remember it. It is part of your personal memory. I did not, so it forms part of my cultural memory. Cultural memory is the part of history we feel most inward with: including things we did not witness, but know as if we did.

Your feeling about an event will differ if it forms part of your personal memory rather than part of your cultural memory. It is often said that most of the World War I memoirs started coming out about a decade after the end of the War. There was a comparable lapse of time before Holocaust survivors, and many other war veterans, published their World War II memoirs. These people had good reasons for not wanting to remember, not wanting to commemorate their experiences. It was perhaps only as they began to feel they were in danger of forgetting them that they started writing about them. Another motive may be a feeling of unease with the way a traumatic event is becoming assimilated into cultural memory – especially when that cultural memory is felt as being at odds with personal memory. While watching *Saving Private Ryan*, my stepfather (who fought in the Pacific, not in Europe) found one scene exasperating, in which Tom Hanks gives a sanctimonious, earnest justification for why he is fighting. This seemed to him utterly implausible: a misrepresentation of the ironic understatement that characterized his memories of how participants actually spoke about the war.

The attitude to atrocity in those not directly involved is different. In her book *Modernism, History and the First World War*, Trudi Tate discusses the atrocity stories that were circulated as propaganda: a Canadian soldier crucified; mutilated nurses; raped nuns; “soldiers with their faces tattooed with enemy insignia, a German factory for converting battlefield corpses into usable products”.[2] She cites Freud’s analysis of the “Rat Man”, the “Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis” of 1909. The patient, Ernst Lanzer, had heard in the army a story of a “horrible punishment used in the East”, in which rats are placed in a pot applied to the victim’s buttocks. Freud is struck by Lanzer’s ambivalent expression when recounting the story, and

[2] Trudi Tate, *Modernism, History and the First World War* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1998), 45.

deduces that he felt "horror at pleasure of his own of which he himself was unaware".[3]

Tate suggests that wartime propaganda too is animated by horror at its own unconscious pleasure. The problem is that this mechanism might also describe our relation to other war narratives, especially those representing the unprecedented horrors of the Western Front and the Holocaust. Indeed, the question is larger still, and makes us ask: what is the pleasure we gain from the literature of suffering; whether epic; tragedy; horror; or the literature of war? Racine wrote of the peculiar pleasure of tragedy. What, then, is the peculiar pleasure of war literature? What does it do with our desire? Why do we desire it? These questions are more often asked about film, in which extreme violence and destruction is recognized as powerfully attractive. They are perhaps more disturbing in relation to literature. War literature is widely recognized to be exciting, and reading it as normal. Yet finding pleasure in pain is otherwise taken to be perverse – as sadism or masochism.

Furthermore, as Tate argues, criticism of war can be caught in a double bind: "Criticism of the war reveals some of the obscene pleasures which drive the war's psychic economy. But it also mobilizes them in its own writings." In British schools the teaching of First World War poetry is a key part of literary education. Schoolchildren read the graphic descriptions of appalling wounds, deaths, and madness, and enjoy them, often picking them out later as examples of their favourite literary works. It is the most eloquent writers against war who present the most unforgettable pictures of it – Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Vera Brittain.

One line of critical defence would be to say that we can draw a line between propaganda and art; that propaganda seeks to manipulate people cynically, whereas art wants to give expression to them in all their complexity and ambivalence. This is the distinction Tate implicitly defends. She praises a novel for "enacting" the contradiction between enjoyment and denial, "not only by exposing the damage done by rumours, lies, and sensational stories, but also

[3] Sigmund Freud, 'Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis', in *The Pelican Freud Library* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), IX, 47-48. Tate, *Modernism, History and the First World War*, 61.

because it is covertly interested [in] the pleasures they generate".[4] In many ways this is persuasive. Yet there is still a problem, of course. If you are "covertly interested" in pleasures, are you not unconsciously enjoying them to some extent? Can a war novelist, or autobiographer, ever not be complicit in the sadism, the perverse pleasure at pain?

I am going to explore this question by considering the case of the writer Mary Borden. Besides being a successful novelist, and literary hostess, she is remarkable for having served in both World Wars, both times establishing and running mobile hospitals in conjunction with the French: on the Western Front in World War I; and in World War II first in France, until the fall of France in 1940, and then in North Africa. She is also remarkable for having written a volume of memoirs about each War: *The Forbidden Zone* about the First, and *Journey Down a Blind Alley* about the Second.[5] I shall concentrate on *The Forbidden Zone*, because it is better written and more interesting; though *Journey Down a Blind Alley* is fascinating for its portrait of General de Gaulle and the tensions between the Allies and the Free French; and the differences between the two works raises interesting questions about the different roles in cultural memory of the two Wars.

Mary Borden's writing shows that ambivalent feelings about war were not unknown to participants too. Both books are concerned with the relation between suffering and pleasure; between war and excitement. Both pain and pleasure are stimuli to memory, as cathexes attached to memories. This is perhaps why people remember their war experiences so vividly, and remain excited by them years later. It could be argued that Borden is simply interested in the extraordinary contrasts war provides. The touching courtesy of the French soldiers apologizing for causing the nurses trouble, even as they are suffering from appalling pains and mutilations. The inexplicable cheerfulness of a badly burnt and injured soldier. The gentle appeal in the voice of the soldier who does not yet realize he has been blinded. That is, what positive values there are in the experience stand out precisely because

[4] *Ibid*., 62.

[5] Mary Borden, *The Forbidden Zone* (London: Heinemann, 1929); *Journey Down a Blind Alley* (New York and London: Harper, 1946). Page references to *The Forbidden Zone* will be given parenthetically in the text.

they are so unexpected in that context. But Borden's writing about pleasure is much more problematic than that.

The Forbidden Zone is in many ways a Modernist text. It is a series of intense sketches, vignettes of her war experience, followed by poems. Either could have taken their place in a Modernist journal like *Blast*: "To those who find these impressions confused, I would say that they are fragments of a great confusion" ("The Preface"). It is memoir by fragment, by impression, and the fragments have the technical self-consciousness and metaphoric intensity we expect of classic Modernism. In the chapter entitled "Moonlight", for example, she fantasizes about her companions:

> For companions there are, of course, the surgeons and the nurses and the old grizzled orderlies. But I have other companions more intimate than these. Three in particular, a lascivious monster, a sick bad-tempered animal, and an angel; Pain, Life and Death. The first two are quarrelsome .... Pain is the stronger. She is the greater. She is insatiable, greedy, vilely amorous, lustful, obscene – she lusts for the broken bodies we have here. (54)

Observing one of the nurses, Borden writes:

> She is no longer a woman. She is dead already, just as I am – really dead, past resurrection. Her heart is dead. She killed it. She couldn't bear to feel it jumping in her side when Life, the sick animal, choked and rattled in her arms. Her ears are deaf; she deafened them. She could not bear to hear Life crying and mewing. She is blind so that she cannot see the torn parts of men she must handle. Blind, deaf, dead – she is strong, efficient, fit to consort with gods and demons – a machine inhabited by the ghost of a woman … (59-60)

The nurse has killed the woman in herself in order to be able to carry on. But the position of the woman has been taken over by the personification of Pain:

> Once they were fathers and husbands and sons and the lovers of women. Now they scarcely remember. Sometimes they call to me "Sister, Sister!" in the faint voices of far-away men, but when I go near them and bend over them, I am a ghost woman leaning over a thing that is mewing; and it turns away its face and flings itself back

> into the arms of Pain, its monster bedfellow. Each one lies in the arms of this creature. Pain is the mistress of each one of them.
>
> Not one can escape her. Neither the very old ones nor the young slender ones. Their weariness does not protect them, nor their loathing, nor their struggling, nor their cursing. Their hideous wounds are no protection, nor the blood that leaks from their wounds on to the bedclothes, no the foul odour of their festering flesh. Pain is attracted by these things. She is a harlot in the pay of War, and she amuses herself with the wreckage of men. She consorts with decay, is addicted to blood, cohabits with mutilations, and her delight is the refuse of suffering bodies .... In the dark she wakes them and tightens her arms round their shriveled bodies. She strangles their cries. She pours her poisoned breath into their panting mouths. She squeezes their throbbing hearts in their sides .... This is true. I know. I have seen. (61-63)

In another sketch, “Blind”, the memory of the reception of a blinded soldier prompts some thoughts about a kind of self-blindness. She is puzzled by how she was able to be happy working amidst the squalor of war:

> Yes, I was happy there.
>
> Looking back, I do not understand that woman – myself – standing in that confused goods yard filled with bundles of broken human flesh. (149)

> I think that woman, myself, must have been in a trance, or under some horrid spell. Her feet are lumps of fire, her face is clammy, her apron is splashed with blood; but she moves ceaselessly about with bright burning eyes and handles the dreadful wreckage of men as if in a dream. She does not seem to notice the wounds or the blood. (151)

It might be objected that I am making too much of an honest expression of her feelings at the time. She was doing good work; saving lives. Some of it may well have been gratifying. And if we never hear that note of happiness in Vera Brittain’s autobiography, *Testament of Youth*, that is because her personal losses – brother, fiancé, friend – were too great for the War to feel anything other than a tragedy. Alternatively, it might be objected that what we have in the personification of Pain is a literary stereotype of the *femme fatale*: and a surprisingly misogynistic one, perhaps, given that it is written by a

woman, and an apparently extremely liberated one. For all the Modernist fragmentation and experimentation, there is also a *fin de siècle* quality, redolent of the Aesthetic movement. Yet nonetheless I still find that insistent sexualizing of pain disturbing. If this is "la belle dame sans merci", she is in full sadistic dominatrix gear. You could say that the juxtaposition of desire and agony serves to heighten the horror, and the more uneasy we feel about it the better. But it also insists on a fatal attraction to the horror. Pain, the woman, "is attracted to these things". And does not the writing itself do what it says Pain does? – luxuriate in horror; desire it?: "She consorts with decay, is addicted to blood, cohabits with mutilations, and her delight is the refuse of suffering bodies."

These passages also return us to the question of the aesthetic; to how art might differ from propaganda. For to personify pain as a mistress is to aestheticize it. Like other Modernist epiphanies, the drive is to transcend fact; to transmute it into mystery, visionary experience, ecstasy. This is what Borden's poems do too, as in "The Hill", which begins: "From the top of the hill I looked down on the beautiful, the gorgeous, the superhuman and monstrous landscape of the superb exulting war" (175). This might sound like Marinetti expanding on the beauty of war, in the passage analysed by Walter Benjamin in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" as an example of the fascist tendency to aestheticize politics.[6] Politically Borden was to prove a dedicated opponent of Nazi Germany. Rather, she is responding to a sense of crisis in history that affected many Modernists: a feeling, as T.S. Eliot said, writing about Joyce, of the "immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history".[7] In Borden's words, "To those who find these impressions confused, I would say that they are fragments of a great confusion".

The First World War was confusing because it was not what wars were supposed to be like; it was not what life was supposed to be like. It felt to many participants something in excess of what could be comprehended; something beyond humanity, beyond history. Witness

[6] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936), in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), 244.
[7] T.S. Eliot, "*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth" (1923), in *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 177.

Siegfried Sassoon bearing witness to an experience that seemed beyond imagining, and thus on the boundary of what could be described:

> I, a single human being with my little stock of earthly experience in my head, was entering once again the veritable gloom and disaster of the thing called Armageddon. And I saw it then, as I see it now – a dreadful place, a place of horror and desolation which no imagination could have invented.[8]

The response to this sense of the unprecedented and incommensurable ("the thing") was to metaphorize; to be transcendental; to read the War not as history, but as mystery; to treat it, as Sassoon does here, as eschatology; not another battle, but as the last battle: the thing called Armageddon. This was a common rhetorical trope; and its effect is to seek to move the war from the human to the metaphysical, the religious. To sacralize war. To give it the status of something sacred. "Sacralization" (defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "The action or fact of endowing with sacred qualities") is a key term in Peter Novick's controversial book *The Holocaust in American Life*.[9] Novick argues that American discourse has sacralized the Holocaust to an excessive degree. He is not a Holocaust denier, but offers a critique of a discourse in which the Holocaust acquires the function of a religious mystery: something it is taboo, or idolatrous to seek to represent directly; something that must be given a biblical name; described as unique.

For historians like Novick the desire to lift the Holocaust out of human history is to falsify not only the human suffering involved, but our sense of what humans are capable of. Sassoon's phrase about the Western Front as "a place of horror and desolation which no imagination could have invented" could also stand for the sacralizing attitude towards the Holocaust. It too has been described in those terms. Yet it is not just that the Holocaust was conceived and executed by human imagination. We need also to remember that World War I propaganda rumour about "a German factory for converting battlefield corpses into usable products". Because that is one of the aspects of

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[8] Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (London: Faber and Faber, 1930), 216.

[9] Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

Auschwitz that has seemed most inassimilable: its conversion of human individuals to the raw material of an industrial process. Yet here it is: imagined, as propaganda, thirty years before the Final Solution.

My argument is that this process of sacralization is not unique to the Holocaust; but now regularly follows mass trauma. Contemporary attitudes to World War I, to Hiroshima, to the Gulags, to the Vietnam War, and now to September 11th, could all be said to be sacralizing. That is what is happening when politicians say the world changed on September 11th. And that is partly what Art Spiegelman objects to in the commemorations of that event.

It could even be argued that, as we become more averse to risk, any public disaster becomes a site of sacralization: the collapse of a football stadium; a train crash; a murdered child. Indeed, at one extreme it may be that sacralization is simply a response to the trauma of death. Yet the commemoration of war goes beyond the commemoration of our ancestors and the consecration of their burial grounds. As with memorials to the unknown soldier, there is an element of mystery. As with the tradition of a two minutes' silence, there is an element of ceremony, and an evocation of prayer, which transforms a cultural memory into a sacred rite. Can the cultural memory of war ever be divorced from sacralization? Is cultural memory modernity's residue of the sacred: the ancestral traditions that shape identity and cultural values? It is certainly difficult, perhaps impossible, to avoid sacralizing our encounters with death, war, and other traumas.

But at a time when political rhetoric is once again glorifying war and violence as expressions of sacred concepts – jihad, axis of evil, war on terror, shock and awe, the crusade for freedom, and so on – we would do well to remember two things. First, that there are degrees of sacralization. Observing a respectful silence to commemorate suffering is one thing. Claiming the conversion of that suffering into a redemptive gift – "sacrifice" – or an object of aesthetic pleasure – "nobility", "heroism", "glory" – is quite another. To say this is emphatically not to deny the possibility of a genuine heroism; nor need it diminish one's admiration for someone prepared to risk their life for what they believe in, or one's awe at the appalling suffering of mass mechanized warfare. Such, after all, are among the most

harrowing and poignant themes of the best World War I poetry. And yet – and this is the second point to be remembered – it was those very poets, such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, who were most angered by the rhetoric that sought to sacralize war experiences, to claim that "*dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*".

As Derrida has suggested, in a piece about Levinas, this issue of the sacralizing of war relates to a tradition of posing war as ontological revelation; a spiritual test and transformation; and a philosophical attempt to deconstruct it: to liberate itself from the "visage of being that shows itself in war":

> It is at this level that the thought of Emmanuel Levinas can make us tremble.
>
> At the heart of the desert, in the growing wasteland, this thought, which fundamentally no longer seeks to be a thought of Being and phenomenality, makes us dream of an inconceivable process of dismantling and dispossession .... A thought, finally, which seeks to liberate itself from a philosophy fascinated by the "visage of being that shows itself in war" which "is fixed in the concept of totality which dominates Western philosophy".[10]

One might say that the unknown soldier represents the visage of non-being, too. But his absence is sacralized. The war dead are said to represent a sacrifice, which like Christ's is supposed to be redemptive. This is meant to make us feel indebted; to be inadequate to their sacrifice; and thus guilty. Such a strategy is at the heart of recent World War II films too. *Schindler's List* was criticized for centring its representation of the Holocaust not on the six million victims, but on the handful of the saved. Such criticism is partly motivated by one version of sacralization: the Holocaust is beyond representation because any attempt at representing it is bound to misrepresent it by reducing it to received conventions (such as narrative conventions of rescue or salvation). Yet the structure of the film can be seen as motivated by another version of sacralization. By taking a story of salvation as somehow representative of the Holocaust is, at least at an emotional level, to seek to convert trauma into redemption. In a less problematic way, *Saving Private Ryan* can be seen as attempting the

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[10] Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas", in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), 83.

same sleight of hand. Focusing on one of the episodes of greatest American losses, the D-Day landings, which formed its unforgettable first half-hour, full of the trauma of death and mutilation, the film then works to turn this image of mass suffering into a story of the preservation of a single life. It too could thus be seen as converting trauma into a redemptive "saving".

I now want to place alongside the concept of sacralization another view that might seem diametrically opposed: that of testimony. Here I am indebted to the work of Shoshana Felman, who has argued that testimony is our mode of relating to events; that we live in an "age of testimony".[11] She starts from the legal origins of the term: the bearing witness in a court of law to establish the facts. But, as she says, this is required precisely when the facts are obscure, in doubt. This leads her to another, and more profound definition of what it means to live in an age of testimony. The most searching testimonies of our era, she writes, "seem to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference".

Felman says that like Novick she is opposed to sacralizing the Holocaust, which is her prime example of such an event "in excess of our frames of reference". Yet her language finds the drive hard to resist. Like the phrase "bearing witness", her use of the term "testimony" seems to me also to have a sacralizing force; as is signalled by the recourse to scriptural diction in each case. Bearing witness is the opposite of bearing false witness; it is trying to state the truth, but indicates that the witness is under a spiritual as well as legal obligation to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God. (Even the legal connotation of "witness" is inextricable from the scriptural, when witnesses are required to give evidence under oath sworn on a sacred text.) One meaning of "testimony" is "The Mosaic law or decalogue as inscribed on the two tables of stone" (*OED*).

Testimony must accumulate facts, real experiences, so as to realize, to make real, what would otherwise remain unimaginable,

[11] Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 5-6 and 206.

incomprehensible. But in the cases of World War I or the Holocaust or Hiroshima or other atrocities, the force of the facts is to represent the event as in excess of our normal categories of experience, or understanding, or metaphysics. And it is a short step from saying an event is in excess of our frames of reference, to claiming that it is outside history; beyond representation. War writing thus moves between (is perhaps unimaginable without?) two rhetorical poles: on the one hand, documentary realism that seeks to represent the facts; to bear witness; to give testimony. But, on the other hand, this is always already bound up with sacralization. As Felman argues, a testimonal attitude comes from feeling the event is in excess; that it is a mystery.

Take, for example, Ernest Hemingway. Perhaps the most famous passage in his writing is the classic statement rejecting precisely the sacralizing attitude to the war, in favour of a restrained documentary realism:

> I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious and sacrifice and the expression in vain .... I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it. There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity. Certain numbers were the same way and certain dates and these with the names of the places were all you could say and have them mean anything. Abstract words such as glory, honour, courage, or hallow were obscene, beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates.[12]

"September 11th" has become such a date, and the twin towers such a place-name, both now (as Spiegelman suggests) more expressive than the kitsch seeking to make political and moral capital from them. Hemingway had seen "nothing sacred" because war is, almost by definition, a state in which nothing is sacred: when virtually all of the ten commandments are in abeyance, and when the orders from above exhort killing and stealing, condone adultery, and bear the false witness of describing these things as noble.

Yet even in writing such as this, or perhaps especially in such writing, does not sacralization nonetheless operate? Hemingway's

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[12] Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), introduction by Ford Madox Ford (New York: The Modern Library, 1932), 196.

existential parataxis has biblical resonances that reconnect it with the sacral; that seek not so much to reject the transcendental, but to transcend better. He still wants to commemorate, but to find a way of commemorating that does not feel "obscene". "Obscene" is a striking word there, not only because surprising as a comment on sanctimonious vocabulary like "sacrifice" and "hallow"; but because "obscenity" is what society forbids because it cannot tolerate certain kinds of pleasure: blood lusts.

Borden in *The Forbidden Zone* keeps wanting to move from documentary realism to sacralization, but that weakens the writing, the strength of which comes from its modernist specificities, not its aesthetic metaphors. It is better on anaesthetics than aesthetics. It may seem that I am confusing the religious and the aesthetic, by suggesting that any attempt to aestheticize war is also to sacralize it. But I am arguing that the confusion is in Borden's text itself, and indeed in much war writing. ("To those who find these impressions confused, I would say that they are fragments of a great confusion": Borden, "The Preface".)

So far I have considered two aspects of Mary Borden's memoirs, which I have argued are representative of war narratives: her disturbing invocations of pleasure; and the sacralizing of war. The final part of my argument asks whether there is any relation between the two? Is it coincidental that *The Forbidden Zone* concerns both excitement and a sacralizing view of war? I want to argue that it is not; otherwise you would not also find the combination in so many other war memoirs and novels and poems – by Richard Aldington, Edmund Blunden, Ford Madox Ford, Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and so on.

I am going to propose two psycho-analytically-inflected models for how they might be connected. The first is what I will call the infantile model. This is where destruction is felt as so intensely exciting for its own sake that it produces a feeling of transcendence, of ecstasy. Marinetti exulting over the bombing of Ethiopian villages, and finding beauty in it. Ernst Jünger sacralizing the exhilaration of battle as a "baptism of fire". Put like this, it is the infantile position because there is no prohibiting super-ego telling the child not to be destructive. Fascist writers may succumb to it, since Fascism glorifies violence, and its *Duce* takes the position of the super-ego, saying, instead, thou

shalt kill! It is the position of the child knocking the heads off flowers, just because he can, and because it shows his power.

If that is the pre-Oedipal model, the other is the post-Oedipal, in which the super-ego forbids the ego its unconscious enjoyment. Borden explains that her book is called *The Forbidden Zone* because "the strip of land immediately behind the zone of fire where I was stationed went by that name in the French Army" ("The Preface"). But it is also, perhaps, because she is conscious, or partly aware, of feeling and writing things that are taboo, forbidden.[13]

According to this model, the ego partly enjoys war, but the super-ego forbids such pleasure. The enjoyment is thus banished to the unconscious, and the subject feels guilt for entertaining forbidden desires, and feels the need to atone. Such atonement, according to this view (or in Kleinian terms, the attempt to make reparation) would be the source of the sacralizing drive. You sacralize to stop yourself enjoying it, or to punish yourself for covert pleasure; abjecting yourself before the super-ego. By sacralizing war, you are enforcing a solemnity of attitude; insisting that its cultural memory can only be experienced as pain, grief, and mourning. Of course wars are experienced like this, especially by their survivors, who have the fact of their survival as further grounds for guilt. But the literature shows that they are experienced in other ways too, though these ways we can hardly bear to witness.

Invoking September 11th at the start of academic performances has become a suspect rhetorical gesture nowadays; an often spurious attempt to confer *gravitas*, or existential angst on an otherwise tedious argument. It is perhaps an all too familiar form of academic sacralization. What I have not yet heard said about the attack – which has after all now become a defining cultural memory of our own time – is one of the things that most struck me while watching the initial news reports, with my young son, then ten years old. It was his response that started me thinking along these lines. He was visibly excited by the destruction. He enjoyed it. At first I rationalized his excitement by saying: it is like a cartoon, or a disaster movie for him; he does not need, yet, to distinguish between fictional destruction and

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[13] Both terms "forbidden" and "zone" are particularly susceptible of erotic connotations in English (forbidden desires; erogenous zones), and their combination sounds rather like innuendo.

the real thing. But then, as one spectator after another said "it's like a movie", it became clearer that it was not just a child's response to take pleasure from the images of the planes crashing into the towers, or the towers collapsing. Or if it was, we were all infantilized by those images. We kept watching them, over and over again, like a movie. And we kept saying it was like a movie as a mode of denying that we could want to watch if for real. Why was it shown repeatedly, and then suddenly not shown? What was this desire in us to see such things, again and again? Is it our death wish, or our wish for the death of others? And was that feeling of awe the images produced, not the beginning of the sacralizing attitude?

At one level, then, autobiographical war narratives can be read as spiritual confessions in which the pleasure of destruction is denied. As assertions that these events can only be represented as tragic, as obscene, as beyond the grasp of the human. The sacralized episodes are under the reign of the super-ego: hence the feeling of an obligatory religious or aestheticized attitude.

But what then do we do with the Art Spiegelmans who want to represent the Holocaust as a cat and mouse game? Roberto Benigni who wants to assert the possibility of comedy even in the death camps? Or in Britain, the "Blackadder" series with Rowan Atkinson, Hugh Laurie, and Stephen Fry, which took on all of English History, and particularly World War I, as susceptible to farcical treatment? My argument is that the sacralizing drive, policed by the superego, comes into force precisely because of our desire for destruction. That it is, in short, our perverse pleasure in aggression, violence, and war that commemoration seeks to make us forget.

Spectres of the Past, Inhabitations of the Present: Jochen Gerz and the Problem of Commemoration

Jonathan Kear

This article is about two commemorative projects by the German conceptual artist Jochen Gerz, *The Invisible Monument at Saarbrücken* or *The 2,146 Stones Against Racism* as it later became known and *The Monument Against Fascism, Injustice and Racial Hatred.* The use of the term "monument" to refer to these works immediately raises a question, for as a description of these two projects it appears to require some explanation. As monuments these are paradoxical objects, objects that are either invisible (concealed underground as in the Saarbrücken piece), or are conceived to disappear over time (as in the vanishing column of *The Monument Against Fascism*). These are works of commemoration that commemorate their own absence and the memory of their own passing into oblivion. Traditionally monuments have been intended to stand as imposing and durable reminders of the past events but here are monuments that insist upon their non-identity, that refuse to perform the role normally accorded to the monument, insist on their insufficiency, and which eschew the notion of presence in preference of a principle of self-erasure and non-being. The eternal, static form characteristic of traditional commemorative memorial is in these works inverted and subjected to negation. In this way Gerz's monuments might be described as ambivalent objects that deconstruct the traditional way in which public commemorative works have characteristically functioned, or as sceptical reflections on the impossibility of making memorials.

In each case these works addressed aspects of the plight of the Jews in the Third Reich and Germany's Nazi past. The *Invisible Monument at Saarbrücken* was a documentational response to the history of the destruction of Jewish memorial spaces. The project was located in front of the Schloss Saarbrücken, the castle that was once

the former home of the Gestapo, situated in the square where Nazis brought the local Jewish population on Kristallnacht in 1938 to publicly humiliate them. It was also from this square the town's remaining Jews were deported to Southern France in October 1940. On the fiftieth anniversary of these events, over the course of several months, the old cobblestones of the square leading to the castle were secretly dug up under cover of night by Gerz and a team of assistants and engraved with the names and locations of the 2,000 or so former Jewish cemeteries that had been abandoned, vandalized or disappeared in the period leading up to and during the early Third Reich.[1] These stones were then re-placed face down in the square from which they had been taken, thereby leaving no visible evidence that the operation had taken place.[2]

This subterranean monument might in one respect be said to embed history in its very structure, to invite being read as a poignant metaphor for the subconscious forces of history. A metaphor also for the forgetfulness of history, of how places once the site of atrocity have their historical meanings concealed in the passage of time, as they become discreetly reclaimed and reintegrated back into the fabric of everyday life and the former meanings associated with such spaces altered or made oblique – the Schloss Saarbrücken is where the democratic regional assembly is now located. But it is also an ambivalent and disquieting monument. Visitors to the forecourt, or passers by of what is a busy pedestrian thoroughfare, may have no realization that they are walking on stones that have become symbols of the destruction of part of the legacy of Jewish German culture,

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[1] The replaced stones were also inscribed with the date Gerz had rediscovered information of the erstwhile existence of the cemeteries. On this memorial, see Andreas Hapkemeyer, "On the Principle of Dialog in Jochen Gerz's Works for Public Spaces", in *Jochen Gerz-Res Publica: Public Works 1968-99*, eds Andreas Hapkemeyer *et al.* (Ostfildern and New York: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 1999), 23. On the missing graveyard syndrome, see J. Merloo, "Delayed Mourning in Victims of Extermination Camps", in *Massive Psychic Trauma*, ed. Henry Krystal (New York: International Universities Press, 1968), 74.

[2] As Sergiusz Michalski has suggested there may be a reference here to the Jewish tradition of throwing small stones onto graves (Sergiusz Michalski, *Public Monuments: Art in Political Bondage 1870-1997* [London: Reaktion, 1998], 182).

since no plaque indicates the existence of the work.[3] Even when conscious of its existence they will be unaware of which of the forecourt's stones they tread upon bear the names of the cemeteries and therefore unable to know whether the stones beneath their feet bear inscriptions or not. Consequently, part of the meaning of this monument is bound-up with the way it poses perplexing and unresolvable questions for the visitor, questions about how to respond appropriately to the site, of what response the site demands of the visitor.

The Monument Against Fascism and Racial Hatred, completed four years earlier in 1986, sited in Harburg, a suburb of Hamburg, had originated as a commission for a public commemorative work of art against Fascism, war and violence and for peace and human rights. It was a monument with a theme that had immediate political relevance in a blighted area made up of a mix of blue-collar German families and Turkish "guest workers" that in recent years had seen rising racial tension.[4] For it, Gerz designed an audaciously simple monument, consisting of a pillar, twelve metres high and one metre broad, made of hollow aluminium plate with a thin layer coating of soft dark lead. The pillar was erected in front of the local City Council building. Over the course of several months the column was gradually lowered at intervals into the ground until it eventually disappeared. Each lowering was attended by a fanfare of city politicians, local dignitaries and the media, turning out to preside, in a supremely ironical gesture, over the disappearance of the town's monument against Fascism. After eight lowerings over a seven-year period, the monument eventually disappeared on 10 November 1993. Only the surface of the top of the pillar remains covered with a burial stone inscribed to "Harburg's Monument Against Fascism and Racial Hatred".

Gerz has described these works as an attempt to adequately express absence. But what exactly does it mean to adequately express absence? How are we to interpret such monuments and the ideas that

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[3] In stimulating debate or disseminating information about his public works, Gerz has generally preferred booklets, interviews and other forms of communication to the use of informational plaques placed *in situ*.

[4] On the background of the commission, see James E. Young, *At Memory's Edge: After Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 127-39.

inform their conception and how are we to conceptualize their intervention into the post-war debates about commemorative works of art in a context that Marianne Hirsch has described as the "post-memory of the Holocaust", where our relationship to such events is an ever more vicarious one, and our knowledge of these events exists only within the ways in which its history has been passed down to us?[5]

Commemorative projects such as these have taken place in a climate of scepticism towards the relevance of traditional monuments in the contemporary setting and disillusion surrounding official commissions for the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Holocaust, commissions that have sparked a volatile debate that still continues today. Two memorial projects most immediately spring to mind as the most evident cases in point. Firstly, the ill-conceived *The German National Memorial to the Victims of Tyranny and War,* dedicated in 1993, located just beyond the Berlin wall in what was the eastern sector of the city (it is actually the centre, "Berlin Mitte"), at the Neue Wache (a domed temple-like structure designed by Karl Friedrich Schinkel in 1818 as the Prussian Royal Guardhouse, which under the Nazi and Communist regimes functioned as a national memorial site). This memorial was intended by Chancellor Kohl to serve as central monument to all Germany's war dead (including German military as well as murdered Jews) and as such represented an assertive symbol of reconciliation and reunification.[6]

The second project was the ill-fated *Competition for a Memorial for the Murdered Jews* (1994), again sited in Berlin, which emerged as a strategic counterweight to the latter. While the proliferation of monuments to the Holocaust in Germany in recent years marks a recognition of the need to forcefully redress the silence, aphasia and even indifference toward the extermination of Jews, political prisoners and other persecuted minorities under the Third Reich, this has gone hand in hand with a recognition of the problems such memorials pose. If these commemorations are meant to function as an opportunity not

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[5] Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Post-Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 8-9.

[6] See Sergiusz Michalski's discussion of the commission of the *German National Memorial to the Victims of Tyranny and War* in the Neue Wache, in Michalski, *Public Monuments*, 88-92. See also Thomas S. Schmidt, Hans-Ernst Mittig and Vera Böhm, *Nationaler Totenkult: Die Neue Wache: Eine Streitschrift zur zentralen deutschen Gedenkstätte* (Berlin: Verlag Silke Schreiber, 1995).

only for remembering and mourning but also for understanding or reconciliation should they not somehow take a form that facilitates thought and reflection on the events that led to the Holocaust? Must they not find a way to reflect a genuinely critical and self-examining consciousness of historical knowledge of the past, to pose questions and sustain uncertainties rather than move simply toward closure, redemption and rehabilitation (a redemption and rehabilitation that the perpetrators of such atrocities themselves may well have anticipated would happen in time, and which is perhaps deeply engrained in the nature of our understanding of the purpose of art)? If not, memorial monuments instead of acting as a conduit for collective historical memory and consciousness raising perhaps run the risk of stifling dialogue, occluding awareness, of becoming a bearer of memory that in a certain sense enables forgetting, takes away the burden of memorial responsibility from the people who must ultimately be the carriers of such memories.[7]

Monuments can perhaps too easily be regarded as symbolic forms of atonement, as substitutes for thought, as standing in place of reflection. Rather than creating the conditions of reflection on the past, memorial projects like *The German National Memorial to the Victims of Tyranny and War*, rashly executed and insensitively adorned with Christian symbolism, have fuelled the suspicion that such monuments simply express a desire to bury the memory of Germany's recent past in order that a newly reunified Germany might move on unencumbered. For some critics on the Left, the protracted and heated panel discussions and public colloquia that ensued over a ten-year period for *The Competition for a Memorial for the Murdered Jews* was thus far preferable to the construction of an actual monument.[8] The debate, they argued, constituted a genuine examination of the intractable problems at the heart of German Holocaust memory, a necessarily ongoing, unfinished and interminable process which represented a more fitting memorial than a single work of art provide, not least because it reflected the contradictions and crisis of meaning the Holocaust might be said to represent. That valuable process of

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[7] For a discussion of this, see Michael Kimmelman, "In the Faces of the Living: Horror in the Dead", *New York Times*, 12 September 1997, 1, 26.

[8] See James E. Young's insightful discussion of the *Competition for a Memorial for the Murdered Jews*, in Young, *At Memory's Edge*, 184-223.

debate if inevitably short on answers served at least to clarify the questions that need to be asked about commemorating these events, about who such memorials were for and for what purposes, debates that might only be ameliorated or silenced by the realisation of an actual monument.

The completion of *The Memorial for the Murdered Jews* proved a difficult and protracted affair. From the initial five-hundred-and-twenty-eight entries to the competition a design by Christine Jacobs-Marks was chosen by the jury.[9] This consisted of a concrete gravestone, seven metres thick and ninety-one metres square, tilted at an angle and ascending from a height of two metres at one end to seven metres at the other. The gravestone was to be engraved with the four and a half million recovered names of murdered Jews. Eighteen stone boulders from Masada in Israel, the last stronghold against the Romans in the Jewish uprising of 66-73 CE, and the site of the mass suicide of Jews who refused to submit to enslavement by the Romans, were to be placed at intervals across its surface, a reference to the Jewish tradition of leaving small stones at the graveside to mark the mourner's visit. The number of the boulders referred to the Hebraic symbolism of the number eighteen which represents *chai,* or life.

But this initial conception was never realized. The literalism of its conception, and the fatalism of its heavy handed symbolism, in particular the references to Jewish self-sacrifice, received strong criticism from various quarters.[10] In response to the deluge of criticism it provoked the organizers eventually rejected Jacob-Marks' design and the competition was declared void. A new competition was eventually organized, which involved a series of public colloquia and talks by guest speakers held during January, March and April 1997. The nine finalists whose designs were shortlisted for the 1995 competition were then invited to resubmit their plans in the light of the vociferous discussions that had ensued in the colloquia.

The entry subsequently chosen by the jury was a design submitted by Peter Eisenman and Richard Serra comprising of a field of stelae

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[9] The jury's decision was announced in March 1995 and awarded the first prize to two winning designs, one submitted by Jacob-Marks and another by Simon Ungers, a New York artist living in Cologne. But it was proposed that only the Jacob-Marks design would be built.

[10] Young, *At Memory's Edge*, 189-91.

made of dark and fine-pored concrete reinforced by steel, of varying height, width and inclination, distributed in rows at varied intervals across the massive 20,000 square metre site. The design based on a childhood memory of a disconcerting experience in an Iowan cornfield, was intended to create an effect of undulating waves and a disorienting impression of "being lost in time and space … a sense of insecurity but not of overwhelming loss".[11] After much delay construction on the Memorial commenced on 1 April 2003, with a completion date set for the end of 2004. The completion of the revised plans for the memorial, however, continued to be beset by problems, interventions and interruptions. Eisenman's initial co-collaborator Richard Serra dropped out an early stage in the competition. In 1998 the preparations for construction were interrupted when a bunker thought to have belonged to Josef Goebbels was discovered on the site.[12] Arguments subsequently arose over the dedication of the monument solely to Jewish victims, excluding thereby other victims of Nazi genocide such as gypsies, homosexuals, the disabled, those on the Left of the political spectrum, as well as the fifteen million or so ethnic Germans who were expelled or forced to leave Central Europe.[13]

Despite the approval of the project by the German Bundestag on 25 June 1999, the original design of the architect underwent significant modifications in the light of specific objections about the initial plans, in particular the costs involved in realizing the memorial. Originally Eisenman intended the monument to consist of a field of 4,000 stelae and to be "absent of meaning", insisting it should not be regarded as a graveyard and therefore not include names. Yet opposition from Michael Naumann, Chancellor Schröder's Minister of Culture at the time and later to become one of Eisenman's staunchest allies, to the scale of the project, cost and the absence of guiding information

[11] L. Harris, "The Wound That Never Heals", *The Art Newspaper*, 142 (December 2003), 9.

[12] See *The Art Newspaper*, 79 (March 1998), 10.

[13] In response to pressure from groups representing these interests the memorial's foundation included a series of lectures in autumn 2002 focused on non-Jewish victims of the Nazi regime. The Lower House Culture Committee of the German Parliament have recently approved plans for a memorial to gay victims of the Holocaust, though these have been opposed vehemently by the conservative Christian Democrat party.

resulted in a further set of compromises. Eisenman agreed to reduce the memorial to 2,751 stelae to reduce costs and to include an underground information centre comprising a multifunctional foyer, exhibition space and library to be located in the south-eastern corner of the Memorial site. This underground centre, composed of four thematic spaces: *The Room of Silence*, *The Room of Fates*, *The Room of Names* and *The Room of Places*, was integrated into the memorial as a "supplementary … element in the overall concept which does not impinge on the field of steles".[14] The inclusion of the cost of the underground centre within the original budget necessitated further economies in the project. As a consequence Eisenman agreed to compromise on his wish that the stelae be finished in natural stone in order not to jeopardize the completion of the project within its timescale and to keep the memorial within budget.[15]

Work on the project was again halted on 25 October 2003 after it was discovered that Degussa AG, the firm employed to coat the concrete pillars with anti-graffiti paint had once held a 42.5% stake in Degesch, the company responsible for the manufacture of Zyklon B, the hydrogen cyanide used at Auschwitz and other Nazi death camps. The suspension of work amid a statement issued by the memorial's trustees, which included representatives from Jewish groups as well as Germany's major political parties, criticizing Degussa's involvement in the project re-ignited the volatile debates about the monument, and

[14] In March 2001, the Board of Trustees appointed Berlin-based designer Dagmar von Wilcken to develop a design concept for the Information Centre in conjunction with the architect Peter Eisenman and the design committee set up by the trustees. On 24 October 2000, talks took place between Wolfgang Thierse, the Chairperson of the Foundation, Bundestag, and Avner Shalev, the Chairperson of the Board of Directors of Israel's central holocaust memorial Yad Vashem following the offer of the Foundation to place a database created in Israel with all the known names of Jews murdered in the Holocaust at the disposal of the Foundation. A database intended to be continually renewed and expanded will be made accessible to visitors in *The Room of Names* in the Information Centre. The opening of the Information Centre was planned for spring 2005 to coincide with the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War.

[15] The costs of the Memorial and Information Centre were included in the Federal Government's budget of 16 November 2000, which set aside € 27.6 million for the project (€25.3 million for the construction of the Memorial and the underground information centre and €2.3 million for the interiors).

Degussa's participation in the memorial.[16] In November 2003 the Board of Trustees decided work on the memorial should resume with Degussa still involved, a decision determined as much by financial, legal and political considerations as moral ones.

Though *The Memorial for the Murdered Jews* was eventually completed and opened in May 2005, the history of the difficulties encountered in its realization indicates the sensitive and problematical nature of such projects. But the question of how public memorials and monuments once built might continue to stimulate rather than stifle debate raises a further series of issues. This question has obviously gained in significance at a time of great historical transition and conflict in Europe that has recently seen radical forms of nationalism, ethnic conflict and genocide on European soil resurfacing. What role, if any, has the remembrance of the Holocaust to play in our understanding of the present and what function might contemporary monuments perform in answering that question? Monuments have typically celebrated the aspirations, heroism and triumphs of the nation state over those of other cultures. The conventional form of the monument, allegorical, imperishable, elevated, larger than life, exuding confident authority and generally unequivocally heroic, embodies this transcendental impulse.[17]

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[16] Harris, "The Wound That Never Heals", 9: while Alexander Brenner, President of the Berlin Jewish Community, argued that given Degussa's past connections with Nazism their contribution to the memorial was like "rubbing salt in the wound"; others, including Avi Primoe, the former Israeli ambassador to Berlin and Peter Eisenman himself, defended the company's involvement in the memorial pointing out how much it had done to atone and make reparation for its past actions in the Third Reich era, which included the endowment of a fund for the victims of the Nazi forced labour camps. Commentators on both sides of the debate have shared a concern that the debate itself has become incorporated into the commemoration of the memorial. Brenner along with Solomon Korn, vice-president of the Central Council of German Jews, argued that nevertheless the forty stelae already erected at the time of the announcement should remain as a reminder of the debate. Likewise, Wolfgang Huber, president of the Council of the Protestant Church in Germany argued that a history of the debates about the monument should be recorded on a panel situated nearby the memorial. For Eisenman's comments, see *The Art Newspaper*, 142 (December 2003), 20.

[17] See Toby Clark, "Remembering War: Memorials and Anti-Monuments", in *Art and Propaganda in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Toby Clark (New York: Calmann and King, 1997), 118-23.

How can the formal language of the monument be shaped to express the tragedy of the Holocaust? In addressing this issue artists and architects working on memorials in public spaces have been engaged in a contest with the formal visual discourses of orthodox monuments, experimenting with both the forms of intervention such memorials can make into the physical environments we inhabit and the kinds of experience to which they might give rise. Working against the grain of the traditional monument, has involved theorizing on the relationship to conventional forms of commemoration and producing what James Young has termed "counter-monuments or "counter-memorials", monuments that create a space not only for mourning but for critical reflection, and that provide unconventional and sometimes confrontational ways of engaging with the question of remembering the past.[18] These counter-monuments have at once been an attempt to bring the long tradition of western monumental sculpture to an end, in the belief that it is no longer relevant or even desirable in a modern democratic setting, while at the same time renewing the conception of what comprises a memorial around forms of visual expression that more adequately reflect a contemporary sensibility and which can act, in Habermas' words, as constitutive features of ethico-political self-understanding.[19]

In one respect this has involved a deconstruction of official forms of commemoration. One of Gerz's earliest and most provocative pieces on the Holocaust, *Exit/Dachau* (1974), was an installation that simulated the Holocaust visitor centre at a former concentration camp, with the purpose of showing the resemblance between certain aspects of the institutional language of administering memory at the museum and the language that once administered the camp itself.[20] The installation consisted of a dimly lit long hall with twenty tables in two rows of ten, with a chair underneath. On each table was anchored a handcrafted wooden cover photo album containing images and other material Gerz had taken from Dachau Holocaust museum. There were no directions for the visitor and the freshly cut wooden covers of the

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[18] Young, *At Memory's Edge*, 120.

[19] Jürgen Habermas, "Concerning the Public Use of History", *New German Critique*, 44 (Spring-Summer 1988), 40-50.

[20] *Exit/Dachau* was installed at the large *Deutschlandbilder* exhibition in the Marius Gropius Bau in Berlin, 7 September 1997-11 January 1998.

albums and un-sanded chairs were apt to leave splinters. The experience was thus a disorienting and an unnerving one for the visitor. Each album opened with an exit sign from the Museum and from overhead speakers visitors heard recorded sounds on a sound loop of someone running with scurrying with feverish footsteps and out of breath, interspersed with the sounds of the bell and carriage return of a rapid typewriter. Inside the album were the memorial site regulations telling visitors how to behave in the museum and concentration camp rooms (no smoking, no baby strollers, no litter, no touching, no straying from the path: the museum is open from 9-5pm).

Images and further instructional signs from the camp grounds followed (do not damage exhibitions, do not write on walls, exhibits not recommended for children under thirteen years of age) superseded by photographs of cushioned benches which bore the imprint of visitors' bodies, a train schedule, photographs of a fire alarm, a fire extinguisher and a telephone with a blank space for a fire department number. Other signs signified with a discreet but deeper historical resonance, such as the signs placed over the doorways reading "no entry" or "exit", or the lock on a toilet door which is turned to read both "*besetzt*" and "*frei*" ("occupied" and "free"). Toward the end of the album, tourists encountered images of the museum's guest-books, which incorporated earlier visitors' responses into the later visitors' experience, but even here Gerz shows how the visitor experience was strictly regulated. Spaces allowed only for quantifiable data to be collected (the visitor's age, profession, nationality), and asked questions such as "Do you find the documentation instructive – Yes or No?". A photograph included in the album showed a visitor meticulously answering these demands.[21]

Exit/Dachau constituted more than a provocative criticism of a particular museum it challenged the capacity of the museum to dictate the terms of remembrance. Gerz was the first artist to do so and to characterize it as a formal, if ironic extension of the authoritarian regime it would commemorate. Ultimately this critique is not so much about content, as the relationship such museums establish to the visitor. The visitor experience becomes less about learning about

[21] On the responses to *Exit/Dachau*, see Jochen Gerz and Francis Levy, *EXIT: Das Dachau Projekt* (Frankfurt: Verlag Roter Stern, 1978).

history than about how we comport ourselves within and conform to the rules and regulations of such institutions.

Beyond deconstructing pre-existing institutional commemorations, however, there has been a responsibility to find ways of relaying deconstructive principles within newly constructed monuments. To these ends post-Second-World-War artists have increasingly turned toward an aesthetic that uses negative space, absence and invisibility as metaphors for the problems of representation their subject poses.[22] Such non-representational monuments, voids with abstract bearings as they have been described, for many artists and architects have seemed the only adequate response to the carnage and trauma of the events of the Second World War, that black hole of culture and civilization, as one writer has referred to it. Only in avoiding figuration, they have argued, can one register the limits and faltering of language in the face of such catastrophic events. The competition for *The Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe,* not surprisingly included a number of proposals for ruinous or semi-ruinous spaces, most notably Schlosser and Steen's recreation of the ground plan of a concentration camp barracks by means of an excavation covered with stones, a proposal comprising of a gigantic hole, 80 by 60 and 50 metres deep, and Horst Hoheisel's plan to blow up the emblematic Brandenburger Tor (a monument symbolizing Prussian might, crowned by a chariot borne by Quadriga, the Roman Goddess of Peace).

In their refusal of figuration, works like these have an evident relationship to the Jewish prohibition of images, and stand in stark contrast to the triumphalism and authoritarian character of earlier national monuments, most immediately the grandiose architectural schema favoured by the Third Reich and its immediate predecessors.[23] This use of negative space, in its varied manifestations, has proved an enduring feature of responses to recent memorial projects allowing artists to create monuments that express loss, register rather than erase the violence of the past, avoid imposing terms too deterministically on the experience of the visitor to such sites and rethink the relationship of memorials to the history they allude to.

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[22] See Michalski, *Public Monuments*, 172-89.

[23] For a discussion of Third Reich monuments and architecture, see Robert R. Taylor, *The Word in Stone: The Role of Architecture in Nationalist Socialist Ideology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974).

Horst Hoheisel's *Aschrott Fountain Monument* (1998) in Kassel, for example, addressed the destruction of a pyramidal *Belle Epoque* style fountain placed in the main public square. Commissioned by a Jewish manufacturer the fountain was vandalized by local Nazis in 1939. Subsequently it became known as Aschrott's grave, the basin filled in with earth and planted with flowers. Instead of designing a wholly new monument or restoring the original, Hoheisel's design made no attempt to erase the history of political vandalism responsible for destroying the fountain. Preserving its history, however unfortunate that history had been, was a crucial part of Hoheisel's intentions. His monument would be a new fountain in hollow concrete form, one that formed a mirror image of the original. Situated in the original site it would "rescue the history of this place as a wound and an open question …".[24] The design was a recreation of the old fountain inverted and placed face down, so that the pyramid shape of the original fountain became a funnel into whose dark depths water ran. The only evidence of the fountain's continued existence is the sound of running water in the open grating placed around the fountain's periphery. The unveiling of the piece involved the exhibitions of the old plans of the fountain and for a week the new fountain was displayed as a resurrected shape at the City Hall Square before it was sunk, mirror-like, twelve metres into the ground water.

As Sergiusz Michalski has stated the use of a negative form in some cases has been connected to a dysfunctionality charged with the conveying a sense of unredeemable loss, as in Rachael Whiteread's concrete cast library for the Holocaust memorial for the Judeplatz in Vienna, which allows no access into the interior.[25] The question of the accessibility of the past such work raises is also taken up in Micha Ullman's poignant *Empty Library*, which commemorates the burning of books by Nazi students on 10 May 1933. Sited in front of Berlin University, where the event had taken place, the piece consists of an inaccessible subterranean rectangular room, whose walls are covered

[24] Quoted in James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 45. See Horst Hoheisel, "*Aschrottbrunnen* – Denk-Stein-Sammlung-Brandenburger Tor-Buchenwald: Vier Erinnerungsversuche", in *Shoah – Formen der Erinnerung: Geschichte Philosophie, Literatur, Kunst*, eds Nicolas Berg, Jess Jochimsen and Bernd Stiegler (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1996), 253-66.

[25] Michalski, *Public Monuments*, 178-79.

by empty shelves. The room can only be viewed through a small, thick glass window cut in the cobblestone road; a steel tablet set into the stones contains an inscription that quotes Heinrich Heine's prophetic words: "Dort, wo man Bücher / Verbrennt, verbrennt man auch am Ende Menschen" ("Where books are burned, so one day will people also be burned").[26]

The thickness of the glass provides a surface that is a perspective, a vantage point, onto something that lies beyond and beneath it, but also constitutes a surface that has its own properties, both reflective and opaque. When looking through the glass window into the library a play of liminality results, whereby interior and exterior continually merge and unmerge; the reflections of the outside environment, the passage of clouds, the ghostly reflections of viewers, whose image is incorporated and reflected back to themselves, create a paradoxical space that is at one and the same time defined in terms of its pure surface and its inaccessible depth, a space simultaneously delimited and undefined, at once bound and unchained by time. It combines two kinds of temporality, an interior, an unchanging time capsule of sorts, buried underground, and as counterpoint to this, a differential exterior surface continually in flux as random reflections pass across it from the contemporary world of the street. As such *The Empty Library* provides a metaphor for the past as a place in time that we have only a limited and an ultimately intangible relationship to and as a place continually changed and renewed by our own particularized and historically situated perspectives in time.

This use of negative space with metaphorical bearings, bearings that reflect back on the nature of time and memory leads me back to Gerz's vanishing and invisible monuments, where similar concerns with embodying temporality into the work's formal structure are present. In one respect *The Monument Against Fascism and Racial Hatred*'s embracing of the transitory serves to convey a sense of the un-remedial and irrevocable ephemerality of being in the world, of temporal succession, the passing of time, the procession of history, of mortality. But the question of temporality also extends to the changing appearance of the metal surface of the work. The presence or absence of sunlight, altered the appearance of the monument, the lead

[26] Heinrich Heine, *Almansor*, ll. 243-44, in *Sämtliche Schriften Heinrich Heine*, ed. Klaus Briegleb (Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein Werkausgaben, 1981), I, 284-85.

coverings presenting either a semi-bright metal reflection or dull opacity. Such momentary transformations in the column's surface had the effect of changing the potential array of meanings that could be read into the work, what constituted its primary temporal reference point and emotional tenor. Visitors to the site, before the column's disappearance, recall how vivid sunlight or cloudy weather had the potential to become a resonant part of the work's symbolic meanings.[27] Sunlight might suggest the immediacy of the present, and thus convey an impression of the work as reflecting on present-day society. Cloudy or inclement weather might more readily suggest the past and hence to encourage more immediately a reflection on loss. The monument in different lighting and climatic conditions could also convey an impression of the present as a time for optimism or alternately trepidation.

Just as the subterranean *Monument at Saarbrücken* evokes a notion of history as an intangible force, at once invisible but deeply embedded in our history and psyche, the symbolic rising up and gradual disappearance of *The Monument Against Fascism and Racial Hatred,* offers a vanishing monument to the vanished people who perished at the hands of the Nazis, an anti-redemptory expression of irreparable loss, the loss of a Jewish culture that formed a vital strand of German traditions of thought and ways of life, but which was severed during the Second World War. It is a work that insists on the insufficiency of the monument either to preserve historical memory or to atone for this loss. That insufficiency also reflects back upon the semantics of these monuments, for despite their ability to generate associations, Gerz's conceptualist accent on absence and the ephemeral leaves the meaning of his work deferred, and in certain respects, given its sensitive subject, makes the work ambivalent, uncomfortable, devoid of the certainties and circumscribed meanings that much of its audience might seek from such a work of art. It puts meaning at risk, in calling for a constructive intelligence, a willingness to read meaning into a void. As such the monument prompts the recognition that history and the memory of the past is not given but must be created and re-created in time rather than preserved. As such the time of the monument is as much the time of the present and future

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[27] See Young, *At Memory's Edge*, 132-37.

as the past. As the full title, *The Monument Against Fascism, Injustice and Racial Hatred*, suggests it was intended not only to refer back to the events of the Holocaust, but as a reminder of the present-day dangers of racism and other forms of social injustice and anti-democratic sentiment. Rather than understanding the Holocaust as a discrete historical event, a rupture within civilization, the monument becomes a witness for our time, but a witness that poses many unanswered (and perhaps unanswerable) questions about not only the events themselves but also about our understanding of history and the way in which we re-imagine the past.[28]

While Gerz's work has won acclaim it has provoked criticism from certain quarters. To his critics this aesthetics of invisibility has amounted to little more than a kind of silence, a refusal of responsibility and commitment. Gerz's preoccupation with making monuments that connect past and present acts of racial violence, his belief that Holocaust monuments must be statements made in and for the present, has also drawn criticism for the way it de-particularizes and de-historicizes the history of the Holocaust. Irit Rogoff has questioned the impersonality and universality of Gerz's monuments, and in particular their refusal to recall victims in their multiple, variegated, individual human lives.[29] For Rogoff the commemorative projects of German artists have unintentionally and uncannily continued to present the kind of unified and monolithic characterization of Jewish peoples present under the Third Reich. No doubt there also exists a danger that the motif of the void as a visual mode of discourse is fetishized and becomes in effect a post-modern variant of the Sublime. As such there is a risk of mystifying the

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[28] The question of access to the past and the concomitant problem about the status of retrospective testimony reliant on memories of past events has been a significant issue for representations dealing with the Holocaust and one that has had implications for the conception of memorials and public monuments. See the discussion of this in Daniel R. Schwarz, *Imagining the Holocaust* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 1999), 1-42. For a more general discussion, see Nicola King, *Memory, Narrative, Identity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2000), 1-32.

[29] See Irit Rogoff, *The Aesthetics of Post-History: A German Perspective,* in *Vision and Textuality*, eds Stephen Melville and Bill Readings (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1995), 115-46, and also "Dieses Obskure Objeckt der Begierde", in Jochen Gerz, *2146 Steine: Mahnmal gegen Rassimus*: *Saarbrücken* (Stuttgart: Verlag Gerd Hätje, 1993).

Holocaust through a type of visual representation that too readily invites metaphysical speculation and sacralization. In short there is a danger that the void acquires its own myth.

Underpinning these lines of criticism is a concern that history should not become needlessly abstracted and dehumanized and a belief that Holocaust history is most effective when most intimate, materialist and personalized. Gerz has himself criticized his own reliance on absence and reflected on the deeper range of meanings this reliance might have for him. He has referred to the invisibility of these monuments as both an intellectual challenge but also, more defensively, as a strategy against the Neo-Nazi defacement that has been such a part of the response to these memorials. One might also recognize a latent personal attachment to such an aesthetic. One of Gerz's earliest childhood memories is the day in 1944 when, aged four years old, his family home was destroyed by a bomb. He has spoken of watching the fir trees in the garden gently topple: "They fell so slowly and burned like candles. Everything was so quiet" – and of being struck dumb by the sight of his home burning; he apparently lost his voice for a year, which only returned on his fifth birthday.[30]

Gerz's recent work has seen attempts to embody non-identity and temporality in a context of more permanent monuments. For his *The Living Monument: A Work in Progress* (1996) sited at Biron in France's Dordogne (a commission from the French Ministry of Culture executed with the assistance of students from the Art College at Bordeaux), he resurrected an old monument to the fallen of the World War II, but this "restoration" involved transforming the monument's inanimate surface.[31] In confidential individual interviews with local residents Gerz posed a "secret question" on the theme of war. The replies were then recorded, edited and transposed onto red plaques attached to the restored obelisk. A couple in the village are charged with posing the secret question again to all new residents and the village's youth when they reach the age of adulthood (eighteen years old). Their answers will then be added to the monument. The

[30] See the interview with Gerz by Stephen Snoddy, "25 May 1991 …", in Jochen Gerz, *Jochen Gerz: Life After Humanism* (Bremmen: Edition Canz, 1992), 67.
[31] See Rosanna Albertini, "Biron – The Living Monument", in *Jochen Gerz-Res Publica*, 29-32.

memory of the dead thus becomes renewed in the ever changing surface of the monument's obelisk.

For *Warum ist es geschehen?* (1997/98), Gerz's unsuccessful submission to *The Competition for a Memorial for the Murdered Jews*, visitors to the site of the monument were to be asked a perpetually repeated question "Why Did This Happen?". The square of the vast monument site, which measured some 20,000 square metres, was to be covered with thirty-nine steel lamp poles bearing neon lights that spelled out the word "Why?" in the various languages of Europe's persecuted Jews. The site was to contain a visitor's memorial centre, a building designed by the Iranian architect Nasrine Seranji conceived to imitate the shape of an ear. Inside three rooms were to be located: *The Room of Memory*, *The Room of Replies* and *The Room of Silence*. *The Room of Silence* was to be one of the archives of the Shoa Oral History Foundation that preserves the testimony of Jewish concentration camp survivors. *The Room of Replies* was to be a place where visitors could record their responses to the question, individually or in dialogue with other visitors, and where assistants of the centre would provide help and access to archives holding the responses of other visitors. These replies were to be displayed not only in books lining the building's glass walls but engraved into the floor of the square until it was filled. *The Room of Silence*, described by Gerz as a "a space of meditation rather than recollection ... a mirror in which one sees nothing, was to be a circular room, darkened to make uncertain its dimensions, with a circular sky hole in the ceiling, and empty apart from a bench".[32] There visitors were to hear "the eternal e" of the American composer La Monte Young, an austere musical piece that consists of a single tone that can only be heard by the human ear in faint waves.

Yet, the persistence of Gerz's concern with absence, ephemerality and complex temporal effects suggests their resources as metaphors, resources that cannot be explained away as merely reflecting a mimetic relation to Gerz own biography or as a form of silence in the face of horror. Despite the undeniable force of the criticism his monuments have encountered these critiques run the risk of ossifying

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[32] Jochen Gerz, "*Why Did It Happen?*", Proposal for Berlin's "Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe", Unpublished submission to the Senatsverwaltung für Wissenschaft, Forschung und Kultur, Berlin, 1997.

his work, either by defining it around a single given meaning rather than responding to its semantic plurality, or by failing to take sufficient account of the way the actual work is only one part of a longer process that has an open-ended and participatory character and within which the monument itself could be said in some respects to be expendable. The opposition between abstraction and particularity, Rogoff criticizes in Gerz, does not register the way the particularized, variegated and individualized are already embodied in his earlier monuments, though in terms of its incorporation of voices from the present not the past. Its witnessing is thus ultimately not about the past but about the present.

Participation and collective authorship constituted an integral part of the process and semantics of both *The Invisible Monument at Saarbrücken* and *The Harburg Monument Against Fascism*.[33] Each of these monuments was the product of debate and dialogue, concerns central to the conception and realization of the work rather than simply a preliminary part of the decision making process. The *Invisible Monument at Saarbrücken,* for instance, was a collaborative work in a number of different respects. Gerz employed teams of students taking a class on conceptual art with him to dig up the stones and conduct the research for the monument. But the role of participation extended beyond the initial conception and execution of the piece, for the work's actual existence and completion was uniquely bound up with its public reception.[34] Public knowledge of the monument was dependent on the action being publicized, and to this end Gerz wrote to Oskar Lafontaine, the President of Saarland and Vice-President of the GSDP, informing him of the action and asking for financial assistance to continue and complete the project. Lafontaine responded with a grant of 10,000 German marks and a warning of the illegality of the operation.[35] When information about the monument's existence was leaked to the newspapers, a vociferous public debate ensued about whether Gerz's actions constituted public vandalism, was a hoax or represented a genuinely creative response to the problem of the memorial. When Gerz gave a public lecture on the

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[33] On this aspect of Gerz's work, see Hapkemeyer, "On the Principle of Dialog in Jochen Gerz's Works for Public Spaces", 22-28.
[34] SeeYoung, *At Memory's Edge*, 140-44.
[35] *Ibid*., 143.

project, the whole German Democratic Socialist Party contingent walked out, but the parliament took a more supportive view, eventually voting to rename the Plaza *The Square of the Invisible Monument*.

The Monument Against Fascism and Racial Hatred was conceived with his wife Esther Shalev-Gerz and the process of dialogue and questioning was once again the focus of the work. Speaking of this piece Gerz stated: "What we did not want was an enormous pedestal with something on it presuming to tell people what they ought to think."[36] In order to maximize its impact and its ability to generate public discussion, Gerz and Shalev rejected its original site in a pleasant park in the town centre in favour of a less attractive setting in a pedestrian shopping mall in the rather commercial centre of the town. When the column was unveiled in 1986, three years after the date of its commission, an inscription (in German, French, Russian, Hebrew, Arabic and Turkish) near the base read:

> We invite citizens of Harburg, and visitors to the town to add their names to ours. In doing so, we commit ourselves to remaining vigilant. As more and more names cover this 12 metre tall lead column, it will gradually be lowered into the ground. One day it will have disappeared completely, and the site will be empty. In the end, it is only we ourselves who can rise up against injustice.

Inviting its own de-sanctification, a steel pointed stylus was attached by a length of cable to each at each corner of the column, for visitors to make inscriptions on the soft lead of the pillar. The speed of the pillar's descent was determined by the response of its audience, the more actively visitors participated the quicker the monument began to disappear. As five-foot sections became covered with memorial graffiti, the monument was lowered into the ground into a chamber as deep as the column was high.

While Gerz had intended the public's response to the monument to comprise a row of neatly inscribed names, and in this fashion to function as a modern equivalent of the war memorials of another age (serving to remind the visitor of their own mortality reflected in their

[36] Quoted in Claude Gintz, "'L'Anti-Monument' de Jochen & Esther Gerz", *Galleries Magazine*, 19 (June-July 1987), 80-82. See also M. Gibson, "Hamburg Sinking Feeling", *Art News*, 7 (Summer 1987), 106-107.

identities being added to this column commemorating the dead) what resulted was more anarchic and idiosyncratic. Visitors scrawled their names, but also comments, covered the monument with spaghetti like scrawls, drew hearts, stars of David, swastikas and faces. Someone even fired bullets against it. While the city council initially voiced concern about the unsightly vandalism of the monument, Gerz came to regard the vandalism as giving a new powerful dimension to the work, allowing the monument to become a social catalyst, which documented the social temperament and political climate of the time. The vandalism and defacement formed an important part of the monument's own history. The graffiti strewn monument as one newspaper stated "brings us closer to the truth than would any list of well meaning signatures. The inscriptions, a conglomerate of approval, hatred and stupidity, are like the fingerprint of our city applied to the column."[37]

Such articles represent the vanishing monument's own memorial, prolonging discussion and debate about the meanings of the work and the events to which it refers. As such the issue of participation and dialogue was an integral part of the temporality and consciousness raising of these works. The vanishing column was ultimately part of a process, a process that begins with the work's appearance, its intervention into a public space, but which ends by returning the burden of memory to the community. Therefore the monument ultimately becomes expendable, for it operates primarily as a vehicle that spurs the articulation of social values. Indeed, the destruction of the physical existence of the memorial was regarded by Gerz as the precondition of establishing a genuine reflective consciousness of the past. In relation to *The Monument Against Fascism and Racial Hatred* he commented: "We will one day reach the point where anti-Fascist memorials will no longer be necessary, when vigilance will be kept alive by the invisible pictures of remembrance."[38]

I began this article from a position of emphasizing the void like quality of these works, their concern with absence, non-identity, the fragility of memory and the ephemeral, but in the course of this discussion it is also apparent that these works are also deeply

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[37] Gibson, "Hamburg Sinking Feeling", 107.

[38] D. von Dräteln, "Jochen Gerz's Visual Poetry", *Contemporanea* (September 1989), 47.

concerned with questions about language, and the role it plays in organizing our experience of events and the way we remember them. In all Gerz's work there is an evident concern to avoid collectivizing memory, of synthesizing the various responses to the questions his work asks into a single answer. The conception of each monument instead emphasizes the fragmentary, multiplicity of memory and understanding, the slow labour of memory, and the role of respondent in the creation of the work's meanings.

The emphasis on dialogue, in Gerz's monuments, which is part of the way the work embodies temporality, reflects a search for democratic expressions of commemoration, and entails at some level a willingness on his part to call his role as author and arbiter of meaning into question. Gerz's commemorative works search for a mode of visual language for the monument that speaks against authority and the imposition of a collective social meaning in favour of a conception of the work as an intercessor or point of mediation that focuses and stimulates debate, that incorporates different viewpoints rather than imposing consensus, that enables those to whom the work is addressed to articulate personal meanings through it. In this way the monument loses its authoritarian character and becomes instead a sounding post against which respondents to it may listen to the reverberations of their own thoughts.

REPRESENTING THE EXTREME: REMINISCENCES OF NAZI GERMANY IN *TRAS EL CRISTAL*

CAMILA LOEW

Memories of World War II and the Holocaust occupy a prominent space at the centre of cinematographic representations of historical events. The fascination with this period, considered the darkest chapter in the entire history of humanity, is today, more that sixty years later, an inexhaustible inspiration for film productions in different genres stemming from both sides of the Atlantic. According to Mark Seman of the Imperial War Museum, advisor to many films based on this historical period, nowadays "the interest in World War II is greater than ever".[1]

Sander L. Gilman, meditating upon the worldwide success of a recent, controversial film that broaches the concentration camps, Roberto Begnini's 1998 *Life Is Beautiful*, reminds us that all analyses of Holocaust representation must bear in mind the transformations in meaning and function that have occurred in films and literary works on the subject over the past fifty years. Gilman shows that while in the immediate post-war years the Holocaust was understood as a very specific historical moment, one aspect among others of Nazi crimes, in the 1970s it became the central aspect of the horrors of World War II. More recently, in the last decade or so, the Holocaust has again evolved in its representation and has become, in its uses, not only a concrete historical period but also a metaphor for pure evil and horror.[2] One of the particularities of artistic production based on the Holocaust is that critics tend to consider the biography of the artist to be particularly relevant. Thus Holocaust representations that are considered adequate and are culturally acceptable most frequently stem from Jewish artists. Even Begnini, a non-Jew, was concerned with establishing biographical links with the Holocaust: even though

[1] Guillermo Altares, "La II Guerra Mundial, inagotable", *El País*, 17 December 2000, 10 (my translation).

[2] Sander Gilman, "Is Life Beautiful? Can the Shoah be Funny? Some Thoughts on Recent and Older Films", *Critical Inquiry*, 26 (Winter 2000), 279-308.

he claimed that his intentions for the film were not realistic, he nevertheless tried to validate his fable by evoking the memory of his father, a soldier and prisoner of war during World War II.

In the Spanish film industry, the presence of World War II and the Holocaust remains limited. This lack can be accounted for by the fact that by the time Nazism had conquered Europe, Jews had been mostly absent from Spain for five centuries. As long as it remains true that mainly Jewish artists are granted prime authority in speaking about the Holocaust, Spaniards do not possess the biographical authority to speak of it. At the same time, perhaps because Spain did not participate directly in this conflict, or perhaps because Spaniards are more concerned with their own twentieth-century war against Fascism (considered by many historians the prelude to World War II), in decades that have acted out, through art, the doings of Nazism over and over again, Spain has not contributed greatly to this volume of filmic patrimony. The film analysed here, *Tras el cristal*, is one of the few Spanish films in which the legacy of Nazi Germany is present and represented. In this film, the Mallorcan director Agustí Villaronga's 1986 debut, memory of the extreme – the Holocaust, which as a metaphor is the Extreme – is evoked in extreme, that is through an utterly grim scenario in which death, perversion, torture and horror invade and pervert all aspects of the daily life of every single character in the film, including innocent children.

The central, still much discussed and mostly unresolved issue of debate in the field of Holocaust Studies over the past few decades is the concern for the appropriate way, form or genre, in which an event as extreme as the Holocaust can be represented without arriving at a facile reduction or an aesthetic domestication of human pain and suffering. Comedy, for example, has mainly been out of the question as an appropriate genre; thus the anger of many critics at Begnini's attempt at slapstick humour. A recent Spanish film, Fernando Trueba's *La niña de tus ojos* (1998), unites Spanish and German Fascism in a comedy that recalls to Ernst Lubitsch's classic *To Be or Not To Be.* However, as in Lubitsch's 1942 film, Trueba's allusion to Nazism avoids any profound, serious reference to human extermination and devastation.

Perhaps in 1942, elusion was the only possible way to speak of the unthinkable. But we are no longer in 1942. Today death, supreme

horror and destruction come immediately to the minds of all readers or viewers that approach any work of art about the Holocaust. As to the form or genre appropriate to such an extreme subject matter, not all critics agree. Some argue that innovative forms are inadequate for the representation of the Holocaust, because a form that tries to correspond to the radical novelty of the subject rather than ensuring communication would make it more difficult.[3] However, others believe that an unaccommodating narrative form could be the better way to convey the disruption and unease the subject demands.[4]

It is precisely disruption and unease that permeate *Tras el cristal*, to such an extent that the film even suffered censorship, and was banned from the 1995 Mardi Gras Film Festival. During the New York screening of the film, a critic from the *New York Post* warned the audience that at every show, halfway through the film about a third of the audience would abandon the theatre, since they were unable to bear the violence on screen.

Tras el cristal is the story of Klaus, a Nazi doctor who during World War II sexually abused, tortured and murdered young boys in name of his medical experiments. As the war comes to a close, Klaus tries to commit suicide but fails and is confined for life to an iron lung. Eight years later Klaus, wife Griselda and daughter Rena live an isolated life in a secluded house in an unnamed foreign country, presumably Spain. Sick and tired of her husband's omnipresent illness, Griselda daily questions herself whether to pull the plug on the machine (which would be the same as pulling the plug on her husband, who is no longer more than an extension of the claustrophobic apparatus) and save Klaus – and herself – from his misery. One day she decides to hire a nurse to take care of Klaus. Enter Angelo, a mysterious young man who claims to have been Klaus' nurse in the hospital he was put into immediately after the collapse of Nazi Germany. For some reason, Klaus takes to the young man and wants to keep him on. Soon we find out that Angelo and Klaus do share a past, but not exactly in the post-war hospital: Angelo was one of the children abused by Klaus during the war, and now he has come back for revenge.

[3] Andrea Reiter, *Narrating the Holocaust* (London and New York: Continuum, 2000).
[4] Sue Vice, *Holocaust Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

But has he really? Angelo certainly converts his former torturer into his own victim, but in doing so he seems to achieve a pleasure comparable only to the pleasure Klaus took on young Angelo eight years earlier. As the plot unwinds, Angelo becomes a minutely precise reproduction of wartime Klaus, his initiator, mentor, teacher, and muse. Angelo even dresses up in Klaus' SS trench coat and dark glasses.

Angelo's conversion is the first and most striking of a whole series of inversions and reproductions that can be outlined through the following dualities: Angel(o)/Nazi devil; victim/torturer; innocence/perversion; private life/privation of life; corpse/corpus (or body/writing). This last pair suggests the dilemma that underlies all previous stated dualities and grants them a sort of pattern: namely, the relationship between art and horror, or the aesthetization of death.

In the opening sequence of the film, we are shown the immediate moment before Klaus' suicide attempt. Having just completed one of his gruesome experiments, Klaus is about to take a picture. The image of the viewer behind the camera is superposed on that of another furtive eye, which belongs to a hidden spy. As Klaus takes his jump, the hidden voyeur grabs a notebook before running away. The pieces of this puzzle come together later in the film: we shall learn that the hidden onlooker was none other than young Angelo, and the notebook was Klaus' war diary, which contains detailed descriptions of the vicious tortures performed on his young victims.

Throughout the years Angelo, by force of repetition, grows to learn Klaus' prose by heart. His memory is caught between the forms delineated by the lines he reads written on paper and the scars he can see written on his body, which merely echo the scars inside. As Angelo brings Klaus back into his life by reappearing to nurse him, his obsession finally allows corpse and corpus to reunite and become one.

This encounter symbolizes the abyss all Holocaust survivors bear witness to, namely the gap between the language they have at their disposal to give words to their memory, and the experience inscribed in or on their bodies (both physically and spiritually, in their minds and souls). Robert Antelme, survivor of Dachau and Buchenwald, author of one of the first published testimonies to the concentration camps, speaks in the name of all fellow witnesses to the horror when

he tries to describe the imminent need to speak about what had happened to him, as painfully opposed to "the distance we discovered between the language we had access to and this experience that, for most of us, was still going on in our bodies".[5]

When Angelo and Klaus meet again eight years after their first encounter, Angelo has memorized Klaus's lines and can recite them, much as one recites a favourite poem of an admired author. Angelo takes perverse, erotic pleasure in Klaus' writing (again, on the body and in the diary). This satisfaction leads Angelo to repeat not only the written lines but also the acts inscribed in them (and in himself): in order for the circle to be complete, Angelo must hunt out new innocent victims to play his part in the cyclical repetition of horror. Just as he has now become Klaus, the children are new Angelos. In this lung-chamber-turned-concentration-camp even the material surroundings must be perfect: after murdering Klaus' wife to get her out of the way, Angelo redecorates the house by papering the walls with barbed wire, as he says – "so the birds can't escape".

Like the former Angelo and Klaus' daughter Rena, innocent children, today's victims, are tomorrow's torturers. In the cyclical repetition of horror devised by Villaronga, they will eventually come to repeat the same actions, over and over again. One of the questions that comes to mind is who is the author (or better, the perpetrator – as one who makes deeds perpetual) of the crimes? Is it Klaus, a typical military man who only responded to his superiors' orders and examples? Is it Angelo, or is he still a victim of the pain and suffering inflicted on his body and soul before he was old enough to know the difference between good and evil? In one scene Angelo is shown copying Klaus' handwriting, superscribing or writing over (writing yet again) the crimes. He gives an account of his doings in a precise way as he proceeds to perform them, almost ritually, in front of his master.

With this aesthetized exploration into the perverse life of an imaginary Nazi commandant, Villaronga raises the issues of the relationship between aesthetic, narrative memory and the perpetuation of the horror that lies at the heart of history's story. Memory of the extreme must not be lost. This idea lies at the heart of all discourse – both historical and artistic – about the Holocaust. The need to

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[5] Robert Antelme, *L'espèce humaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), 11 (my translation).

remember surpasses the difficulties inherent to each form of representation. This need is usually linked to the assumption that not forgetting means not repeating. But this idea can be inverted, which is what occurs here, leading us to the question of whether obsessive memory may also lead to perpetuation?

The plot performed by fictitious characters, in which each image and frame is sophisticated and carefully chosen, is highlighted in one moment of the film with the superposition of black-and-white documentary images from the actual Nazi period. This occurs, significantly, during the scene that represents the first time Angelo uncovers his written source and recites from the diary in front of a now crippled, impotent, shocked Klaus with whom the viewer almost begins to sympathize. The insertion of documentary material serves Villaronga in order to call the viewer's attention towards the enormous, unfathomable gap between historical events and their representation. This montage raises issues pertaining to the frequent debate about the boundaries between artistic and historical narrativity.

However, this use of real photos from the Holocaust can prove tricky and perhaps even dangerous. In one review of the film, a critic compares the fakery and sham of many Hollywood war films to the exemplary efficiency of *Tras el cristal*, which he calls "the real thing, ... the murders are graphic, but in a strange way tasteful".[6] Yet another delicate question arises when we take a step back from the plot and consider the film among the canon of cinematographic (and other artistic) representations of the Holocaust. While Villaronga calls forth the problematic relationship between art and horror, is he not in a way simultaneously also perpetuating the pattern of memorization of horror by offering a highly aestheticized vision of it?

This question stands at the heart of many critics' and historians' analyses of postmodern Holocaust representations. Historians like Omer Bartov or Saul Friedlander suggest that strange forms of contemporary art can eventually overwhelm the content of the memory they work to bring forth.[7] As a historian, Bartov is more

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[6] Carcharias, "In a Glass Cage The Evil That Men Do", online source: <http://epinions.nbci.com/mviereview-7B94-D04A561-3934868E-prod1>

[7] Omer Bartov, *Murder in Our Midst: The Holocaust, Industrial Killing, and Representation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Saul Friedlander,

worried about whether an artistic exploration of the event can add to our understanding of the event in itself or the artist's relation to them, and less concerned about the artistic power of the work of art based on the Holocaust.

In the scene in which Angelo's voice is heard reciting from Klaus' diary while crude documentary images of real children in the camps appear on the screen, Angelo says to Klaus: "Horror, like sin, has its own fascination." Both Susan Sontag, in her influenial 1974 essay "Fascinating Fascism", as well as Saul Friedlander in *Reflections of Nazism* describe the aesthetic obsession with Fascism in our time, and raise the question whether this obsessive fixation on the Nazi past (and the new discourse born of the constant elaboration and reinterpretation of Nazism) is merely a reflection on Fascism, or whether it is not perhaps in itself an extension of that same Fascism.[8]

It is far from my aim here to attempt to answer this question (nor is there, I believe, a straight answer). But some aspects of *Tras el cristal* suggest that this film foregrounds issues that demand meditation upon the representational status of the Holocaust in present day artistic discourse. If it is true that *Tras el cristal* calls forth the difficulty of representing the extreme by itself using extreme modes of representation (by foregrounding the perverse), it is no less true that some uses of violence and perversion leave open an interrogation on the nature of representing suffering and horror. By portraying a Nazi torturer as a confused, fragile victim and making his former victim the cruel, merciless soul, is Villaronga proposing a meditation upon the banality of evil or is he using this inversion in order to signal the dangers of extreme representation or of the representation of the extreme? This question must be left open, but in closing we can say, taking Sander Gilman's idea a bit further, that through *Tras el cristal* it becomes clear that in contemporary representations the Holocaust is no longer merely a historical period, yet it is also something more than a metaphor for human horror. Today the debate about how to represent that horror becomes a part of the work itself.

Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death (New York: Harper and Row, 1984).

[8] Susan Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism", in *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1980), 73-105; Friedlander, *Reflections of Nazism*, 19.

FILM AND WAR IMAGINARY: THE HOLLYWOOD *COMBAT* AND CULTURAL MEMORY OF WORLD WAR II

SARA PESCE

The collective memory of an historical event is transmitted by a system of representations that are socially accepted and perpetuated in time. These representations ultimately allow memory to survive. In the case of World War II, this system is fed by living testimonies, fictional narratives, and by the preservation of materials and contents that are regarded as worthy of being remembered. The products of cinema also feed this system, that is, the imaginary of the war. Films have a special role in the domain of collective representation, due to their enormous cultural impact following the end of the conflict. Especially since the war, their consumption has permeated the public and private sphere of contemporary life. The corpus of films on the subject constitutes an archive not only of images of undoubted iconic force, but also of psychological codifications, of emotional responses to the war. Such codifications have gone to the making of a cultural memory that is accessible to those who had no direct experience of the war, but for whom it remains an important historical patrimony. Seen in this way, cinema constitutes a repository of modern memory.

An important area that I intend to examine in this essay is the transmission of cultural memory. In her book *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des Kulturellen Gedächtnissen*,[1] Aleida Assman compares recollections of living witnesses and cultural memory: the former is more strongly subject to the physical and psychic experiences of the one who remembers, while the latter is by definition artificial. Personal memory is a spontaneous phenomenon, whose occurrence follows the general laws of psychology, while cultural memory is based on specific mediators and deliberate

[1] Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des Kulturellen Gedächtnissen* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1999).

policies. When, in the contemporary world, certain types of memory lose ground, as in the case of the living memory of the Shoah, other forms become more powerful and meaningful, that which Assmann calls "mediators" and politics of memory. Mediators can include texts, images and places, all of which are documentary in nature. There are, however, other types of "mediators" that belong more to the realm of invention and imagination, and cinema offers a very important example.

Film representation of the war can function as a "mediator" of cultural memory. Studying the characteristics and tracing a genealogy of this imagination is indeed complementary to another operation, which has for decades concerned the Second World War, and particularly the Shoah, that is the recuperation and preservation of a living memory. That kind of effort has been fuelled by the need to consolidate the direct memory of eye-witnesses (the living memory) so that it is not lost. The work on cinema, on the other hand, aims to pay attention also to the importance of artificial sources of memory.

Among the films on the subject produced in different countries, I have chosen Hollywood because its products enable us to trace a genealogy of mainstream representation of the war that come together in the making of war cultural memory. In Europe, Hollywood has undoubtedly exerted a powerful influence on the collective imagination of the war: its products have enjoyed a widespread distribution on European markets, with its record-beating production quotas and strong clout over the distribution of its films in European countries, starting precisely from the end of the second world war. In fact, World War II marked an important turning point in the relations between the United States and Europe, and among the many phenomena involved was the massive importation of American film products. The post-war period marked the beginning of a programmatic cultural expansion of the United States throughout Europe, with Hollywood as one of its main beneficiaries; an expansion aimed at exporting an economic model, a social ideal and an historical outlook marked by democratic discourse. Indeed, among Hollywood's goals was that of making a militant contribution to the idea that cinema would never again be an instrument of dictatorship, as had occurred under the Fascist and Nazi regimes.

When, after 1945, American films made their return to European screens, demand for this product was enormous. The end of the conflict saw a lifting of Fascist and Nazi bans on American films, which immediately boosted Hollywood's export policies. The massive circulation of these films on the European market took place at the time of their production (from the earliest films of the Forties until now distribution in European countries has been systematic), but it is also a phenomenon regarding the latest decades. The system of redistribution in VHS, starting around the early Nineties, brought about a more recent revival of the cinematic imaginary of this period of European history.[2] Taking into account both the achievements in film distribution and the history of the reception of these products, we are struck by the trans-national impact of the film representation of this war. Trans-national, therefore, are also the contents of cultural memory, for they are shared by the countries involved in the circulation of Hollywood products.

The study of Hollywood contribution to a collective imagination involves the reconstruction of a body of common knowledge that constitutes the basis for inter-communication among different periods and nations. Cultural memory rests upon such shared knowledge. According to Maurice Halbwachs,[3] in national memory the sense of sharing a common history and tradition stems less from the fact that all the members of a given society descend from the same ancestors, or from predecessors who actually experienced certain historical events, than from the fact that the members possess a strong representation of that history. Such representation conveys the will of the community to perpetuate itself. Memory is not merely a record of past events: it is their social construction, which coincides with the generation of representations, constructed through a selective process, that includes or excludes other representations.

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[2] In Italy, for example, see the reissue of war films by the publisher Fabbri, in the series *Il grande cinema di Guerra*, Fabbri Video, 1999, as well as the series *I film di guerra nel cinema italiano*, distributed by Parrini, Rome and Milan, 2000. A large number of films take the form of documentaries and war newsreels, such as those distributed by the Istituto Luce, accompanying the magazine *Il Borghese*, or the more commercial *Hobby and Works*, *I segreti di guerra*, 1999.

[3] See Maurice Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968).

According to Halbwachs, memory lives and flourishes by communication. We remember only what is communicated and what can be localized within the collective memory frame of reference.[4] A person's individual memory is structured according to his or her participation in communicative processes, that is, to his or her involvement in different social groupings, from the restricted realm of the family to national community. This is illustrated by Hollywood's impact on European spectators, how its products attracted the masses inside the cinemas and became relevant for their collective memory. It is a phenomenon that has also been explained as the need for America in Europe – and especially in Italy – in the decades following the war: a desire to adopt the USA as the measure of comparison and the model for the immediate future. As Giuseppe Prezzolini maintained in 1958, the USA had become a nightmare for some people and a mirage for others.[5]

Moreover, the sociology of mass communication reminds us that coercion uses the means of seduction in order to be effective, and that to propagate a model requires an intercultural context that is appropriate, for instance where the source and the recipient of communication share common grounds.[6] As observed by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith,[7] the success of Hollywood products is not purely attributable to more effective business strategies, but also to its capacity to meet the demands of the mass market, and above all to its potential to produce myth. Images are always and intrinsically part of a system of values; nevertheless, myth operates in such a way as to make us perceive any image as being of universal value. That is the

[4] See Jan Assman, *Das Kulturelle Gedächtniss: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1992).

[5] "In Europe there was a need for America, a desire to adopt the United States as if they were a sort of touchstone for the nearby future. As Giuseppe Prezzolini wrote in 1958 'United States are a nightmare for some people, and a mirage for others'" (S. Gundle, "L'americanizzazione del quotidiano: Televisione e consumismo nell'Italia degli anni Cinquanta", in *Quaderni storici*, XXI/2 [August 1986], 561-62, quoted by Guido Fink and Franco Minganti in "Il modello americano in Italia", in *La vita privata: Il Novecento*, eds Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby [Bari: Laterza, 1988], 354 [my translation]).

[6] Sophie Body-Gendrot, "Il modello americano in Francia", in *La vita privata: Il Novecento*, 316.

[7] *Hollywood and Europe: Economics, Culture, National Identity, 1945-95*, eds Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and Stephen Ricci (London: British Film Institute, 1998).

great appeal of Hollywood, and it is achieved by participating in the practices of communication in the countries where its products are distributed. The seductive power of American films explains their tremendous influence on our imagination of the war.

Over recent years, Hollywood – but European cinema as well – has shown a deep interest in the Second World War period, a trend confirmed by the Oscar awards. In the last decade, the number of films released on the subject was just as relevant as the awards they received. In 1993 the Oscar went to *Schindler's List* (Stephen Spielberg) for best film and best director; in 1996 to *The English Patient* (Anthony Minghella) for best film; in 1998 to *La Vita è Bella* (*Life is Beautiful*, Roberto Benigni) for best foreign film; and in the same year to *Saving Private Ryan* for best director. Also, we should not forget the five Oscar nominations (no award) for *The Thin Red Line* (Terrence Malick, 1998). 2002 was marked by the release of Roman Polanski's impressive *The Pianist*. The phenomenon reflects a rediscovery and a coming to terms with this chapter in history, which nevertheless does not offer a historical interpretation. In fact, these films re-propose the traditional tropes of cinematic representation of World War II and reinforce its official memory.

Take Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* as an example to analyse the workings of cinematic imagination as an artificial source of our memory. This film is a particularly fertile ground for discussion for three main reasons: it actually includes memory, and the war memorial as one of its main themes; it was created and produced by people with no direct experience of the war; and it constitutes a palimpsest of traditional Hollywood war films.

The opening sequence takes place in a war cemetery in the US, where the old Ryan visits the cross of captain John Miller. Following this overture, and merely separated by a very near close-up, a long battle sequence begins of Omaha Beach for which the film is famous. We are immediately thrown into the war scenario without any transitions. This situation is juxtaposed to the introductory scene, set in the present-day United States, which turns the rest of the film into an act of recollection. Viewers are presented with a powerful illusion of the past, into which they are hazardously precipitated. The battle scene appears deliberately unstructured, with no explanation beyond the title "Omaha Beach", no historical background or preparation to

the attack. The way in which the audience is plunged into the action is one already used in the history of Hollywood.

Well before this film, in the Sixties, films on World War II had attained a level of maturity as a genre sufficient to allow one to take for granted that the audience knew the historical facts. In addition, the audience became accustomed to a certain representation of the situation, and was immediately able to follow its internal logic thanks to a familiarity with the basic co-ordinates of the genre – combat film. In the combat film as such, a genre that started with the official involvement of the US army in the war, a number of story elements remained unchanged. There was, in fact, a hero, the patrol or the army, the war aims, etc.; and a recognizable iconography that allowed the watcher to reconstruct the missing piece of information in a sequence, as, for example, when two meaningful shining black boots or a monocle would appear. The same would work with battle scenes. Thus, for example, a film such as *Merrill's Marauders* (Samuel Fuller, 1962), immediately casts us into a scene of combat, in which we are required to call upon our knowledge of the genre, as well as our ideas on the war. Spielberg's strategy is similar to Fuller's – that of the abrupt impact with the battle – though in his hands, it is configured as a genre feature.

Where other directors can use their personal experience of war to support their films, as in *The Big Red One* (1980) again by Sam Fuller, who was a war veteran, Spielberg relies instead on his own immense film-making expertise and, above all, on the viewpoint of the contemporary audience. The Omaha Beach sequence is a shocking emotional experience, but it does not really take us by surprise from an iconographic point of view, precisely because we carry with us a considerable store of similarly organized war images. In other words, Hollywood war films have already assimilated this format: the absence of explanation and the hard impact effect have become part of its genre characteristics (see, for example, the D-Day in *The Big Red One*, showing the red tinted water, the paroxysm, the incoherence).

Spielberg pays homage to the entire Hollywood war film tradition, starting from its birth in the forties. He cites all of the elements which have gone to structure the combat genre for this conflict: the heterogeneous group representing an American melting pot; the battalion that functions harmoniously despite its heterogeneity,

representing a form of surrogate family; the heroism of the commander, who is also a father figure; the always faceless enemy (except in one exceptional case, that of the German soldier who, after being saved from execution, kills the American Jew who had spared him), conceived as absolute evil, who is even almost wholly deprived of all human attributes; the emphasis on military strategy and technological details as a fundamental aspect of the adventurous narrative conception; the absence of female characters; and the need to remember and discuss home. Spielberg's narration is littered with objects and details that have become so embedded in the war genre as to seem to be a natural part of it: letters home to the family, for example, or boots (symbolic objects reminding, either by contrast or analogy, of home), or again the moment when the company stops to enjoy nature. Taken together, these elements can be seen as an attempt by soldiers at war to establish a relation of continuity, with order perceived as a healthy principle carried over from their life before they went to war. These elements are bearers of a collective meaning: ultimately they articulate a discourse about America. This is the basis upon which Hollywood constructs its canon of the war imagination.

Spielberg's film reinforces this canon by inscribing in his work the distinguishing traits of the combat genre. According to Halbwachs, collective memory, such as the memory of a shared past, can only exist in the presence of a continual reconstruction of the memory itself. If memory is a collective construct based on the accumulation of selected and repeated representations, then Hollywood functions as an agent of memory, insofar as it perpetuates this mechanism by representing and revisiting its own contents. Indeed, *Saving Private Ryan* re-proposes the style and rhetoric of all epochs of war film, but especially that of the Sixties, a period to which Spielberg's cinematography is strongly indebted. We can count among the forerunners of this work films such as *The Longest Day* (Kenn Annakin, 1962), *Tora Tora Tora* (Richard Fleischer, Toshio Masuda, and Kinji Fukasuku, 1970) and *The Battle of the Bulge* (Kenn Annakin, 1965). Closely based on true events and committed to creating an intensely realistic effect, films like these represent a season in which the combat genre assumed epic form, presenting an impressive, choral narrative, foregrounding the details of battle, the historical background, and being made in the real theatres of war with

international casts. These works, of epic revival, however, actually served to make history more legendary, more distant and mythic: ultimately it removed the war and substituted it with a gigantic cinematic event.

For example, *The Longest Day* substitutes the real heroes of the Second World War with heroes of cinema, famous stars well known for this type of role, like John Wayne, as Colonel Ben Vandervoot, Henry Fonda, as Teddy Roosevelt Jr., and Robert Mitchum as General Norman Cota. Although the spectator might have seen photographs of American military figures in magazines, newspapers and through other documentary sources (increasingly difficult in recent times), few will know what Teddy Roosevelt actually looked like. The casting therefore exploits the screen persona of the actor, that is his curriculum of previous roles and characters, to boost the effect of reality. This is the case of John Wayne, for example, who endlessly quotes himself through gestures and rhetoric. He makes reference to his preceding roles as a cowboy, a horse-riding army officer in the civil war, or a US Force envoy in the South-Pacific. John Wayne can always be counted on, and in moments of crisis he exclaims, "God Willing, we'll do what we came here to do" – words expressing a strength and spirit accumulated by the fictional Wayne during the course of his career, including war films such as *Sands of Iwo Jima* (Allan Dwann, 1949), *They Were Expendable* (John Ford, 1945), *Back to Bataan* (Edward Dmytryk, 1945). Because of his screen persona, we believe that John Wayne is Colonel Vandervoort, or better, that Vandervoort was John Wayne. In this way, the audience is thrust into the centre of a legendary event and relives D-Day as a filmic reality, a Hollywood reality.

Spielberg makes use of a similar device, except that this time he does not rely on individual war genre stars, but on the entire aesthetic system of the Hollywood combat. Spielberg creates a filmic event to which the audience responds as if to a great myth. Over the decades, Hollywood has moved towards an ever increasing degree of abstraction in its representation of war, also corresponding to a shift in perception on the part of audiences, which has become less real, more self-referential and dependent on the imagery of television. The more time elapses from the historic events in question, the greater our knowledge of war is drawn from photographic sources and

cinematography. All the cinema subsequent to the war period itself re-proposes and re-packages remembered instead of first-hand images. The use of black and white becomes therefore meaningful. For decades the deliberate use of this type of photography was part of an aesthetic that assured a neutrality to the representation. It immediately reminded spectators of the documentary images of the past they had already seen, which, iconographically, were similar. The mental image of the war of the Forties is in black and white (based on original newsreels, on photographs and films already seen). Adding colour to the images of war would go to the detriment of the effect of reality. Colour lends greater brilliance and beauty to the images, with the risk of softening the truth of reality. What counts is not the reality of war, but its appearance. That is the rationale of the black and white of Spielberg's *Shindler's List,* as it is of the visual intensity of the Omaha Beach sequence: they are devices that insistently make reference to the consumption of images that took place in the past.

Saving Private Ryan also revives the propaganda rhetoric of the early films on the Second World War. Starting in the Forties, the American war film was a propaganda vehicle because it discussed the reasons for combat and sought to provide a justification for the war through the dialogue among characters. A characteristic of Hollywood is to set this discussion among the soldiers themselves, thus making the war a question of the people, that is, incorporating it into national democratic discourse. War is terrible, but there is a reason for fighting. This is the underlying message also of *Saving Private Ryan*. After showing the horror in the first combat scene, the various strands are brought together to place the war firmly within the discourse of valour, the homeland and family. During their various exploits, the platoon members discuss at length the reasons for their mission, pondering the sense of sacrificing a whole group for the life of a single soldier. In the reflection emerging from the numerous exchanges among characters, we find all the ingredients of the ideology of this war and of American patriotism.

These ruminations are not removed from the core of the film, the combat. In fact, the sequences focusing on discussion are interlaced with those of the battle. The moment of military conflict is indeed a crucial aspect of the propaganda rhetoric throughout the tradition of Hollywood World War II film. The combat film is structured so that

the public feels ennobled by having shared the experience of battle with the soldiers on the screen. The viewer feels exalted and dignified by the fact of having lived through that adventure. At the end, the public and soldiers are all brothers in arms. As Jeanine Basinger observes, World War II gave birth to a completely new genre, the combat film indeed, centred on the graphic representation of the battle.[8] The military conflict becomes the narrative pivot of the relationship between the public and the content of the film, that is war. It is a different relationship from the one encountered in Hollywood films that deal with other wars: the War of Secession, for example, and even films on World War I. If the First World War was the first conflict seen at the cinema by those who had taken part in it, the type of vision was still very different from the mass experience that would become the hallmark of films on World War II.[9] The Second World War has always been understood as a mass experience, precisely like cinema. Combat film is based on an experience of co-operation and has a popular appeal. It is conceived as the epitome of collective consumption. Upon this principle, essentially aesthetic, is based the statute of the American combat genre, a fact that explains also why it is so easy to export it to Europe.

The invention of *Saving Private Ryan* springs from such principle. The film stems from a generational need: not that of explaining the war, but rather of paying homage to the generation of soldiers who fought it, in Spielberg's case, the fathers. For Spielberg this can only be done by paying homage to the cinema that represented it, so that the experience of war and the cinema of war become one of the same thing on the basis of the likeness of their cultural statute: the capacity to impress a significant mark on memory. In other words, the film is at the same time a memorial of Second World War and a memorial of the cinema on this war. As a matter of facts, the intention is not to offer documentary evidence, to bear witness, but to re-create the real-life experience of war, arriving on the verge of the virtual. The metaphor of the virtual is particularly appropriate because Spielberg gears his medium towards the maximum sensorial involvement of the audience. In the Omaha Beach sequence this takes place with such

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[8] Jeanine Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre* (1986) (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2003).

[9] *Ibid*., 88.

visual – and sensorial – intensity that film borders on the genres of horror, and splatter. The stress and violence to which we are subject are so strong that we ourselves feel we have participated in the battle. The filmgoer experiences virtually the disorientation of the soldier in battle. This fact assumes the validity of a poetic declaration: Spielberg shoots the film as if it was the real war, as he himself claims. His film builds up an illusion of a situation of the past. In Spielberg's hands, cinema gains the power of giving life to history and becomes therefore an artificial source of memory. To attain his goal, he exploits the iconic potential of film and starts up the circulation of codified contents of memory (an archive of information both fictional and documentary, like *D-Day, June 6 1944: The Climatic Battle of World War II*, 1994, by Stephen Ambrose, and other sources, such as the advice of war veterans, which Spielberg used systematically).

What does Spielberg's film tell us about the impact of Hollywood on the European memory of World War II? *Saving Private Ryan* is constructed as a memorial, as a monument. It opens in a cemetery dedicated to the US soldiers who died in the war. Thus, the perspective on war is clearly from the American homeland. This is a film whose rationale – consistently with Hollywood tradition – is to define America, but in doing so it sets a distance between here (the US) and there (the actual setting of the war). Defining present-day America by way of graphically illustrating a distant past: such an operation falls into an discourse analogous to that which has supported, for example, the establishment of Holocaust Memorials in the US in the latest few decades (for example the memorial built in Washington in 1993). Such a discourse implies that the Shoah has special importance for the American national identity. Preserving the memory of the genocide of Jews, the monument reinforces indirectly the democratic statute of the United States as opposed to the crimes of the Nazis. It states that "in act and word the Nazis denied the deepest tenets of the American people".[10]

[10] *The Campaign for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, Washington DC, US Holocaust Memorial Council, nd, 4, quoted by I.E. Young, "The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum: Memory and the Politics of Identity", in *The Jew in the Text: Modernity and the Construction of Identity*, eds Linda Nochlin and Tamar Garb (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 295.

The Hollywood combat film is similarly conceived. It uses a war scenario to reinforce collective imaginary and national identity. In both cases memory is based upon devices that remove the agent of discourse far from the object of interest and renders this object abstract. The American Holocaust Memorials are intrinsically removed from the "topography of terror". Where European memorials located *in situ* often suggest themselves rhetorically as an extension of the events they aim to commemorate, those in America must gesture abstractedly to a past removed in both time and space:

> If memorials in Germany and Poland composed of camp ruins invite visitors to mistake them for the events they represent, those in America inevitably call attention to the great distance between themselves and the destruction. The meaning in American memorials is not always as self-evident as that suggested at the camps, places of deportation, or destroyed synagogues. In this sense, American memorials seem not to be anchored in history so much as in the ideals that generated them in the first place.[11]

Despite the intense illusion of reality, distancing the theatre of war is also fundamental to Spielberg's approach to the memory of World War II. The agent of this distance, its medium, is cinema itself. Cinema operates an abstraction and sets up a sense of distance towards the war by depending on the self-referentiality of its narrative models. Both Holocaust memorials and Hollywood combat genre affirm their remoteness from the actual places of the war. The memorials include Nazi crimes in national discourse showing what is un-American. Cinema continuously reproduces itself. Hollywood transmits this distance also to those who are culturally close to the theatres of war, namely ourselves, European audiences. Such distance affects the imaginary that undoubtedly inhabits the collective understanding of the war. It is one of the various phenomena that come together to the making of cultural memory and therefore raises a question concerning our relation to the places and events of our history.

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[11] *Ibid*., 293.

"GOD'S PLAYGROUND": POLAND AND THE SECOND WORLD WAR IN WAJDA'S CINEMA

GABRIELLA ELINA IMPOSTI

> Suddenly, in 1939, everything collapsed. My father was lost; he went to war and never came back. My mother could not stay at home, she had to go to work, we became workers. Our intelligentsia family found itself in completely different surroundings ….
>
> My father, Jakub Wajda, lived only to the age of 40. He was captain in the 72nd Infantry Regiment and died at Katyń. But until 1989 we were not allowed to make an inscription on the family tomb, saying where he was killed.

This is how Andrzej Wajda, born in Poland in 1926 and thirteen-years old at the outbreak of the Second World War, remembers the shattering events of those years and their aftermath. Young Andrzej did not have "good papers", so in order to survive, he had to work in his uncle's locksmith's shop in Krakow:

> Thanks to my father's brothers, I was able to survive the occupation; I probably owe them my life, because my papers [documents] were very insufficient. I had to stay at home, I was scared even to go to the tram stop, because there was always some kind of control going on …. This work later helped me understand what physical labour really means, what it means to work every day, to go to work in the morning, and when later, in the 50's, there was talk about the workers, the working class, I could say to myself 'I have also been a worker'. It was not strange to me.

Later he became part of the Armia Krajowa (Home Army), the Polish Resistance, albeit only with minor tasks. He witnessed those terrible years that left a profound scar on the consciousness of the Polish people, who at the end of the war found their country part of the

Soviet bloc and radically changed in its boundaries and in its social and ethnic composition:

> I could have been sent to Auschwitz; by a strange twist of fate it didn't happen. I could have been arrested and sent to Germany as a slave labourer. I had a little luck, but this is a country where you actually have to find excuses for your luck. Because it is also true that all those who were braver, more determined, more desperate, more eager to take up arms, are mostly dead. And it must be said that these certainly were the best people.[1]

This sense of guilt and responsibility for those who did not survive, for the "submerged" – to use an expression of Primo Levi's – was probably one of the reasons that conditioned the keen interest of the Polish filmmaker in history, especially the history of the Second World War, and the role the Poles, as individuals and as a nation, played in it and the Shoah. This was an interest, or rather an obsession, that Wajda shared with other filmmakers of the "Polish Film School", which blossomed in the late 1950s. As the famed actor Zbigniew Cybulski put it in an interview:

> For Poles war is an obsession. What is more, the filmmakers who created the Polish Film School belonged to a generation who took part in the Second World War. Our obsession is a kind of psychological appendage that lasts right up to the present time.[2]

Of nearly forty films for the cinema and about twenty television programmes Wajda has produced during more than five decades of activity as a filmmaker, a third investigate history. The historical sweep goes as far back as the Middle Ages, to the time of Crusades, and right up to contemporary events, such as the rise of the Solidarity Movement in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

At twenty-eight Wajda started his career as a filmmaker with a film on the Second World War. There had been other films on this topic. In

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[1] Excerpts from a speech in the film *The Debit and the Credit* (for the text see http://www.wajda.pl).

[2] See the interview with Zbigniew Cybulski in Małgorzata Furdal and Roberto Turigliatto, *Dalla scuola polacca al nuovo cinema (1956-1970)* (Milan: Ubulibri, 1988), 162 (my translation).

1947, *Zakazane Piosenki* (*Forbidden Songs*), by Leonard Buczkowski, in spite of its success was soon withdrawn from distribution on the grounds that it allegedly pardoned the crimes of the Germans. In 1949 the film was released again in a second version with new scenes clearly illustrating the occupants' brutality.[3] The following year, 1948, saw the release of Wanda Jakubowska's *Ostatny etap* (*The Last Stage*), a stark, semi-documentary picture of the concentration camp world of Auschwitz, where the film director herself had been sent in 1943. Her film was awarded the Grand Prix at Marienbad Film Festival. In 1949 Aleksander Ford, a veteran of the Polish pre-war film industry, presented *Ulica Graniczna* (*Border Street*), the story of a building where both Polish and Jewish families live which becomes the border line of the Warsaw Ghetto. The everyday life of the inhabitants of this building is set against the dramatic background of the Ghetto Rising in 1943. In spite of its rather traditional, pre-war approach, the film is well made and memorable.[4] The early 1950s were characterized by the enforcement of "Socialist Realism" as the dominant aesthetic dogma, with its stereotyped positive heroes and biased vision of the war.

Andrzej Wajda worked on his debut film, *Pokolenie* (*Generation*) in 1953-54,[5] when this set of rules was starting to crumble. Indeed his film definitely contributed to the rise of a new concept of cinema in post-Stalinist Poland. The sensation of novelty was keenly perceived by all the protagonists of these events, as Roman Polański testifies:

> For us it was a film of tremendous importance. The whole Polish cinema began with it. It was a marvellous experience …. The whole crew was very young. Wajda was very young, very sincere. We worked day and night. He believed in what he was doing – this was something utterly new in Poland (these were still Stalinist years): the

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[3] See Bolesław Michałek, *The Cinema of Andrzej Wajda* (London: Tantivity Press, 1973), 12; Bolesław Michałek and Frank Turaj, *Le cinéma polonais* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1992), 54.

[4] See Michałek, *The Cinema of Andrzej Wajda*, 13 and Michałek and Turaj, *Le cinéma polonais*, 54-55.

[5] The film, released on 25 January 1955, is based on the celebrated novel by Bohdan Czeszko (1923-1988), *Pokolenie*, published in 1951.

film was different, young.[6]

From the aesthetic point of view, the film owed a lot to Italian neo-realism, which, paradoxically, was regarded with suspicion and disapproval by official critics such as the Minister of Culture Włodzimierz Sokorski,[7] who branded it as "naturalism" and "primitive exhibitionism":[8]

> My first film was a kind of introduction, a prelude to what I would do later. The heroes of my first film are people who, with the total persuasion and naivety of the young devote all of their energies and their own lives to a grand idea …. however, these young people are radically different from the models that were enforced at the time: their heroism is very different from the heroism of the characters in the *Young Guard* and similar novels. They are simply unaware of their heroism, that is to say they do not pose as heroes …. In the eyes of the viewers a new type of heroism takes shape, a heroism more contemporary and more authentic.[9]

The new film-shooting and staging style, the creation of a new type of hero – embodied especially by Tadeusz Janczar as the highly-strung, vacillating and eventually tragic figure of Jasio Krone – and the work of the actors on themselves, their acting style, contributed to the beginning of the new Polish Film School.[10] As the critic Bolesław

[6] Hadelin Trinon, *Andrzej Wajda* (Paris: Èditions Seghers, 1964), 172; for an English version see also Michałek, *The Cinema of Andrzej Wajda*, 18.

[7] Removed from office in April 1956.

[8] See Bolesław Michałek, "Le scelte del cinema polacco tra gli anni Cinquanta e Sessanta", in Furdal and Turigliatto, *Dalla scuola polacca al nuovo cinema (1956-1970)*, 30-31 and Michałek and Turaj, *Le cinéma polonais*, 62. Jerzy Plazewski comments on the neo-realist influences apparent in Wajda's first films: "Certains paysages et certains gestes dénotent l'influence de films tels que *Miracle à Milan* ou *Rome, ville ouverte*. La critique polonaise le lui a reproché Le second film de Wajda: *Kanal*, démontre que sa vision du monde ne consiste pas à emprunter …. Ce qui est sûr cependant, c'est que son art résulte du refus d'accepter les recettes toutes faites imposées aux artistes et qui à l'époque du 'réalisme socialiste'" (*Cahiers du Cinéma*, 82 [April 1958], reprinted in Trinon, *Andrzej Wajda*, 152).

[9] See Conversation with Bolesław Michałek for a programme for the Belgian Radio-Television in 1963, as reported in Trinon, *Andrzej Wajda*, 103-104 (my translation).

[10] See Wajda's interview as reported in Furdal and Turigliatto, *Dalla scuola polacca al nuovo cinema (1956-1970)*, 51.

Michałek puts it, this new aesthetic conception, which was far from being monolithic and uniform, blazed the trail for the understanding of recent history, but also moved towards a critical view of the contemporary age and therefore to the discovery of truth.[11]

Pokolenie was the first film of a trilogy[12] that included *Kanał* (*The Sewers*) (1957) and *Popiòł i diament* (*Ashes and Diamonds*) (1958). A fourth film, *Lotna*, could be associated with this trilogy. It completes the portrayal of wartime events and concludes the decade and also the brilliant, albeit brief, lifespan of the Polish Film School.

Contemporary history, the change of political atmosphere from strict post-war Stalinism to the relative thaw of Gomułka's early rule,[13] contributed to the opening up of a debate about the years of war and occupation and the role different, non-communist formations had played. The veil of Soviet propaganda was being torn away by the very generation which had spent its youth during the war period and which was now trying to understand its own identity, its own meaning and role both in the past and in the present. In *Kanał* Wajda abandons the elements of official optimism, which one can detect in *Generation*, for a more tragic vision of events that had been taboo for nearly a decade, the Warsaw Rising of Summer 1944. After the War, Poland had to face the devastation and loss which in part resulted from the romantic heroism that had led to the Rising. After 1949 official propaganda, by emphasizing the decisive role of the Soviet Army in the liberation of the country, all but accused the Home Army of collaborationism with the enemy.[14]

On the other hand, the legend of the Rising continued to grow in the public mind. Jerzy Stefan Stawiński, the author of the stories from which the screenplay was taken, had been a young officer in the Home Army and had taken part in the Warsaw Rising. His stories also inspired Andrzej Munk's *Eroica*, Witold Lesiewicz's *Dezerter* (*The*

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[11] See Michałek, "Le scelte del cinema polacco tra gli anni Cinquanta e Sessanta", 31.

[12] According to Toeplitz's definition (see Trinon, *Andrzej Wajda*, 13).

[13] Comrade Wiesław was unanimously elected First Secretary by the 8th Plenum of the Central Committee on 21 October 1956 (see Norman Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland*, 2 vols [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981], 584).

[14] "It has been said that public discourse in post-war Poland was governed by two taboos. One laid down that no one was permitted to speak badly of the Soviet Union. The other laid down that no one could speak well of the Warsaw Rising" (Norman Davies, *Rising '44: "The Battle for Warsaw"* [London: Macmillan, 2003], 511).

Deserter) and Jerzy Passendorfer's *Zamach* (*Answer to Violence*). The main point was the conflict between open sympathy for the tragic fate of the Home Army soldiers and a streak of scepticism as to the purpose and achievement of their heroism. The issue at stake was a traditional one in Polish literature and art: the meaning and content of Polishness, the lack of political and social common sense, the propensity for disproportionately high sacrifices. While Munk in *Eroica* depicted a grotesque parody of heroism and Passendorfer intoned a panegyric in his *Zamach*, Wajda found a kind of balance, or rather historical ambiguity between criticism and admiration.

In the first part of *Kanal* Wajda shows the last days of the Rising and the insurgents against the sunny, almost blinding background of Warsaw in ruins and flames, before their descent into the hell of the sewers, still unaware of the terrors that await them: "[This part] gives the viewer something he expects, elements of a national epic (let us not forget this is the first film dealing with the topic), and holding back the shock of the later descent into the sewers, as if to lull the viewer into a false sense of security."[15] The claustrophobic, hellish presentation of the pointless descent into the sewers; the undeniable force and shocking quality of the close-ups and of the double exposure; the deafening rumble of bombs, shots and shouts; the filth that soon covers the bodies and the faces and the darkness that engulfs them; the memorable scene of the grille that blocks the outlet into the river through which one can imagine the other riverbank, where the Soviets are waiting; the dazzled Mądry who emerges into the glaring sunshine to be shot along with hundreds of others in a scene that reminds of Goya's execution painting; all these scenes, despite certain technical imperfections or redundancies of the screenplay, leave a lasting trace in the memory of the viewer:[16]

> "We entered the sewer …. We immediately fell into deep water up to my chest. The water rushed by so strongly that we had to hold on to

[15] Krzystof Rucinski, "Two men against History: A Comparative Analysis of Films by Miklós Jancsó and Andrzej Wajda", *Kinoeye*, III/3 (February 2003), in online edition: http://www.kinoeye.org/O3/03/rucinski03.php, 2004.

[16] Wajda himself selects the scene of the grille and of Mądry's exit from the sewers as the most memorable in his film: see the interview published in Trinon, *Andrzej Wajda*, 105; and also Eric Rohmer's reaction to these very scenes, *Arts*, 19 March 1958 (also published in Trinon, *Andrzej Wajda*, 151).

> each other …. The water roared and emitted a frightful stench …. There were strong currents which were carrying not just excrement, but thick gravel and hard stones that flayed the skin from one's legs …"[17]

Inevitably, the film triggered off a stormy reception and public controversies both among the supporters of the Rising, who expected sublime martyrology – which Wajda deliberately chooses not to do – and its opponents. Significantly, a quite balanced and sober appreciation was given by the critic of the official newspaper *Tribuna Ludu*, Aleksander Jackiewicz:

> Maybe *Kanał* will mark the beginning of the truth being told about the history, about ourselves, about a whole generation. Perhaps it will prove to be art as warning, art as purgation, a triumph of the heroism of life over the heroism of death?[18]

In *Ashes and Diamonds* Wajda completes the picture of Poland emerging from the war. In fact the film is set, symbolically, during the very first day of peace, or rather the last day of war in Europe, 8 May 1945. But a new war is already being waged – the struggle between two parties to assert their power on the new Poland emerging from the ashes of the great world fire. Wajda again deals with a taboo topic during the first ten years of Communist rule in Poland: the underground Resistance to the Sovietization of the country, which, according to Norman Davies lasted from 1944 to 1947.[19] Maciek, the reluctant hero (played by an excellent Zbigniew Cybulski), is an assassin leading a battle doomed to defeat. He has a fleeting taste of what normal life and love could be, but he is summoned to kill again. The grotesque crowd of phantoms dancing at dawn to the sound of a distorted polonaise celebrate the vanity and emptiness of Polishness –

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[17] K. Pużak, a witness of the Rising quoted in Davies, *Rising '44: "The Battle for Warsaw"*, 399.
[18] "The army enters the Sewers", *Trybuna ludu*, 24 April 1957, quoted in Michałek, *The Cinema of Andrzej Wajda*, 36.
[19] Davies, *Rising '44: "The Battle for Warsaw"*, 512.

a theme that Wajda develops to its bitter end in *Landscape after the Battle*[20] – while the hero meets a meaningless death on a rubbish heap.

> Once, during the shooting of the film, when I was driving around I noticed a huge rubbish heap. This image fascinated me, in that heap you can find anything. At a certain point I imagined that there you could even find shreds from Maciek's clothes and bones from his body. Running away from his pursuers and everybody else, when he is useless for everybody, he will find there his last refuge.[21]

The tragic meaning of this chess game where individuals are merely the pawns of history, where killer and victim (Maciek and Szczuka) share the same destiny of death, is reinforced by the adoption of the classical unity of place, time and action, which has its climax with the equally absurd and useless death of both heroes.

Lotna (1959) is a film Wajda is particularly attached to, in spite of all of its defects and shortcomings. The story, which is rather loose and lacks the symmetry of his previous films, is taken from a novel by Wojciech Żukrowski and recounts the legend of the heroic and desperate charge of Polish uhlans (cavalry) against German tanks, a legend that spread through Poland soon after the German occupation. In a way Wajda revives the myths and rituals of the cavalry barracks he grew up in with a sense of nostalgia and melancholy rather than with bitterness or sarcasm. The beautiful white mare called Lotna, which gives the film its title, is the symbol of a dying world, but also a touchstone of the men's character and patriotism. Her death at the end of the film can be seen as the death of that Poland which was briefly resurrected between the two World Wars in the attempt to build on the romantic myth of Polishness. It was then destroyed by the German occupation never to be found again.

"This film has been a nightmare for me, but it is the closest to what I love in cinema, it shows what a film should be like" – said Wajda during an interview.[22] Stylistically, it was a very different film from

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[20] The dance in a circle was a motif inspired by Wyspiański's *Wedding* and was to be developed twelve years later by Wajda in the film taken from that book in 1970.

[21] Interview with Andrzej Wajda, published in Furdal and Turigliatto, *Dalla scuola polacca al nuovo cinema (1956-1970)*, 94 (my translation).

[22] Interview with Marcel Martin in *Cinéma 62*, 70 (November 1962), published in Trinon, *Andrzej Wajda*, 114 (my translation).

the previous ones, first of all because of the use of colour – it was one of the first Polish films to use it. Wajda here is less worried with the script, his language is mainly visual and symbolic. The shots have a painting-like quality that reflects his own formation as a painter at the Academy of Arts soon after the war:

> You cannot deny that the essence of true cinema is the synthesis quality of the image …. A film is directed not to the rationality of the viewer but rather to his imagination, his feelings …. what is needed are new creative solutions.[23]

> All I want is to stir audiences, because that is the easiest way of getting through to them. I want to say goodbye to certain noble national tradition and I think this should make it a very Polish film.[24]

Particularly luscious is the use of colour and images that turn into symbols – a snow-white handkerchief wiping the blood from a sword combine the two colours of Poland's flag, white and red. A bride's veil caught on a coffin and a coffin filled with apples signify the combination of life and death. The flaming colours of the Polish autumn gradually fade away into dark and hueless brown with the death of the heroes, the end of hope, the end of Poland. Critics have talked about a baroque quality of the style,[25] but Wajda himself prefers to talk about surrealism rather than baroque.[26] "Indeed certain surrealist visions have become real. During the Second World War we

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[23] Wajda in Furdal and Turigliatto, *Dalla scuola polacca al nuovo cinema (1956-1970)*, 98 (my translation).

[24] Quoted in Michałek, *The Cinema of Andrzej Wajda*, 51.

[25] "The film is a crucial work in the Baroque style …. From the very beginning the plaster statues, which populate a park aflame with autumn hues, and the huge mirrors in the abandoned palace, transport us into a Baroque universe. Catches? Yes, certainly, especially explicit in the use of certain typical elements. The inventiveness of the filmmaker, however, never ceases to amaze us particularly in his masterful handling of colour, he has found the means to create visual enchantment for which I can find no precedent" (Marcel Martin, *Cinéma 65* [April 1965], 54).

[26] Zygmunt Kałuziński, who had previously attacked *Ashes and Diamonds* found an element of coherence in the surrealism of the film: "Surrealism is the style of a civilization in defeat, and so, strangely enough, it seems here to accord with the theme" (see Michałek, *The Cinema of Andrzej Wajda*, 53).

witnessed truly surrealist situations which painters had foreseen twenty years before."[27]

It might seem that after a film like *Lotna* nothing else could be said about the Polish experience of the War. In his next film *Samson* (1961), however, Wajda did find another crucial and troubled issue – antisemitism and the fate of the Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto. While in the previous films history was seen as a blind, anonymous and overpowering force senselessly crushing the lives of individuals, in *Samson* Wajda attempts to focus on its social, political and ideological reasons. The individual slowly acquires a sense of responsibility, overcoming the anguish and the fear that freeze him into submission. The main character is a man isolated, lonely and abandoned, as the author of the novel, Kazimierz Brandys, points out: "The destiny of the Jews interested me not just from the point of view of antisemitism, but particularly from the point of view of the loneliness of an individual in society, an individual who … essentially is a stranger."[28]

Like *Kanał, Samson* exploits the contrast between the blazing light outside and the darkness in the cellars and the hideouts where the protagonist seeks refuge. It is a "long journey underground, a path in the darkness where fear turns a man into a vermin".[29] It is an experience hundreds of survivors of the Ghetto can recall. In a documentary Wajda recently made for the Survivors of the Shoah Foundation, a survivor, Stanisław Jonas tells his story of endless and desperate search for a safe hideout and concludes:

> What the War left me is this feeling I have to keep hiding. I'm hiding all the time even if I am not really hiding, I am somehow trying to hide. And sometimes it happens to me even now, even in America. Somebody asks me if I am a Jew and without thinking, automatically, I answer I am not.[30]

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[27] Interview with Wajda, in Furdal and Turigliatto, *Dalla scuola polacca al nuovo cinema (1956-1970)*, 98 (my translation).

[28] Kaziemierz Brandys, author of the novel from which the film was taken and also author of the screenplay, interview published in Trinon, *Andrzej Wajda*, 179 (my translation).

[29] Jean-Paul Torok, *Positif*, 43 (January 1962), published in Trinon, *Andrzej Wajda*, 165 (my translation).

[30] *Pamiętam. I Remember. The Broken Silence*, 2001 (Premiere, 15 April 2002).

The balance of the first seven years of Wajda's work as a filmmaker clearly points out the importance of the War theme in his production and how deeply the reflection on the various issues raised by that historical period is intertwined with his growth and evolution as an artist. He gradually acquires and masters new approaches, new techniques and a new language. His research never stops, even when he appears to have abandoned the theme of war. In the episode "Warsaw", included in *L'Amour a vingt ans* (1962),[31] faced with the theme of love as it is experienced by the new generation, Wajda chooses to "point to the conflict between … two generations [those who remember the War and those who don't], to the impossibility of deep and lasting communication between them".[32] The people of the War generation have lost their heroic shine and charm. Nostalgic and pathetic memories of the heroic past resurface only when they are drunk, so past heroes are inevitably soon dismissed with contempt by the younger generation, or even portrayed as fakes and impostors, as in Tadeusz Konwicki's *Salto*, a film shot a few years later. With this film the kind of vicious circle[33] the War theme represented for the Polish Film School was completed. *Warsaw* sets "a seal on the biography of a generation which he [Wajda] and other filmmakers of the 'Polish school' … had created …. And yet, … there is a note of acceptance in the film. The clock cannot be stopped."[34]

In the following four decades or so Wajda never abandoned the theme of war, although he picked it up more rarely than in the first period of his career. He never stopped his investigation into the various aspects of war, of the issues it raised, both for individuals and nations as a whole. There are essentially three lines of his enquiry: first, the problem of the survivors and their coming to terms with their memory of horror and their need to find their way back home; second, everyday life, everyday feelings during the war; and third, the theme of the Holocaust.

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[31] It is a portmanteau film set in various countries: France (François Truffaut), Italy (Roberto Rossellini), West Germany (Marcel Ophüls), Japan (Shintaro Ishirara) and Poland (Andrzej Wajda). It aimed at investigating "the inscrutable youth of the atomic age and technological civilization" (see Michałek, *The Cinema of Andrzej Wajda*, 75).
[32] *Ibid*., 77, and also interview with Wajda in Trinon, *Andrzej Wajda*, 121.
[33] As Wajda puts it himself in Furdal and Turigliatto, *Dalla scuola polacca al nuovo cinema (1956-1970)*, 52.
[34] Michałek, *The Cinema of Andrzej Wajda*, 78-79.

Krajobraz po bitwie (*Landscape after the Battle*: 1970) is a film that can probably be better understood if we consider that it comes shortly after *Wszystko na sprzedaż* (*Everything for Sale*: 1968), a film where the director sums up the meaning of his own first creative period and tries to tell a story of personal and collective memory in order to compensate for the loss of his favourite actor. Everything is for sale in cinema, even the story of Cybulski's tragic and meaningless death. This is a film about the making of cinema, like Fellini's *8½*.

The shift from this reflection on the working of the film industry to the landscape left after the battles of the Second World War could not have been sharper. The film is a peculiar and penetrating hybridization by the director and his scriptwriter, Andrzej Brzozowski, of a series of stories by Tadeusz Borowski published soon after the war. The title is taken from a story, "The battle of Grünwald", which tells the commemoration of the historic victory of the Poles against the Teutonic Knights in 1410. It is acted out by the Polish prisoners after their liberation from a concentration camp. In the film, however, this is just an episode, although central, while details about the horrifying experience in the camp, which are taken from other stories of the series, surface in the memory of various characters. Tadeusz Borowski, who ended up committing suicide in 1951, portrays life inside the camp in a lucid, bitter, aggressive and ruthless manner while at the same time managing to achieve a documentary, detached quality. He portrays men who have been inside the camp as deeply contaminated by death and the destruction wrought by the war persists inside them even after they are liberated. The fine line between executioners and victims is constantly blurred, as in the episode where a prisoner remembering the killing of others comments on brain being "very tasty eaten raw", thus hinting at episodes of cannibalism.

The opening scene is a splendid piece of cinema. To the sound of Vivaldi's *Spring* the grey crowd of prisoners run toward the barbed wire fences. They stop hesitantly while one takes courage and touches the wire. His surprise and relief at being still alive, the brief joyous and unco-ordinated rush out of the camp into the white frozen landscape and the swift return to the prison sum up the meaning of this film, which deals mainly with the truce that follows the devastation of the battle, a truce that is well symbolized by the long

permanence in a displaced persons camp somewhere in Germany. It is a time when survivors have to come to terms with their memory, to recover their own dignity as human beings and make decisions about their future. The theme of Polishness is treated here in an even more ruthless and sardonic way than in *Ashes and Diamonds*. The central scene of the Grünwald commemoration unmasks the vanity of this attempt at reshaping pre-war power and hierarchies, as if there had been no war, no massacres, no debasing of man. As in *Ashes and Diamonds*, the celebration ends in a grotesque pantomime of the sacred Polonaise. True heroism lies somewhere else, not in the pseudo-romantic image of Polishness, not in vain rhetoric nor in the revival of past glories. It lies in the ability to make a decision, to finally run away from the new prison, from this state of paralysis. Tadeusz, the main character, decides to go back to his Motherland, devastated and beyond recognition as it is, to become involved in its rebuilding, and perhaps face the repression that the new regime has launched against the members of the Home Army.

The film caused vehement ideological and political controversy. The filmmaker was accused of denigrating his country, there were demands for the withdrawal of the film, and in fact it circulated in Poland only after it had been shown in Cannes, where it was not as successful as one might have expected. Wajda was faithful to his choice of showing all the ambiguity of his nation torn apart between past grandeur and the grotesque, cruelty and guilt. As Melchior Wańkowicz, an authority of Polish letters and journalism, aptly summarized it:

> Unless the scurvy scab … is scraped off this nation which has the virtues of a flexible culture, it will become a trampled gangway, a nonentity. You [must not] spit contemptuously on this scab … you must dig your nails into it and tear. Like Wajda does.[35]

Eine liebe in Deuschland (*A Love Story in Germany*: 1983) is a film shot after another crucial turning point in Polish contemporary history, the rise of the Solidarity movement, the agreement of Danzig and the enforcement of martial law in December 1981. It also comes

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[35] Melchior Wańkowicz, "The Teeth of My Heart", in Michałek, *The Cinema of Andrzej Wajda*, 133.

after two major political films in Wajda's *oeuvre*, *The Man of Iron* (1981), and *Danton* (1982). Wajda preferred to work abroad in order not to have to compromise with the regime. He had been thinking of *Eine liebe in Deuschland* since 1981, when the West Berlin producer, Artur Brauner, suggested adapting a film from Rolf Hochhut's book which, thanks to thorough research, creates a mixture of fiction and essay on the history, the collective psychology and Nazi paranoia in a small German village in 1940. Bolesław Michałek and Agnieszka Holland worked on the script, which deals with the love story between a Polish prisoner and a German woman (played by Hanna Schygulla) that ends with the hanging of the man, who has refused to renounce his national identity as a Pole. *Eine liebe in Deuschland* is presented as a flashback, a gradual reconstruction of past events by two men, probably the woman's son and grandson. The quiet everyday life in a small village is represented not without sympathy. The uncontrollable passion between the two protagonists is balanced by the cold, methodical bureaucracy that the punishment must follow. Indeed, according to German law, a Pole could not be executed by a German, but only by another Pole, whose compensation would be three cigarettes. A Pole's refusal to perform the execution would lead him to the same fate. Although Wajda chooses to represent the story in a sober, realistic way, without the usual emphasis on Nazi bestiality, he does stress the essential complicity of ordinary German people in the crimes committed by the Nazis during the War. For this reason the film was not at all welcome in Germany, where probably a more clichéd approach would have fared better. Paradoxically, Polish authorities also rejected the film on the grounds that it allegedly justified Nazism.[36]

When Wajda returned to his country after its democratization, he set out to break the silence on the Holocaust that had reigned there for so long. He had been planning a film on the Warsaw Ghetto for quite a few years. This time, however, he did not take a novel or a story as a starting point but a real person, a type of lay saint, Janusz Korczak – a pseudonym for Henryk Goldszmit (1878-1942) – a Jewish-Polish doctor, prose-writer, publicist and author of numerous works on innovative pedagogical methodologies, the founder of two model

[36] See Michałek and Turaj, *Le cinéma polonais*, 185.

orphanages.[37] Contrary to ideas then fashionable that harsh discipline should be used to educate children, Korczak maintained that children are not just in the process of becoming human beings, they already are human beings, citizens with their own responsibility and dignity. He tried to spread his views with popular publications and a programme, entitled "Light-hearted Pedagogy", on the Polish radio in 1935-1936. He was removed after attacks by nationalists, who accused him of "Jewing up the radio" and "demoralization". After the Nazi invasion his orphanage "Dom Sierot" was moved inside the Warsaw Ghetto. Korczak fought desperately to save the lives of two-hundred orphans in his care and did not leave the children alone in the face of death, perishing with them in the gas chambers of the Nazi death camp in Treblinka in August 1942.

The shooting of the film *Korczak* coincided with the 1989 elections, when Wajda was elected to the Senate, but in spite of this, he "committed all of his talents and skills"[38] to this film. Thanks to the "flawless script [based on Korczak's own *Journal*] by Agnieszka Holland, the black-and-white photography that amazingly intensifies the cruellest details of life in the ghetto, and signed by Robby Müller (cameraman for Wim Wenders and Jim Jarmusch), and Wojciech Pszoniak's interpretation, full of dignity, [the film] gives this battle for humanity the magnitude it calls for".[39] The choice of black-and-white photography[40] is an aesthetic and ethical one. This slightly outdated, un-cinematographical language is a challenge to contemporary

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[37] For Wajda's own statements in the film production brochure, see Paolo D'Agostini, *Andrzej Wajda* (Milan: Il Castoro, 1993), 126. UNESCO declared the year 1978, the centenary of Korczak's birth as well as the Year of the Child, to be the Year of Korczak. A year later, in 1979, the International Korczak Federation was established, made up of over twenty committees and Korczak Societies in Europe and worldwide. On Korczak, see http://www.diapozytyw.pl/en/ site/ludzie (accessed February 2005).

[38] See Wajda's words as reported on his official site: http://www.wajda.pl/en/filmy/ film29.html.

[39] Jean Ray, "Jesus de Varsovie", *L'Humanité*, 12 May 1990: see http:// www.wajda.pl/en/ filmy/film29.html (accessed February 2005).

[40] A choice followed by Spielberg in *Shindler's List* three years later. It is worth mentioning that in November 1999 the American director wrote a very warm letter in support of a special Honorary Academy Award for Andrzej Wajda adressed to Mr Robert Rehme. The text of this and other reviews are published on the site: http://www.wajda.pl and also http://www.pan.net/hollywood/wajda/sspielberg.htm (accessed February 2005).

cinema, which thanks to technological evolution aims more at amazing and entertaining the public than at telling a story, which requires good will and involvement to approach a truth that represents an unhealed wound in contemporary consciousness.[41]

The official screening at Cannes in May 1990 was met by a standing ovation. The following day, however, *Le Monde* had transformed the director into an anti-Semite, and launched a campaign against this film, which was accused of being a "profanation".[42] Apart from claiming that in the film no space was left to the children themselves and no mention was made of the role of the Poles during the Shoah[43] – "And what do we see? Germans (brutal, they must be brutal) and Jews, in collaboration. Poles – none. The Warsaw Ghetto? A matter between the Germans and the Jews. This is what a Pole is telling us." – what most excited bitter criticism was the epilogue, the scene of the carriage becoming detached from the convoy and of the children and Korczak emerging from it and running away in slow-motion into blossoming fields. This scene was defined "a sleepy, disgusting dream on the edge of revisionism".[44] It was in fact based on a legend that started to circulate soon after the historical events, according to which the "old doctor" and his children had managed to escape their fate of death.[45] As Bolesław Michałek points out, this epilogue, far from representing a stylistic failure, is in fact coherent

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[41] See Wajda's views in the brochure quoted above in n. 37.

[42] Danièle Heymann, " 'Chasseur blanc, coer noir' de Clint Eastwood ; 'Korczak' d'Andrzej Wajda : L'home de rêve et l'home de plomb", *Le Monde*, 13 May 1990, text on the site : htpp://www.lemond.fr (accessed February 2005).

[43] A judgement that was probably suggested by the lack of knowledge of the language and a too hasty vision of this film, where truth is not shouted out, but merely hinted at through details which leave the viewer to find and reflect on their real value. See for example the scene where the Polish girl wears a fur "bought for a very cheap price" from the Ghetto and tells the Jewish boy that she cannot meet him again, because everyone can tell he is a Jew, and she is afraid of the consequences. Wajda just tells us the facts, there is no judgement.

[44] Heymann, *Le Monde*, 13 May 1990.

[45] See Betty Jean Lifton, *The King of Children: A Biography of Janusz Korczak,* (London: C&W, 1988), online text http://korczak.com/Biography/kap-37.htm (accessed June 2008). See also *Holocaust Chronicles: Individualizing the Holocaust Through Diaries and Other Contemporaneous Personal Accounts*, edited by Robert Moses Shapiro (New York: KTAV, 1999) where excerpts of Korczak's diary are published. This idea of a train transformed from a vehicle of death into a means for escaping death is central to the film *Train de vie*.

with the overall message of the film on the power of art, of the word, of "enthusiasm for life and negation of death [which] on the aesthetic level represent the mobile factor of all of his work … [and in particular of] *Korczak,* a film deeply rooted in the tradition of the Polish Film School".[46]

The long creative season of this director was not finished yet. In over a decade since *Korczak* he has gone back to the theme of the Second World War (*Pierścionek z orłem w koronie* [*The Ring with the Crowned Eagle*]: 1992]) and of the Holocaust (*Wielki Tydzień* [*The Holy Week*]: 1995). In the latter Wajda, like Jerzy Andrzejewski in his tale, again in "an attempt to confront the moral void which appeared in the collective mind of Poles",[47] deals with the problem of their responsibility for the Holocaust. Wajda chooses a different view both from the frequent condemnation of the nation as a whole and from the emphasis on Poland's own huge losses during the War. It is a matter of personal responsibility and guilt, where everything one attempts to do sometimes turns out to be nothing.

Exactly five decades after making *Kanal*, Andrzej Wajda turned to an event that had marked his personal life as well as those of thousands of other Poles. This event, the massacre of Katyń, had been absent from his personal "panorama of Polish misfortunes".[48] In fact, the name of the Belorussian village where the murdered Polish officers were buried stands for many other places scattered all over the Soviet Union where other such massacres were performed in the spring of 1940. As the director himself explains in an interview, his father was executed near Kharkov, but the inscription on the family tomb mentions Katyń, "because it has become the symbol"[49] of the

[46] Michałek and Turaj, *Le cinéma polonais*, 186.
[47] Tadeusz Sobolewski, "Review of the film *Wielki Tydzien*", *Kino*, 1995, X, see the Wajda's official site: http://www.wajda.pl/en/filmy/film32.html (site accessed February 2005).
[48] "*I just can't stand aside*, Barbara Hollender speaks with Andrzej Wajda on the director's eightieth birthday", *Rzeczpospolita*, 6 (March 2006), see http://www.wajda.pl/en/wywiad80.html (page translated by Jennifer Zielinska), for the Polish version see www.rzeczpospolita.pl (accessed June 2008).
[49] "Przeszłość nieopowiedziana, Z Andrzejem Wajdą rozmawiają Joanna Olczak-Ronikier i Tomasz Fiałkowski", *Tygodnik Powszechny*, Dodatki specialne, 18 September 2007: for the text, see http://tygodnik2003-2007.onet.pl/3591,1438924,dzial.html (accessed June 2008; my translation).

systematic massacre that wiped out a whole class representative of the Polish intellectual elite.[50]

Wajda would have liked to have made this film much earlier, in 1989-1990, when "the Russian side was looking for some kind of understanding of the facts and on both sides of the border nationalism had not yet been revived".[51] The film was released on 17 September 2007,[52] on the exact anniversary of the Soviet invasion of Poland, a date which not many of the younger generation nowadays remember.[53]

In the Katyń theme a "double tragedy was involved: the massacre and the historical lie".[54] It is probably for this reason that, apart from Zbigniew Herbert's poem "Buttons", published in his 1992 collection *Rovigo*,[55] and Pendererckiʼs "Polish Requiem",[56] it was conspicuously absent from Polish literature. Wajda, who has always started from a literary text in making his films, in this case lacked a scenario.[57] His personal involvement in this tragedy was also a problem, as he was

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[50] The trailer of the film shows a crucial scene in a detention camp on Christmas Eve 1939, when the Polish general asks his officers to survive: "Gentlemen, you must endure. Without you, there will be no free Poland." On the advice of his secret police chief, Lavrenty Beria, Stalin ordered them to be executed because they were "irredeemable" and could obstruct the Soviet Union's plans to absorb and "Sovietize" Poland's eastern territories.

[51] "Przeszłość nieopowiedziana, Z Andrzejem Wajdą rozmawiają Joanna Olczak-Ronikier i Tomasz Fiałkowski", *Tygodnik Powszechny*, Dodatki specialne, 18 September 2007: http://tygodnik2003-2007.onet.pl/3591,1438924,dzial.html (accessed June 2008; my translation). The film provoked some sceptical or even hostile responses in the Russian media. For this, see Anne Applebaum, "A Movie that Matters (review of Andrzej Wajda's 'Katyn')", *New York Review of Books*, 14 February 2008, text from the site: http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1963400/posts (accessed June 2008).

[52] The initial working title was *Post mortem, a tale about Katyn*, taken from a story by Andrzej Mularczyk, who wrote the script with Wajda.

[53] See the *Director's Statement* in www.katyn.netino.pl/en/ (accessed June 2008).

[54] "Tylko guziki nieugięte. Rozmawiał Tadeusz Sobolewski i Andrzej Wajda o jego filmie 'Katyn'", *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 16 September 2007, text from the site: http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,4493450.html (accessed June 2008; my translation).

[55] And quoted indirectly in the film by Jerzy.

[56] The music for the film was written by Krzystof Penderecki.

[57] See "Przeszłość nieopowiedziana, Z Andrzejem Wajdą rozmawiają Joanna Olczak-Ronikier i Tomasz Fiałkowski".

tempted in the direction of a rather obvious autobiographical representation of the events.[58] In the end he chose a different solution:

> I see my film as a story of a family separated forever … about individual suffering, which evokes images of much greater emotional content than the naked historical facts. A film that shows the terrible truth that hurts, whose main characters are not the murdered officers, but women who await their return every day, every hour, suffering inhuman uncertainty …. I would not like the Katyń film … to be my personal search for the truth and a vigil light lit on the grave of my father. Let it spin a tale about the suffering and drama of many Katyń families. About the Katyń lie … which forced into silence about it for half a century the then allies …[59]

For the director, *Katyń* was not only a problem of content, but also of form. This is the reason why he chose to use an innovative filming technique and researched thoroughly the details of customs, environment and behaviour.[60] The story is told from a female point of view, that of mothers, wives, sisters and daughters who waited and fought to keep the memory of their beloved alive. This gives the tragedy a human proportion, not just a Polish one. From the initial episode – centred on Anna's failure to persuade Andrzej, her husband to flee from detention by leaving his comrades – the storyline gradually broadens its perspective to illustrate the fate of several characters during and after the war. Wajda chose to concentrate on young people in order to better show the effects of these events on their future.

Some, like Irena or Jerzy co-operate with the former Soviet enemy in order to build a new Poland.[61] Others, like Roza, the general's wife, obstinately endure against the official Soviet lie, which, significantly, reproduces the same arguments and the same language used by Nazi

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[58] See his interview "*I just can't stand aside*", quoted earlier.

[59] See the *Director's Statement* in www.katyn.netino.pl/en/ (accessed June 2008).

[60] *Katyń* is the first film shot in 4K digital in Europe. This technology enables you to obtain a resolution, in postproduction, that is four times higher than that obtained with 2K. See "A truly creative collaboration", interview with the film producer, Michal Kwieciński, *Cineuropa*, 2 February 2008. Online edition: http://cineuropa.org/ffocusinterview.aspx? lang=en&documentID=82327&treeID=1488 (accessed June 2008).

[61] Jerzy, however, cannot bear the sense of guilt and shoots himself in the head.

propaganda after the discovery of the Katyń mass graves. Agnieszka, like Antigone, by refusing to inscribe 1941 on her brother's memorial plaque as his date of death instead of 1940, chooses not to build her future on a lie and ends tragically. The young partisan Tur, who is about to start a new life, by foolishly tearing up a Soviet propaganda poster attracts the attention of the police and is killed in what is clearly a quotation of *Ashes and Diamonds*. The truth, however, filters through the official lies thanks to small, apparently insignificant objects like a rosary or a notebook. This leads to the final sequence that narrates, in a crescendo of repeated, almost ritual-like, acts, the systematic killing of the Polish prisoners, one by one with a bullet in the head, as in an abattoir. In these ten minutes of tremendous cinema we are finally shown that tragedy we could only imagine, without emphasis, without demonization of the executioners, who were probably in their turn wiped out to leave no witnesses. *Katyń* is not an indictment of Russia, as some fear (or wish), but rather an indictment of all totalitarian systems.

The film ends with the hand of a victim sticking out of the soil clutching a rosary,[62] as the bulldozers fill in the graves and the sun disappears into the silent darkness that follows for a few moments before the end credits start to roll to the music of Penderecki's oratorium "Requiem aeternam dona eis":

> For half a century… [Wajda's] movies have always been made with his countrymen in mind, which gives them a special flavor. Because he knows what his Polish viewers will know – about history, about politics, about the ways people behave under occupation – Wajda has always been able to rely upon them to interpret his work correctly, even when censorship forced him to make his points indirectly. His latest film, *Katyn* … is in this sense a classic Wajda movie.[63]

[62] A similar image is used by Wajda in *Lotna*.
[63] Applebaum, "A Movie that Matters (review of Andrzej Wajda's 'Katyn')".

CHASMS OF SILENCE: THE *LUFTKRIEG* IN GERMAN LITERATURE FROM A REUNIFICATION PERSPECTIVE

RAUL CALZONI

Following reunification, Germany has begun openly to examine some episodes of the total war that had caused a deep epistemic fracture in its recent history: the Allied air raids on German cities between 1940 and 1945 (the *Luftkrieg*), the flight of refugees from the bombed areas and regions progressively occupied by the Red Army (the *Flucht*) and**,** last but not least, the expulsion and deportation of millions of Germans from the eastern part of the country by the Russians in the post-war period (the *Vertreibung*).[1] The air raids, in particular, has been the subject of heated discussions in both historical and literary circles: the concealment of information concerning the Allied retaliation against German cities has provided an excellent opportunity to recommence discussing the repression of history by those regarded as the culprits.

In 1999, with *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, W.G. Sebald took issue with standard post-war literary practices, finding a predominance of "pseudo-aesthetic" and "pseudo-documentary" representations of Allied raids in them,[2] while Jörg Friedrich produced in *Der Brand: Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940-1945*, the first convincing

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[1] On these last two topics, see *Die Flucht: Über die Vertreibung der Deutschen aus dem Osten*, eds Stefan Aust and Sthephan Burgdorff (Stuttgart, Munich, and Hamburg: DVA, 2002). A work which approaches the three issues instead from a socio-psychological point of view is Klaus R. Röhl's *Verbotene Trauer: Die vergessenen Opfer* (Munich: Universitas, 2002). On the different approaches to Nazism and the World War II in post-unification German literature, see Elena Agazzi, *Erinnerte und rekonstruierte Geschichte: Drei Generationen deutscher Schriftsteller und die Fragen der Vergangenheit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht), 2005.

[2] See W.G. Sebald, *Luftkrieg und Literatur: Mit einem Essay zu Alfred Andersch* (Munich and Vienna: Hanser, 1999), 32 ff. ("Air War and Literature. Zürich Lectures", in W.G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction* [New York: Random House, 2003], 29 ff.).

historical reconstruction of the Allied attacks on Germany in a narrative form,[3] not hesitating to extend his observations to the moral and ethical implications of the Anglo-American strategy of "moral bombing".[4]

Luftkrieg und Literatur, a series of lectures on the relationship between air raids and literature given by Sebald in 1997 at the University of Zurich, reveals, in fact, how writing following standard post-war literary procedure avoided focusing on Allied air raids on German cities, or at least was unable to do so convincingly, confirming the impression of a repression of the problem by the national collective consciousness. Although Sebald's theses have stirred up controversy in Germany amongst critics and contemporary writers,[5] they have been successful in kindling interest in the reunified nation for an aspect of their recent past which, as Sebald says, does not seem to have become a "figure" in its collective and cultural memory:

> The destruction, on a scale without historical precedent, entered the annals of nation, as it set about rebuilding itself, only in the form of vague generalizations. It seems to have left scarcely a trace of pain behind in the collective consciousness, it has been largely obliterated from the retrospective understanding of those affected, and it never played any appreciable part in the discussion of the internal constitution of our country. As Alexander Kluge later confirmed, it never became an experience capable of public decipherment. This is highly paradoxical in view of the large numbers of people exposed to the campaign day after day, month after month, year after year.[6]

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[3] See Jörg Friedrich, *Der Brand: Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940-1945* (Munich: Propyläen, 2002).

[4] On the moral value of the air raids and accusations of revisionism by English historians towards Friedrich, who in *Der Brand* often seems to lump together the victims of the air raids and the Jews exterminated in Nazi concentration camps, see the essays in *Ein Volk von Opfern? Die neue Debatte um den Bombenkrieg 1940-1945*, ed. Lothar Kettenacker (Berlin: Rowohlt, 2003).

[5] For a synthesis of the lively debate stirred up by Sebald's *Zürich Lectures*, see *Deutsche Literatur 1999*, eds Volker Hage, R. Moritz, and Hubert Winkels (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1999), 249-90; Volker Hage, *Zeugen der Zerstörung: Die Literaten und der Luftkrieg* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2003), 113-31.

[6] Sebald, "Air War and Literature. Zürich Lectures", 2.

Is it legitimate to think that the huge Allied military operation carried out in German skies, which caused between 420,000 and 570,000 civilian victims, was sucked into the "chasms of silence" which characterized post-war German accounts and left no "trace of pain", as Sebald assumes, noting the intensity of the desire to start all over from scratch?

Observing the guidelines of Sebald's critique, aimed at supporting the thesis of an exclusive literary production of unconvincing accounts of the air raids in the post-war period, is enough to reveal how *Luftkrieg und Literatur* makes use of a limited choice of works, to the detriment of a synoptic overview of German literature in the wake of the Second World War. Sebald insists mainly on the role of the realistic-documentary view of the Allied attacks in *Der Untergang: Hamburg 1943* by Hans Erich Nossack, in *Der Luftangriff auf Halberstadt am 8. April 1945* (1977) by Alexander Kluge and in *Der Engel schwieg* by Heinrich Böll.[7] The study, however, does not mention any literary renditions of the air retaliation that might lessen the weight of the theses underpinning Sebald's research.

One questionable absence in *Luftkrieg und Literatur* is Gert Ledig's novel *Vergeltung* (1956), which, though it sank into oblivion immediately after publication,[8] figures among the most successful literary works on the air raids. Sebald, who sought to compensate for

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[7] See Hans Erich Nossack, *Der Untergang: Hamburg 1943* (1948) (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1976); Heinrich Böll, *Der Engel schwieg* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer and Witsch, 1992); Alexander Kluge, "Der Luftangriff auf Halberstadt am 8. April 1945", in *Neue Geschichten: Unheimlichkeit der Zeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 3-106 (reprinted in Alexander Kluge, *Chronik der Gefühle II: Lebensläufe* [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000], 27-82). It was decided not to take into consideration these three works here and instead provide room for other literary representations of the bombing that were ignored in *Luftkrieg und Literatur*. Some particularly interesting argumentations regarding Sebald's critique of Kluge's and Nossack's works can be found in Andreas Huyssen, "On Rewriting and New Beginnings: W.G. Sebald and the Literature About the Luftkrieg", *LiLi: Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik*, XXXI/124 (2001), 72-89.

[8] See Sebald, "Air War and Literature. Zürich Lectures", 91. As Sebald reminds us, with *Stalingorgel* (1955) (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1999), Ledig had already given literary form to one of the climaxes of the Second World War, breaking the "cordon sanitaire" of concealing recollections that the Germans had created *ad hoc* to repress the painful memory of their recent past. On the latter, see Aleida Assmann and Ute Frevert, *Geschichtsvergessenheit – Geschichtsversessenheit: vom Umgang mit den deutschen Vergangenheiten nach 1945* (Stuttgart: DVA, 1999), 97-147.

this failing by dedicating a critical portrait to Ledig's novel in the third part of his study, did not, however, manage to be fully convincing or, at least, justify the presence of *Vergeltung* in the body of post-war German literature as proof of his thesis. Ledig's novel actually seems to confute it, through a realistic narrative that does not hesitate to confront the reader with the tragic consequences of an air raid on an anonymous German city. Ledig distinguished himself not only for having applied the mosaic editing memory technique to writing, probably suggested by the theories of Arno Schmidt on post-war narrative standards,[9] but also for the extreme laconic quality of the language in *Vergeltung* referring to the destruction caused by the bombing:

> *1 ⁰¹ pm in Central Europe*
>
> Let the little children come to me. When the first bomb fell, the air pressure flung the dead children against the wall. They had suffocated the day before yesterday in a cellar. They had been put in the cemetery, because their fathers were fighting at the front and their mothers had yet to be found. This was the beginning.[10]

Sebald, by proposing an analysis of *Vergeltug* that is only a footnote to *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, does not sufficiently stress Ledig's narrative capabilities, which are actually very similar to those of the highly celebrated *Der Luftangriff auf Halberstadt am 8. April 1945* by Kluge. What the works of Kluge and Ledig have in common is not only the laconic language and the fragmentation of the narrative flow, resulting in a mosaic-like story, but also the continuous alternating points of view used in *Vergeltung* to describe the bombing. If in *Stalinorgel* (1955), Ledig put himself between the two fronts of the battle of Stalingrad, constantly moving the point of view of the narrative from the German troops to the Russian ones, in *Vergeltung* the mosaic of the novel is composed through the continuous dislocation of the viewpoint of the narrator who follows from above events in the air with the bombers and, from below, the bombs

[9] See "Berechnungen I" (1955), in Arno Schmidt, *Aus julianischen Tagen* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1979), 234-42.

[10] Gert Ledig, *Vergeltung: Roman* (1956), with an Afterword by Volker Hage, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999), 9 (my translation).

exploding, the wail of sirens, life and death in the bomb shelters of the city. Disregard for Ledig's work is not, however, Sebald's only shortcoming. Too often he appears concerned with personal rules of taste when he tries to identify, within post-war German literature, pseudo-aesthetic representations of the Anglo-American air raids.

Another decidedly controversial absence (along with that of the novel *Die Galeere* by Bruno E. Werner, or the only post-war play written on the subject, *Soldaten – Nekrolog auf Genf* by Rolf Hochhuth),[11] in respect to a group of literary works that appeared in the years following the war and referring, like Nossak's *Der Untergang*, to the Allied attack on Hamburg in the summer of 1943, casts doubt on Sebald's argument that "no German writer, with the sole exception of Nossack, was ready or able to put any concrete facts down on paper about the progress and repercussions of the gigantic, long-term campaign of destruction".[12]

The style, halfway between "pathos and the tone of an official report",[13] with which Nossack described the destruction caused by the "Operation Gomorra" bombing carried out during the night of 27 July 1943, produced that characteristic sinister and alienating atmosphere, through which the horrors experienced by the author were recorded in an effective narrative framework. Nossack, who witnessed the bombing of the town of Dorf Horst near Hamburg, and let the horror in his story emerge indirectly from the description of the city after the attack, managed to depict the bombing by becoming a recorder of reality.

This feature of the writer, praised by Sebald, comes through in a particularly touching passage of *Der Untergang*, in which Nossack withdraws into the impersonal and lets the annihilation caused by the attack be conveyed through completely objective language. The latter, in fact, is used to report the psychological scars in the German collective subconsciousness:

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[11] See Bruno E. Werner, *Die Galeere* (1949; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1958); Rolf Hochhuth, *Soldaten – Nekrolog auf Genf: Tragödie* (1967; Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1995).

[12] Sebald, "Air War and Literature. Zürich Lectures", 27.

[13] On this see the *Nachwort*, in *Hamburg 1943: Literarische Zeugnisse zum Feuersturm*, ed. Volker Hage (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2003), 287, where it is stated that Nossack's style in *Der Untergang* oscillates between "Pathos und Protokollton".

> People said that the corpses, or however one wishes to call the remains of what were once human beings, were burned on the spot or else incinerated by the flamethrowers in the shelters. But it was actually worse than that. They weren't able to reach the shelters because of the planes, they crawled over the ground … the flames must have prevented them from creating an opening among those who had died in the blazes.[14]

Relegating the narrator to the sidelines of the account, characteristic of some passages of *Der Untergang*, in war-torn Germany turned out to be an expressive strategy able to translate almost plastically the perception that the observer had of being crushed under the weight of pain. The objectivity suggested by Nossack influenced, in fact, much of German literature dealing with the trauma of the air raids, also as an attempt to counter Theodor W. Adorno's precept that "after Auschwitz, to write a poem is barbaric".[15] Objectivity enabled episodes of the Second World War to be inserted in a pedagogical project of processing the past promoted by Adorno which, based on veritable memory work, is still needed today, to allow the German collective memory to come to terms with its Nazi history.[16]

Resorting to the viewpoint of a recorder of reality was not, however, characteristic only of Nossack and Kluge, as Sebald claims in different passages in *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, but was, in the immediate post-war period, a narrative strategy that different authors used to try to objectively reconstruct the phases of the air raids on German cities.

Apart from the narrative styles of Ledig, Nossack and Kluge, this feature can be seen also in the story "Herr Pambel" (1946) by Hans Leip, in which the narrator places himself alongside the protagonist at the centre of events by following him through the streets of Hamburg during Operation Gomorra. Leip, accompanying Pambel as a reporter through the bombed city until the hero manages to save himself by getting on a truck that will take him outside Hamburg, succeeded in

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[14] Nossack, *Der Untergang*, 52 (my translation).

[15] See "Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft" (1949), in Theodor W. Adorno, *Prismen* (Munich: Dtv, 1963), 23.

[16] See "Was Bedeutet: Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit" (1959), in Theodor W. Adorno, *Angriffe* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1963), 125-46.

reproducing the effects of the destruction caused by the retaliation through an account which, though ironic in parts, never resorts to stereotypical or pathetic language:

> The storm howled there, and the streets were brightly lit up by the burning houses. What a show! Fantastic, really! thought Mister Pambel. Those who had stayed in the neighbourhood were busy carrying their belongings and what little they were able to save into the middle of the road, where the incendiary cases hadn't fallen, the cases which here and there, separated from one another after crashing to the ground, shone like torches tossed aside by a procession.[17]

By making Pambel's story a synecdoche of the entire German population, Leip, manages to draw the reader into the emotional state of the Germans during the Allied air attacks. The writer photographed the emotions of a people which, though threatened by air raids, were committed to keeping up their daily routine at all costs, psychologically denying the reality of the destruction around them.

The "abjection" of reality, in the sense given to this term by Julia Kristeva,[18] regarding the bombings, which appears in Leip's story and other writings of the period,[19] is less significant in Otto Erich Kiesel's novel *Die unverzagte Stadt* (1949) which contains, in the chapter "Die siebende Schale" (where "Schale" [shell], is a metaphor for air raid shelter), a long description of the emotional reaction of the population of Hamburg during the air attacks of July 1943. Kiesel, often giving way to metaphysical reflections, exhibits an often uncertain documentary style despite which he is able to produce a very convincing poetical rendering of the horror in the long section of the novel dedicated to the attack on Hamburg. In fact, the writer uses a language full of expressive nuances which does not prevent his

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[17] "Herr Pambel", in Hans Leip, *Ein neues Leben: Zwei Erzählungen* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1946), 36 (my translation).

[18] See Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: Essai sur l'abjection* (Paris: Seuil, 1980), *passim*.

[19] See, among others, Hermann Kasack, *Die Stadt hinter dem Strom* (1947), (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978); Hans Erich Nossack, *Nekyia: Bericht eines Überlebenden* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1947); Peter De Mendelssohn, *Die Kathedrale* (Hamburg: Krüger, 1983 – a narrative written in 1948, but not published until 1983).

writing from realistically reproducing the convulsive moments of the bombing experienced in an air raid shelter:

> And as if the sky had wanted to let it happen, above them screams and the whistling of the explosions of bombs which fell and broke apart. The shelter was lifted, pushed up by a powerful fist and then sank back into its previous position. The people exploded in animal-like shrieks and wrapped themselves around each other, as if by so doing they could turn their backs on the horror. The din of the walls collapsing was like the thunder of eternity.[20]

Kiesel, putting himself at the centre of the action and directing the narrative towards an aesthetic transcription of the pain that was concentrated in scenes of extreme harshness, proposed with *Die unverzagte Stadt* a description of the phases of Operation Gomorra in which the devastation itself provides the framework of the discourse. The writer managed to go beyond "pseudo-aesthetic" depictions of the bombing which, according to Sebald, characterized Arno Schmidt's novel *Aus dem Leben eines Fauns* (1953): the inability to represent "life at the terrible moment of its disintegration".[21]

The ability to reach past this limitation in depicting the air raids is, however, peculiar also to other writers active in West Germany during the 1960s and '70s: that is, in the period in which thanks to Helmut Heißenbüttel,[22] there was a "canonization" of the documentary novel, writing became more objective and a series of records concerning the Second World War was published, providing highly realistic accounts of the nights of the bombings.

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[20] Otto Erich Kiesel, *Die unverzagte Stadt*, (Hamburg: Krüger, 1973), 301 (my translation).

[21] Taking into consideration Schmidt's novel, *Aus dem Leben eines Fauns* (1953), (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1973) and referring to the linguistic radicalism used to describe an air raid from within, Sebald reveals how in contrast to Nossack, the writer avoided, through "his linguistic fretwork", representing "life at the terrible moment of its disintegration" (Sebald, "Air War and Literature. Zürich Lectures", 53-53.

[22] Heißenbüttel's theoretical guidelines on the German documentary novel are contained in his "Frankfurter Vorlesungen über Poetik" (1963), in Helmut Heißenbüttel, *Über Literatur* (Freiburg: Olten, 1966), and in *Zur Tradition der Moderne* (Neuwied and Berlin: Leuchterhand, 1972). On Heißenbüttel's role in the success of post-war German documentary writing, see Bruno Hillebrand, *Theorie des Romans: Erzählstrategien der Neuzeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1996), 404 ff.

In the 1960s, Heißenbüttel presented six stories dealing with World War II that were brought together later in the volume *Das Textbuch*,[23] which can be considered of prime importance for post-war documentary literature. They would, in fact, play a fundamental role in defining the most suitable narrative method for describing the air raids for authors such as Hubert Fichte, Hiltgunt Zassenhaus, Ingeborg Hecht, Ralph Giordano and Walter Kempowski.

With *Das Textbuch*, Heißenbüttel became a reference point for documentarism, suggested by the style of the trial records of the Nazi *Kapò* in Frankfurt and of Eichmann in Jerusalem, and by reflections on the ontological status of writing after Auschwitz, above all promoted by Adorno. The writer thus defended records as the only opportunity for post-war German literature to survive, considering it an expressive possibility allowing access to the reality of a world irremediably damaged by the Nazi past. The collection, in which Heißenbüttel limited himself to combining letters, extracts of diaries, literary texts and SS reports in a narrative collage which prevents flights of fancy and provides the writing with the objective value of historical testimony, produces a text which, completely ignored by Sebald in *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, is in fact a very convincing account of the Allied air raids on German cities.

Divided into thirteen topical units, *Deutschland 1944* (1967) is at a structural level an example of editing of contemporary reports on the bombings of German cities. They consist of self-contained fragments which, inserted into a narrative flow without punctuation, brilliantly express the convulsion of the destructive process caused by the air raids: "formations of North-American bombers led terrorist attacks from the west and the south against western and southwestern Germany caused damage above all in the residential areas of the cities of Munich Schweinfurt and Saarbrücken population suffered losses at the same time the anti-aircraft defence brought down 61 airplanes …."[24]

From 1960-1970, the success of documentary writing in Germany was not only promoted by the theories and the narrative style of Heißenbüttel, but also by the publication of the *Dokumente deutscher Kriegsschäden* (1958-1971). The latter work, significantly edited by

[23] See Helmut Heißenbüttel, *Das Textbuch* (Neuwied and Berlin: Luchterhand, 1970).

[24] "Deutschland 1944" (1967), in Heißenbüttel, *Das Textbuch*, 271 (my translation).

the "Bundesminister für Vertriebene, Flüchtlinge und Kriegsgeschädigte",[25] collected with the precise language of an objective report the testimonies of survivors of the war, of refugees from the bombed cities and Germans from the eastern parts of the country as the Red Army advanced. Of particular interest as far as the bombing is concerned is the first appendix to the collection, called *Aus den Tagen des Luftkriegs und des Wiederaufbaues: Erlebnis- und Erfahrungsberichte* – its *Augenzeugen* section contains different testimonies of events experienced by the population during the Allied raids.

An extremely important record contained in the appendix is that of Gretl Büttner who, employed during the Second World War as a "Berichterstatterin der Hamburger Luftschutzleitung", provided a particularly convincing account of the bombing of the Hammerbrook quarter of Hamburg. Büttner, in the record called *Zwischen Leben und Tod* (1943), tried to maintain a realistic perspective and transcribed the interminable moments of the raid through a report which, though at times sentimental, provides a convincing rendition of the air raid. As can be seen from this description of the city under attack, subjective and objective perceptions of the event are perfectly balanced:

> Then – in the end – I reached the area around city hall. Everything was burning here, too. The flames climbed all the way up to the top of the tower – a photograph, as if up there a gigantic billboard had been lit up. Even the houses were burning. One could see only fire – in every direction …. A few minutes after my arrival at the command post, completely blackened by ashes, General von Heimburg told me for the time being it wasn't possible to leave the shelter, because the exits couldn't be used. We were closed in by the fire. The refugees huddled in the corridors over their bundles; the mothers rocked babies in swaddling clothes on their knees, many, exhausted, slept with their mouths wide open.[26]

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[25] See *Dokumente deutscher Kriegsschäden – Evakuierte, Kriegssachgeschädigte, Währungsgeschädigte: Die geschichtliche und rechtliche Entwicklung*, ed. Bundesminister für Vertriebene, Flüchtlinge und Kriegsgeschädigte, 5 volumes and 2 appendixes (Bonn, 1958-1971).

[26] Greti Büttner, "Zwischen Leben und Tod", reprinted in *Hamburg 1943: Literarische Zeugnisse zum Feuersturm*, 24-25 (my translation).

We must not forget that in the *Dokumente deutscher Kriegsschäden*, alongside accounts of the raids like that of Gretl Büttner, there are also reports of autopsies carried out on victims of the bombings in the hospital of Altona near Hamburg contained in the *Todesursache* dossier, which would influence Hubert Fichte in the writing of his novel, *Detlevs Imitationen "Grünspan"*.[27] The language used by the writer to describe the air raid on Hamburg has the same laconic tone of the reports of those anatomical dissections which were, in fact, explicitly cited by Fichte in his book. This can be found in the seventeenth chapter of the book in the recording of an episode whose objectivity in its aesthetic rendering of the consequences of the air raids was also noted by Sebald, who went so far as to define Fichte "professionally involved in the horror".[28] It is the moment in which the protagonist of *Detlevs Imitationen "Grünspan"*, while visiting the medical library of the university of Eppendorf, comes across the volume of *Dokumente* called *Ergebnisse pathologisch-anatomischer Untersuchungen anläßlich der Angriffe auf Hamburg in den Jahren 1943-1945: Mit dreißig Abbildungen und elf Tafeln* (1948), and stops to read "autopsy b".[29]

This documentation, which has to be imagined as if Jäcki were reading it to himself in the library, has a medical report of the pathological analysis carried out by a certain Dr Siegfried Graeff on the carbonized body of a victim of the bombardments. The detailed description of the cadaver fascinates the protagonist of the novel to the point that he tries to collect as much information as possible on the Allied raid, and also contacts those who had lived through the attack and its dramatic consequences. Jäcki's imaginary dialogue with Dr Graeff responds to this need as well, in which the protagonist asks the doctor about his work as a pathologist. In the imaginary conversation in which Curzio Malaparte participates through a citation from *La pelle* given in Italian in the text,[30] an interesting detail is the

[27] Hubert Fichte, *Detlevs Imitationen "Grünspan"* (1971; Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1979), 34 ff.

[28] Sebald, "Air War and Literature. Zürich Lectures", 57.

[29] Fichte, *Detlevs Imitationen "Grünspan"*, 35.

[30] *Ibid*., 52: "From all parts came an uproar of flames and shovels, a swash, death splashes of the oars in the boats, and cries soon suffocated, and laments and dry gun shots" (my translation).

intermittent voice of two anonymous orators, the one German and the other British, expressing the dramatic conviction that it is impossible for human language to depict the shock inflicted by the air raid: "Speech is impotent to portray the measure of the horror."[31]

Fichte, who tried to provide a documentary account of the attack on Hamburg with Jäcki's story, used the anatomical report given by Graeff as the narrative pretext to introduce his observations regarding the unspeakable nature of the horror of the air raids. The pieces provided by Fichte can be considered, then, among the most successful literary representations of the bombing of Germany, also because they tackled the problem of searching for a linguistic medium able to express the psychological effects of the event on the German inner consciousness.

Other writers also faced these problems in the 1960s and '70s. They used objectivity in their accounts and organized the records of the nights of the air raids over Germany in chronological order. Their narratives were based prevalently on eyewitness accounts of the attack on Hamburg, such as in *Ein Baum blüht im November: Bericht aus den Jahren des Zweiten Weltkriegs* (1974) by Hiltgunt Zassenhaus, *Die Bertinis* (1982), a novel by Ralph Giordano, and *Als unsichtbare Mauern wuchsen: Eine deutsche Familie unter den Nürnberger Rassengesetzen* (1984) by Ingeborg Hecht. What these works have in common is the double threat hanging over the protagonists of the narratives: the bombing and the fear of being arrested by the SS as opponents of the regime, as in the case of Zassenhaus, or for racial reasons like Hecht and Giordano.

In *Ein Baum blüht im November*, the heroine, based on Zassenhaus herself, is a physics student who, during Operation Gomorra, has to go to the university to take an exam, making her way through the rubble of Hamburg. The woman is threatened and kept under close observation by the Gestapo, due to her involvement in translating the correspondence of some members of the "Scandinavian Resistance" imprisoned in the city. The opening scene of the story refers to her illegal activities, and also introduces the beginning of the air raid:

> It was Saturday night; I spent it at my desk – a last-ditch attempt to study for the exam. My physics book was in front of me. Dusk came,

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[31] *Ibid*., 50 ff. (my translation).

> the lines faded before my eyes. The searchlights began to scour the sky. I thought about the man in the penitentiary who had entered my life that day. Then the sirens went off; their wail cut the night like a knife. It startled me. We went to the shelter, I brought with me a pile of letters belonging to the prison inmates.[32]

While in her *Account from the Second World War*, the subtitle of her novel, Zassenhaus is very close to the reporting style of Fichte and Büttner, Hecht was able to provide, with her recording of the air raid on Hamburg, some of the most moving pages in post-war literature on the bombings. The daughter of a Jewish man and a German woman, the writer recollects in *Als unsichtbare Mauern wuchsen* how she and her parents, divorced for some time, took refuge in an air raid shelter. It was her last encounter with her father, who was arrested shortly afterwards by the Gestapo, deported and then murdered at Auschwitz. Hecht, abandoning the objective tone that characterizes the novel, uses a moving narrative cameo in which the bombed city and the horror of the persecution of the Jews provide the background for her last family gathering. In the air raid shelter where Hecht stayed with her parents, all judgements about history are suspended and every hope for the future temporarily evaded in favour of an exaltation of the *hic et nunc*:

> It was as if they had repudiated any form of escape, there was no yesterday and there would be no tomorrow – there was the here and now, which they serenely perceived in this cramped, smoky place, basically illuminated only by a candle which was burning now on very little oxygen, in which the light of a past which was wonderful and affectionate fell – before it was completely extinguished.[33]

The dual menace of the bombs and racial persecution looms also, as Ralph Giordano wrote, over the Bertini family which witnesses first hand the Allied air raid on Hamburg on 24 July 1943. The author narrates the saga of the Bertinis from the end of the nineteenth century up to post-war reconstruction, tracing the parabola of a family of

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[32] Hiltgunt Zassenhaus, *Ein Baum blüht im November. Bericht aus den Jahren des Zweiten Weltkriegs*, (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1974), 56 (my translation).

[33] Ingeborg Hecht, *Als unsichtbare Mauern wuchsen: Eine deutsche Familie unter den Nürnberger Rassengesetzen* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1984), 63 (my translation).

Italian-Jewish-Swedish origin in German history and focusing on the social and psychological upheavals following the two world wars. The novel describes, in fact, the progressive disintegration of the bourgeois world as capitalism encroaches upon it through a game of cross-references between past, present and future in which personal survival, in the most desperate moments of World War II, was always subordinate to that of the family. And it is precisely the unity of the family circle on which the air strike inflicts a mortal blow, forcing the Bertinis to escape from Hamburg, a city they were not allowed to leave without the Gestapo's permission because of their Jewish origin. The desperate attempt by Lea's sister, Roman Bertini's wife, to reunite the relatives who had survived the attack in Bodendorf, a place which while unprotected from Nazi persecution was at least protected from the memory of the bombing of the avenue in which the family used to live, the Lindenalle, provides the epilogue to this harrowing epic:

> And thus began the family's escape. In the middle of the street, among the torches of the lime trees, among the houses falling into blazing, crackling pieces, which collapsed on the stones of the pavement which were groaning under the firestorm and the pressure of the explosions of the bombs and mines, they reached the *sand barrier* and rolled themselves into its extinguishing tub – all around the wall there was only rubble. Suddenly Alf Bertini got up from the shallow water and took his mother onto his shoulders like a doll, tripped, picked himself up again and staggered on, followed by the others.[34]

Giordano is not, however, the only author for whom the air raid represents an irreparable break in the history of a German family. In *Die deutsche Chronik*,[35] Walter Kempowski concentrated on the aerial

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[34] Ralph Giordano, *Die Bertinis* (1982) (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2003), 340-41 (my translation).

[35] See Walter Kempowski, *Die deutsche Chronik*, 9 vols (Munich: btb), 1999, includes writings by the author from the 1970s and '80s collected by the editor in the following order: *Aus großer Zeit: Roman* (1978); *Schöne Aussicht: Roman* (1981); *Haben Sie Hitler gesehen? Deutsche Antworten* (1973); *Tadellöser und Wolff: Ein bürgerlicher Roman* (1971); *Uns geht's ja noch gold: Roman einer Familie* (1972); *Haben Sie davon gewußt? Deutsche Antworten* (1979); *Ein Kapitel für sich: Roman* (1975); *Schule: Immer so durchgemogelt* (1974); *Herzlich willkommen: Roman* (1984).

attack of April 1942 on Rostock, his birthplace.[36] The novels in the latter collection actually narrate the vicissitudes of generations of Kempowskis, from the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the 1960s, from an ironic point of view, focusing like *Die Bertinis* on the progressive decline of the German bourgeoisie in the twentieth century.

The fourth volume of the collection, *Tadellöser und Wolff* is completely dedicated to the war years, which although ironically reduced in the novel to a mere adventure, represent the definitive collapse of bourgeois society. In *Tadellöser und Wolff*, Kempowski provided a description of the air raid on Rostock which, filtered through the vision of children, gives the episode a comic quality seemingly able to deprive the bombing of any destructiveness.[37] Preparations for blacking out light and protection from the imminent raid, which take up Chapter 17 in the novel, give rather a view of bourgeois life than a literary description of the atmosphere of menace and fear which immediately precede a bombing. The windows of the house are carefully left open to prevent the panes from breaking under the pressure of the bombs; in the family shelter people read, or else discuss the cost of the raids, considering them a simple "shooting":

> As soon as the sirens went off we jumped out of bed. Put on our "vests", fill the buckets of water, up with the blinds and leave the windows ajar, so that the glass won't break in the explosion of the bombs – which no one believed in. "What a revolt, what disorder" …. Then the adults started discussing the costs of the shooting. An eight-eight grenade costs 250 marks.[38]

This scene clearly depicts the naïve viewpoint permeating Kempowski's narrative which, characterized by the immediacy of

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[36] On Kempowski's literary representation of aerial war over Germany, see Raul Calzoni, *Walter Kempowski, W. G. Sebald e i tabù della memoria collettiva tedesca* (Pasian di Prato: Campanotto, 2005), 147-68.

[37] The ironic view offered by Kempowski in reference to the air war evokes the *Blechtrommel* by Günter Grass, especially when Oskar, the protagonist of the novel, visits Berlin with his company of dwarf acrobats of which he is one. During his sojourn in the German capital, the party is forced by a bombing to seek refuge in an air raid shelter, which handily turns into a stage for them to perform in (Günter Grass, *Die Blechtrommel* (1959; Munich: Dtv, 1993), 388 ff.

[38] Kempowski, *Tadellöser und Wolff*, 161-62 (my translation).

individual petit-bourgeois needs, was diametrically opposed to the medical-pathological writing typical of the report style which provided an access to the trauma of the air raids in the 1960s and ’70s.

Kempowski did not, however, limit himself to touching on the air strikes in Chapter 17 of *Tadellöser und Wolff*. In the years following the *Deutsche Chronik*, he addressed the issue of Allied attacks once more from two perspectives that evoke the works of Ledig and Kluge. In the 1980s Kempowski edited an account from above of the air strikes over Germany, *Die Feuerreiter: Gefangen in fliegenden Festungen*,[39] recording the memories of the former US pilot Ray T. Matheny who crashed in 1944 during re-entry after an attack on Kiel. After the reunification he once again looked from below to refer to the air raid. Thus by accepting a completely objective position on the subject, which was reflected in the assumption of the role of reporter of the air strike, incomparable in post-war German literature, Kempowski proposed a very convincing literary recording of the bombings in the following collections: *Das Echolot: Fuga furiosa. Ein kollektives Tagebuch Winter 1945*, *Der rote Hahn: Dresden im Februar 1945*, *Das Echolot: Barbarossa ’41. Ein kollektives Tagebuch*.[40]

In the three collections, made up of extracts from diaries, letters, photographs and archive material arranged in a unifying framework, the single fragments referring to the bombings of Russian and German cities are dialogically linked to each other, so that the tragedy of the air raids speaks for itself. The author, completely withdrawing behind his own writing, composes, as Ledig does with *Vergeltung*, a mosaic of horror in which the single narrative pieces converge in a report of the destruction and psychological prostration of the population after the attacks. In the language of these testimonies there vibrate myriad voices silenced by the war and Nazism, or on which the conflict etched an indelible trace of pain. Whereas *Das Echolot: Barbarossa*

[39] See Ray T. Matheny, *Die Feuerreiter: Gefangen in fliegenden Festungen*, aus dem Kempowski-Archiv Zeitgenössischer Lebensläufe (Munich and Hamburg: Albrecht Knaus, 1988).

[40] See Walter Kempowski, *Das Echolot: Fuga furiosa. Ein kollektives Tagebuch Winter 1945*, 4 vols (Munich: Albrecht Knaus, 1999); *Der rote Hahn: Dresden im Februar 1945* (Munich: btb, 2001); *Das Echolot: Barbarossa ’41*. *Ein kollektives Tagebuch* (Munich: Albrecht Knaus, 2002).

'41 reports testimonies linked to the homonymous bombing operation of Russia carried out by Hitler, confronting Germans with their own guilt, *Der rote Hahn* records the return horror suffered by the Germans through the air raid of Dresden with the motto "those who sow wind reap storms".[41]

The principle of cause and effect, which runs through the collective diaries of Kempowski, finds its most complete expression in *Das Echolot: Fuga furiosa.* Composed of four volumes, it mainly relates, as the subtitle of the collection declares, testimonies on the *Flucht* and the *Vertreibung*. The literary representation of the Second World War provided by Kempowski with the "*Echolot*-project"[42] lays the foundation of the cognitive process of history, that prismatic perspective of the past which, as Walter Benjamin suggested, makes it possible to reconstruct "in the analysis of the single fleeting moment a crystal of the whole event".[43] Furthermore, thanks to this narrative strategy, Kempowski succeeds in composing that "novel of our times, which includes concentration camps, the war and the post-war period",[44] which in the 1960s Heinrich Böll only theorized about.

Böll, who wanted to name this novel *Die Baracke*, exploiting the symbolic value of the hovels in which the concentration camp inmates lived, had not foreseen a work expressing the tragedy of the Second World War in its prismatic complexity could be constituted by a narrative montage of authentic testimonies.[45] And it is in reference to the air raid that this reaches one of its most intense and tragic

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[41] See Kempowski, "Foreword" to *Der rote Hahn*, 5.

[42] The expression "*Echolot*-project" is used not only to refer to collections previously cited, but also to the first and fourth collective diary published by Kempowski, the former regarding the battle of Stalingrad in the winter of 1942/1943, the latter portraying the final two months of World War II (see Walter Kempowski, *Das Echolot: Ein kollektives Tagebuch Januar und Februar 1943*, 4 vols [Munich: Albrecht Knaus, 1993]; *Das Echolot. Abgesang '45: Ein kollektives Tagebuch* [Munich: Albrecht Knaus, 2005]).

[43] Walter Benjamin, "Erkenntnistheoretisches, Theorie des Fortschritts", in *Das Passagen-Werk*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, eds R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982), V, 575 (my translation).

[44] Heinrich Böll, *Essayistische Schriften und Reden I 1952-1963*, ed. B. Balzer, (Cologne and Berlin: Kiepenheuer and Witsch, 1978), 44.

[45] On Kempowski's montage technique, see Carla Ann Damiano, *Walter Kempowski's* Das Echolot: *Stifting and Exposing the Evidence via Montage* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2005), 89-121.

moments with Kempowski's *Der rote Hahn*, a literary work in which each single testimony of the February 1945 attack on Dresden becomes a depiction of the traces of pain the air strike left in German collective memory. The testimony of Otto Griebel from the collection is an example of this:

> What you could see here was overwhelming. Old ladies, whose clothes had been literally burned off their bodies, staggered along. Some had been completely, or partially blinded. Those who sought help did it mainly because of the terrible burns on their limbs. No one knew what had happened to their loved ones and those who knew only sobbed with dry hiccups, their eyes being too damaged by the fire to allow them to shed tears.[46]

Therefore the deep psychological wounds inflicted on the German population by the bombings are not only represented, as Sebald claims, in the works of Nossack, Kluge, Böll and Fichte, but also in many other accounts of the air strikes which took root in the German collective consciousness when the country was divided. Reunified Germany is thus called upon to cure the amnesia of German collective memory by recovering from the "chasms of silence" the testimonies of the *Luftkrieg*, the *Flucht* and the *Vertreibung* forgotten during the Allied occupation. A careful perusal reveals that they are neither pseudo-aesthetic nor pseudo-documentary, but merely shunted aside during the post-war period of a country which, since history had seared it with an indelible brand of guilt and shame for the crimes perpetrated by Nazism, could not deal with its own pain.

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[46] Kempowski, *Der rote Hahn*, 253 (my translation).

DEATH AND MOURNING IN THE MEMORY OF WORLD WAR I IN ITALY

OLIVER JANZ

The death of about ten-million people during the First World War represented a completely new experience for the societies involved in the conflict. This mass death, which touched almost all families, was followed by mass mourning. In a few years, the European societies that had been warring became societies mourning their dead. A great number of studies, mainly in England, France and Germany, has analysed the way in which war trauma was elaborated and even exploited. However, so far the research has been centred mainly on public and collective war memories, therefore giving preference to war memorials and remembrance ceremonies devoted to the dead as a group: not much attention has been addressed to the mourning of single victims of the war, or to individual mourning.[1] Private mourning is clearly understood as a phenomenon that is difficult to classify within precise historical categories. As a consequence, it is taken for granted and any deeper analysis is often left out.[2]

This was also the case in Italy, a country that registered about 680,000 casualties during the First World War, corresponding to almost 3.5% of the male population,[3] a figure probably twenty times higher than the casualties occurred in the various wars, insurrections and conflicts that had taken place in the previous hundred years.[4] Until

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[1] See Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), 15-53; Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14-18: Retrouver la guerre* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), 197-258; Joy Damousi, *The Labour of Loss: Mourning, Memory, and Wartime Bereavement in Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999).

[2] See Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, *14-18: Retrouver la guerre*, 200.

[3] See Giovanna Procacci, "L'Italia nella grande guerra", in *Storia d'Italia, V: Guerre e fascismo*, eds Giovanni Sabbatucci and Vittorio Vidotto (Rome: Laterza, 1997), 91.

[4] See Piero Pieri, *Storia militare del Risorgimento* (Turin: Einaudi, 1962), 221, 247, 303, 586-88, 619, 764-66, 781; Franco Molfese, *Storia del brigantaggio dopo l'unità*

today, nobody has tried to fully investigate how Italian society elaborated the related trauma. Certainly, the fact that after the war memorials and commemorative tablets were erected almost everywhere in Italy is a well established fact, now confirmed by a series of local studies.[5] And yet, it is not so well known that already during the war the cult of single dead soldiers had started, leading to the publication of several *in memoriam* pamphlets that have been almost completely ignored by historiography.[6]

About a quarter of these little books and pamphlets are devoted to a restricted group of heroes and martyrs of war celebrated and known all over Italy, such as Cesare Battisti and Francesco Baracca; and they were published mainly by publishers or organizations and institutions, and have either a political-propagandistic purpose or a commercial one. The remaining three-quarters of these pamphlets are devoted to unknown fallen soldiers and were published mostly by their families or friends.[7] Only a small part of these publications were promoted and supported by real publishers. In the majority of cases, we can only imagine that these pamphlets were given to relatives and friends of the dead soldier and of his family; they were also distributed among the family and the working circle, the neighbourhood, or among associations and other organizations, often with the purpose of expressing their gratitude for condolences that they had offered.

The majority of these pamphlets were published already during the war, or in the very first months of the post-war period, often to mourn the first month after the soldier's death, or the first anniversary. The structure of these collections is quite varied, including as they do any number of pages, ranging from ten to a hundred. As the tables of

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(Milan: Feltrinelli, 1964), 436-38; Martin Clark, *Modern Italy 1871-1982* (London: Longman, 1992), 100; Giorgio Candeloro, *Storia dell'Italia moderna* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1986), VI, 474; Franco Gaeta, *La crisi di fine secolo e l'età giolittiana* (Turin: Einaudi, 1982), 414.

[5] See Oliver Janz, "Grande guerra, memoria della guerra", in *Dizionario del fascismo*, eds Victoria De Grazia and Sergio Luzzatto (Turin: Einaudi, 2002), 627-30.

[6] For a broader introduction to and documentation of this subject, see Oliver Janz, "Monumenti di carta: Le pubblicazioni in memoria dei caduti della prima guerra mondiale", in *Non omnis moriar: Gli opuscoli di necrologio dei caduti italiani nella Grande Guerra. Bibliografia analitica*, eds Fabrizio Dolci and Oliver Janz (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2003), 11-44.

[7] In the following paragraphs, it is to these sources, which are more interesting for a micro-history of war memory and mourning, that I refer.

contents indicate, they mostly display obituaries and *in memoriam* speeches. The authors are often the fathers and brothers of the dead soldiers, family friends, colleagues and comrades, or even priests and teachers. They also often include speeches in praise of the dead soldiers previously published in the press, letters and journals of the dear departed, photographs and certificates of his war decorations. Given the related costs and cultural restrictions, this private cult of the dead in a published written form was not available to the majority of the population, and it became a prerogative of the upper middle class, as well as of the best educated sections of the lower middle class. About two-thirds of the celebrated dead soldiers had already obtained their high school certificate, or even a university degree. The remaining ones had been regular officers, schoolteachers, public employees and executives, professionals serving in various technical and business departments. Within this social class, to which an increasing number of young reserve officers recruited during the war belonged, the habit of paying homage to dead soldiers by means of an individual commemorative pamphlet started to be a real mass phenomenon spread all over Italy. So far, more than 2,300 publications of this kind have been registered. They refer to about 1,450 dead soldiers. More than 80% of the dead who are celebrated in these pamphlets were officers or aspiring to be officers. Almost 10% of dead Italian officers were commemorated through this type of publications.[8]

These pamphlets are interesting for a number of reasons. First of all, they introduce the reader to a cult of the dead which was already widespread during the war. This is important not only for Italy, especially since, until now, scholarly investigations have been focused mainly on post-war commemorations and memorials. However an even more important reason is the fact that this cult is placed at the crossroad of private mourning and collective memory, somewhere between the family and the nation. In this case, memory is not encoded by institutions and organizations, but instead by families and their entourage. As a consequence, both mourning and the elaboration of trauma are investigated from the viewpoint of the relatives who, in

[8] See Giorgio Rochat, "Gli ufficiali italiani nella prima guerra mondiale", in *Ufficiali e società*, eds Giuseppe Caforio and Piero Del Negro (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1988), 231-52.

traditional studies on the cult of the dead, have so far played a marginal role. Finally, since a similar phenomenon cannot be found in Germany, nor in France or Britain, this type of cult seems to be an Italian peculiarity and the reasons for it need to be investigated.[9]

To elaborate the mourning and commemoration

To devote a written pamphlet to the memory of dead people was already a common practice in nineteenth-century Italy.[10] Therefore, the pamphlets written in memory of soldiers who died in the First World War are not an absolute novelty and must be considered first of all as a cultural practice shifted from civilian to military death at war. However, this reason alone does not suffice to explain the large number of pamphlets published and their wide diffusion during the war years. Commemorative pamphlets clearly provide an answer to an increased need to translate a symbolic representation of both death and mourning. In order to better understand this phenomenon, it is useful to remember some specific aspects of war mourning in the twentieth century.

Death at war is both violent and unnatural; and this is already a truth particularly difficult to be accepted by the family of a fallen soldier. It is a kind of death that needs to be justified. But there is another reason that makes such a death difficult to be accepted: at war, it is young men who die. World War I overturned an order which, at the beginning of the twentieth century, had been perceived as natural for quite a long time: furthermore, by the time of this war, death was no longer a constant reality, but was more and more associated with old age.[11] Therefore many elements lead us to believe that in the case

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[9] In the case of France and Germany, no more than 120 publications have been made available; whereas *in memoriam* pamphlets dedicated to single soldiers are quite numerous in Israel. See Emmanuel Sivan, "Private Pain and Public Remembrance in Israel", in *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century*, eds Emmanuel Sivan and Jay Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), 177-204.

[10] See the pages on "Biographia contemporanea", in *Bollettino delle pubblicazioni italiane ricevute per diritto di stampa* (Florence 1886-1915).

[11] See David Cannadine, "War and Death, Grief and Mourning in Modern Britain", in *Mirrors of Mortality: Studies in the Social History of Death*, ed. Joachim Whaley (London: Europa, 1981), 187-242, especially 187; Martina Kessel, "Sterben/Tod: Neuzeit", in *Europäische Mentalitätsgeschichte*, ed. Peter Dinzelbacher (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1994), 260-74; Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, *14-18: Retrouver la guerre*, 243. Concerning the rate of mortality in Italy before World War I, see Lorenzo Del

of the dead of World War I, the process enabling survivors to elaborate their loss was mostly connected to the sense of guilt, mainly among old people, but also among the brothers who survived. Due to these premises, the disposition to celebrate dead soldiers as war heroes, which characterizes almost all cults of the dead, must be probably interpreted also as a strategy for compensation.

Therefore, the mourning belongs, first of all, to the parents. Only a third of the Italian soldiers who died in the First World War were married. Psychologically, the loss of adult children is considered as the most dramatic of traumas. In these cases, the mourning follows chronic and complicated paths. Investigations carried out on the parents of dead soldiers in Israel confirm the extraordinary intensity and duration of this type of mourning, which leads to a state of depression and high risk of mortality. Italian commemorative pamphlets are strongly characterized by this typology of mourning. It is mainly the young unmarried dead son who lived with his parents before going to the front who is celebrated, and even the pamphlets dedicated to married sons are often edited by their parents.

However, there is a further aspect that should be taken into consideration: the family of the soldier who died at the front is not only excluded from the actual moment of death, but also from funeral services. The corpses of the dead soldiers, if and when they were found, were not sent back to their homes, at least while the war was still being fought. The family could not see the corpse, nor could they attend a funeral; in addition, they have only a few scattered pieces of information about the death. This too makes it difficult to accept this type of death. To the family, the lack of all funeral services translates into the loss of the most important of traditional funeral rites. It is quite possible that such a situation led to a growing need for a service of compensation. Therefore the pamphlets written in memory of a lost soldier also function as a replacement. They are two things at the same time: a ritual and a memorial. They simulate a funeral service and create a virtual funeral procession through the obituaries and the letters of condolence. At the same time, they build up a memorial to the dead soldier: this is easily confirmed by the representations of the

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Panta, “Dalla metà del settecento ai giorni nostri”, in Lorenzo Del Panta and Massimo Livi Bacci, *La popolazione italiana dal medioevo ad oggi* (Rome: Laterza, 1996), 131-212.

dead soldier and by the epigraphs which in some cases are set at the beginning of the text, in the frontispiece. The pamphlets often report also real memorial services that were nevertheless held to compensate for the lack of rituals: in this way, to write and to print the commemorative speeches and the name of the participants, implants a lasting memory of the event.

The pamphlets in memory of dead soldiers bear witness to various rituals of condolence; and at the same time perform other important functions. While writing and distributing the pamphlets, the family would get in touch with various people – friends, schoolmates, teachers or colleagues of the dead soldiers – who often added their own contribution. In this way, the relatives find psychological support within a sphere larger than that of the family itself. In almost all cases, the relatives frequently exchanged letters with the senior officers and comrades of the dead soldier, or with the doctors and the military chaplain at the front so as to get more information about the death of their lost one and about his burial.

These people, who were direct witnesses of the soldier's death, played an important function for the families who were excluded both from the death and the burial. For this reason, their letters were often reported in the pamphlets. It is only by means of these written reports that the family could learn about a death that took place so far away from them. The family community was therefore opened up to those who, in the letters, replaced the family at the front. The senior officers and the comrades shared the last moments of life of the dead soldier, they assisted him during the agony of death, they recovered his body, they buried it and often they even took care of his grave. And, what is most important, in their letters they told everything to the relatives of the fallen one. It is through this process that death at war, which is a violent, anonymous and public death, and which in many aspects is quite contrary to the typical nineteenth-century bourgeois death, can be in part re-familiarized and brought back to the private sphere.

How is such a death told and described, represented and imagined in the letters of these direct witnesses? Their task is to describe the death of the soldier to his own family members: it is a difficult task indeed, since they want to convey a private aspect to such a death at the same time as they try to deny its matter-of-factness and its horror. The result is an almost artificial operation, an invention rather than a true representation of the death. The death of the fallen is rarely

described in full detail: more often, it is concealed by euphemisms which draw from a limited repertoire of discursive models and stereotypes.

It is possible to trace three main strategies that do not mutually exclude, but instead complement each other in the discourse: the heroic valorization (heroic death); the aesthetic valorization (the beautiful death); the moral valorization (death as sacrifice). The strategy of heroic valorization mainly uses the language of masculine qualities and values. The death, in sharp contrast with the reality of war, is interpreted as a gift which is gratefully received by the soldier who is not presented as a mere target of the enemy's violence, but as an active subject. In addition, death is never trivial, casual, unexpected or a military nonsense. In the majority of cases, it is preceded by victorious battles or by a dangerous reconnaissance which convey a true military meaning to death: in the course of these actions, the soldier who died had the chance to show his high military value and heroism. Young officers always die in the battlefield and almost always in the middle of an attack while at the head of their platoon (for this reason they become a shining example); they hardly ever die during a retreat, and never while running away from the battlefield. This explains why they are almost always wounded in their breast or forehead.

Then, death is almost always presented as being beautiful and clean. The corpses of the dead are rarely torn to pieces or mutilated. The aesthetic of the body is kept intact. Blood, filth, and wounds are left out from the description, and agony is denied. Soldiers perish quickly, without long suffering, or at least this is what the relatives are almost always assured of. It is also for this reason that the expression left on the face of the dead soldier is frequently described as peaceful. As a consequence, by denying the horror, such an image suggests that the lost one peacefully accepted his own fate. In such contexts, the metaphor presenting death as sleep also often recurs, therefore understating the atrocity of death and its finality.

All the above melts into the semantics of sacrifice. Death is not suffered, but is a conscious and even a joyful sacrifice of life, a heroic victory over the individual's ego, and even represents the devotion of the individual to a higher purpose: death is therefore the highest expression of the morality of man. This redefinition of death as a

willing sacrifice is performed, first of all, through the publication of the letters of the dead soldier. Here we find those documents, to which Adolfo Omodeo refers, typical of a generation of enthusiastic young supporters of the war coming from the educated upper middle class.[12] These letters frequently look like testaments, so much so that it is often the dead themselves (and it is a peculiarity of this cult of the fallen soldier) who offer an interpretation of their tragic destiny. In this way, the ideology of the sacrifice of one's life acquires its authenticity and is legitimated. The family can find comfort in the consent of the victim. The publication of the letters brings the dead back to life and offers a voice from beyond the grave, bringing comfort to those who have survived.

Nation and religion

The semantics of sacrifice establishes a deep connection with the language of the nation in almost all of the commemorative pamphlets. As a consequence, they not only have a therapeutic function for the relatives of the victim, who want to know why and for what reasons their beloved ones died, but they are also manifestations of a spontaneous war propaganda which is based on a self-mobilization aimed to spread the ideology of the sacrifice for one's own country among the middle classes. While cultivating the cult of their dead, middle-class families and their friends and acquaintances become not only a group of consumers or receivers, but also they amplify the national war ideology: when they make use of the patriotic discourse to elaborate their sorrow, the relatives of the fallen soldier also legitimate it, claiming for their vocal witness – which is the voice of people who are personally involved – a specific recognition of authenticity.

In the obituaries, in the commemorative speeches, as well as in the letters of mourning it is possible to trace the full range of national interpretations of war: from the war of liberation of unredeemed lands now fulfilling the ideals of the *Risorgimento*, to the war fought in the name of the sacred egoism" and of the great Italy, transforming Italy into one of the great powers; to the war fought together with Western democracies to defend justice and freedom against the militarism and

[12] See Adolfo Omodeo, *Momenti della vita di guerra: Dai diari e dalle lettere dei caduti* (Turin: Einaudi, 1968).

authoritarianism of the Central European Empires.[13]

More so than in the public sphere, where the different political parties often competed against each other for ideological hegemony, these divergent interpretations were evoked by the authors of the family cult of the dead; and their action was conceived as an additional amplification and harmonization of these interpretations, giving shape to a syncretic mixture which aims at finding some sort of meaning, approval and comfort for the family of the fallen soldier. The true political and propaganda meaning of this cult is to be found precisely in this particularly efficient mixture of different war ideologies and semantic policies. Clearly, the trans-political dimension of war and mourning was easily evoked to shelve the political and ideological conflicts concerning the meanings and the objectives of the war.

The trauma of a loss almost always leads to a broader religious interpretation; yet, in most cases, it corresponds to a model of civic religion. In 95% of the publications the language of the nation plays an important role, whereas in more than two thirds of them there is no explicit reference to Christian religion. As a matter of fact, these sources clearly bear witness to the deep secularization shared at the time by a large part of the upper middle class of the Italian society, as well as to the fact that they agreed upon a religion of the nation promoted by decades of patriotic pedagogy in liberal Italy. National interpretations of war and death are quite often imbued with religious semantic values that are transferred without scruple to the political field: unredeemed lands are described as "sacred", "consecrated" by the blood of the dead soldiers; the dead soldier presented as a "martyr", his mother as a "saint", the battlefield is "an altar" of the "religion of the country". At the core of the political religion that is clearly revealed in these sources, we find the cult of the sacrifice for the country, which secularizes the Christian idea of eternal life, and instead passing it on to the nation. The dead, this is the essence of the

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[13] To further investigate the question of Italian war nationalism and its various nuances, see Oliver Janz, "Nazionalismo e coscienza nazionale nella prima guerra mondiale. Germania e Italia a confronto", in *Centralismo e federalismo tra otto e novecento: Italia e Germania a confronto*, eds Oliver Janz *et al*. (Bologna: Mulino, 1997), 219-50. To further explore the more general question of Italian nationalism in those years, see Emilio Gentile, *La grande Italia: Ascesa e declino del mito della nazione nel ventesimo secolo* (Milan: Mondadori, 1997), especially 73-145.

idea, continue to live in the memory of the living, as well as in that of future generations of the national community, for which they become a stimulus and a model: it is a political interpretation of death, possessing also considerable religious power, mainly due to the promise of immortality. But the Christian afterlife is replaced by national memory. By accepting this formula and by supporting it through the cultural praxis of the *in memoriam* pamphlets, the authors and the editors of these publications take on themselves a highly religious function, as immortality can be assured to the fallen soldier only if his memory is established in the national memory permanently.

However a large section of the pamphlets does not limit itself to the consolatory discourse offered by the patriotic ideology of death at war. In one third of the cases, besides the patriotism, there are Christian and Catholic interpretations and models of death. In these obituaries and commemorative speeches there is often a reference to the Christian education received by the fallen soldier in his family, to the good influence of the Catholic schools he attended, or also to his engagement in Catholic associations. In the pamphlets, not only are the military value of the fallen soldier and his sense of duty and the sacrifice he made for his country praised, but his faith and his virtues rooted in the Christian religion, such as humility, modesty, purity, chastity, are also celebrated.

More generally, his goodness and his humanity towards his subordinates in the army are honoured. The authors invoke the acceptance of God's will in order to comfort his relatives and themselves with the certainty of eternal life obtained by the fallen soldier, because he was a good Catholic Christian, and with the promise of a family reunion in Heaven. In most of these memorial writings the language of the nation and the religious and Catholic one are not set one against the other. On the contrary, they are combined with the clear intention of contributing to death the greatest possible meaning. National and religious content usually do not coincide; instead, they are put beside one another, and mutually reinforcing each other. Here too, the semantics of sacrifice constitutes a crucial connection. The idea of overcoming oneself in the name of a faith can be intended in a religious-civic sense but it can also be interpreted in the light of a patriotic Catholicism which considers the Christian instruction to obey and love one's neighbours as the foundation for sacrifice in the name of one's country. The semantic of sacrifice

allows, within certain limits, a symbiosis of national and Christian ethics which, putting aside the differences in the contents, gives to death at war the same ethical value and sanctifying power of the death suffered by Christian martyrs. The dead did not die for the Christian faith; yet, dying for a faith, they died as Christian martyrs, and by so doing acquired the right to an eternal life in the Christian sense of the word.

Women too were involved in this memorial cult: they were both the addressed by the texts and their authors. The different forms of co-existence and combination between nation and religion, already considered, are also due to this feminine presence, as can be shown by taking as an example the mourning letters received by the families and often published in the volumes. Half of the letters use the patriotic language related to the ideas of sacrifice, nation, duty and heroic death. In 15% of the letters the Christian semantics of death is preferred, and in another 10% both semantic fields can be found, while the remaining quarter simply makes use of the traditional formulas for mourning and grief. About a quarter of the authors of mourning letters (who themselves come from the upper middle class of the Italian society) make use of consolations of Christian inspiration, partly being satisfied with them alone, partly combining them with the language of nation. However, in the case of women, who represent more than one third of the authors, this percentage increases dramatically: women's letters, which are mainly addressed to the mothers, sisters and wives of the fallen soldier, use the Catholic-Christian language in nearly 50% of the cases, and half of these do not use the patriotic language at all.

Family and nation

This cult is at the same time a cult of the nation and a cult of the middle-class family. The two dimensions co-exist and are intermingled in several ways.[14] The *in memoriam* pamphlets do not exclusively celebrate patriotic sacrifice; on the contrary, through the publication of family letters, they underline the mutual love among the members of the family. Thanks to the cult of family ties, family members confirm their own identity as a related group: in this way

[14] For more in general, concerning this theme, see Ilaria Porciani, "Famiglia e nazione nel lungo Ottocento", *Passato e Presente*, XX/57 (September/December 2002), 9-40.

they reinforce the integrity of the family wounded by death. The mother of the fallen soldier remains at the core of this cult, together with her grief for her lost son; she represents the strategic point of the funeral cult and its hidden centre. In all the consolatory strategies she is the main person addressed and it is not by chance that she is the only member of the family who occasionally speaks in the celebratory pamphlets. Indeed, it is the love of the dead soldier for his mother that is mainly celebrated and glorified. The apotheosis of filial love can thus be interpreted as a symbolic compensation of motherly love, as it becomes the ritual restoration of the tie broken by death.

The commemorative texts balance in different ways the potential tensions between family and nation. First of all, through the fact that the death of the soldier at war can be symbolically capitalized and can bring social credit: the sacrifice of a son's life brings honour to his whole family. By describing the death of their sons as a sacrifice for the nation and by proposing the fallen soldiers as ideal models for future generations, families establish their long-lasting memory: they build up a monument to the family itself, which is then proclaimed as the privileged keeper of the national idea, and upon which special social acknowledgment should be bestowed. Mourning is changed into pride, loss is turned into an ideal gain for the family: this is done also by asserting that the heroism of the dead is the result of pure family traditions, values and education. Thus, these pamphlets *in memoriam* help the family to overcome loss in two different manners: they give meaning to the death of the soldier and assure his survival through memory; and they increase the prestige and honour of the family among those who read them – friends and acquaintances, colleagues and partners, neighbours and among the social elites to which the family belongs. The request of a symbolic fulfilment is mainly satisfied through the letters of condolence printed in the pamphlets, which often cover up to fifty pages.

Self-celebration of middle-class families in the obituaries frequently refers to deeds in favour of the nation undertaken by previous generations, in most cases their participation to the *Risorgimento*. In this way, war is interpreted as a completion of the *Risorgimento* and, at the same time, as a continuation of family traditions. The idea of national solidarity placed above each generation, inducing all descendants to fulfil the spiritual inheritance and the works of the forefathers, is therefore applied to the single

family. Those who died kept faith to the legacy of their grandfathers, and are presented as an example to their younger brothers or sons. Thus family tradition is mixed with the national one, mutually reinforcing each other.

The obvious conflicts opposing the sacrifice of one's own life for the good of the nation and the faithfulness to one's own family are mostly left out or mitigated. This operation can be successful only by giving the mother, who is the symbol of the familiar sphere opposed to the male and military nation, a central role in the cult of the fallen. Then, besides the heroism of the fallen soldiers there is also the heroism of the Italian mothers who sacrifice their sons and accept that their mourning becomes part of the nation's fate. By humbling themselves, mothers represent the female part of the nation, as well as its contribution to war. By so doing they become a model for the nation and a symbol. Mothers, through their sacrifice, play a part in the collective event, in the renewal, in the liberation and fulfilment of the nation. They have acquired the right to a particular recognition and to a symbolic compensation, to a veneration which is frequently conveyed through the association of the mother with the idea of *Pietà*, sanctified in her grief and in direct correspondence with God's mother crying over the dead body of Christ.

Even though there is an effort to conciliate family and nation, these pamphlets nevertheless remain an individual and familiar form of the cult of the fallen, a form that resists complete nationalization and the collectivization of death. In addition, mourning and trauma are not always smoothed out and tamed and are often manifested in all their incompatibility, side by side with those hegemonic speeches that try to keep their subversive potential under control. The private memorial cult of the middle class leaves more room for syncretism, polyphonies and unorthodox interpretations as compared to the collective commemorations during and after the war. Moreover, also in the case of the most stereotyped publications that contain only the most conventional elements of the hegemonic ideology, it is possible to state that the memory is always only the memory of an individual – the pamphlet celebrates a single family and their mourning, not the death and sacrifice for the nation *per se*.

So we return to the original question: how to explain the great quantity and diffusion of pamphlets *in memoriam* of the Italian middle

classes? Does the private cult of the fallen, that seems to be a peculiar Italian phenomenon, refer to a cult of the family particularly rooted in the Italian bourgeoisie, as well as to a certain gap which, in spite of all the patriotic rhetoric, seems to exist between these classes and the state? This hypothesis would be confirmed by the most recent studies on the Italian middle classes, which have underlined the striking cult of the family and localism of this class in the period between the unification of Italy and the rise of Fascism, as well as its low degree of national integration.[15]

The private family cult of the dead could be seen as a symptom of a limited trust in the institutions of liberal Italy and of their capacity to offer a suitable commemoration for fallen soldiers that was capable of symbolically gratifying their families. This lack of trust in the state should not necessarily be opposed to the prevailing patriotic attitude of these families: it is precisely because they perceived themselves as the bearers of the national idea and tried to establish a privileged connection between the individual and the nation, that they did not want to trust and to be satisfied with the official and collective celebrations of the dead.

The middle-class cult of the fallen soldiers is an element linking the civic and bourgeois cult of the dead in the pre-war period, which is the cult of the bourgeois individual and of the bourgeois family, and the public and collective cult of the fallen, which was fully expressed only after the war. The civic cult of the dead implies a massive politicization: the mourning community is enlarged, death is nationalized, solace and eternal life are sought for in the symbolic compensation of national memory. Regarding the cult of the dead after the war, with its tendency to the collectivization of the death, it is possible to see the middle-class memorial cult as being both elitist and individualistic: it is a cult devoted to the memory of young reserve officers, which is used for the self-celebration of a class that intends to strengthen its right to social acknowledgment and to political leadership, and demands both a private monument for its fallen soldiers and a privileged place in the national pantheon.

[15] See, for example, Alberto Mario Banti, *Storia della borghesia italiana: L'età liberale* (Rome: Donzelli, 1996), 181-212.

THE DEAD HERO, THE DEAD BODY: ANTI -EPIC AND RESEARCH OF MEANING IN THE FICTIONAL REPRESENTATION OF WORLD WAR II

ALBERTO CASADEI

In the novels and in the memories about the World War II, the representation of dead bodies acquires a meaningful relevance, especially due to the cultural-ideological value that is conveyed to such a representation in the text. Taking into consideration Fussell's and Leed's fundamental studies (which discuss works dealing with the First World War),[1] and Agamben's more recent notes on the naked life perceived as a core to exert power (especially starting from the experience in the concentration camps),[2] it is possible to affirm that in an almost totally technological war as the one fought between 1939-45, the corpse of the fallen soldier often becomes the symbol of the non-relevance or, at least, of the non-justifiability of the death of the individual. As a matter of fact, it is not only that simple civilians often constitute the majority of the dead bodies; even the soldiers themselves – that is those who should be represented as the new heroes – are abandoned with no glory and honour (apart, it is obvious, from the post-mortem honours which can be officially bestowed upon them).

Therefore, the peculiar result of the new battles, even though, as I will show, it is not the only one, is to underline the weakness of the human body. To be unarmed against the overpowering strength of the enemy is the most frequent condition for those who fought in the

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[1] Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975); Eric J. Leed, *No Man's Land* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979).

[2] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer: Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita* (Turin: Einaudi, 1995); *Quel che resta di Auschwitz: L'archivio e il testimone* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1998).

Second World War. Thus, their paradigm is constituted by the oppression and destruction of the Jews and of several other ethnic-religious groups carried out by the Nazis. Such a disproportion characterizes many descriptions of the fallen soldiers, even though – and especially in the most propagandistic books – more traditional modes of representation can still be found, often standing as institutionalized repetitions of ancient epic attitudes. However, by examining a famous passage by Stendhal, it is possible to prove that death has been narrated in other ways, since, at least, the post-Napoleonic period.

The disillusionment of the epic death

This is death at Waterloo, as it is perceived by Fabrice del Dongo in *The Charterhouse of Parma*:

> What struck him most was the dead man's filthy feet, already stripped of his shoes; the corpse was left with nothing but a blood-stained pair of ragged trousers …. A bullet, entering one side of the nose, had come out through the opposite temple and hideously disfigured the corpse; one eye was still open.[3]

Those who went to war thinking that death in the battlefield was going to be beautiful, heroic and glorious, experienced the most complete disillusionment. There is nothing noble or solemn in the rotten corpse of the humble soldier – its materiality cannot be avoided, especially in its most degraded and dreadful traits (the dirtiness of the feet, the wide-open eyes). No epic over interpretation, no superimposition of an ideology of victory created to praise the force of a whole population through its heroes, can be employed to modify the direct perception of the brutal consistency of a dead body: that is, what is left of a defeated combatant.

Many other aspects would be worthy to be analysed in this passage from Stendhal's novel, but I want to underline one in particular that was to be fundamental for successive representations of war. At the end of what was considered as the major modern epos with Napoleon embedding a new type of post-revolutionary Emperor, it was certainly

[3] Stendhal, *The Charterhouse of Parma*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: The Modern Library, 1999), 38.

possible to identify the falseness of both classic and more recent epic constructions – that is to say their simple sublimation of the majestic and exciting aspects of war, to the detriment of the more vile and depressing ones. However, in order to modify a well established literary form such as the epic, it was necessary to introduce another one, potentially free and unconventional, such as that offered by the novel. In the early nineteenth-century conception, the subjective element of the novel, the focus on various characters (at the time accompanied by a clear perception of the author's voice and authority) succeeds in debunking truths previously considered as objective and untouchable, as, for instance, the case of what were considered to be objective epic visions of war and battle, until then perceived as topical moments enabling the individual and his country to achieve glory.

Stendhal's narration is also pervaded by a certain irony characterizing the account of Fabrice's war *Bildung*: the vision of the dead soldier is the bitter and material counterpart of a personal exaltation of war, which is, all the same, mocked in the text. In Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1865-69), however, Prince Andrej speculates on the meaning or the lack of meaning of death in war starting from a tragic experiencing of heroism in the modern age; while on the opposed side, Napoleon still believes he can find a "belle mort". And yet, his attitude is not only induced by a mystification of reality, which is typical of the little Corsican in Tolstoy's representation, but also by his inability to understand the desperate solitude into which the soldier, finally feeling the insignificance of his body, falls before dying. This is a state that cannot but lead, from Tostoy's perspective, either to nihilism or to the acceptance of the inscrutable will of God.

The dead body as a manifestation of a superior power

But where there is no sign of divine presence, in the lack of space and time in the trench, which is the most shocking symbol of fighting during First World War; the dead body can implicitly represent martyrdom, something which is not the result of religious faith but instead the consequence of a philosophical and ideological contrast. It is easy to trace the influence of Nietzsche in Ernst Jünger's warmongering to the point that the terrible descriptions in *The Storm of Steel* can be understood above all as projections of the soldier's

drive towards the doctrine of the superman. As a consequence, the dead body is not annihilated but instead lacerated, torn to pieces, disfigured, thus revealing the effects of the superior power, both of the enemy's will and of new technological weapons (and it is the latter that serves the former). A clear example is offered in the chapter entitled *Guillemont*:

> Over the ruins, as over all the most dangerous parts of the terrain, lay a heavy smell of death, because the fire was so intense that no one could bother with the corpses. You really did have to run for your life in these places, and when I caught the smell of it as I ran, I was hardly surprised – it belonged to there. Moreover, this heavy sweetish atmosphere was not merely disgusting; it also, in association with the piercing fogs of gunpowder, brought about an almost visionary excitement, that otherwise only the extreme nearness of death is able to produce.
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> Here, and really only here, I was to observe that there is a quality of dread that feels as unfamiliar as a foreign country. In moments when I felt it, I experienced no fear as such but a kind of exalted, almost demoniacal lightness; often attended by fits of laughter I was unable to repress.[4]

Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*[5] is very different from Jünger's novel: it witnesses the experience of the same drive towards war, but now perceived from the bottom, by those who are doomed to become dead bodies in no man's land. The opposition to this horrible condition is clear: Remarque's sincere hostility towards war is evident. Nonetheless, the text clearly discloses also the acceptance of its mechanisms in order to defend one's own survival. The decomposing corpses cause a strong uneasiness because of the impossibility of showing any human solidarity; sometimes the dead

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[4] Ernst Jünger, *Storm of Steel*, trans. Michael Hofmann (London: Allen Lane Penguin Books, 2003), 93. Many other passages in *Storm of Steel* could be quoted to support this argument. It is important to note that Jünger considered that the Great War was the last to be associated with heroic ages, and not a matter of "chemists, physicists, engineers" like those that followed (see Franco Cardini's *Quella antica festa crudele* [1982; Milan: Mondadori, 1997], 443).

[5] Erich Maria Remarque, *Im Westen nichts Neues* (1929). All quotations in this essay are taken from *All Quiet on the Western Front*, trans. A.W. Wheen (New York: Fawcett Books, 1982).

bodies are represented as the remains of sacrificial victims, men forced to become soldiers and sent to die following a philosophy of bullying or, more trivially, following military strategies still based on the importance of heroic assaults.[6]

In this sense, the climax of *All Quiet on the Western Front* is to be found in the narration of the relationship (or rather the non-relationship) with the Frenchman Gérard Duval, hit by Paul in self defence, kept close and agonizing for a long time, and at the end recognized as a "brother" (in the name of *fraternité*). The hero Paul Börner says: "Comrade, I did not want to kill you."[7] With this ethic consciousness, the death of the enemy-companion is paradoxically to be redeemed, to the point of a false identification that aims at continuing the life of the dead soldier:

> This dead man is bound up with my life, therefore I must do everything, promise everything in order to save myself; I swear blindly that I mean to live only for his sake and his family, with wet lips I try to placate him – and deep down in me lies the hope that I may buy myself off in this way and perhaps even get out of this; it is a little stratagem: if only I am allowed to escape, then I will see to it. So I open the book and read slowly. Gérard Duval, compositor.
>
> With the dead man's pencil I write the address on an envelope, then swiftly thrust everything back into his tunic.
>
> I have killed the printer, Gérard Duval. I must be a printer, I think confusedly, be a printer, printer ….[8]

The exaltation of the sacrifice

When the drive towards war in the World War I ends, as Mosse[9] and Winter[10] demonstrate, the memory of battles that brought millions of

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[6] There are more neutral descriptions, even though they are given in a context that shows the absolute negativity of the situation: "The days are hot and the dead lie unburied. We cannot fetch them all in, if we did we should not know what to do with them. The shells will bury them" (*ibid*., 125-26); in other descriptions the unjustifiability of death is more explicit, as, for example, in the case of the young boys sent to the front-line without any training, doomed to die because of their unawareness: "Their sharp, downy, dead faces have the awful expressionlessness of dead children" (*ibid*., 130).

[7] *Ibid*., 223.

[8] *Ibid*., 225.

men quickly to their deaths becomes fundamental in the collective imagery of the countries involved: the exaltation of sacrifice, as it is also confirmed by literary works, acquires a role of social and national unity.[11]

After World War II, in the fictional representation of battles there is often an effort to justify the death of soldiers and civilians from the outside, and often ideologically. But, as has already been suggested, in many novels it is clear that there is no possibility of redeeming the dead body, as well as no glory for the dead hero. Paradoxically, the concentration camp is now the symbol of a new (and totally unequal) struggle: it is the result of the will to annihilate, wanting to turn the enemy into a nonentity. The corpses of the enemies (which, with tragic irony, are those of the Jews and of other prisoners who could not even fight) are not redeemable, as there is no way of telling their end: the "drowned" (the "Muslims" in the concentration camps) would be the only real witnesses of this annihilation of the body. This extreme condition is present also in other descriptions that are not related to the reality of concentration camps, and are often elaborated some time after the event, that is to say deriving from a re-thinking of the sense of the struggles, a sort of *Erlebnis*.[12] As a case study, I will introduce here a brief specimen of Italian literary works: they represent the different ways to find or not to find a reason for the sacrifices in war, from those that are more marked and explicit to others that show only implicitly the de-humanization and deconstruction of heroism in all deaths on the battlefield (or due to the war).

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[9] George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990).

[10] Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995).

[11] On this point, see the fundamental works by Fussell and Leed. Concerning the study of the *memory* of conflicts, see also *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century*, eds Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999).

[12] On this point, see my book *Romanzi di Finisterre*, which offers many examples. Different viewpoints are offered in Antonio Scurati, "Sul realismo nella narrazione della guerra: una comparazione tra antichi e moderni", *Il Ponte*, LVII/3 (2001), 124-33; *Guerra: Narrazioni e culture nella tradizione occidentale* (Rome: Donzelli, 2003); and also in *Le notti chiare erano tutte un'alba: Antologia dei poeti italiani nella Prima guerra mondiale*, eds Antonio Scurati and Andrea Cortellessa (Milan: B. Mondatori, 1998).

First of all, it is important to acknowledge that it is possible to find, especially in the works published soon after the war (but also in later ones), the affirmation of ideological and ethic judgements generated precisely by the sight of the dead bodies.[13] For example, Eugenio Corti in his memoir of the Russian campaign, *Few Returned*, invokes God's punishment to justify the terrible decomposition of corpses:

> There were mortar holes practically all around us. Scattered matter gone to rot. Corpses that had lost human form. Ragged frostbite casualties dragging themselves along. And just beyond, the infirmary graves brimming with dead bodies. War!
>
> … The horror of the martyred and rotting flesh on those live bodies, a punishment in kind for the inexcusable inebriation of the flesh. As in the valley of Arbuzov, again we had before us God the castigator.[14]

But in the journal of the philosopher Pietro Chiodi, *Banditi* (*Bandits*),[15] the unfair death of innocent people can have the opposite effect, sweeping away all doubts:

> A terrible thought overwhelms me. Why did I engage in this fight? Why am I here when so many who are healthier and stronger than myself live peacefully, and take advantage of the situation? I rethink my life as a student, of my work on Heidegger, now interrupted. Why did I leave all that? I remember very well: a street full of blood and a cart with four corpses near the Mussotto. The roadman who says: – It is better to die that endure all that –. Yes, it is at that moment that I decided to chance my arm.

Guglielmo Petroni, imprisoned by the Nazis in Rome, in a Note added in 1960 to his work *Il mondo è una prigione* (*The World Is a Prison*)[16]

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[13] On this aspect, see Andrea Battistini *et al*, *Letteratura e Resistenza* (Bologna: Clueb 1997); Giovanni Falaschi, *La resistenza armata nella narrativa italiana* (Turin: Einaudi, 1976); and also, for a historiographic viewpoint, Claudio Pavone, *Una guerra civile: saggio storico sulla moralità nella Resistenza italiana* (Turin: Bollati-Boringhieri, 1991).

[14] Corti Eugenio, *Few Returned: Twenty-eight Days on the Russian Front, Winter 1942-1943* (1947), trans. Peter Edward Levy, Foreword by Carlo D'Este (Columbia: MO and London: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 187.

[15] Pietro Chiodi, *Banditi* (1946; Turin: Einaudi, 1975), 41 (my translation).

[16] Guglielmo Petroni, *Il mondo è una prigione* (1948; Florence: Giunti, 1995), 126

advocates a vivid anti-heroism precisely in order to protect the memory of the dead:

> In these fifteen years (from 1945 to 1960) we have perhaps learnt that the winning heroes, and the defeated heroes are our true enemies, the bugs which bite the earth under our feet, those which prevent us from understanding the horror of the truth of many dead, who are not heroes: millions of dead.

The passages quoted above represent a spectrum of reactions, either following the sight of corpses, or triggered by the memory of the dead, who bear witness first of all to an individual ethical choice (it is important to notice that all these particular works are diaries and not novels). In this perspective, *La casa in collina* (*The House on the Hill*) by Cesare Pavese is a novel about the Resistance that turns the description of fallen soldiers into both a narrative and an ethical theme. In this novel, the hero is Corrado, a professor who willingly chose not to join the war. From his house in the hills, far away from the battlefield, he has been speculating about what is happening in Turin and in Italy after the armistice. However, at the end of the novel, he is obliged to cross the battlefield in order to return to his native village and he is forced to see directly what it means to die at war:

> When I had cautiously reached the road corner, I saw the huge motor truck. It was stationary and empty across the road. A pool of petrol stained the road, but it was not only petrol. In front of the vehicle by the wheels lay human corpses. The petrol was slowly trickling towards me; it was dyed red. Some people – women and a priest – were moving about among them. I saw blood on the bodies.
>
> One soldier – in a blood-spattered field-grey uniform – was lying on his face, but his feet were still in contact with the coach. Blood and brains were oozing from under his cheek. Another, a little man, was staring upwards, yellow, dirt-stained, his hands across his belly. Then more twisted bodies, flat on their faces in horrible attitudes, a dirty livid colour. Some of them looked dwarfed and lay there like a bundle of rags. One was lying part from the rest on the grass verge – he had leaped there from the road, shooting to defend himself; he was kneeling, rigid, against the barbed wire, as if he were still alive, with

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(my translation).

> blood dripping from his mouth and eyes, a boy of wax, crowned with thorns.[17]

This passage is in the penultimate chapter (XXII): the effect of the sight of the corpses on the main character is strong, as is clearly shown by the last image with the superimposition (merely iconographical) of the dead man and Christ on the Calvary. In the last chapter (XXIII) Corrado understands that he can no longer avoid confronting the massacre that took place around him:

> It is back to these woods here that the war has brought me, and continues to bring me …. I have looked on dead who are unknown to me, the dead of the Republic. It was seeing them that awakened me. If a stranger, a dying enemy has this effect, and one stops and is afraid to stride over his body, it means that even conquered, the enemy is still a human being, that having shed his blood, we must placate it, lend it a voice, justify whoever has spilt it. Looking at corpses is humiliating. They are not other people's concern; we cannot feel we have just chanced to be at that spot. We have the impression that the same fate which had stretched these bodies on the grounds, nails us here to look at them, to fill our eyes with the sight of them. It is not fear, not common cowardice. It is humiliation. We learnt through our eyes that it might well be ourselves in the place of these dead and it would be no different and that if we are alive, we owe it to this sullied corpse. Because every war is a civil war; every man who falls resembles the one who survives and calls him to account.[18]

According to the author of *The House on the Hill*, it is possible to state that "every war is a civil war". Apart from the just ideals and any political reasons, if life itself is at stake even those who did not take part in the war must feel that they are nevertheless involved, as they have indirectly contributed to other people's death. It is on this base that they must start to believe (or, as Pavese himself did, they must decide that they cannot believe). Therefore, the whole conclusion of *The House on the Hill* constitutes one of the highest peaks in all speculations on the meaning of war and death, affecting also those

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[17] Cesare Pavese, *The House on the Hill* (1949), trans. W.J. Strachan (London: Mayflower-dell Paperback, 1965), 119.
[18] *Ibid*., 125-26.

who did not want to be involved in the fight (the not-guilty rather than the innocent). However, this kind of consciousness is achieved only at the end of the road: also in Pavese the representation of death does not form (as in the case of Fenoglio's *Il partigiano Johnny*) the foundation of the narrative, the hard truth to be grasped underpinning all wars, even those that are victorious. The dead bodies lead not to an action, but to a reflection. In any event, they ask for a reason that can explain what happened.

The condition of the dead is therefore unredeemable, a situation which is clearly expressed in *L'Agnese va a morire* (*Agnese Goes to Die*) by Renata Viganò: even though an ideological take (in this case a Communist imprint) is undeniable, in this novel the final death of the main character is seen as absolute, and given as a non-manipulated still-shot: "Agnese remained alone, strangely small, a heap of black rags in the snow."[19] The impossibility of glorifying the dead is even more evident in the work by Mario Spinella, *Memoria della Resistenza* (*Memory of the Resistance*, which was probably partially written as a diary in the period 1943-45, and then revised in 1961):

> We wait long, in case someone moves. But we hear only the outburst of the gasoline, the avid twisting of flames. Later, when we descend to the road everything has been accomplished: a black and burnt stain, a few lines of blood, the faces strained by terror.
>
> Unfortunately, experience has accustomed us to death and it is I who rummages looking for a wallet, a letter, an identification mark.[20]

The familiarity with death prevents horror, and, on the contrary, encourages everyday gestures: the only possible honour is the identification of the fallen body. Elsewhere, almost symbolically, death is surrounded by silence: "The corpses of nine partisans hanged on a row of trees, clean in the eye. Around them was the silence and a

[19] Renata Viganò, *L'Agnese va a morire* (1949; Turin: Einaudi, 1994), 239. On other occasions, the dead body appears in its total wretchedness and yet it calls for rebellion: "Each time the instinct gave her a shock, the will to rebel against that ignored end for which so many bodies, now still entire, healthy, living and capable of living, were broken into shapeless fragments, a heap of bones, flash, blood like beasts slaughtered by incompetent butchers" (*ibid*., 201; my translations).

[20] Mario Spinella, *Memoria della Resistenza* (1961; Turin: Einaudi, 1995), 170-71 (my translation).

remote void."[21] In this case, too, the Communist ideology, doubtlessly defended, is not enough to justify the unredeemable status of the dead bodies, which is stressed by their condition of complete solitude.[22]

***Il partigiano Johnny*: death does not bring glory**

From an existential speculation (which in part only is also an existentialist one) on the author's real life experience comes the more troubling representation of the dead which can be found in Italian literature after the Second World War – the one offered by Beppe Fenoglio, especially in his novel *Il partigiano Johnny* (*Johnny the Partisan*). Fenoglio starts from a completely positive consideration, as a "survivor" (in the sense Elias Canetti gave to this word), as proven by his *Appunti partigiani* from 1946, in which the heroic tale of the Resistance also fully justifies the fallen soldiers who fell for the liberation of the "Madre Langa" (mother "Langa") and of the entire Italian population.[23] However, when Fenoglio rewrote his own experience of the years 1943-1945, and in particular his period in the Resistance (writing that took place between 1955-58, for which we now have different drafts), no doubt he overcame the myth of heroism in favour of the perception of immanent death as the personal destiny of the main character (and it is important to underline that such an individual destiny differs from the fate of the whole group). Fenoglio wants to convey a stylistic dignity to the life of his *alter ego* Johnny, which in the section of the great novel that we call today *Il partigiano Johnny*, tries to achieve the form of an historical epic.[24] Here indeed

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[21] *Ibid*., 155-56 (my translation).

[22] See also the passage: "As with the newly-arrived young, nobody will ever know who among them fell, ran away or was kept prisoner. Only the next day, with the binoculars, it will be possible to discern their mates hanged on the branches of the trees" (*ibid*., 180), then followed by the expression of a sense of remorse: "Then we saw the dawn, as lucid as rain, and the corpses of the hanged ones, as remorse for what we could not prevent" (*ibid*., 181).

[23] See Beppe Fenoglio, *Appunti partigiani*, ed. Lorenzo Mondo (Turin: Einaudi, 1994) (later also in *Romanzi e racconti*, ed. Dante Isella [Turin: Einaudi-Gallimard, 1992; 2001]); *Opere*, critical edition by Maria Corti (Turin: Einaudi, 1978); *Romanzi e racconti*, ed. Dante Isella (Turin: Einaudi-Gallimard, 1992; 2001).

[24] Regarding these interpretations, see Alberto Casadei, *Romanzi di Finisterre: Narrazione della guerra e problemi del realismo* (Rome: Carocci, 2000); "Dagli *Appunti partigiani* al *Partigiano Johnny*", *Testo*, XXIV/45 (2003), 39-54; "L'epica storica di Fenoglio", in *Atti del convegno B. Fenoglio e la Resistenza – Roma, 11-13*

lies a fundamental aspect it is necessary to take into account before taking into consideration the descriptions of the fallen soldiers in Fenoglio's masterpiece.

Modern historic epic, as represented in *Il partigiano Johnny*, shows signs of the desegregation of heroism earlier understood as a kind of palingenetic utopia for both the individual and the collectivity. Fenoglio, a writer without ideology (although he certainly was not without ethical values, in particular when he championed the legitimacy of the Resistance), compares the story of the celebrated partisan vicissitudes (which are, in this way, turned into something different from those that occurred in the autobiographical chronicle), with the experience of death suffered by the hero. And it is precisely this death that marks the distance from classic epics, because the modern hero fights in such a way that the death of his enemy does not bring any glory to him: even though the dead enemy becomes a corpse dragged into the dust (to paraphrase Simone Weil), the elaboration of this very fact makes the winner understand that his own fate is no different.[25]

Johnny's world without Fate is a world in which experience leads, step by step, to the loss of all meaning, including the meaning of glory, which at first seemed to be the only achievable one. The defence of the civilian population from the Nazi and Fascist enemies (who are always well identifiable and never justified in Fenoglio's works), and the requirements for a wholly epic action on the part of the hero are left untouched. Still, they are not sufficient to justify the fate of the individual. Therefore, what is lost is not the value of the Resistance, but the value of the glory (in all its meanings) of the hero. If in the *Iliad* epic death was an integral part of the battle, in an immanent perspective that did not affect the question of survival in

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novembre 2003, eds Giulio Ferroni, Maria Ida Gaeta and Gabriele Pedullà, (Rome: Fahrenheit 451, 2006). Among the most important studies on Fenoglio are Gian Luigi Beccaria, *La guerra e gli asfodeli: Romanzo e vocazione epica di B. Fenoglio* (Milan: Serra and Riva, 1984); Roberto Bigazzi, *Fenoglio: personaggi e narratori* (Rome: Salerno, 1983); Luca Bufano, *Beppe Fenoglio e il racconto breve* (Ravenna: Longo, 1999); Eduardo Saccone, *Fenoglio: I testi, l'opera* (Turin: Einaudi, 1988).

[25] In this perspective it is possible to justify the comparison underlined in various ways between Johnny and Ettore (made quite explicit in passages such as "His congenital, Ettore-like preference for the defensive" [*Il partigiano Johnny*, 461]).

Hades, in modern epics the survivor understands that his action has brought to light the unavoidability also of the winner's own death

In *Il partigiano Johnny* (and also in other works by Fenoglio), the most typical feature of death "which does not bring glory" is perhaps the definition of a truly powerless combatant, as if he were turned into a puppet to be hit at a fair. In this perspective, a haunting image in Fenoglio is that of the enemies who, as in target shooting, are ready to hit: "They stood still, as in target shooting, sighting and firing off comfortably."[26] See also the endings of the short stories "L'andata" ("Going") and "Una questione privata" ("A Private Question"): "in line and shooting as in target shooting" and "in line as in target shooting".[27]

Parallel to the situation in which the fighter is at the mercy of the enemies (and therefore cannot show his heroism in any way) is the idea of death as something that turns men into "puppets": "The brat squeaked, Ivan was the first to fire the first shot, with a gun, and one of the fascists tottered, as a shaken puppet with plumbed feet."[28] Death without glory brings exactly this acknowledgment, that the loss of life reduces all the previous biological-biographic construction to inert matter: the dead body does not achieve any meaning from any deeds accomplished.

In this sense, it is interesting to quote here a passage from *Il partigiano Johnny* in which the main character, as so often happens to him, thinks about his fate soon after he has once more escaped impending death:

> [Johnny] felt all his organs perfectly, happily alive and functioning and healthy, and yet a bullet, very soon, would hit them and block them and corrupt them all. Heart and lungs, hands and feet. He remained alone for a little, apart from those three squatting there, smoking the last cigarette, concentrating on the deeds of men and the splendour of the sun. Slowly, powerfully, the knowledge invaded him that he would not see the setting of that sun. He would fall there on the edge of the scrub or at the feet of those trees, in shade or sun, or would he be hit during the ascent, his body rolling down into infinity, to the

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[26] *Il partigiano Johnny*, *Winter* 1, 778 (my translation).

[27] "L'andata" and "Una questione privata", in *Romanzi e racconti*, ed. Dante Isella (Turin: Einaudi-Gallimard, 1992; 2001), 33 and 1125.

[28] *Il partigiano Johnny*, *Winter* 7, 837.

> river? And would he lie there on his face or his back? And would anyone touch him again?[29]

The impossibility of defending the dead body corresponds to its lack of glory: no epic funerals for the hero, but the status of inert and manipulated matter is the fate of those who wanted to be heroes. Clear evidence (with an important corrective) is provided by the description of the particular corpse of a dear mate of Johnny's, Sergeant Miguel; such a description is placed in a part of the narration in which it is possible to guess that the battle in defence of the city of Alba has been lost:

> [Johnny] dived into the mud and swam towards Michele. He pulled him down into the ditch by the feet, turned him over, he was light and docile. He laid him out, holding him by one hand under his wood-like neck. The bullet had gone in at the forehead, above the left eye, a little clean hole, but enormous if you looked at it in the centre of the closed *sealedness* of the face. The spurting blood had, like the water, a difficult and varied course, blood and water fought with alternating success to turn his face red and then white again. Johnny leaned over him, cold and silent, feeling mutilated. From the walls of San Casciano there came the terrifying signal to withdraw. Panic seized the adolescents in the trench. Johnny shoved Michele's dead body by the feet into the cement tube so that his noblest part was sheltered by the verminous rain.[30]

In addition to the terrible lack of proportions between the "small clean hole" and its consequences for the person who used to be Miguel, it is important to notice the feature of inert matter given to the corpse, "wooden-like" (just like a puppet) which has now reached his "*sealedness*", his final rigid posture. But, at least in this passage, Johnny's *pietas*, even though it cannot assure glory, nevertheless induces him to protect the dignity of a loyal companion, so that the "verminous rain" (that is the natural elements, which are now adversaries, like the entire world, to those who are defeated or even annihilated) does not destroy "his (Miguel's) noblest part": a gesture

[29] *Ibid*., 306.
[30] *Ibid*., 266.

that constitutes a minor replacement of the funeral honours for the hero.

The impossibility of redeeming the fallen soldier is, in some cases, stressed by the contrast between the common aspect of his exteriority and the "unbounded solitude" in which the dead body lies:

> The valley became narrower, the vegetation grew darker, an hour later there than on the high hills, and so the track was already fading, as were the terrified faces of the rare farmsteads. So it was only at the last step that he noticed the bundle that blocked the road.
>
> Johnny sat down beside it, on the rigid grass, sprinkled with blood. His face was hairless and serene, his hair well brushed in spite of the shock of the volley and the thudding fall to the ground. The blood that had spurted from all the holes in his chest had barely splashed the edge of his blue silk scarf worn round his neck like a cowboy and it was the only piece of clothing of a certain shocking luxury amid the general poverty of a partisan preparing for winter. Johnny turned his eyes away from hi intact face, then fixed them on it again suddenly almost as if to surprise him, with the mad idea that the boy would half-close his eyes and then lower the lids again for his renewed attention. He lay in unbounded solitude which was accentuated by the single-voiced sound of the nearby stream. They had taken off his boots, Johnny examined his double stockings of thick, holed wool. And he thought that Pierre and Ettore were lying just like this, some millions of hills further back.[31]

The fallen companions are a mirror and an anticipation of what Johnny will become: the dead partisan is only a corpse, and the corpse will not receive any glory from a conflict which is no longer based on the heroic struggle of the individuals. World War II has turned all combatants into pawns on a vast chessboard: "Then [the partisans] looked again down to earth, puzzled and depressed they looked at that Lilliputian world that they must defend, the final goal of that world war."[32]

Starting from 1939, the extreme condition of defencelessness of the human being is more and more dramatically perceived. When the ethical and ideological motivations, which are very important from the

[31] *Ibid*., 346-47.
[32] *Ibid*., 596.

historical point of view, do not support the *Erlebnis* any longer, the unjustifiable condition of the dead bodies becomes, in many novels, the only result of the struggle. It is important to underline, in relation to the works here discussed, that, biographically, none of the authors considered, and especially Fenoglio, would regard the Resistance as worthless: it was a war that had to be fought by the Italians. However, the impossibility of giving epic glorification as a form of redemption from death to the individual seems to be irrefutable: the combatant, who cannot be a hero and who is now just a prey hunted by omnipotent enemies, bears witness to, in a different way, the unbalanced condition of the fight, symbol of the intrinsic unfairness of the Second World War (and, in different forms, also of all the wars that are still being fought).

TARICCO'S MEMORY

ROBERTO BIGAZZI

In a fragment of an unfinished tale, probably written in the early 1960s, Beppe Fenoglio outlined what could perhaps be considered as the best self-portrait of himself and of his generation, under the disguise of a provincial Socialist named Placido Taricco. A former partisan, now a trade unionist, Taricco is trying to defeat in his countryside the intrigues of the *bonomiani*[1] trade unions of the Christian Democratic Party: he ventures so far to challenge his adversary to a public meeting to which the provincial leaders of his same trade union are also invited. However, his opponent does not even bother to appear. Being sure of his dominance at the national level, he can disregard the unpleasant confrontation:

> Taricco took those from Cuneo [that is the Socialist leaders who had come to help him with the debate that had failed to materialize] to the car, advising them to talk about what had happened at the provincial secretariat, to turn what had happened into a real paradigm; then he went back home. And he started to write page number one-hundred-forty-four of his book, a book in which he was telling the story of the life and wars of his father, the memories of his grandfather, his own partisan war, and the reality of San Benedetto today. He had spoken about it only with the schoolteacher, and the schoolteacher had simply told him to pay attention to the spelling of the double letters and had reminded him that there is also a subjunctive mood, among the available tenses.
>
> Naturally, Taricco did not think of a publisher, not even of the publisher of the provincial party; he was writing the book for himself and as a memoir for his future children.[2]

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[1] From Paolo Bonomi, Christian Democrat and president of the National Union of Farmers.

[2] Beppe Fenoglio, *Opere*, ed. Maria Corti, 5 volumes (Turin: Einaudi, 1978), III, 634-35 (my translation).

Without knowing it, Taricco rediscovers the ancient formula of merchants in the Middle Ages: they used to write in their books all the memories of what concerned their community and their family, mainly for the benefit of their descendants, so that they could act in the world with due consideration (after all, Voltaire himself stated that the beginning of all histories is to be found in the tales that fathers tell to their children).[3] Moreover, he has retrieved the consciousness which governed the birth of the middle-class novel in the nineteenth century: by telling of the adventures of characters, sometimes in just a local story, almost a chronicle, and by preserving the memory of public and private events, the writer intends to represent the "uses" (as they used to say two centuries ago) or the "mentality" (as we prefer to say nowadays) of his countrymen. In both cases, the ruling class analyses history and records it according to its own viewpoint.

And, in this regard, one could recall here the figure of Walter Scott, who even before starting his career as a novelist, when gathering the popular poems of the Scottish Border described their historical importance as follows:

> In the Notes and occasional Dissertations it has been my object to throw together, perhaps without sufficient attention to method, a variety of remarks regarding popular superstitions and legendary history which, if not now collected, must soon have been totally forgotten. By such efforts, feeble as they are, I may contribute somewhat to the history of my native country, the peculiar features of whose manners and character are daily melting and dissolving into those of her sister and ally. [4]

It is therefore clear that for the writer the ballads have the fundamental merit of preserving the ancient Scottish identity at a time when Scotland was losing it, following the union with England. And again in 1806, still before becoming a novelist, Scott insisted on this issue in a review of poems of the Middle Ages:

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[3] "Histoire", in Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique*, III, *Oeuvres complètes*, nouvelle edition (Paris: Garnier, 1879), XIX, 347-48: "… les premiers fondements de toute histoire sont les récits des pères aux enfants."

[4] *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802-1803), ed. Thomas Henderson (London: Harrap, 1931), 70.

> In fact, to form a just idea of our ancient history, we cannot help thinking that these works of fancy should be read along with the labours of the professed historian. The one teaches what our ancestors thought; how they lived; upon what motives they acted, and what language they spoke; and having attained this intimate knowledge of their sentiments, manners and habits, we are certainly better prepared to learn from the actual particulars of their annals. From the romance, we learn what they were; from the history, what they did: and were we to be deprived of one of these two kind of information, it might well be made a question, which is the most useful or interesting.[5]

Such an acknowledgement of the "works of fancy" was not so odd, since after all the great historians of the nineteenth century came to acknowledge Scott as an important master.[6]

However, notwithstanding many noble ancestors both among the literary critics and among the historians (particularly in Italy), it is still difficult to acknowledge the merit of narrative in bringing to the historical memory "what our ancestors' thought". On the contrary, some critics are suspicious of literature that is also engaged with history. It is not by chance that the character mentioned earlier, Placido Taricco, had little faith in the possibility of finding a publisher for his own account of war and peace, even within his own party.

Indeed, publishers had already fulfilled their duty, at least for a short period of time from the immediate post-war years to the middle of the 1950s. And it is precisely the Fifties – with the upheaval in Italian society due to the beginning of the epochal shift from agriculture to industry, and the negation of the ideals of the Resistance induced by Centrist governments (but also by the Cold War and the facts of Hungary) – that raised a series of questions which the best Italian writers tried to face. These writers, who had experienced and often fought in the Resistance, had the task of judging whether their society had been faithful to the ideals of the war of liberation. In order to do so, it became important to understand Italians in a historical perspective, investigating how they had lived their recent past and the recent war, as well as what their true aspirations, and their identity were.

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[5] *Edinburgh Review*, XIV (January 1806), 388.

[6] See Roberto Bigazzi, *Le risorse del romanzo: Componenti di genere nella narrativa moderna* (Pisa: Nistri Lischi, 1996), chapter on "Romanzo e storia".

Such a situation characterized also other national realities; and yet, in Italy it was a particularly crucial issue, because the Fascist period had devastated all continuity with the past, something that had to be reconsidered in order to avoid all hypocritical repairs. Pratolini and Fenoglio, Calvino and Bassani, and many other Italian writers (such as Taricco in Fenoglio's tale) engaged in a vast survey, mapping the Fascist years (and sometimes even those previous), the war, the war of Resistance and the early post-war years. Their intention was not just to document what it had been like (as in reporting or in memoirs). Instead, they had an anthropological aim that was also a moral one. They bore witness to the need to find through history an identity that was not the Fascist one, still present in the newborn Italian Republic. Therefore, the goal was not to excavate history in order to offer a chronicle of what had happened; instead, the goal was to reinterpret the past so as to build a different collective memory, something that could guide the making of the nation then in progress.

As a consequence the research carried out in the 1950s began with a sharp judgement of the traditional figure of the Italian intellectual, which Calvino used to define as "hermetic" or "lyrical",[7] and Fenoglio as "sentimental and snobbish". The destruction of this figure, still perceived as the symbol of the old culture, would lead to a new perspective on reality. And in the new novels, reality, now questioned historically from such a new viewpoint, revealed the history of a population that I would define as "puritan", that is linked to the values of hard daily labour, of the community; a population opposed to a middle class which appears to be illiberal and static, driven by business and corrupt, pleased with a culture embracing D'Annunzio's aesthetics, either still embedded in violence or pursuing a hermetic separateness.

Therefore, this was not just populism, or provincial detachment from the more decadent take characterizing European literature at the time (a criticism often brought against neo-realist narrative). Instead, it was a conscious dismissal of that very culture pursued through the criticism of the symbolic figure of the intellectual who had been at its core since the end of the nineteenth century. And the popular history narrated by the neo-realist writers moves precisely from the last years

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[7] Italo Calvino, "Il midollo del leone", in *Una pietra sopra* (Turin: Einaudi, 1980), 4 ff.

of the nineteenth century: certainly, it is a popular history, but it is not encouraged by a populist drive. The tale of the gigantic transformation of Italian society could not but be addressed to a vast audience, to all those classes who had been playing an active role. Similarly, at the beginning of the nineteenth century writers no longer wrote for the aristocracy, but started to write for the middle class, fostering similar accusations. Also then, just like as in the World War II post-war period, it was the writers who were called to build a different collective memory that could become the ground from which to build the new identity that political struggles were then inducing.

It is Fenoglio who has conveyed one of the noblest versions of such a collective portrait, which finds its apex in his works on the war and the Resistance. The issue is displayed already in his early works, presenting partisans and farmers in the Piedmont landscape, the setting often being the Langhe area, his native region (Fenoglio was born in Alba in 1922, and lived there until his death in 1963). Already Ettore, the main character of *La paga del sabato* (*The Saturday Wage*, written in 1950, but published after the death of the author), must acknowledge, even though in an elementary form, the relation existing between his present and the past. A former partisan, now unemployed, he answers his mother who urges him to look for a job so as to help the family to escape poverty: "I cannot find myself in such a life because I fought in the war. Always remember that I have fought in the war and the war changed me, made me unfit for such a life here."[8]

The fact is that for Ettore "such a life", in spite of the war and the successful war of Resistance, looks exactly like the previous life, now including recycled Fascists, the usurers, the bosses, the power of money. There is no other different image that can be taken for a model. If "such a life" is just that and does not change, than it is he himself, now changed because of the war, who has to cancel the memory of the new world for which he had fought and get accustomed to the old one, "get used to it once more": the result cannot but be a tragic one. Similarly, his next novel, *La malora* (*The Bad Luck*, 1954), even though it is set in the early twentieth century, is permeated by the new historical reality: the domain of power is unavoidable, but the novelty in relation to the *Paga del sabato* is

[8] Beppe Fenoglio, *La paga del sabato* (Turin: Einaudi, 1969), 9-10 (my translation).

offered by the fact that, just as in Verga, the farmers' world seems to offer an exemplary type of man, a specimen who can resist all bad luck (*La malora*). Agostino, the main character, finds such types in remembering his parents' brave feelings as youngsters, and also in the meaning of his own work.

The puritan ideal, which Fenoglio will later make explicit in his *Il partigiano Johnny* (*Johnny the Partisan*), has its roots in the strenuous ethic of such a farmers' microcosm. It is an ethic that is not too far from the utopia (and from the desperation) that can be found, for instance, in a similar investigation of the past (and in the people of the past) offered in other novels published in the same years, from *I vecchi compagni* by Cassola (*Old Companions*) to *Metello* by Pratolini and even Calvino's *Visconte dimezzato* or *Barone rampante* (*The Cloven Viscount*, *The Baron on the Trees*). To the rhetorical history written by Fascism and embedded in its rituals, all these novels oppose the rediscovery of a more ancient Italy, rich not of martial virtues, but of everyday virtues. In the 1950s, it was these virtues that Italy had to count on, if it wanted to face the gigantic task of reconstruction, and, at the same time, a change of civilization, moving from agriculture to industry. *La malora*, which is intentionally set in a far away past, is therefore constituted as the memory of exemplary events and characters that form such an ancient ethic.

Soon after *La malora*, and pursuing the same intent to record an exemplary ethic, in the second half of the same decade Fenoglio envisaged his novel *Il partigiano Johnny*, a work that is not yet fully appreciated because, due to both publishers and critics, it is now almost impossible to read according to the author's original plan. The novel that is now called *Il partigiano Johnny* and published posthumously in 1968, is a totally arbitrary construction since it contains only a part of the great novel that the writer had written on the Second World War and on the Resistance, intended to cover the whole period 1940-45. The publishers to whom the author submitted the book did not accept it in its entirety (we must remember that at the end of the Fifties in Italy the topic was labelled as "neorealist" and therefore looked suspicious). After having submitted another reduced version, even though more complete, that was still refused by the publishers, Fenoglio concentrated on the first part, covering the years from the Declaration of War to the months just after 8 September

1943. He rewrote it, found a quick ending to it (the death of the partisan Johnny) and published it in 1959 under the title of *Primavera di bellezza* (*Spring of Beauty*), which has been in print ever since. Later, after Fenoglio's death, another part of the original novel was published, that known as *Il partigiano Johnny*, in a mangled form which is in fact the result of the melting of two different editions of the main body of the whole novel (covering the period between September 1943 and the beginning of 1945).

The final section of the original book remained unpublished for many years: this section covers the period from the beginning of 1945 to the beginning of the Liberation, soon before 25 April, and it is written in a very peculiar English, a language that Fenoglio used to write the first draft of this section and, most likely, the other two parts, later translated into Italian. This previously unpublished section, was published, under the title *Ur-Partigiano Johnny,* only in the Einaudi critical edition, now out of print (five volumes containing all Fenoglio's works, edited by Maria Corti). Since then, it has never been republished, in spite of the fact that it constitutes the real perspective necessary to enlighten the whole novel.

The writer's project is quite ambitious, already starting from its premises. It is certainly true that Fenoglio's definition of the bourgeois student Johnny – "sentimental" and "snobbish" – seems to invest him apparently with two of the old characteristics of the traditional narrative character; and yet, the sentimental sphere includes Johnny's values and, therefore, his relationship with others and with his native Piedmont. Similarly, to be a snob here means to act to protect those values, following a code established on the desire to be different: it implies a condition of voluntary isolation from a world now judged negatively (something similar to what happens to the main character of Calvino's *The Baron in the Trees*, who chooses to live in the trees, or to the students in Calvino's short stories grouped in the volume *L'entrata in Guerra – The Entry into the War –* who in order to set themselves apart from Fascists decide to be Anglophiles). Therefore it is evident that the question here is not to focus on personal psychology, but instead on an historical portrayal – historical to the point that this novel has been used by those like Claudio Pavone who

have reconstructed with masterly skill ideas and passions of the Resistance.[9]

Taken in its entirety, Johnny's vicissitudes are marked by the progression of his relationship with the world, as well as by the progressive ideological clarification of the type of defence that is necessary to safeguard the values he believes in. As a consequence, his education will take place through a complex journey of initiation: at first, around 8 September and in Rome, Johnny, a soldier of the royal army, supporter of the House of Savoy, Anglophile and for this reason (and for this reason only) antifascist, understands that that very army, which is the expression of the old liberal society, is as rotten as the rest of society (*Primavera di bellezza*). He then returns, after an adventurous trip, to his native land, the Langhe, where he explores the partisans' world, first joining the reds (the Communists), then the blues (who follow more moderate ideologies); and yet, he always ends by leaving all organized groups because it seems to him that each group reproduces the vices of the old society. He finds himself alone on a hill, during the cold winter of 1944-45, to bear witness to his ideal of an un-compromised liberty among the miseries of hunger and cold (*Il partigiano Johnny*).

When spring arrives and everything seems about to become easier (this is the less well-known part of the novel), for Johnny all solutions are instead constantly and pitiless frustrated: Fascists and shirkers join the partisan brigades, thereby exemplifying the post-war transformism; at the same time, even the Americans and the much loved British appear to be unreliable models. Similarly unreliable appears to be also the group of strange partisans that Johnny joins towards the end, in the company of whom he clarifies his own ideal of a utopian community, itself puritan, which could embed the ideal of a renewed world. And one by one, the rare individuals with whom Johnny establishes real relations, look as isolated as himself and doomed to die, just like Johnny – even though we do not know if Johnny dies, because the last pages of the original have disappeared, or were never written (*Ur-Partigiano Johnny*).

Hence, what we find here is not the apotheosis of the partisans who die fighting (as in *Primavera di bellezza*, published in 1959, or in the

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[9] Claudio Pavone, *Una guerra civile: saggio storico sulla moralità nella Resistenza italiana* (Turin: Bollati-Boringhieri, 1991).

editorial vulgate of *Il partigiano Johhny* which ends with his own sacrifice in the style of Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*); instead, just as in *La Paga del sabato* and *La malora*, we have a world of losers that we have to interpret against the setting of the 1950s and, especially, against the Cold War and following a sad note in Fenoglio's journal: "I have spoken to Corsini and Cerrato [two friends] about West and East. To Corsini, who does not want to choose and declares that he is ready to die freely so that no side can claim him, I reply that already to choose is martyrdom." At the same time, while the viewpoint is born from the writer's own present, Fenoglio's very original style confers to daily events, or to the partisan life, already worn out because narrated in a myriad of books, an epic value and, therefore, a new understanding and a new depth. It is as if Ulysses and Aeneas would always be observed against the light, and Achab of Melville's *Moby Dick* or the characters in the *Old Testament* with them, that is all those characters whose stories suggest the meaning of a dramatic search. It is precisely the outdated nature of Johnny's ideals that forces the storyteller to render them in a refined style, so as to protect their meaning against a lack of understanding or trivialization. They are the ideals of those who fought for a better world, and Fenoglio renders them to us in the most solemn form, because he has painfully investigated their defeat, already present in the middle of the battle in which they originated. It is not a celebratory evocation, but instead a way to make a memory of the causes and modes of that defeat.[10]

Hence, Fenoglio's universe, his short stories and his other novels or drafts, are inhabited by these losers, and he starts to conceive a sort of *War and Peace* (another historical project) which starts from the Great War and follows the vicissitudes of a country family, in order to oppose to the society that triumphed the values of those who, because of their own virtues, have always lost (I am here referring to the fragments published under the title *Un Fenoglio alla prima guerra mondiale – A Fenoglio to the First World War* – and wish to relate it to the Taricco project with which I opened this essay). It is as if Fenoglio had found and registered something his generation had been looking for among its so many derangements, the meaning of a new

[10] On this theme, see also Roberto Bigazzi, *Fenoglio: personaggi e narratori* (Rome: Salerno, 1983).

identity that cannot but be ancient, which precedes Fascism and the bourgeoisie that had sought it – it is an archaic peasant identity, and yet not a provincial one because it is epic, just as the identity of Verga's farmers, from Rosso Malpelo to the Malavoglias was epic. He found it precisely when it became clear that such an identity was beginning to be out of place in the new reality of the 1950s. But his proposal was not a nostalgic one, because with his call to resist bad luck, he grasped ideals at work in our society, in a way that, after Fenoglio, cinema rather than literature grasped too (with movie-makers like Pontecorvo or Rosi).

In brief, narrative, with its modes and its costumes that it turns into memory, helps us to read the weakness of the Italian middle class, its parasitic constitution in relation to an ancient identity linked not to the cities, but to the province, the countryside and the people (and, in the city, linked to life in the boroughs). It is ironic that, after having despised it in so many ways, when facing emergencies – earthquakes, floods or economical crisis – all that the official world can do is to address those puritan values and solidarity that still underpin our pretentious modernity.

In the case of Fenoglio, the integral reading of Johnny's story offers us a new novel which, in the middle 1950s, reconsidered both the war and the Resistance with a critical perspective which historians would adopt only much later, therefore proving that the writer's memory often has the merits of primogeniture. The fact is that Fenoglio rejects official memorials and therefore all the typical approaches of those who recall those struggles in order to bear witness to ideals and heroic deeds, and then lament the betrayal of the post-war years in a more or less explicit way.[11] In place of a chronicle one can substitute the viewpoint of the historical writer, to the extent that the relevant part of Pavone's book may be read as a precise comment (and also as a certification of their historical accuracy) on all the themes present in Fenoglio's novel, which has at its centre the correlation between civil war and morality. This is especially the case if one reads *Il partigiano* in its integral edition.[12]

[11] See Roberto Bigazzi, "Il narratore par lui-même", in *Fenoglio a Lecce* (Florence: Olschki, 1984).

[12] It is important to recall that Pavone's *Una guerra civile* (1991) is presented as a *Historical Essay on Morality in the Resistance* and suggests that to investigate

And yet, Fenoglio critics tend to break such a correlation, blurring or cancelling the civil war and elevating morality to a meta-historical meditation on the destiny of man, to an abstract take on life and death. It is the usual refusal to accept an idea of art in relation to history, in this case due to a tradition of literary scholarship which, given its editorial vicissitudes, has distorted the work. The refusal derives as well from the fact that for some time now, especially starting with Asor Rosa's *Scrittori e popolo* (*Writers and People*), all those themes that in Fenoglio (later in Pavone) show their real depths – themes including the idea of solidarity, the sense of community, of smaller and larger motherlands, of village and nation, peace and war, ancient and perhaps naïve aspirations, as well as more or less concrete plans of social and political revolution, or the most vertiginous utopias – have been turned into demagogy.

Patiently, Pavone has reconstructed them, rediscovering a multitude of often unknown or anonymous voices, emerging from newspapers, letters, memoirs, minutes and, sometimes, novels. Important voices, certainly, and true voices; and yet, I do not understand why even historians seem to be afraid to question the most important writers and prefer to rely upon chroniclers and minor writers (who instead are the really demagogic ones). For instance, nobody better than Fenoglio has embodied the utopia (typical of post-war left-wingers) of the new man who is forged through great self-rigour achieved in solitude. Hence, in the spring of 1945 after the recreation of the brigades, when Johnny leaves his companions soon after having met them again because he must work as a link (and an interpreter) in an Allies' mission, he meets a young British man who looks like him and who enables him to clear his mind. Captain Keany has chosen to leave his own companions, too, for reasons similar to Johnny's:

morality means to investigate not just the facts and the political programmes, but mostly the men: "their moral convictions, the cultural structures underpinning them, their emotional preferences, their doubts and passions encouraged by that brief and intense series of events" (ix). See also Roberto Bigazzi, "Storia e letteratura: Appunto in margine a Una guerra civile", in *Italia contemporanea*, 192 (September 1993), 465-71.

> Why did you volunteer for us, Keany? – A certain degree of sympathy for you worked in this, ’tis most sure, but mainly I was driven to it by my not canning abide any longer contact with the Americans ... – Johnny smiled grimly: – A leftenant of my acquaintance and colleague of yours said they are motorised cullions ... – ... Motorised they are indeed, but no cullions. I did see all flowing, all being done for them, and our loss of power, at the end of all.[13]

The two friends are thus both escaping from their own companions: Johnny sees them as men who, through their amateurishness and their eagerness for rules, are now dissipating the potential renewal implicit in their condition of being irregular warriors, that is in their being a small community of elected people in a corrupted world. Keany, instead, escapes from an ally, America, which is now gaining a power so far held by his own country. Both Johnny and Keany will understand that their impulse to run away does not come from the present, but from the image of the future that their companions are preparing. Since they do not want to take part in this future (the future from which Fenoglio is now writing), they cannot be anything but desperate witnesses. As Keany says:

> Had I at least a centesim of Milton’s genius, and I would work a deathless thing of poetry, to console me of the loss of power …. As you surely know, something alike has happened to your Dante.[14]

Paradise Lost and *The Divine Comedy*: the fall and the journey as an attempt to rescue the hero, whereas for Fenoglio, the teller, there is only the consoling testimony of his work, the act of building the memory by someone who has tried a different road because, from the present in which he writing his work, he knows quite well that his new pilgrim in the world of war and Resistance cannot change the game of the mighty. The post-war period does not belong to the chosen, and the cycle opened by Cromwell’s revolution (both Fenoglio and his character’s ideal) is coming to a close and just when Fenoglio hopes to transplant, through the Resistance, the puritans to Italy, another, quite different cycle is starting, now dominated by the United States.

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[13] Beppe Fenoglio, *UrPartigiano*, in *Opere*, I, 49 (the idiosyncratic English is as in the original).
[14] *Ibid.*, 49-51.

Therefore, writers are intelligent interpreters (and hence also offer reliable support and a guide to all historical interpretations) of a reality which cannot be understood in other ways. To simply quote them as evidence, or to confirm a statement, or for the information that can be offered by a specific passage in their works (with the risk that that same passage, in its full context, might signify something different), means assimilating them to their lesser colleagues, because evidence has its own value no matter what text contains it. If, instead, we consider them as interpreters, then it is the book *per se* that must be considered. As the Irish historian Tom Dunne wrote:

> There seems to be no reason why literary texts cannot be used successfully as primary source material for all aspects of the most difficult, yet most fundamental feature to understand about any age or society, the ways in which it perceived and interpreted reality. These texts offer the testimony of those who were particularly concerned with such perceptions and interpretations. Like other forms of historical evidence, literature has to be treated with caution and sensitivity, its particular language and conventions understood, its bias and motivation taken into account, its limitations accepted. What I am advocating is that modern historians should study literary texts in the same detailed and systematic way as literary scholars, using such established literary critical techniques as may be useful, and even developing some new ones, perhaps, suited to their different purposes.[15]

If well interpreted, Fenoglio reveals his ability to read in the Resistance the questions later posed by the Cold War and reconstruction. In Fenoglio, as in any other great writer, in the memory of the past there is the essence of the present. As a consequence, plots, themes and characters created by these writers can offer what historians also need, a fact that the classics of historiography seem to confirm. For instance, Chabod introduced his *Storia della politica estera italiana* (*History of Italian Foreign Politics*) with an investigation of the mentality and the morality of the individuals in the second half of the nineteenth century (just like Pavone, even though the latter writes of unknown people who did not

[15] Tom Dunne, "A Polemical Introduction: Literature, Literary Theory and the Historian", in *The Writer as Witness*, ed. Tom Dunne (Cork: Cork UP, 1987), 7.

leave precious documents, where Chabod writes about the ruling classes). He writes:

> ... before weaving the minute warp of that politics, before entering into the most specific part, what I would call the most technical part of my thesis, I considered it indispensable to clarify the material and moral basis on which that specific part necessarily stood, the complex of forces and feelings in which it was embedded and within which, at that historical moment, diplomacy also moved. I mean the passions and affections, ideas and ideologies, situations of the country and of the men involved ….[16]

And why to enlighten not only the "minute warp", the "most specific part", but also the "men", "the single personality with their thoughts and affections"? The reason is that: "at least until the present time, history was made by men and not by automatons, and doctrines and the so-called structures, which by themselves are considered by historiography as abstractions, acquire value of historical forces only when they can touch and excite men's souls."[17]

And from Chabod one can move back (and from there come to a close) to a historian who belonged to the generation that in the nineteenth century had already and intelligently profited from narrative, even though in a different way:

> ... these Historical Novels have taught all men this truth, which looks like a truism, and yet was as good as unknown to writers of history and others, till so taught: that the bygone ages of the world were actually filled by living men not by protocols, state-papers, controversies and abstractions of men. Not abstractions were they, not diagrams and theorems; but men, in buff or other coats and breeches, with colour in their cheeks, with passions in their stomach, and the idioms, features and vitalities of very men.[18]

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[16] Federico Chabod, *Storia della politica estera italiana dal 1870 al 1896* (Bari: Universale Laterza 24, 1965), I, 9-10 (my translation).
[17] *Ibid*., 14-15.
[18] Thomas Carlyle on Walter Scott in a book review quoted in *Scott: The Critical Heritage*, ed. John O. Hayden (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 367.

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