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An I for an Eye: Personal Narrative and the Great War

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Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of  
English at Brown University

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Abstract of

"An I for an Eye: Personal Narrative and the Great War"

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May 1989

Personal narratives of the Great War have prompted a variety of responses: from literary critics, historians, students of autobiography, cultural critics, social psychologists and textual theorists. Each of these diverse audiences, however, asks a common question--how should we interpret these remarkable texts? Each from its own perspective probes what they tell us about the human experience of war and asks how they enable us to see the "truth" of conflict. Each analyzes their disparate narrative interpretations of the "reality" of war, identifying the various truth claims--referential, formal, generic, ideological--bound up in these narratives. (CA)

Yet many Great War personal narratives situate themselves in a generic "no man's land," falling between historical memoir and literary autobiography, allowing considerable leeway in their interpretation. Using genre as a heuristic tool, my study attends to the inexorable tension between the world of war and narrative constructions of it, asking, in short, just how personal narratives communicate their reality through various registers of meaning, just how they "stand-for" actuality.

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Studying the array of forces influencing the production and reception of Great War narratives, I propose a model of reading attentive to the epistemological quandary facing these writers: a model anchored historically, one responsive to literary contexts, one open to questions from narrative theory. Seeking a horizon against which to define these personal narratives, my study initially focuses on the narrative matrix surrounding the Battle of the Somme--exploring responses as diverse as battle dispatches and historical accounts, personal diaries and documentary novels--to accent the blurred line between "factual" representations and "literary" constructions of war. The focus shifts, by turns, to these works' avowed intentions, their generic contracts, their narrative configurations and ultimately to the narrative matrix within which readers refigure and interpret these texts. Then, teasing out several implications from the theoretical work of Paul Ricoeur, I propose a hermeneutic method of reading for the best known personal narratives of the Great War, those by Edmund Blunden, Siegfried Sassoon, and Robert Graves.

This dissertation by Thomas Gavin Bowie, Jr.  
is accepted in its present form by the  
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requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## Introduction

I went to cover the war and the war covered me; an old story, unless of course you've never heard it. I went there behind the crude but serious belief that you had to be able to look at anything, serious because I acted on it and went, crude because I didn't know, it took the war to teach it, that you were as responsible for everything you saw as you were for everything you did.

Michael Herr, *Dispatches*

This is a book about war: about the human experience in modern war, about the literary record of it, about the "myriad faces" of war we must see in order to begin to fathom its complex reality, in order to approach its elusive truths.<sup>1</sup> It is a book about how we look at war through the lenses of personal, historical, and literary narratives, and about our "crude but serious belief" in the truths these narratives generate.<sup>2</sup> It is also a book about

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase "myriad faces" comes from Frederic Manning's *The Middle Parts of Fortune*, and also provides the title for Trevor Wilson's 1986 study of the Great War. In our context, it provides an apt image of the multifaceted experience under investigation, for the elusive truth we seek.

<sup>2</sup> I have in mind here the rather complex notion of a hermeneutic truth generated through the narrative and produced by conversation with it: one neither dogmatically absolute nor uncommittedly relative. This truth emphatically resists reduction to mere historical verisimilitude, just as, at the other extreme, it resists discounting all "factual" claims as deferred in literary texts. I propose to work with a truth of discourse, of dialogue, of conversation---a truth manifested, as David Tracy observes, in an "interaction between the object's disclosure and concealment and the subject's recognition" (28). Throughout my study, I will further refine this notion, relying on help from philosophers such as H.G. Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, positing it as a horizon for discussion of various texts. For now, David Tracy's apt summary will suffice: "truth, for Gadamer, as for Heidegger and, in a different way, for Ricoeur, is fundamentally an event that happens to a subject

responsibility, about what it means to be responsible for everything we see--and don't see--as readers of these narratives, as active interpreters of war stories.

Although my study focuses specifically on the Great War, much of what I say applies equally well to any account of modern war--particularly to the literature of the Vietnam War. In fact, a number of important Vietnam writers provide epigraphs for my work, commenting from a more contemporary perspective on the somewhat distant works of the Great War. Yet their voices remind us of the continuing importance of Great War literature, of our ongoing dialogue with these works: they encourage us to think of both the diachronic and synchronic dimensions of the human record of conflict. Furthermore, combined with the range of voices heard throughout my study--historians, novelists, autobiographers, journalists, poets, critics, and theorists--they also help remind us of the diverse audiences attracted to these works: audiences my study invites to converse with each other and with Great War texts.

Although I would be reluctant to limit my own audience to readers conveniently circumscribed by these labels, it might be useful to identify the three audiences uppermost in my mind as I write--audiences that personal narratives of the Great War call out to in important ways. These works should encourage conversation between three quite diverse

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and is not under the control of any subject" (121).  
*Plurality and Ambiguity* (1987).



groups: literary critics (especially students of autobiography), historians (both "personal historians," such as veterans, and professional cultural or military historians), and textual theorists interested in the common ground between literature and history--a middle ground these narratives demand we consider. Each of these diverse audiences, however, asks a common question: how should we interpret these remarkable texts? Each from its own vantage point probes what they tell us about the human experience of war and asks how these narratives allow us to see conflict. Each analyzes how they represent the "reality" of war through their various narrative forms.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps more importantly, each perspective explores--to greater and lesser extents--the ways in which narrative truth claims are

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<sup>3</sup> Just as with our use of truth, we must be cautious neither to over-extend nor to prematurely limit the term reality, we must neither recklessly assume a uniformity of experience (such as seeing only a continual intensity of conflict) nor relativize reality beyond recognition through solipsistic subjectivism. For example, virtually every Great War battle narrative I know of spends as much time chronicling the tedious routine of trench life as it does presenting the more frenetic experience of actual battle. Many also waver between their commitment to personal expression and public history. Tony Ashworth's *Trench Warfare 1914-1918: The Live and Let Live System* (1980) highlights the more routine experience of soldiers in quiet or "cushy" sections, directing attention to a frequently overlooked aspect of the reality of war. He reminds us that we must "present battle experiences in a way which is not merely anecdotal and/or humanitarian but also relevant to wider theoretical perspectives" (226). While he has in mind the perspective of sociology and social psychology, I believe that literary theory may offer an equally informative vantage point through which to view this experience--especially as written records of war experience will soon be the only sources available.

bound up in the totality of experience they communicate--referentially, formally, generically, ideologically--a totality evoked through the narrativization of actual experience. This question, then, through its various manifestations, inspires and directs our ensuing conversation.<sup>4</sup>

John Keegan's provocative book, *The Face of Battle* (1976), sowed the seeds for my own study. Near the end of his long meditation on the virtues and limitations of military history, Keegan observes, "the treatment of battle in fiction is a subject almost untouched by literary critics, but one which the military historian, with his specialized ability to check for veracity and probability might very well think of tackling. He might also think of relating battles more closely to the social context of their own times" (76). Although Keegan is surely right to identify literary texts as fruitful grounds for military historians, I believe that literary critics can offer more to the study of battle narratives than an evaluation of their veracity or probability. More importantly, battle literature offers far more than a mere chronicle of conflict or a description of past battles. Literary criticism over the past decade has turned increasingly towards methods that seek to locate literary texts within social, cultural and

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<sup>4</sup> Here again I am indebted to hermeneutic philosophers, from Gadamer to Tracy, for the notion of dialogue or conversation as a method of interpretation by which to pursue the elusive horizon of truth.

historical contexts--an emphasis Keegan seems to support-- even while theorists have problematized the relationship between text and context, between literature and history, between fictional and factual narratives. Post-structural theoretical critiques, in both literary and historical studies, have generated increasingly complex notions of veracity and probability, notions that any contemporary reading of battle narratives must address in the kind of enlarged study Keegan clearly advocates. Put simply, it is time for historians, literary critics and theorists to speak together, to exchange viewpoints about battle narratives. My work is committed to such an exchange, to a conversation.

But even though I may quibble with Keegan over *who* should reexamine the narrative treatment of battle, I certainly agree with his fundamental project in *The Face of Battle*: a project designed to rethink the human experience of warfare in terms other than the conventional stereotypes prolonged by custom and unreflective imitation--stereotypes perpetuated in military history through what he calls the "battle piece" (76), and in literary studies by critics unreflectively applying conventional concepts of genre or narrative to battle literature. In Keegan's "personal attempt to catch a glimpse of the face of battle," a glimpse he shares with readers by exposing the complexity and multiplicity of battle experience, I see his major contribution to literary studies. Quite simply, readers of battle literature also must attempt to see, however briefly,

this elusive face; more importantly, as Michael Herr so forcefully reminds us, they must accept responsibility for what they witness.

Yet how, we ask, do these narratives present the experience of battle? Even more, how can we best interpret them? Writers of battle narratives since the time of Thucydides have had to struggle with the expectations and assumptions of their audiences, as well as with the conventions of their chosen form of discourse, in order to present some reality of battle, to show a true face in Keegan's terms. For some writers, truth or reality was never an issue--at least in the normal senses of these terms--whereas for more recent authors, especially those dealing with the Vietnam War, reality has become the subject as often as the object of their works, truth an open question. Still war literature throughout history provides moving testimony of the need to explore this reality, however fragmented or elusive, to sound its depths and to probe its intricacies. But a reader's initial struggle to understand this complex reality quickly generates reflection on the way any representation of reality inevitably constitutes an interpretation of it.

Thus our investigation of these works must explore the process of interpretation endemic to all writing and reading. We should understand from the outset that filtering experience through the lens of interpretation in no way discredits the overwhelming actuality of that

experience for either reader or writer.<sup>5</sup> Acknowledging the inevitability of interpretation, however, does require us to release any naive notions we might have regarding direct transcriptions of actuality and directs attention instead to the inexorable tension between the world of events and an authorial interpretation of it. Recognizing this tension then, this unavoidable struggle between actuality and constructed reality, empowers us to ask in what registers of meaning do battle narratives communicate their reality; in short, just how do they "stand-for" actuality? First, we must ask how an experience that clearly stands outside any previous definition of reality--as inscribed by cultural norms or social definitions--can be communicated to an audience or represented for them?<sup>6</sup> How does a war writer record the unprecedented experience of battle? Does he rely on specific forms or traditions to construct his interpretation of this bewildering reality? Following this initial tier of questions, next we must ask how best to

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<sup>5</sup> David Tracy goes so far as to define all understanding in terms of interpretation, all human action as constrained by the power to interpret: "To be human is to act reflectively, to decide deliberately, to understand intelligently, to experience fully. Whether we know it or not, to be human is to be a skilled interpreter" (9).

<sup>6</sup> Eric J. Leed, in *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (1979), studies the psychic problems soldiers experience due to the "profound sense of personal discontinuity" characteristic of war. He suggests: "Any analysis of the war experience must ultimately seek to define the sources of discontinuity that shattered the sense of sameness normally thought to characterize the substrata of psychic life" (2-4). This tension between the continuity and discontinuity of war experience provide two useful points of entry to our study of Great War narratives.

interpret the interpretations--on what levels, or in what registers can we best understand the nature of the realities represented? Are these interpretations--these narratives--personal or public, autobiographical or historical? What types of reality do they address: physical or emotional, social or political? And each of these questions requires us to ask in turn what methods can most profitably guide our interpretation of war narratives?

Questions such as these inform my study; they also ground Keegan's inquiry into the nature of battle. Keegan takes as his purpose "to demonstrate, as exactly as possible, what the warfare, respectively, of hand, single-missile and multiple-missile weapons was (and is) like, and to suggest how and why the men who have had (and do have) to face these weapons control their fears, staunch their wounds, go to their deaths" (77). He focuses on the human experience of battle, on the face of those who encounter its unique reality, experience its horror, and speak to us about its often contradictory truth. Using Keegan's logic of similitude as a point of departure, my own work studies narratives of the Great War as they interpret the experience of battle for modern readers: an attempt fraught with the difficulties involved in demonstrating "exactly as possible" in history or literature what modern warfare is like, one that demands a model of reading attentive to the epistemological quandary facing these writers.

By studying the array of forces that influence the production and reception of Great War personal narratives, my work gradually unveils such a model: one anchored historically, one responsive to literary contexts, one open to questions from narrative theory. And so we begin by asking about war stories. What does it mean to relate one's experience in war, to tell one's story? How are war narratives written? How are they read? How might recent theories of narrative and recent struggles within literary theory encourage us to approach war stories from a different perspective? How might they enable us to understand better the will to narrative of participants as well as the reception of these narratives by their audiences? These questions motivate my theoretical excursus in the first chapter. But although they may seem to speak most directly to an audience overtly interested in theoretical issues, the no man's land of theory might challenge and encourage more traditional historians and literary critics as well. In a recent article Samuel Hynes identifies "two quite different needs that produce war writing: the need to report and the need to remember" (22). If these conflicting needs do in fact aptly characterize war narratives, then perhaps we need a theoretical vantage point capable of examining both motivations, and, by extension, one thereby capable of unsettling traditional ways of reading them.

Following this initial venture into theoretical no man's land, my second chapter turns to the more immediate

narratives of the Battle of the Somme. Seeking a horizon against which to define the personal narratives of the Great War, Chapter Two provides a narrative matrix for one of the most significant battles of the war. Sketching a narrative force-field representing this complex event--by attending to Keegan's modern history, to J.C. Dunn's 1938 compilation of "factual" diaries and letters, to Sir Philip Gibbs' 1916 journalistic accounts and his 1920 "review" of the realities of the Somme, to Sir Liddell Hart's history of the "real war," and to Frederic Manning's documentary novel and David Jones' narrative poetry--we will gradually explore the blurred line between historical documents and literary artifacts, between "factual" representations and "literary" constructions of war. The chapter asks by turns about these works' avowed intentions, their generic contracts, their narrative configurations and ultimately about the narrative matrix within which readers refigure and interpret these texts.

With a clearer understanding of the forces governing production and reception of Great War narratives in hand, at the end of Chapter Two we return once more to recurring questions of theory. But this time, having faced the difficulty of locating reality or truth through specific interpretations of the battle, our interest shifts toward the horizons of expectation and truth outlined by the narrative matrix of the Somme--the horizons that will guide our subsequent readings of the personal narratives of the



Great War. And what to this point in the study has been a methodological subtext--the conversational current of the work--becomes one of its explicit subjects: for here, I propose a hermeneutic method of reading for personal narratives. Teasing out several implications from the work of Paul Ricoeur, my own version of dialogic reading gradually takes shape. In Chapters Three, Four, and Five I test my hypothesis--that reading Great War personal narratives dialogically will yield the clearest understanding of the complex reality and elusive truth that they seek to record, remember, and convey--by applying it to the best known personal narratives of the Great War, those by Edmund Blunden, Siegfried Sassoon, and Robert Graves.

## Chapter 1: War Narratives

As a purely military event the war is of strictly limited interest. But it gains an overwhelming fascination when one looks at it in order to see how it mobilized, articulated, and modified the resources of signification available to the individuals who entered its bewildering and terrifying reality. The war experience is an ultimate confirmation of the power of men to ascribe meaning and pattern to a world, even when that world seemed to resist all patterning.

Eric Leed, *No Man's Land* (1979)<sup>1</sup>

As he wrote to his family on the eve of the Battle of the Somme--the 29th of June, 1916--Private Hubbard knew he was soon to go "up the line" for a major offensive, for a "big push," a decisive blow against the Germans, one designed to bring the war to a timely close. And even while he meditated on the misery of daily trench life, he certainly anticipated far worse prospects than living in filth:

I shall imagine I am in heaven when I get home, what a treat it will be to feel nice and clean, at present it is up to your neck with mud, which all helps to make you feel miserable. I am sorry to have to state all this, but I don't feel inclined to tell you a pack of

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<sup>1</sup> Whereas this quote makes Leed's project sound very similar to my own, his interest in the exchange between combat and identity makes his work more a study of "the transformation of personality in war" and of "the cultural repertoires of meaning drawn upon by participants to define felt alterations in themselves" (ix). Our work intersects in the concern with cultural repertoires available, but our method of inquiry remains quite distinct.

lies, if the truth were told a bit more often, I don't suppose the war would be on now.<sup>2</sup>

Knowing that he soon would go into battle, it should come as no surprise that he was not inclined to tell a "pack of lies," that he insisted upon sharing "the truth" with his sisters. But what is the truth of an event so complex, so staggering, so tragic as the Battle of the Somme? What horizon of truth situates this narrative event, this simple letter, for us as readers? How can even one man's limited version of such truth possibly be communicated?<sup>3</sup>

Private Hubbard simply told his story, telling it even as he apologized for any offense he might give by sharing the truth of his dismal existence in the trench: the physical truth of a life dominated by oppressive natural elements such as mud, lice and rats, not to mention the unspeakable horrors of death or wounding by man-made implements such as machine guns, explosive shells, poisonous

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<sup>2</sup> From a letter home to his sisters, quoted in Malcolm Brown, *Tommy Goes to War* (1978), 144.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Hynes reminds us that personal narratives of war are most often based on "the witness of a single separate consciousness, one tense young man in the whirl and muddle of war. The stories that these men tell are small-scale--a man doesn't see much of the world looking down a gun barrel--and the reality they render is particular and physical. They have nothing to say about strategy or about why men fight, only about how they fight, and where, and how they die" (*Review*, 22). When he accents the partial view most personal narratives present, Hynes clearly hits the mark; possible claims to other levels of reference--strategy, politics, psychological motivation, and so on--let us leave unresolved for the time being.

gas, or bombs.<sup>4</sup> He related events as they appeared to him from the perspective of his own social identity and class background. But Private Hubbard faced a dilemma familiar to many soldiers on the Western Front during the Great War--no matter what their background--how to communicate his personal experience of modern war, how to report its complex truth. Telling his story, narrating his experience, Private Hubbard tried to give his family a glimpse of the squalid conditions on the front, of the pain and suffering there, of his moments of despair and of his hope for a better tomorrow. In the face of such experience, though, the story he told remained fatally inadequate and tragically incomplete--an unwitting lie, perhaps--until one day, overcome by the vision of war still haunting his postwar life, he closed his personal narrative in suicide.

With Private Hubbard's urgent search for something more than truthful description--for some larger or more inclusive narrative truth--as a poignant reminder, as a backdrop for our discussion, this chapter will begin to explore the intersecting concerns of writing and reading war narratives. But in order to approach even the localized narrative truth of Hubbard's short letter, it will be helpful to first situate a few terms frequently used to

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<sup>4</sup> In an earlier letter home in May, 1916, Hubbard revealed: "It has been raining here every day this week which makes things very uncomfortable, heaps of mud and lice including rats of course, but getting quite used to same now, my skin is quite raw owing to keeping on rubbing myself, haven't had a chance of getting water to wash a shirt out but hope to do something towards comfort tomorrow" (quoted in Brown, 88).

analyze narratives.<sup>5</sup> Just what is a narrative and how does defining narrative as both an event and a process, a structure and an act, enable us to more fully understand it? For the sake of convenience I will use the terms narrative and narrative act to designate dynamic processes with dual temporal allegiances, to suggest a diachronic and synchronic dimension to all narratives. Any narrative act then, even the most direct telling of a story, can be charted along a temporal axis suggested by three useful but interdependent terms: *narrating*, *narrative*, and *narrativity*. Looking ahead to our discussion of Paul Ricoeur's interlocking categories of the same, the other and the analogous--and the way these categories enable him to pursue the elusive features of temporal expression--we would hope to explore the dynamics of narrative by applying similarly interdependent heuristics to narrative theory. All too often, however, theorists turn to these three terms independently.

Taking the Hubbard letter as our immediate example, we may identify the moment of narrating (Private Hubbard writing, telling, producing the story), the narrative letter

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<sup>5</sup> Although this is not the place to critique or review the many current theories of narrative, several recent books take on various aspects of this project. Wallace Martin's *Recent Theories of Narrative* (1986) and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (1983) provide excellent overviews of the subject, whereas Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (1985) and Thomas Leitch, *What Stories Are: Narrative Theory and Interpretation* (1986) both survey a number of theories in route to presenting their own. Of course, Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative* (1983-85) also summarizes several diverse theories on the way to reorienting the entire study of narrative.

he produced (the text or document, the narrative discourse), and his sisters' narrativity (the tools and conventions that readers use to construct a story from the raw data the narrator presents). Although my emphasis throughout this study will be on the interaction of these terms--on the dynamic quality of all narratives--various narrative theories encourage us to focus on the conditions of narrating, or to privilege the narrative text, or to stress only the narrativity of the audience. Indeed, much of the confusion in narrative theory and the proliferation of terminology--the bane of narratology--results from attempts to isolate or hypostatize elements of what must be understood as a complex and dynamic process.

One benchmark in narrative criticism has long been Scholes and Kellogg's *The Nature of Narrative* (1966). Defining narrative works as those distinguished by "the presence of a story and a story-teller," they direct attention to the act of narrating by the teller and to the resulting narrative, the tale. In this early formulation, they decree that "for writing to be narrative no more and no less than a teller and a tale are required" (4). Although narratives certainly do require both a tale and a teller, many subsequent theorists have found narrative definition slightly more problematic. In his recent discussion of narrative ontology, Thomas Leitch nicely states the difficulty surrounding definition in narrative theory: "Everyone knows what stories are--fortunately; for it is

excessively difficult to say just what they are" (3). Our brief sample from Private Hubbard's letter seems to confirm Leitch's point that most people do in fact know how to tell stories, that most stories have a recognizable public quality, and that most are designed to evoke planned responses from their audiences. Seeking to extend some of Scholes' later work to the area of audience interaction, to examine the nature of narrativity, Leitch defines narrativity as the "process whereby an audience constructs a coherent story from the fictional data (images, gestures, sentences) presented in a given discourse" (34). If we modify Leitch's concept of narrativity to include other narratives, such as history texts, autobiographical writing, or even letters, and borrow, at least for the moment, Scholes' later definition of narrative--"a text which requires and rewards narrativity" (*Semiotics*, 62)--we begin to see the complex narrative interaction characteristic of even basic narratives such as Hubbard's letter:

Hope we shall be successful on Saturday morning July 1st at dawn when you are all fast asleep in driving the Huns out of their present position, and without any bad luck to myself. I have got to go over with the first batch, and assist in cutting the barb wire [sic] which hasn't been destroyed by our artillery during the past few days heavy bombardment. . . . I should be in my glory if the news came through to cease firing and pack up. . . . I can imagine how everything looks at home,

and the garden as you say must be almost at its best, you will soon be having beans I presume. I shall imagine I am in heaven when I get home, what a treat it will be to feel nice and clean, at present it is up to your neck in mud, which all helps to make you feel miserable. I am sorry to have to state all this, but I don't feel inclined to tell you a pack of lies, if the truth were told a bit more often, I don't suppose the war would be on now, when they land you over here, they have got you tight and treat you as they think (Brown, 144).

Within the context of our discussion of narrative, then, Hubbard's letter can be seen as a collection of data, related by a narrator, that seeks integration into a story by engaging his sisters' narrativity. There should be nothing particularly difficult about these terms for they merely describe the process by which we interact with any narrative, whether or not we label the stages narrating or narrativity. With the addition of the concept of narrativity, we have merely moved beyond seeing Hubbard's letter in terms of narrating--as a tale told by a teller--to observe the exchange between tale and audience.

When we note how Private Hubbard solicits active participation to construct his story of life on the front, to extend his description of physical circumstances toward some more inclusive truth, narrativity is at work. One potential way for Hubbard to engage his sisters'



understanding of his story would be to relate his experience to some analogous one in their lives--but trench life had few parallels in Edwardian England. Failing to find a comparable moment in civilian life, Hubbard instead positions his story in relation to other stories familiar to his sisters by contrasting his current situation with the "heaven" of home.<sup>6</sup> In what may well be an unconscious evocation of narrativity, Hubbard thus suggests a whole range of cultural narratives dealing with hell as possible metaphors for life in the trenches.<sup>7</sup> This move shifts the level of importance of his report, suggesting a new register for his truth claims. In a similar move, earlier in the letter, he contrasts trench life with an edenic vision of the garden blooming at home and characterizes himself as a sacrificial victim: "Hope we shall be successful on Saturday morning July 1st at dawn when you are all fast asleep,"

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<sup>6</sup> Although Hubbard desperately wishes to return home as soon as possible, a subtle antagonism towards those at home lingers through his letters and diary entries. When we consider the gender of his audience--recall that he writes to his sisters--the issue becomes more pointed still. While he fights in the trenches, they tend the garden at home. While he goes over-the-top, risking life and limb, they sleep late at home. While he suffers, they prosper. Perhaps our experience in Vietnam--with the marked disparity between the typical soldiers' class and racial background and that of those still at home--provides a more recent example of the social and cultural isolation that so often accompanies the physical isolation of soldiers at war. Often literature of the Great War responds to the complicated reworking of gender roles underway in society at large.

<sup>7</sup> That this metaphor seems somehow appropriate to soldiers' experiences on the Western Front is attested to by John Ellis' recent book about trench life: *Eye-Deep in Hell: Trench Warfare in World War I* (1976).

noting as well that "when they land you over here, they have got you tight and treat you as they think," and that he is "hoping to write a longer letter to Heather & you all if I get through alright" (Brown, 144). Whether or not we are sympathetic to the self-pitying tone Hubbard adopts here (and the ultimate horror of the Somme soon provided ample reason for lament), we must note that cultural narratives have begun to mediate Hubbard's narration of his experience: consciously or not, he employs religious images from his prewar life to tell his story, he invokes analogous narratives. What is more, he intuitively or unconsciously assumes that his letter--his narrative--will be understood, will be clearly interpreted by his sisters because he has engaged their narrativity, because he has actuated a cultural structure that will enable them to interpret his narrative, to participate in his truth.

With this brief sample of a narrative letter and its corresponding appeal to narrativity in mind, Gerard Genette's definitions of story, narrative and narrating may be used to position the structural or semiotic axis of narratology. Representative of a most influential body of narrative theorists, Genette sets out to orient his entire study of narrative discourse around the relationship between these three terms, initially viewing narrative discourse as a dynamic process designed to evoke what we have been calling, with Leitch and Scholes, narrativity; a process that combines in perpetual tension the relationships between

the story, defined as the succession of events or content of the narrative discourse; the narrative, meaning the narrative statement of those events; and the act of narrating, "the event that consists of someone recounting something," and "by extension, the whole of the real or fictional situation in which that action takes place" (25-27). At this point I am clearly in sympathy with Genette's position, for it is just such a dynamic view of narrative that seems to most fully account for the complex process of narrative production and reception, for the dialectic between specific narrative acts and the system that contains them. But after defining these terms as relational moments in the narrative process, Genette quickly restricts his study to a narrow definition of narrative as narrative text: "It is fairly evident, I think, that of the three levels we have just sorted out, the level of narrative discourse is the only one directly available to textual analysis" (27). Whatever the merits of limiting narrative study to textual analysis--and Genette's work does have considerable merit--the problem with Genette's use of these terms, and with the resulting semiotic approach to narrative and narrativity in general, is that Genette's own practice tends to hypostatize his operative terms--converting "into substance what is each time merely a matter of relationships" (31)--more often than his statements admit. Privileging the text over the circumstances of its production and reception, in

other words, Genette freezes narrative in a static textual moment rather than defining it in a fluid cultural array.<sup>8</sup>

Closely attending to the relational quality of each of these terms, to the dynamic intersection of narrative production and reception, Paul Ricoeur presents his own complex version of narrative with the assistance of philosophical hermeneutics. In what may well be the most sophisticated concept of narrative and narrativity currently available, Ricoeur's work over the past ten years moves beyond the prescriptive rationality or systemization characteristic of narratology or semiotics by observing the necessary but insufficient contribution these theories make to charting the process of narrative understanding. Culminating in his three volume work, *Time and Narrative* (1983-85), Ricoeur's study of narrative gradually spirals outward to suggest a fully dialectical concept of narrativity. When Ricoeur speaks of placing "the narrative back into a moment of transmission, into a living tradition, as a story told by someone to someone," he envisions a constant dialectic between the story, narrative, and act of narrating, and he extends the dialectical process to encompass historical and contemporary reception of the narrative as well: "the story thus belongs to a chain of speeches by which a cultural community is constituted and by which this community interprets itself by means of

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<sup>8</sup> See the debate between Barbara Hernstein Smith and Seymour Chatman in *On Narrative* (1981) for a more detailed discussion of the value and limits of semiotic narratology and "narrative pragmatics" as advocated by Smith.

narratives" ("Explanation," 154). Lest we fail to appreciate the full scope of Ricoeur's inquiry, his work defines narrative as

the operation that unifies into one whole and complete action the miscellany constituted by the circumstances, ends and means, initiatives and interactions, the reversals of fortune, and all the unintended consequences issuing from human action. In large part, the epistemological problem posed by metaphor or by narrative consists in tying the explanation set to work by the semio-linguistic sciences with the use of prior understanding resulting from an acquired familiarity with the use of language, be it poetic or narrative use (*Time 1*, x).

In short, Ricoeur formulates narrative as a dynamic and relational process, one uniting the chaos of human action in a meaningful form, one engaging different registers of human cognition in a continual dialectic of narrativity, one hermeneutically spiraling through cognitive levels of explanation and understanding. Narrative thus defined takes on specific epistemological status, and points towards the ontological aporias that link it to the human structures of temporality which constitute Ricoeur's focus in *Time and Narrative*.

But here I am getting ahead of myself. For our present purposes we need only affirm, with Ricoeur's assistance, the definition of narrative we began with--

narrative is a dynamic and fluid form, both an event and a process, a structure and an act. As historical events, narratives are stories told by specific people, people situated by physical circumstances, material forces, psychological dispositions, and in given social and cultural milieux; as diachronic events they must be read in light of their moment of transmission--what Ricoeur calls elsewhere a "space of experience." Yet as synchronic structures, they are also texts open to semio-linguistic coding and explanation, as well as to reception and understanding within various horizons of expectation. Most revealingly, only a recursive process of interpretation--one equally attentive to the act of narrating, the narrative text, and audience narrativity--can possibly approach the complex truth manifested through narrative.

Placed in terms of our previous example from Private Hubbard's letter, we must work then to understand not only the relationship between the actual events of his story, their written record, and his act of telling the story, but also the reception of these same three aspects of his narrative. In the dialectic between these phases of narrative, we begin to glimpse the brutal and squalid features of his war experience as they crush against the inadequacy of his report of the Somme, we note narrative pressures--from generic codes for familiar letters and social expectations to write encouraging cards from the front--grinding down his ability to tell his own story, we

sense his overwhelming effort to configure his world with meaning--to tell its truth--forced into an impossible appeal for narrativity. Nonetheless, we leave Hubbard's letter having glimpsed, however briefly, a human experience of war--one face of battle--precisely because we struggled with its dynamic narrative power. Viewing narrative through the interlocking frames of narrating, narrative text, and narrativity, we see that each stage within the narrative process saturates the others: Hubbard's narrating caught up within his sister's narrativity, the narrative letter inseparable from its production in the trenches or its reception back in "Blighty," the forms of narrativity outlined by reading against various horizons of expectation: those of soldiers, of contemporary readers in England, of writers remembering their war experience in the decades following the war, of historians searching out the details of the Somme, of modern readers seeking stories central to their cultural community. Chapter Two defines these various horizons more clearly by constructing a narrative matrix for the Battle of the Somme, tracing the way assumptions and expectations of both writers and readers intersect in the narrative act. But first, in order to see how our dialogue with Great War texts generates a dynamic definition of narrative, we must look more closely at the phases of the narrative act--beginning with the way soldiers tell war stories, then gradually observing how any writing about war assumes a reading of it.

## Writing the War

Well, the soldier can't really teach anything. The only thing he can do is tell war stories.

Tim O'Brien, from his memoir of the Vietnam War

In his extensive study *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), Paul Fussell seeks in his own way to describe the face of battle, a face--he contends--that modern consciousness sees reflected in the mirror of its collective memory.<sup>9</sup> Reviewing numerous literary accounts of the War, Fussell concludes: "the problem for the writer trying to describe elements of the Great War was its utter incredibility, and thus its incommunicability in its own terms" (139). Although countless writers felt the baffling character of their wartime experience, many attempted to communicate the inherently incommunicable. They felt compelled to capture the nightmare, to portray the horror, to share the sense of comradeship, or to simply tell their story. In so doing, they wrote for an audience who gradually came to expect, and eventually to demand, ever more complex versions of the Western Front reality--of the elusive truth Private Hubbard wanted to share. As the first "historians" writing about the war, soldiers often wrote

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<sup>9</sup> Although Keegan builds his study around the trope of "the face of battle," many Great War narratives also rely upon this figure--Frederic Manning's use of "the myriad faces of war" provides a representative example. Of course, since representation provides a central axis for our study, we must ask how "facing battle" enhances or limits our approach to its elusive reality and enigmatic truth. (See the first section of Chapter 2 for a fuller discussion of Keegan's work).



their stories in diaries and letters, recording impressions and reporting conditions. Yet, as we have seen with Hubbard's letter, even these immediate accounts were frequently shaped by their narrative commitments. And it is to these "firsthand" reports that military historians traditionally turn for evidence, for facts.<sup>10</sup> Interpreting the soldiers' interpretations, historians filter and sift these accounts, gradually compiling and shaping their own composite view of a war or a battle--providing their own interpretation, suggesting their own narrative of the truth of the Western Front.

John Keegan, however, questions the adequacy of these narratives, the validity of their "truths." He discloses that many depictions of battle succumb to a "rhetoric of battle history" which employs conventional techniques in order to describe battle. All too quickly these battle narratives turn into "'battle pieces', that is to say essays in a highly traditional form, which no amount of labour to fill out with new information will materially alter so long as the historian accepts the conventions within which he is working" (34-5). Moreover, what the historian perceives as an aid to description all too often becomes an unquestioned appropriation of "that inventory of assumptions, and usages through which the historian makes his professional approach to the past . . . [which] is so strong, so inflexible and

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, works by Keegan, Wilson, Leed, Ashworth, Ellis, Brown, Winter and many others in the list of Works Consulted.

above all so time-hallowed that it exerts virtual powers of dictatorship over the military historian's mind" (35). In other words, Keegan suggests that rather than the military historian shaping material to accurately describe a battle, instead the conventions of the battle piece often interpret the evidence for him, and more importantly, these conventions circumscribe the very way battles can be thought about.

Tracing the modern success of the battle piece to Edward Creasy's *Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World*--a Victorian best-seller "rivalling Darwin's *Origin of Species* in the frequency with which it was republished"--Keegan observes that Creasy's moral justification for war provided both a model of amazing commercial success and a ready excuse to treat battle in history: "Battles are important. They decide things. They improve things. Exactly what, and how, are questions that the individual historian is left free by Creasy's *nihil obstat*, his grant of moral approval, to judge for himself" (56-60). With popular success beckoning, military historians eagerly adopted a proven style and wrote according to the formula of the battle piece.

Keegan describes the conventional features of this typical battle narrative, "with its reduction of soldiers to pawns, its discontinuous rhythm, its conventional imagery, its selective incident and its high focus on leadership," as particularly inadequate to represent the modern experience

of battle (61); nevertheless, this style characterized popular battle literature prior to the Great War and provided the dominant paradigm for military historians dealing with it. What is more, when we look closely at many "personal" narratives of the war, we see that this style heavily influences them.<sup>11</sup> Recall Private Hubbard's letter: he portrays soldiers as pawns in an incomprehensible game, deploys conventional religious imagery for description, and defers all individual autonomy to remote leaders. Although his narrative clearly seeks to alter the perspective of traditional accounts, his writing is steeped in narrative conventions. Joining the ranks of writers such as Private Hubbard--who fight against the tyranny of such conventions--Keegan sets out to examine and expose the face of battle, to explore its ever more complex and elusive truths.

Both Fussell and Keegan propose, for literature and history respectively, that the truth of the human experience of battle resides somewhere outside the limits of conventional forms of representation. Implicit in their related suggestions is the assumption that all writers write

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<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, Samuel Hynes quotes the preface to Hervey Allen's World War I memoir to outline an "esthetic of war writing: 'I have tried to reproduce in words my experience in France during the great war. There is no plot, no climax, no happy ending to this book. It is a narrative, plain, unvarnished, without heroics, and true. It is what I saw as nearly as memory has preserved it, and I have set it down as a picture of war with no comment'" (Review, 24). Whether or not any narrative can present plain and unvarnished truth remains to be seen; the effort, however, to reject conventional plots and stylized presentation--to personally present experience--does indeed characterize many of the best narratives to emerge from the Great War.

within an identifiable context--generic, historical, literary, cultural, and so on. Whether a soldier writes a letter home from the front, recollects his experience in an autobiographical memoir some time after the conflict, or researches the background and flow of the battle in order to write a historical account, in each case the chosen form will dictate generic expectations and techniques, respond to different intended audiences, evoke different literary and cultural reactions or modes of interpretation. Put in slightly different terms, each writer responds according to the contract he establishes with the reader--a contract governing both production and consumption of the battle narrative.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, both Keegan and Fussell assume that the conditions or restrictions of most of these contracts somehow attenuate or mediate the "reality" of the experience being conveyed.

For the soldier-writer or the military historian of the Great War, it is a challenge to break free from constraining contexts--dictated in part by traditional writer-reader contracts--in order to communicate the reality of battle: a reality so primal, powerful, and resonant that none of these authors ever questions its existence. In fact, the best writers in each genre--such as Robert Graves, Liddell Hart,

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<sup>12</sup> The idea of a contractual exchange in literature--a performative contract between writer and reader--finds its roots in the speech act linguistic theory, initially proposed in the work of Austin and Searle and modified for literary studies by a number of theorists. For a sophisticated recent adaptation of this concept, see Marie Maclean's *Narrative as Performance* (1988).

or Frederic Manning--address the epistemology of battle experience, measuring their efforts against an inescapable horizon of truth--one textured by the grimy details and insistent particularity of their accounts. If Samuel Hynes--the author of his own personal narrative of war--is right that "in the ontology of war remembered, there are no abstractions" (*Review*, 24), then the epistemological issues these narratives raise pose important questions for certain post-structural theories. Of course, both Fussell and Keegan know that many writers either adopt traditional expressions of battle reality or reshape and transform prevailing conventions in minor ways. The particular emphasis on *personal narrative* in Great War literature, however, testifies to an awareness of the epistemological quandary facing modern soldier-writers--one intensely displayed in their work but certainly more of a "modern condition" than unique to them--even as it demands revision of the conventional reading models used to interpret these works. Indeed, the most important and revealing aspect of the best battle narratives of the Great War may well be the way in which their generic transformation or permutation--their insistent blend of personal expression and narrative constraint--points to a larger refiguring of existing social and cultural paradigms.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> See George P. Landow's *Images of Crisis* (1982), where he extends Thomas Kuhn's notion of paradigms in scientific discourse to literary studies. Examining dominant cultural metaphors such as the Christian journey of life and its post-Christian counterpart, the shipwreck, Landow notes these metaphors function like scientific paradigms, allowing

For all the similarities between Fussell and Keegan, though, one crucial distinction separates them: Fussell limits his work to analysis, Keegan moves beyond analysis to personal composition. Fussell identifies the context within which writers of the Great War composed their works and then traces their legacy; Keegan joins with these writers in their search for the face of battle. To oversimplify somewhat, Fussell reads the war; Keegan writes it. Because Keegan's work provides a useful parallel to that of the soldier-writers of the Great War, we will soon turn to his narrative of one of the most important battles of the war, the Battle of the Somme. But before moving to Keegan and the narrative matrix surrounding the Somme, we must first consider briefly how the war might be read, and more importantly, how any writing of it presupposes reading it.

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cultures to impose a sense of order on the seething chaos of actuality. "Furthermore, like such paradigms, such images or metaphors have major cultural value for those who accept them, since they become the 'ordinary' or dominant way of considering reality. They also become, of course, a chief means of communicating that way of considering reality" (see especially pages 3-33). My study suggests that personal narratives of the Great War introduce a generic permutation into traditional means of communicating reality, one indicative perhaps of a corresponding shift in larger cultural paradigms. Also of note here is Tim Travers' work in history--especially his important book *The Killing Ground*--where he also extends the notion of paradigms to military science. But his primary interest is in the resilience of existing paradigms of strategic thought--paradigms largely responsible for the tragic deadlock of western front.

## Theoretical No Man's Land: Reading the War

What battles have in common is human: the behaviour of men struggling to reconcile their instinct for self-preservation, their sense of honour and the achievement of some aim over which other men are ready to kill them. The study of battle is therefore always a study of fear and usually of courage . . . always of anxiety, sometimes of elation or catharsis; always of uncertainty and doubt, misinformation and misapprehension, usually also of faith and sometimes of vision; always of violence, sometimes also of cruelty, self-sacrifice, compassion; above all, it is always a study of solidarity and usually also of disintegration.

John Keegan, *Face of Battle*

What does it mean to read something called a *personal narrative* of the Great War? To understand both its quality as a personal statement and as a configured narrative? Have previous readers and critics read these texts adequately, studied them in light of the incontestable human component Keegan suggests above? Have readers recognized the implications of their status as narratives? How can such questions of reading be usefully theorized? To raise these issues is merely to observe that when we speak of reading war literature, or more directly of reading the war, we force the term *reading* to serve a number of different meanings. But even if we adopt a traditional definition for reading, a related question quickly arises: when we do read the war, do we read only primary reports of experience (such as diaries, personal letters, and documentary journalism), or do we also incorporate more distant accounts (such as those by personal narrative writers, literary artists and historians)? Perhaps we should include the critical

readings--contemporary and modern--that have gradually encrusted primary texts as well as historical and artistic ones?<sup>14</sup>

At the most immediate level, reading the war may be seen as a moment of reflection by a soldier where he "reads" the "text" of his personal experience as it is recorded in memory. Although the complex processes of memory and the intricate workings of the mind continue to elude psychologists, philosophers, and literary theorists alike, one metaphor commonly used to describe mental processes is that of the text. In psychoanalysis, the analyst assists the patient to reconstruct the narrative of his or her past; philosophers as diverse as Jacques Derrida and Paul Ricoeur speak of language and discourse as fundamental structures of consciousness, a view extended in much post-structural literary theory to claim that "all the world's a text." In a more subtle analysis of recent narrative theory, Wallace Martin reminds us of the many "ways in which writers and readers can change the borders that in theory should separate the story from its interpretation," and then he concludes "that writers are not inspired transcribers but

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<sup>14</sup> This final question flows into my own work as well. How justified is my selection of Keegan's historical text for detailed analysis when Fussell's critical text gets treated only in passing? To what extent must our readings of these works move at a metacritical or metahistorical level? And if we do move to the level of metacommentary, are the "primary" texts necessarily displaced or ignored? As we shall see throughout the remainder of this book, the wider our critical net reaches, the more precarious the balance becomes between various levels of response. Consciously negotiating between these responses necessarily places a great deal of responsibility on the reader.



readers and interpreters of experience" (178). We need not reduce the world to language or to a text--and we must stringently resist doing so--in order to observe the advantages of utilizing a textual metaphor for memory. The war writer, then, emerges as neither an inspired transcriber nor a dispassionate observer, but rather as the first reader and interpreter of his experience, a reader who in the act of writing opens his experience first to himself and then to others.

Once we admit that one way to write about the experience of conflict is for the writer to read the text of his personal history, as it is recorded in memory, it is a small step to ever more inclusive or dynamic conceptions of reading. Yet though different theories privilege various points along the subject-object axis, every act of reading necessarily involves the encounter of a reader, the subject, with a text, the object. In terms of the Great War, at the most basic level, we have an individual soldier reading his personal experience--a discrete subject and object.<sup>15</sup> Although we typically define reading as an isolated act of understanding a single written text from the war, it may easily be extended to mean understanding the war by reading many written texts, including everything from diaries to novels. Expanding our definition even more, we could begin

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<sup>15</sup> Of course, at this basic level we smooth-over the complex issue of "individual subjectivity" that is particularly acute for a soldier within the material and ideological constraints of the military system. Yet as we move to ever more complex notions of subjectivity, perhaps we may all be "soldiers" to a degree.

to speak of "reading" generic, historical or cultural contexts in order to understand better the literary texts being read. In each of these definitions, the reading subject remains constant while the object gradually evolves. But the key term in these extended definitions--understanding--prompts us to ask "understanding for whom?" Just as the object of reading can be modulated to accommodate more complex "texts," so too the reading subject has been defined as everything from a totally autonomous individual to a rigidly determined subject.

Thus, within literary studies, especially under the rubric of reader-response theory, reading has come to be seen as everything from a totally subjective encounter with a text--understood as Stanley Fish or David Bleich might advocate--to a more fully dialogic reading conception--such as that of Bakhtin and his followers or akin to reception theorists of the Constance school--to a largely determined response: one which might range from the ideologically determined reading of say Foucault or followers of Althusser, to the intentionally determined readings of E.D. Hirsch or Knapp and Michaels.<sup>16</sup> While this is not the place

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<sup>16</sup> A number of good overviews of reader-response and reception theory are available: see especially Susan R. Sulieman and Inge Crosman, eds. *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation* (1980), Elizabeth Freund's helpful introduction to reader-response criticism, *The Return of the Reader* (1987), and Robert C. Holub's critical introduction to reception theory, *Reception Theory* (1984). For a recent additions to the debate, see Inge Crosman Wimmers' *Poetics of Reading* (1988), and later this year (July 1989), Wolfgang Iser's *Prospecting: From Reader-Response to Literary Anthropology*. Iser may well provide

for an exhaustive review of reader-response or reception theories, it is worth pausing to consider the impact such divergent notions of reading have on our ability to read the personal narratives of the Great War. In many ways the sheer volume of such theories, with their largely incompatible linguistic assumptions and ideological claims, stagnates critical dialogue; instead of exploring texts through readings, or even discussing readings of readings, critics all too often spend their time positioning themselves--digging in, entrenching, and fortifying themselves against an inevitable theoretical counterattack.

One image from the Great War that seems particularly apposite to our current theoretical context is that of no man's land. Whether or not this Great War image resonates in modern memory as a result of the complex process Paul Fussell describes, no man's land does seem an appropriate metaphor for our current theoretical situation.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, it is precisely this metaphor that Robert Scholes turns to in *Textual Power* (1985) in order to characterize the

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his own version of the fused method of reading Paul Ricoeur deploys in *Time and Narrative* and I develop here.

<sup>17</sup> Although the gender-restrictive notion of this phrase certainly calls into question its utility for our current theoretical debate, I have in mind the traditional, and more specifically liminal, associations the term carried during the War and in the decade following. In this context, since women were physically barred from the front line, the phrase is technically correct. But women indisputably occupy a front line position in our current theoretical debates. More directly, Elaine Showalter's *Female Malady* and Gilbert and Gubar's volumes titled *No Man's Land* specifically take up the Great War gender implications of the term.

treacherous ground between established theoretical positions (80). At the risk of painting an overly reductive picture of contemporary theoretical debate, the image of no man's land--whether we speak of the literal no *man's* land of an essentialist feminism, or observe the carefully calculated raids from various entrenched positions (such as unreformed New Critics or reactionary old Marxists), or merely listen to the desperate cries from wounded graduate students or tenure-conscious assistant professors abandoned there--yes, the image of no man's land can be quite compelling.

But what do we gain, or lose, by thinking of theory in terms of no man's land? More directly, to what extent are literary studies caught in a deadlock, frozen in position, paralyzed by theoretical divergence and discord? One index of our current theoretical incompatibility might be the long, almost obligatory, theoretical introductions now characteristic of many critical works--the long introductory chapters (like this one) that position the selected approach, and attempt to justify it, for readers. Perhaps professional courtesy now demands such positioning (Is this another deconstructive reading? A feminist or marxist approach?) as the prolegomena to any critical act. Or perhaps this remains as one legacy of post-structuralism, an increased emphasis on "calling into question," an exhortation to self-reflexive critical practice, and thus a necessary step in any practice, a required laying-the-cards-on-the-table. It seems to make little difference whether we

adhere to more traditional claims for critical objectivity and its reliance on reason or common sense, or criticize such claims as hegemonic, always-already within language, ideology, or the western metaphysical tradition, our professional discourse seems bound by the conventions of playing theoretical aces early in the game and trumping opposing positions. In short, our critical discourse, especially over the past decade, has formally underscored our disparate theoretical commitments; now the time has come to consider the treacherous middle ground between them.

My first inclination facing this problem was to invite warring parties to lay down their arms, to call a sort of Christmas Truce, to recall the spirit of the extraordinary moment in December of 1914 when British, French and German soldiers declared a spontaneous truce and met amicably in no man's land, exchanging souvenirs and joining in song. Yet while history records this unprecedented and remarkable moment, it also notes the outrage of commanders on all sides and the subsequent lengths they went to to preclude any repetition of this stunning event. More realistically, then, the generals in our current theoretical debates might be equally unsympathetic to spontaneous truces, to generous or eclectic pluralism--perhaps with good cause.

One recent discussion of attempts to mediate contested theoretical claims is found in Robert Scholes' *Textual Power*. Scholes identifies a major area of contention in literary studies as the no man's land between secular and

hermetic conceptions of texts and the world, the terrain located at the intersection of the text and the world (*Textual*, 74-85). Observing that "the relationship between a text and the world is not a given but a problem," Scholes maintains that "the relationship between text and world is not simply a fascinating problem for textual theory. It is, above all others, the problem that makes textual theory necessary" (75). Given our concern with the intersection between personal narratives of the Great War and the experiential world they represent, we too must attend to textual theory, we too must seek a vantage point capable of seeing both the text of the world and the world of the text. Developing this theory, Scholes defines his key terms, the opposing views of world and text, the competing camps of secular and hermetic critics: "The secular or worldly critics see texts as historically grounded in public occasions and socially supported codes. The hermetic interpreters see texts as radically self-reflective and non-referential--and therefore beyond the reach of criticism" (76). Pointing to Terry Eagleton and Paul de Mann as examples of each position, Scholes then critiques Frederic Jameson's attempt to negotiate the treacherous ground between them.

The grounds on which Scholes takes Jameson to task are precisely those of textuality--where the world collapses into a text--and the points he makes here are particularly important to our discussion about reading the war, and the

impasse we may reach in the no man's land of reading theory. Citing Jameson's argument that the textual revolution of post-structuralism "has freed us from the 'empirical object' and given us textual objects in its place. . . . that is to say, real objects that function like texts because they are cultural," Scholes quickly counters, noting that even the study of cultural objects depends "upon a grounding in empirical objects: dates, documents, buildings, practices, and so on. . . . seeing institutions as discursive creatures, caught up in webs of textuality even while spinning new ones, does not free us from 'the empirical object'" (84-5). Whether or not Scholes is sufficiently attentive to the complexity of Jameson's argument, the point here is that any theory that privileges textuality in place of reality, excluding "the much maligned 'referent,'" must perforce fail.

Scholes encourages literary studies to engage issues of textual power, to become, in effect, studies critical of textuality because "textual power is ultimately power to change the world" (165). Change, we might add, possible only if we critique the ubiquitous process of textualization that anchors textuality. Thus he carefully distinguishes his position, which studies institutional practices and social structures as *if* they were codes and texts, from a deconstructive position, which argues "that reference is a mirage of language, that there is no simple reference or unmediated perception, that the world is always already

textualized by an archewriting or system of differentiation that effectively brackets or sets aside questions of reference" (92).<sup>18</sup> In other words, two quite different methods of reading are at stake here: one deploys the heuristic of textual power to study various textualizations of the world (the general path we will follow), the other deconstructs the world by embracing the radical skepticism of textuality.

Scholes' chapter on reference and difference does a particularly thorough job of exposing some limits of deconstruction, but no one example is more important to my study than his reading of Aphra Behn's novella, *Oroonoko*. Following the now famous tale of Captain Cook and the kangaroo (where Scholes demonstrates that living objects may precede language in emphatic ways, such as when the physical reality of what we would now call a kangaroo hopped past Captain James Cook, naked of all signifiers, in Australia in 1770), he explores a similar case in Behn's fiction where an object was plainly perceptible, yet devoid of all signifiers. The event centers around her description in the novella of a "Numb-eel" and Scholes senses behind this description

a reality trying to enter the English consciousness through a language ill-prepared to receive it. More

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<sup>18</sup> Scholes leaves open, interestingly, the possibility of complex reference or mediated perception, presenting an opening for his deconstructive critics. My own application of philosophic hermeneutics to this "complex" problem troubles these issues without endorsing the radical hermeneutics of deconstruction.



than half a century before Ben Franklin flew his kite, when the word "electricity" was used only by a few savants like Sir Thomas Browne to signify something like the phenomena we know as magnetic attraction and static electricity, a young Englishwoman in South America encountered signs of what we now call electric eels (100).

Whereas Scholes limits his discussion here to the naming function of language, and more explicitly to a critique of Saussure's linguistic system, his point that "there is both pressure and resistance on both sides of the signified" (101)--from a physical referent on one side, in this case the actual electric eel, and on the other side from the sign that enters language to represent this reality, in this case the *electric eel* common to modern English rather than Behn's *Numb-eel*--touches important concerns for the writers and readers of Great War personal narratives.

What can an author do when the available language, and by extension the available forms, are inadequate to the reality present for description?<sup>19</sup> Placed within the

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<sup>19</sup> See Fussell: "One of the cruxes of the war, of course, is the collision between events and the language available--or thought appropriate--to describe them. To put it more accurately, the collision was one between events and the public language used for over a century to celebrate the idea of progress. . . . The problem was less one of 'language' than of gentility and optimism; it was less a problem of 'linguistics' than of rhetoric" (169-70). Although Fussell is certainly right to direct attention to the collision between event and language, he assumes a rhetoric limited to semantic choice in his allusions to the indescribable rather than pursuing the rhetorical dimensions of genre and form. Moreover, the presentation of reality

context of our earlier discussion of narrative, writers and readers must recognize both the pressures of textuality as well as those of an overwhelmingly real world. Once again, our emphasis will be more epistemological than ontological, more concerned with how we know and figure this excessive reality than with fundamental shifts in the way humans experience war. But the ontological force of modern war may well be of an unprecedented scale, demanding a basic rethinking of the epistemological methods we measure it by. Just as we watched Private Hubbard labor to integrate his experience with previous narrative frames, so too Keegan struggles against a historical model more committed to textuality than to understanding reality; he answers through his human narrative of battle, through his sketch of its human face. We will explore the advantages and limits of his response to the Battle of the Somme in the next chapter.

In a similar way, many soldier-writers of the Great War adapted various forms of narrative response to their experience of war, and in the process exposed a disparity or tension between the modes of response available to them and their experiences; a disparity, I suspect, that evinces a reality trying to enter English consciousness through inadequate forms of response, a reality similar in

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for him--"there is no reason why a language devised by man should be inadequate to describe any of man's works"--seems to be less a problem of language mediating reality than of audience reception. As Scholes reminds us, the pressure in this equation must work both ways.

important ways to the one Scholes identifies above. Yet whereas in Aphra Behn's case the reality has a physically determined ground and limit, the war authors' reality only begins with the labeling of physical experiences, and may ultimately be limited, as Paul Ricoeur provocatively suggests, only by the aporetics of human temporality.<sup>20</sup> In short, the reality may well be the reality of the human condition. As Ricoeur so carefully demonstrates, beyond the semantic level of any narrative response, syntactic and formal features combine in their own efforts to represent reality, thereby evoking their own systems of reference.<sup>21</sup> Our reading of war narratives must be open to each of these registers, to the fullness, even to the excess, of a multifaceted reality.

How might we understand the nature of the Great War reality forcing its way into modern consciousness and in what ways might it be bound up in the complex nature of personal narrative? More narrowly, how do various methods of reading battle narratives of the Great War circumscribe this reality? For example, does reading these works as autobiography encourage a psychoanalytic definition of reality? Or does treating them as historical memoirs confine their experience to public or collective terms? Perhaps most importantly, can the treacherous ground of

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<sup>20</sup> See *Time and Narrative*, especially Volume 3.

<sup>21</sup> See here the parallel versions of "content of form"--in Hayden White, Fredric Jameson, and Frank Kermode.

theoretical no man's land be mediated in such a way that we attend to the intersection between competing methods of reading?

The range and importance of these questions brings us full circle in our discussion of reading the war. From gradually expanding notions of reading, to the disabling condition evoked by the metaphor of theoretical no man's land, to the critiques of several positions within or around no man's land, finally to a recognition of the dialectical struggle between experience and formed language, our discussion has slowly circled around the same question: what does it mean to interpret the Great War? Or, put slightly differently, what does the text--taken in its full metaphoric sense--of the Great War mean when we read it? Against this background, we may now begin to sketch an answer by turning to the narrative matrix surrounding the Battle of the Somme.

## Chapter 2: Narratives of the Somme

Narrative is at once a mode of discourse, a manner of speaking, and the product produced by the adoption of this mode of discourse. When this mode of discourse is used to represent "real" events, as in "historical narrative," the result is a kind of discourse with specific linguistic, grammatical, and rhetorical features, namely, narrative history. Both the felt adequacy of this mode of discourse for the representation of specifically "historical" events and its inadequacy as perceived by those who impute to narrativity the status of an ideology derive from the difficulty of conceptualizing the difference between a manner of speaking and the mode of representation produced by its enactment (57).

Hayden White, *The Content of the Form*

Our attention now turns to the narrative matrix surrounding the battle of the Somme, to a web of narratives that individually and collectively seek to convey the overwhelming experience of a particular Great War battle. We have already seen how Private Hubbard's letter structures a specific world for his readers--the visceral world of trench life, a world radically separated from tranquil Sunday mornings in England, yet a world inevitably evoked through narrative conventions, a world enacted via traditional narrativity. But narratives of the Somme come in many shapes and sizes, they take many forms: analytical histories, personal letters, diaries, journalistic dispatches, documentary fiction and epic poetry, to name only a few. Together these forms comprise what I term a narrative matrix for the Battle of the Somme: an array of personal, historical, and literary narratives oriented around firsthand views of battle experience. Our interest

in these works, at least on the first level, begins with a discernible referent: our concerns align themselves with those of the participants, with the manner of telling they employ to represent their experience. We join, in other words, with the participants--the narrators--in a search for meaning. What happened during the Battle of the Somme? How and why did it happen? To begin to answer these questions we will turn to such diverse authors as the war correspondent Philip Gibbs, the military historian Liddell Hart, the novelist Frederic Manning, and the engraver-poet David Jones.

But our interest in this range of narratives quickly extends beyond the tales told to include questions about how various authors recorded and configured the "what and how" they (re)present. On this level, we address the narrative excess of their accounts, we read the narratives' arrangement and form as well as their factual content. On a final level, we take up their appeals to narrativity through generic contracts and cultural contexts--what we might broadly call their horizons of expectation. In seeking to define a space of experience for these texts, as well as situate their various horizons of expectation, we will follow a general method of inquiry that Paul Ricoeur proposes in the third volume of *Time and Narrative*--a method we will address more specifically near the end of this chapter. For our present purposes, however, Ricoeur's working definition from *The Rule of Metaphor* will suffice:

"Hermeneutics then is simply the theory that regulates the transition from structure of the work to the world of the work. To interpret a work is to display the world to which it refers by virtue of its 'arrangement,' its 'genre,' and its 'style'" (220). Here Ricoeur proposes a method that recursively engages several phases on a narrative continuum between the world of the text and the text of the world; a method, in other words, designed to grapple with narrative as both mode and product of discourse. As always, our focus will be on the intersection of worlds, on the ways various types of narrative mediate between the worlds they construct and the world of actual experience, on the blurred line between historical documents and literary works, between "factual" representations and "literary" constructions of the battle. As a working hypothesis for this chapter let us presume that a comparative study of narratives surrounding the Somme will enable us to better account for the production, method of (re)presentation, and reception of Great War personal narratives. In short, the ensuing dialogue among narratives within this matrix should highlight the advantages of a hermeneutic approach to personal narratives, should enable us to see more clearly the dynamic nature of narrative.

## Facing Battle: John Keegan's Narrative

The infantry, fortunately, remained largely unaware of the random and unsatisfactory result of the shelling which had filled their ears with sound for the last week, during every hour of the day and many of the nights. There was a good deal of individual apprehension. 'It was the Division's first battle,' wrote the historian of the 18th, 'and the solemnity of the occasion affected everyone.' Private Gilbert Hall, of the 1st Barnsley Pals (13th York and Lancs) was not feeling quite himself and had got a headache from the bombardment. Capt. E.C.T. Minet, machine-gun officer of the 11th Royal Fusiliers, felt himself 'sweating' at zero hour. 'But that, I suppose, was nervous excitement.' Private Frank Hawkings, of Queen Victoria's Rifles, had found since 29 June 'the suspense very trying and everyone . . . very restless'. But in the long notice of the battle which everyone who was to be in it had been given--a new development in warfare and a function of the complex preparation which battles of the industrial age require--had allowed men the chance to make what personal accommodation with their fears they could. Most had written home, made out their wills, shaken hands with their pals. Many had gone to church. (Face, 241)

Although Keegan does not write from direct experience of the Great War--he is the only author we will consider at length who was not actually a participant in the war--his attempt to capture the experiential quality of the Somme, to sketch the human face of battle, provides an important perspective for reading Great War battle narratives. As we see above, a measured blend of his voice with those of actual participants, an easy slippage between primary accounts and his own narrative of the Somme, characterizes his style. Keegan's authority comes from the immediacy of soldier-writers telling their stories, reporting their situations, recording their impressions. He too adopts a clear, direct, plain style--one easily aligned with the



personal, immediate style of the soldiers he cites. What emerges is a doubly personal narrative of the Somme: a braided story that gradually defines its narrative authority through its personal style. Drawing upon Capt. Minet's "nervous excitement" and Private Hawkings' feelings of trying suspense, Keegan creates an eyewitness narrative, one full of the experiences of battle--full of its anticipation and charged with its fear.

But what did the soldiers fear? What solemn occasion, what restless suspense did the 1st of July, 1916 inaugurate? In short, why does the Battle of the Somme claim our attention? Outlining the miseries suffered there, as well as the moments of triumph, Keegan reminds us that "the Somme was, in a way true of no other battlefield of the First World War, British territory" (209). It was the testing ground for Kitchener's army, the first major offensive requiring support from the massive civilian recruiting of 1914 and 1915. Although other battles brought greater casualties, the Somme alone accounted for 419,654 British killed and wounded during the last half of 1916 (285). Without a doubt the Somme experience changed the war for the British, bringing the realization home, Keegan notes, "that war could threaten with death the young manhood of a whole nation" (285). Here, though, even a direct or personal style falters a bit. Somehow the truth of such an experience

exceeds its mere report.<sup>1</sup> How can any narrative account for the loss of a generation?

On the first day--of what agonizingly became a five month marathon--on the first day alone, "the British had lost about 60,000, of whom 21,000 had been killed, most in the first hour of the attack, perhaps the first minutes" (260). At 7:30 on that bright, sunny morning of July 1st, the week-long barrage finally lifted. The men, by all accounts heavily laden with over 60 pounds of equipment, scaled ladders lining the trenches and began their slow, methodical march across no man's land. Of the thousands in the first wave, few survived.

One key reason for selecting the Somme as the site for the major offensive of 1916 was that British and French forces could then both participate equally in the assault. Issues of national pride and military alliance notwithstanding, there were only three strategically favorable places to mount such an attack--two of which had already been the sites of allied failures during 1915. Thus, the French commander, General Joffre, wanted to attack on a new front, with the British at his side. Keegan gives the following account of this decision:

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<sup>1</sup> Hayden White closes his essay "Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory" with the following question: "Is it not possible that the question of narrative in any discussion of historical theory is always finally about the function of imagination in the production of a specifically human truth?" (*Content*, 57). Perhaps the narrative or imaginative dimension of the Somme accounts address "human truth" in ways that complement or exceed their documentary value. We will pursue this issue more fully in the closing chapters of this book.

In selecting the Somme Front, which was where the French and British sectors touched, as the focus of Allied efforts for 1916, Joffre was at least to ensure that those efforts would be jointly directed towards the defeat of the German army on French soil and under his hand--even if the method by which it would be defeated was, as he was coming privately to accept, that of usure--attrition--rather than the break-through in which the British still hoped and believed. (215)

Although the initial plan called for equal participation from French and British forces, the devastating losses the French suffered at Verdun, during the first part of 1916, greatly restricted their involvement. Moreover, the same losses forced the British Command to accelerate the planned offensive on the Western Front--an offensive now largely a British event, one anticipated by the High Command rather like a major national sporting event, one seen as a suitable test for a mighty empire. As Keegan suggests, competition figured on many levels--between strategies, personalities, reputations, and nationalities--often becoming as much a struggle with competing identities as with the enemy. But assessing the stakes of the game--retrospectively, of course--it is quite difficult to regain the sense of eagerness so prevalent in the months and days leading up to the battle, quite impossible to play the game.

From its very inception, the battle plan for the Somme was a curious blend of flawed strategy and outmoded tactics,

but one buttressed by an almost blind national pride and smug self-assurance. In defining the narrators of Somme accounts, we do well to keep their allegiances--social, cultural, professional, national--in mind. Keegan, tellingly, characterizes the British Expeditionary Force of 1916 as "a trusting army. It believed in the reassurances proffered by the staff, who, to be fair, believed them also. It believed in the superiority of its own equipment over the Germans. . . . But it believed above all in itself" (219). Need I add that it was an army of shattered belief in the aftermath of the Somme? One significant legacy of the Somme remains its symbolic resonance as token of shattered faith, as emblem of a shift in the national understanding of war.

Although all the narratives of the Somme trace this pivot in their own way, each constructs its own plot in relation to a single common plot: the plot suggested by the official battle plan and its tortured enactment. After outlining the technological limits of artillery support and the depth of the German defenses, Keegan sketches this plan for us:

The British infantry were, therefore, being asked to commit themselves to an offensive of which the outcome, even if completely successful, would leave the Germans still largely in possession of a second and completely independent system of fortification untouched by the attack. . . . That they were not daunted by this prospect is explained in part by the briefing that the

staff had given to the regimental officers, and the officers to their men: that the real work of destruction both of the enemy's defences and men, would have been done by the artillery before zero hour; that the enemy's wire would have been scythed flat, his batteries battered into silence and his trench-garrisons entombed in their dug-outs; that the main task of the infantry would be merely to walk forward to the objectives which the officers had marked on their maps, moderating their pace to that of the barrage moving ahead of them: finally, that once arrived there, they had only to install themselves in the German reserve trenches to be in perfect safety. (218)

Perhaps hindsight gives Keegan's description of the plan its brutal force; perhaps knowing how the story will end irrevocably alters the narrative tone; perhaps even the "objective" or analytical historian cannot help but be swayed by personal loss and public tragedy.

In *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (1984), Peter Brooks explores the range and implications of the human desire and need for narrative order. Defining plot as the "design and intention of narrative, what shapes a story and gives it a certain direction or intent of meaning," Brooks clearly sees narrative as a deeply imbedded psychological force, as "one of the large categories or systems of understanding that we use in our negotiations with reality, specifically, in the

case of narrative, with the problem of temporality: man's time-boundedness, his consciousness of existence within the limits of mortality" (xi). The problem of temporality seems particularly acute to most soldier-writers, in part for the obvious reason that whereas most of us can avoid reflecting on the limits of human existence (at least for the first sixty or so years of life) the soldier has no such immunity. In a way, then, narrative's ability to take up the aporias of human temporality beckons the soldier-writer; it invites him to participate in what Brooks calls the "discourse of mortality" (22). The *Somme*, as we have seen, certainly provided ample opportunity to reflect on mortality.

Sharing a number of important concerns with Ricoeur, Brooks directs our attention to the obvious and significant way plot orders the meanings we squeeze from human temporality, to the structures of meaning narrative encloses and evokes (xi-xvi). Both Brooks and Ricoeur study modes of emplotment, they examine the configuring of events and experience characteristic of any narrative act. Recalling our earlier discussion of Keegan's overall project in *The Face of Battle*, we see that he too is a student of plot: both a reader of the traditional plots of "battle pieces" and a writer struggling to configure the experience of the *Somme* in such a way as to (re)present the human meaning of battle. Our reading so far has highlighted the primary record of experience--*what* happened on the *Somme*, *how* it happened--and we have begun to speculate on *why* it happened.

We have glimpsed who narrates the stories of the Somme and briefly felt the need to situate writers socially and culturally. Turning now to Keegan's own emplotment of the events of the Somme will enable us to extend our discussion to the arrangement of his narrative text and to the dynamics of reading it.<sup>2</sup>

Although Keegan presents his account of the Battle of the Somme with a certain analytical precision--deftly incorporating statistics, carefully judging tactics, neatly dividing the material into objective sections (such as "The Battlefield," "The Plan," "The Bombardment," "The Wounded," and "The Will to Combat")--his focus never really leaves the human victims of the Somme, it never turns far from their faces. His account of the Pals' battalions is indicative of the plot he uses to discover meaning in the larger Somme experience:

Perhaps no story of the First World War is as poignant as that of the Pals. It is a story of a spontaneous and genuinely popular mass movement which has no counterpart in the modern, English-speaking world and perhaps could have none outside its own time and place: a time of intense, almost mystical patriotism, and of

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<sup>2</sup> Both Brooks and Ricoeur are interested in the dynamics of narrative, and my thinking is indebted to their work. Whereas Ricoeur speaks of a complex narrative model figured through a threefold dialectical mimesis--a multifaceted mimesis of the prefigurative, configurative, and refigurative dimensions of narrative--Brooks attempts "to talk of the dynamics of temporality and reading of the motor forces that drive the text forward, of the desires that connect narrative ends and beginnings, and make of the textual middle a highly charged field of force" (xiii-xiv).

the inarticulate elitism of an imperial power's working class; a place of vigorous and bouyant urban life, rich in differences and in a sense of belonging--to workplaces, to factories, to unions, to churches, chapels, charitable organizations, benefit clubs, Boy Scouts, Boys' Brigades, Sunday Schools, cricket, football, rugby, skittle clubs, old boys' societies, city offices, municipal departments, craft guilds--to any of those hundreds of bodies from which the Edwardian Briton drew his security and sense of identity. This network of associations offered an emotional leverage on British male responses which the committees of 'raisers,' middle-aged, and self-appointed in the first flush of enthusiasm for the war, were quick to manipulate, without perhaps realizing its power (221).

Even admitting that Keegan tends to over-homogenize Edwardian life in these generalizations, we note that there is a double "story" here--an especially "poignant" one. We have a story of social cohesion and construction of identity, of common purpose and belonging, of drawing together in defense of King and empire, of rallying round the flag and joining a movement.<sup>3</sup> And Keegan, while

<sup>3</sup> Michael Howard gives us a somewhat more complex picture than Keegan's assertion of social cohesion and the wave of enthusiasm in 1914: "by the beginning of the twentieth century the working classes were responding at least as readily to the stimuli of nationalism as they were to those of socialism, and the most successful political leaders were those who could blend the appeals of both" (110). Following this preface, he goes on to reject the view "that the frenetic and militaristic nationalism of the early twentieth



defusing charges of intentional maliciousness by the recruiters--they play a carefully cast role in the story--still holds them accountable for the tragic results generated by their part in the narrative. In fact, we have a story of heroes and villains, of good and bad actions. As the story proceeds, these raisers, armed with the slogan that those who "joined together should serve together," formed Pals' battalions throughout England. Meanwhile, the response to Kitchener's more general calls for volunteers was overwhelming and quickly swamped available resources for training and supply. "For many months rifles, even uniforms were lacking, so that the Pals' battalions could neither learn the trade of soldiers nor simulate their appearance. Only by endless drilling and marching in formation were

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century was caused by a reactionary ruling class successfully indoctrinating the masses in order to wean their support away from revolution and attract them to the established order" as "crudely mechanistic." With democracy and nationalism feeding each other, "the greater the sense of participation in the affairs of the State, the more was the State seen as the embodiment of these unique and higher value systems which called it into being, and the greater became the commitment to protect and serve it. Moreover, the Nation appeared as a focus of popular loyalty at a time when the power of organized religion was ebbing. It provided purpose, colour, excitement, and dignity to peoples who had outgrown the age of miracles and had not yet entered that of pop stars. But the Nation could only measure its worth and power against other Nations" (111). Meeting its "highest destiny" in the Great War, "1914, like 1789, though it was seen by some as a catastrophic breakdown of a system, perhaps of a civilization, was for others a moment of fulfilment and escape. As in 1789 immense, frustrated energies were released. The masses of men required by military professionals came forward with super-abundant goodwill" (111). For all the complexity of the Edwardian moment, there is nonetheless something resilient in Keegan's picture of a need for socially enhanced identity in the face of such forces.

these thousands of unblooded volunteers . . . able to remind the roadside spectators, at times even themselves, that they were the votaries of the Great Sacrifice" (226). Slowly, the story becomes one of individual and collective will thwarted by administrative incompetence, ground down by forces of modern technology. Gradually, a story of pointless sacrifice emerges: of the young by the old, of humans to technology, of innocent individuals to uncontrollable forces.

And it is the theme of the Great Sacrifice that Keegan pursues throughout this narrative: this directs the plot of his story. Just as he earlier contrasted the benign "walk-over" planned by the High Command with the actual decimation of the 1st of July, here too Keegan weaves irony with tragedy in his ordering of events. After highlighting the Pals' inadequate military training and their minimally qualified leadership, Keegan observes:

The promise of tragedy which loomed about these bands of uniformed innocents was further heightened by reason of their narrowly territorial recruitment; what had been a consolation for the pangs of parting from home--that they were all Pals or Chums together from the same close network of little city terraces or steep-stacked rows of miner' cottages--threatened home with a catastrophe of heartbreak the closer they neared a real encounter with the enemy" (226).

The Battle of the Somme realized the worst fears of such a catastrophe, devastating both entire battalions in the field and villages back home, enacting the tragic plot Keegan offers. The fate of the Pals' battalions, then, serves as a powerful metaphor for the British experience on the Somme--a metaphor as old as that of lambs led to slaughter. Keegan's emplotment of events places his readers on familiar ground, poses related narratives for their understanding. For all the compelling power of his tragic view of the Somme, we must recognize that Keegan has arranged his material into a tragic narrative, has adopted a recognizable mode of emplotment to tell his story. But discerning the configuring force of narrative is only the first step in our study; we must still attempt to assess his narrative's claims to truth: truth manifested in the dialogue between experiential, formal, and cultural levels of his narrative.

Keegan casts each of his set pieces against a vista of human tragedy that characterizes this battle for him--each section gradually building toward a denouement he presents in "The View from across No-man's-land." Although not an utter military disaster, he considers the Somme an unequivocal "human tragedy" (260). Thus Keegan engages its human face, its ineffable truth, through registers of literary truth traditionally evoked by tragedy. He employs a range of classic tropes for tragedy: choosing a serious action for his narrative, charting its course towards catastrophe, focusing on the experience of suffering and

defeat, even highlighting the character flaws--individual and national--that contribute to the disaster. Generically, his account of the Somme reaches beyond traditional boundaries of military history to grasp more general truths of the human condition. Culturally, his narrative activates evaluative registers often reserved for literary, philosophic, or ethical studies. In other words, the truth of Keegan's narrative must be measured dynamically as it gradually spirals outward from the experiential particulars of battle, to the insight accorded by the emplotment of events, and finally to a generic and cultural assessment of the exchange between these first two levels. Our interactive understanding of his story thus moves from a truth of experiential correspondence, to a truth of formal configuration, finally to a truth of narrative mediation. And if, as Brooks suggests above, analyzing the dynamics of narrative enables a clearer understanding of the fundamental experience of human temporality, then this gradually expanding notion of truth must encourage continuous dialogue between these various registers. Moreover, without the experiential truth of our first phase of analysis the abstract truths bound up in the dynamics of narrative emerge vacant of tangible meaning. Perhaps historical consciousness--the human expression and understanding of mortality--finds its most adequate manifestation through personal-historical narratives such as Keegan's. Ricoeur

and Brooks might so argue; we must slowly come to terms with their claims.

Redefining the genre of military history from the perspective of the participant, Keegan seeks a rhetoric and plot appropriate to the occasion. He intends to reveal the true face of battle, to present its truth through his powerfully personal narrative. And he claims similar status for the Great War personal narratives of Blunden, Sassoon and Graves: "everything about them suggests that they will continue to be read, not as background material for an understanding of the Great War, or as documentary evidence, but as moving and enduring expressions of truth about how man confronts the inevitability of death" (288). Perhaps this summarizes their greatest claims for our attention; but they make many other important claims as well. Keegan's story of the Somme helps us to begin to identify a broad horizon of truth against which we may read these remarkable works. Exploring the dynamic quality of other works in the narrative matrix, such as Archie Surfleet's diary and Philip Gibbs' dispatches, will gradually bring this horizon into sharper focus.

But one final example from Keegan's work might help us to understand the dialectic between truth and narrative that we have been pursuing. After wrestling long with the overpowering and tragic story he has been telling, Keegan finally searches for an analogous narrative. He finds one in a comparison between the Somme and the concentration

camps of the Second World War. Noting something obviously "unhistorical" in the analogy, Keegan nonetheless asserts "there is something Treblinka-like about almost all accounts of 1 July, about those long docile lines of young men, shoddily uniformed, heavily burdened, numbered about their necks, plodding forward across a featureless landscape to their own extermination inside the barbed wire" (260). Something elusive, something transhistorical, something compelling unites these narratives. Something in the human paradox of agency and suffering, something in a reader's response to the narrative presentation of this paradox, brings both types of narrative into focus. This something, this complex and intriguing truth provides the horizon for our study, a horizon accessible to us only through a dynamic dialogue with the narratives: a dialogue engaging other narratives of the Somme as well.

## The War the Infantry Knew: Reports from the Somme

That those poor lads of the attacking parties had a real hell of a time is obvious from the lists of those who returned. From what I hear, the enemy were waiting for them with hundreds of machine-guns, bombs and rifles and it seems that the Germans met our attack with real courage. I can only record what I have been told by those who took part: that the Germans stood on the top of his [sic] trenches so that he could mow down our boys more readily, and, Heaven knows, he did that only too well. Our men went down like grass beneath a scythe.<sup>4</sup>

Archie Surfleet, *Blue Chevrons: an Infantry Private's Great War Diary*

Although Archie Surfleet records only what he has heard in this diary entry about the losses during the first day of the Battle of the Somme, his report still commands credibility: he was there, he saw the wounded, he waited all day for the command that might have just as well ended his brief 19 years of life. "We waited hours; news kept filtering through--good news, bad news, news of captured trenches, of casualties, of our part to come in the attack--dozens of rumors of all kinds" (Wilson, 354). Even--or perhaps especially--those nearest the swirling vortex of conflict often must rely on rumor and the stories of companions in order to piece together a picture of battle, to assemble the complex puzzle. J.C. Dunn, a medical officer with the Royal Welch Fusiliers who also participated in the Battle of the Somme--and who later compiled their

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<sup>4</sup> Surfleet's unpublished diary is held by the Imperial War Museum. My reading of the diary relies upon Trevor Wilson's use of Surfleet's text in his chapter "One Private's Somme" in the *Myriad Faces of War* (1987) and Malcolm Brown's citations in *Tommy Goes to War* (1978).

"chronicle of service in France and Belgium," 1914-1919-- describes the perspective of a typical soldier:

The ambit of anyone's observation is limited, especially during action. At all times food and warmth occupy much of the front-line man's thought--indeed, the private soldier's thoughts, as one of them wrote, are largely bound up by these needs; and when things are moving his load or peril engrosses him. Impressions of happenings are consequently blurred, they become mingled, and are soon lost by the great majority of men. (vi)

Thus, in his account of the Royal Welch Fusiliers, Dunn accepts only the testimony of "first-hand knowledge," he draws on "what was seen and felt, and noted, at the time" (v-vi). His authority, much like Keegan's, seems to come from the immediacy of response that characterizes diary and journal writing.

Well north of Dunn's battalion, Archie Surfleet wrote his account of war experience in a diary, recording daily the rumors, impressions, reactions, and feelings of combat. He was lucky enough to avoid going over the top on 1 July, yet his front row seat brought him in contact with many who did: those returning "with blood-stained faces--hands--bandages; some limping, some being helped along by a pal; all with a look of indescribable fear in their eyes. I know, now, I hate this warring business" (354). With such powerful images resonating in front-line accounts, it is



easy to see why Dunn, and many others, place such faith in them.

Although still a novice in "this warring business"-- Archie had joined up when he turned 19 in January of 1916-- he nevertheless had seen enough of the face of battle to know its "grim reality," to share its "indescribable fear," to hate the machined precision of its destructive business. Because his division was near the northern end of the Somme offensive--opposite Serre, where the attack failed almost totally--his experience was in some ways different than many involved in the battle, only attacking on two occasions during the five month ordeal. The historian Trevor Wilson, however, reminds us that Surfleet's "response to the Somme may be thought fairly typical of the civilians-recently-turned-soldiers who constituted the main body of the army involved in the operation." Indeed, Surfleet "encountered the realities of this phase of the war in a number of ways: as a member of gruelling work parties sometimes reduced to a delirium of exhaustion; as a victim of the mud that came increasingly to oppress trench life on the Somme; and as a much-shelled inhabitant of the trenches or regions behind the lines" (357). The diary he turned to hoping to register this experience may also be thought of as representative of the front-line responses to the war--responses both documentary and narrative in nature.

Although keeping a journal or diary on the Western Front was officially outlawed, numerous soldiers relied upon

such forms to maintain some record of their experience. But why take such a risk? Some, primarily men who wrote daily journals in civilian life, continued to feel the compulsion to write even though most of their normal environment disappeared when they entered the army. The diary provided a link with their past, a continuity of identity in a world that frequently ravaged any sense of identity.<sup>5</sup> For others, it provided a record of their ability to cope with the unprecedented experience of modern war--to meet the test. There is some of this veiled pride, this sense of endurance and accomplishment in Surfleet's entries. For many, the diary provided a place where the chaos surrounding them could be ordered and contained--if only momentarily in the space of their narrative. And although journals often seem to resist the imposition of a narrative line, of a plot (thereby making them choice documents for historians--like

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<sup>5</sup> See Thomas Mallon's *A Book of One's Own* (1984) for a thorough study of diary and journal writing throughout the ages. In his typology of diaries, Mallon suggests a number of standard motives to keep a journal, including those peculiar to: chroniclers, travelers, pilgrims, creators, apologists, confessors and prisoners. And within this range of diary situations, each type demonstrates many shades and variations of motive. On a slightly different note, his comments on diarists and time are particularly significant: "Time is the strongest thing of all, and the diarist is always fleeing it. He knows he will eventually be run to earth, but his hope is that his book will let each day live beyond its midnight, let it continue somewhere outside its place in a finite row of falling dominoes" (xv). This confrontation with time especially haunts the war writer, for he often suspects he may be "run to earth" sooner rather than later. Mallon also points out that many diaries unconsciously turn into narratives--"the reader realizes again the diary's trick of turning into narrative almost without meaning to. Suddenly we are at the climax of a story we hadn't even realized was a story" (81).

Dunn--seeking unmediated expressions of some past event), the journals of the Great War often engage the dynamics of narrative and the claims to narrative truth we have been discussing thus far.

Much like the tragic plot line we traced in Keegan's narrative history of the Somme, Archie Surfleet turns to a similar structure for his personal history of the Somme. In many ways his journey is the classic one from innocence to experience, from a certain naive or unreflective patriotism to a profound fatalism and often deep cynicism.<sup>6</sup> After three months in and around the trenches of the Somme, Surfleet remarks:

I think, too, we are becoming more or less fatalistic; you get like that. I, for one, cannot imagine this blasted war ever ending without most of us being killed or so wounded that we go home to Blighty for good. . . . It boils down to this: we've got to the stage when we don't dare to think of the future. If we are

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<sup>6</sup> Critics often trace a similar evolution in Siegfried Sassoon's war poetry, and this journey can be seen as paradigmatic of the experience on the Western Front. Edwin Campion Vaughan's diary of 1917, *Some Desperate Glory* (1981), begins with "the venture into the dreamed of but unrealized land of war . . . an incredible moment--long dreamed of--when the train streamed slowly out of Waterloo, a long triple row of happy excited faces protruding from carriage windows" and ends with his worst fears realized: "Standing near the cookers were four small groups of bedraggled, unshaven men from whom the quartermaster sergeants were gathering information concerning any of their pals they had seen killed or wounded. It was a terrible list. . . . So this was the end of 'D' Company. Feeling sick and lonely I returned to my tent to write out my casualty report; but instead I sat on the floor and drank whisky after whisky as I gazed into a black and empty future" (1-232).

alright today--if we are alright this hour, almost--it is enough. (359)

Growing despair, frustration, resentment and distrust gradually led him to adopt this fatalistic stance. Confronted daily by excruciating contact with human mortality, Surfleet's mind attempts to block out larger temporal vistas and seeks to live only in the phenomenal moment of the present. But his narrative resists.

Although the Somme for him is inevitably linked to pictures "of miserable wastes, mud and devastation," and "surely no place . . . could be more trying to patience, temper and comradeship" (358), he both records these phenomenal pictures and presents these trials through narrative. Whereas on one level he directly presents his experience, on yet another growing hate of "this warring business" provides a plot and meaning for his narrative: it enables him to represent it, to configure or emplot it. And this hate has both internal and external vectors; the experienced Surfleet of November, anticipating another push, questions some grave diggers about their work: "They were actually digging graves in preparation for our coming stunt and if that is not callous, I don't know what is. The very fact that we turned away and sludged and squelched our way into the filthy huts, *merely disgusted*, makes me think a curious change must have come over us all since we got out here" (360). Tracing this change through Surfleet's emplotment of the Somme, we gradually come to see that his

narrative enables him to mediate between the experiential horrors of his daily existence and the larger structures of value and meaning somehow still important in his life. It allows him to catalogue both internal continuity and conflict--to direct frustration and contempt at his acquiescence in change--as well as to examine the impetus to change provided by external events and forces. His diary works on many levels: it chronicles his experience of the Somme, attests to the supreme value of comradeship, traces his individual journey from innocence to experience, reflects on the meaning and importance of the forces shaping his identity--as well as on the extent and limits of his own agency. Although it certainly gives his vision of the "war the infantry knew," our understanding of that war can only come through reading his diary as far more than documentary evidence of battle. In short, observing the narrative dynamics in Surfleet's text between the particulars of his experience and the more universal structures invoked to (re)present them enables us to explore some of the less obvious and more complex aspects of his war story: dimensions endemic to all narratives.

But when J.C. Dunn anonymously published *The War the Infantry Knew* in 1938, one of his major purposes was to correct the narrative excesses of earlier accounts of the war. He went to the "pure facts" of the war experience--to the letters and diaries of members of the Second Royal Welch

Fusiliers--for unimpeachable testimony. The narrative dimension of Archie Surfleet's diary that we acknowledge above has no place in Dunn's "real" account of war experience. His own narrative, of course, has much to tell us about the construction and reception of other Great War narratives. Perhaps more importantly, his work reveals once again the pervasive complexity of the narrative process, reveals again the dynamic force that imbues every narrative text and context.

Dunn sets out to give us an unambiguous "picture of the War from the front-line standpoint, made without afterthought," and he offers us a "Chronicle," "an authentic record of the comings and goings, the chances, deeds and moods of the Second Battalion of His Majesty's 23rd Foot, the Royal Welch Fusiliers; it tells of blissful and what were counted hum-drum days as well as of fevered hours and minutes" (v). His plain and direct method seeks to provide a verbal snapshot for his readers, a clear and immediate picture of war as the front-line infantry knew it. A letter he wrote to Siegfried Sassoon in March of 1929 emphatically underscores the purpose of Dunn's project: "I don't want the moods of the officers & men of the front-line dished up second hand in the manner of Phillip Gibb [sic] & Beach Thomas; nor distorted by facts and notions acquired after the war, there is that in [R.H.] Mottram: nor ridiculed & caricatured by savage disillusion & revolt: nor mellowed to

a form of art" (xxxii).<sup>7</sup> In fact, Dunn writes against every other form of response that constitutes the narrative matrix of the *Somme*. In the next section we will examine more closely the "second hand manner" of Gibbs' journalism, and later on the mellowing form of art. But now we must examine the mediating force of "facts and notions acquired after the war."

After all, Dunn himself compiled his *Chronicle* in the twenty years following the war, finally publishing his extensive efforts in 1938. Throughout the long process of selecting material, composing a narrative, editing and re-editing, Edmund Blunden and Siegfried Sassoon encouraged Dunn with their correspondence and joined forces with him against a common enemy. Later we will address more fully the particulars of this unholy alliance, one specifically directed against the ridicule and caricature, "savage disillusion & revolt" generated by Robert Graves' *Good-bye to All That* (1929), but one equally opposed to other "distorted" narratives of the war. At this point, knowledge of the collaborative context of Dunn's editing will suffice. After presenting the manuscript to Blunden for editing in 1933, Dunn remarked, "I have found that even intelligent people have the strangest idea of a battle as a battalion

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<sup>7</sup> His targets here include: the conservative war correspondent Beach Thomas, the author of *The Spanish Farm Trilogy 1914-1918*, R.H. Mottram, and the "savage disillusion & revolt" of Robert Graves in *Good-bye to All That*, or Richard Aldington in his scathing novel *Death of a Hero*. The "mellowing form of art" could refer to any number of writers, but perhaps especially refers to the work of Ford Madox Ford in *Parade's End*.

wages battle: to them it is hours of physical exertion & of maiming" (xxxiii-xxxiv). He sets out, of course, to correct this erroneous perception, to tell about the real war the infantry knew. In other words, Dunn intends to step outside the limits of individual bias and perception in order to tell the "truth" of battle.

Writing to Sassoon in 1936, Dunn explains his stake in the project:

I do not hunger after authorship or editorship. I do want to publish the work because it is the most complete & dispassionate biography of a battalion throughout the war I know. It gives relaxation & jollity & mere boredom their place alongside hardship & bloodshed, it shows the condition & mind of the Battalion at different times & it gives glimpses--some of my own mostly--of the many interests there were for such as looked around with open eyes (xxxiii).

To his credit, we must recognize Dunn's genuine efforts to establish the mood of the time, to distill a truth of experience from the myriad sources he tapped. Dunn explains his method in the Preface to the work: "the bulk of the story consists of notes which, though expanded later, were made within twenty-four hours, at most, of the events described. . . . Someone with first-hand knowledge has given the detail of each incident or phase, or has added to it, and readers with equal knowledge may have checked it" (vi). Our point here, however, remains that no matter how



scrupulous Dunn was in attending to the facts of war experience, he deals with individual interpretations of events--"some of my own mostly"--and so he spins his own interpretation through the narrative he creates. Once again, the dynamics of narrative demand that we attend to more than the tale told--even when it is told by such a meticulous teller.

Keith Simpson, the editor of the 1987 edition of Dunn's work, summarizes the evolution of the manuscript and explains why Dunn chose to present it as a composite journal or diary. "In the original draft manuscript, Dunn had written up all the contributions based on letters, diaries, and reminiscences as a narrative, but he decided to restore it to the form of a diary, supplemented by memoir" (xxxiii). Dunn distrusted the shaping force of narrative and thus he reverted to the original journal form of his work. But does expunging the overt narrative gesture remove the contouring force of Dunn's presentation? In short, does his stringing together of diaries leave him without a plot for his work? Does his overt effacement as editor imply a completely faceless narrator? Can we ever read his narrative outside the context of the many voices--the narrative matrix--in which he so obviously situated his work?

This barrage of questions returns our attention to the fact that Dunn's work inescapably finds itself within a narrative matrix of other accounts dealing with the war, and they encourage us to think of his work as a dynamic

narrative--as a work in a process as well as a finished product. What is more, Dunn himself encourages us to think in these terms in his Preface, commenting that "a sense of proportion can be had only by comparison with large-scale accounts; such a comparison is beyond the intended scope of these personal impressions and reflections" (vii). Whereas he has in mind comparing his work to formal histories and tactical studies of battle, we might retain the personal scope of his work and still wish to emphasize the need for comparison and context.

Seen against the horizon of our earlier discussion of Surfleet's diary, we know that even first-hand reports often follow an established plot. That Dunn characterizes the action of the Battalion during the war as "the gay self-sacrifice of junior officers and of non-commissioned officers" should tell us much. The unflinching dedication, the "prompt answer to every call" of the Old Army, the "native virtues"--"good nature and endurance"--Dunn finds common to all soldiers, including those from Territorial and New Army units, also reveals much about the narrator shaping this narrative of "the war the infantry knew." Even these few clues are enough to forecast the story Dunn will tell, to outline the meaning he proposes for the Somme. Yet although following out all these narrative threads must remain beyond the reach of our present inquiry, Dunn's account of 20 July, 1916--the attack on High Wood where

Robert Graves was wounded--provides a representative sample of the narrative method he uses throughout his text.

He begins the Battalion "diary" entry for July 20th stating "the Battalion was relieved amid confusion," assuming here, as usual, that he is a transparent narrator reporting the facts. Calmly relaying the detailed confusion of the hours just after midnight, he notes:

During these hours little happened to interest the rest of us. A man was walking along the Contalmaison road when a 5.9 burst beside him; out of the smoke and dust he was flung in a series of somersaults, just like a rabbit shot when at full stretch: like the shot rabbit he lay all of a limp heap. Another 5.9 tossed D Companys's officers, sending Nigel Parry to hospital to lose an eye. They moved. About 10 o'clock there was more commotion among them after a fresh burst. When Barkie detached himself Mann said, 'He's coming for you, Doctor.' We laughed quietly at the quaintness of his stooping gait, straddling as he ran; it was the agile man's usual run over shell-pocked ground under fire. Graves had a bad chest wound of the kind that few recover from. And so, while we just waited on events and orders, the hours sped (230-31).

The tone here is one of detached professionalism, of clinical distance, a tone reflected in the personal effacement of the narrator. He is a professional soldier of long service, a doctor in the R.A.M.C.; he has seen many men

die, like rabbits, and many wounds "of the kind that few recover from." But since Graves discusses his wound at some length in his own narrative--*Good-bye to All That* (1929)--Dunn cannot ignore it. Quietly he defends his commander's judgment that Graves will not survive. However, if we realize that the commander sent a letter to the Graves family announcing his death, and if we further remember the way Graves comically exploits this scene in *Good-bye*, we hear Dunn's narrative engaging in an intertextual conversation.<sup>8</sup> Dunn's entry on July 31st recalls the incident one last time: "When the death of Bowles and of Graves was reported through the Field Ambulance, nine days ago, the customary letters were written to their kin. Now Graves writes to the C.O. that the shock of learning how much he is esteemed has recalled him from the grave, and

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<sup>8</sup> Graves provides this version of events: "My memory of what happened then is vague. Apparently Dr Dunn came up through the barrage with a stretcher-party, dressed my wound, and got me down to the old German dressing-station at the north end of Mametz Wood. . . . Late that night, Colonel Crawshay [his commander] came back from High Wood and visited the dressing-station; he saw me lying in the corner, and they told him I was done for. The next morning, July 21st, clearing away the dead, they found me still breathing and put me on an ambulance for Heilly, the nearest field-hospital. The pain of being jolted down the Happy Valley, with a shell-hole at every three or four yards of the road, woke me up. I remember screaming. But back on the better roads I became unconscious again. That morning, Crawshay wrote the usual formal letters of condolence to the next-of-kin of the six or seven officers who had been killed" (*Good-bye*, 218-19). Over the next two chapters, Graves includes many letters reporting his death and resurrection, making the most of this "comic scene." He ends stating "the only inconvenience that this death caused was that Cox's Bank stopped my pay, and I had difficulty in persuading it to honour my cheques. Siegfried wrote of his joy to hear I was alive again" (227).

that he has decided to live for the sake of those whose warm feelings he has misunderstood" (246). In Dunn's defense of military procedure, of "customary letters," and in his sense of the inappropriateness of Graves' sardonic response, we see Dunn's mask of transparent narrator slip a bit; his intertextual narrative displays a bit more than the raw data of experience.

And Dunn himself faces moments where he realizes that he is shaping the material he (re)presents. When he continues the story of July 20th, he observes: "The events on which our orders would depend were taking place about a mile, as the crow flies, to our right front, on top of the slope that rose before us. We could not see anything of them, and no news or rumour came our way; but without a knowledge of these events an account of our later concerns would be meaningless" (231). Typically, his project here is not only to tell what happened; he must also provide a narrative frame that gives the events meaning. His narrative of the Battalion struggles again and again to make its war experiences meaningful--at least meaningful from Dunn's perspective.

And he has the perspective of a loyal, committed, professional officer. Thus he ends a paragraph assembled "from statements by Royal Fusiliers, Cameronians, and Scottish Riflemen" with this quote from a participant: "'The whole operation had been conducted in confusion almost from the start, and for want of superior direction it became a

shambles'" (232). As a professional officer, Dunn values leadership. He places a premium on courageous actions and intelligent decisions. Graves and Sassoon both record moments during the War when Dunn's leadership exceeded his assigned duties as Medical Officer.<sup>9</sup> Yet even Dunn's loyalty has limits and the villains in his story clearly are the Brigade and Regimental staffs that avoid the front lines:

Brigade was in poor quarters, a thinly roofed trench in the south-east bight of Mametz Wood, nearly two miles from High Wood, although deep and roomy dug-outs made for a German division were in Bazentin-le-Petit within a few yards . . . of High Wood. . . . This remoteness was laid down in a General Routine Order issued because of casualties earlier in the War. The Order was circumvented by Brigadiers who knew when and how to do it, but times without number it warranted the utter negation of Command when prompt and authoritative decision was needed, especially if more than one unit was concerned. Prompt decision and action were

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<sup>9</sup> Graves describes Dunn as "a hard-bitten Scot, [who] had served as a trooper in the South African War, and there won the Distinguished Conduct Medal. Now he was far more than a doctor: living at Battalion Headquarters, he became the right-hand man of three or four colonels in succession. Whoever failed to take his advice usually regretted it afterwards. Once, in the autumn fighting of 1917, a shell burst among the Headquarters staff, knocking out Colonel, Adjutant and Signals Officer. Dunn had no hesitation in becoming a temporary combatant officer of the Royal Welch, resigning his medical duties to the stretcher-bearer sergeant. The men had immense respect for him, and he earned his D.S.O. many times over" (*Good-bye*, 208).

essential this day, 'yet none of our Brigade Staff came within hundreds of yards of its dissolving units.' The cost in all the lower ranks of preserving some Generals of brigade and division, and some members of their Staffs, is beyond reckoning, but must be stupendous (233).

Once again, Dunn turns to an expert witness for testimony, quoting someone else's view that the brigade staff neglected their responsibilities. Characteristically, though, Dunn's values--"prompt decision and action"--frame the quotation, directing the reader toward an understanding of the criminal nature of this neglect. Despite the clinical detachment he tries to assume, despite his intention to avoid shaping these diaries into a narrative, when Dunn records the heroic endurance of the Battalion he does so through a sobering narrative frame--he sees the tragedy of their action at the Somme. In the August 26th entry, after more accounts of futile attacks in High Wood, Dunn concludes "the rest was tragedy. High Wood was never captured by assault except on July 20th" (255).

Dunn clearly constructs a dynamic narrative: one situated within a narrative field by style, arrangement, and generic claims, yet one directly in dialogue with other Great War narratives and the interpretation of truth they present. One of the remarkable things about Dunn's text is the way he resists the narrativization of the war by other writers--especially the "lurid journalese in the home

papers" (250)--yet so often fails to recognize his own narrative commitments. He is not alone in this blindness, however, as another Somme narrative--by the journalist Sir Philip Gibbs--will show us.

"Those damned newspapers"

The press got all the facts (more or less), it got too many of them. But it never found a way to report meaningfully about death, which of course was really what it was all about. (229)

Michael Herr, *Dispatches*

The attack which was launched today against the German lines on a 20-mile front began well. It is not yet a victory, for victory comes at the end of a battle, and this is only a beginning. . . . And so, after the first day of battle, we may say: It is, on balance, a good day for England and France.

Sir Philip Gibbs, *War Dispatches*,  
"The Historic First of July"

Death or victory, what was the Somme really "all about"? Are these categories useful for understanding such an experience? Or should we resist reading accounts of the Somme in terms of reductive oppositions and rely instead upon a broader horizon of truth, a more encompassing view of "what it was all about"? Whether or not the war correspondents of the Great War got all the facts--even more or less--has been a matter of continual debate since the war. One of the most critical and thorough, one of the most dedicated and principled of the lot, Sir Philip Gibbs, recognized many of the problems of reporting from the Western Front and he constantly struggled to send true accounts, to tell a true story. As his son recalls, "in the



beginning he had no business to be doing this. Five times he was arrested on the direct orders of Lord Kitchener. Five times he returned on some pretext, as a 'stretcher-bearer' or a 'hospital orderly,' or as 'official correspondent with the French armies in the field'" (ix). Finally, Lloyd George intervened and the War Office was forced to accept five authorized war correspondents.<sup>10</sup> And Gibbs' efforts did not cease with the war: in 1920 he published his own "supplement" to the dispatches he wrote from the front, revisiting his war experience in pursuit of a deeper and more elusive truth. His two quite different accounts of the Somme tell quite a tale.

We now have enough background, however, from Keegan, Surfleet, and Dunn, to begin to assess some of the truth of Gibbs' journalistic claims for the "historic first of July." Whatever the outcome of the first day of the Somme offensive, it seems obvious that it was not a victory and that most of these writers would have considerable

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<sup>10</sup> Phillip Knightley, in *The First Casualty* (1975), observes that once the official correspondents were selected they were carefully managed and manipulated--each writer assigned to a censor-monitor for the duration of the war. "The correspondents soon settled down into a routine. On the day that an attack was scheduled, they drew lots to see who would cover which area. Each then set out in his chauffeur-driven car, accompanied by his conducting officer. They went as close to the front as possible, watched the preliminary bombardment, got into the backwash of prisoners and walking wounded, interviewed anyone they could, and tried to piece together a story. Back at their quarters, the correspondents held a meeting, and each man outlined the narrative part of his story, keeping any personal impressions for his own dispatch. They then retired to their own rooms, wrote their pieces, and submitted them to waiting censors" (97).

difficulty joining in Gibbs' assessment of it as "a day of promise in this war" (91). Yet Keegan has the decided advantage of historical distance, and even Dunn had ample time to reflect on the context and meaning of first-hand accounts as he wove them into his narrative. How did Gibbs arrive at his own striking rendition of the day's events?

In his own words, he saw his duty then as "that of a chronicler, not arguing why things should have happened so, nor giving reasons why they should not happen so, but describing faithfully many of the things I saw, and narrating the facts as I found them, as far as the Censorship would allow." We question, of course, how adequate a chronicle he provided for the first day of the Somme; we linger over his narration of the facts.<sup>11</sup> Did

<sup>11</sup> Hayden White's work reminds us that even a chronicle of events innocently cast in a story demands scrutiny. In his essay "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality" he takes up several problems that concern us here. First, "narrative becomes a *problem* only when we wish to give to real events the *form* of story. It is because real events do not offer themselves as stories that their narrativization is so difficult" (in *On Narrative*, 4). Although later in the essay he specifies a far more restrictive definition for chronicle writing than Gibbs obviously has in mind, White's position still opens several of the "problems" associated with Gibbs' narrative journalism. White also pauses on "the fantasy that real events are properly represented when they can be shown to display the formal coherency of a story," and notes that "in the enigma of this wish, this desire, we catch a glimpse of the cultural function of narrativizing discourse in general, an intimation of the psychological impulse behind the apparently universal need not only to narrate but to give to events an aspect of narrativity" (4). In his emphasis on the psychological avatar of narrative, his work intersects with the passages from Brooks we took up earlier. Finally, near the end of the essay, White proposes the most important application his formal analysis of narrative might yield: "Where, in any account of reality, narrativity is present, we can be sure that morality or a moralizing impulse is

ensorship distort his narrative? Although the censors reviewed every dispatch he wrote, "after the early hostile days" Gibbs believed "it [censorship] allowed nearly all but criticism, protest, and the figures of loss" (*Realities*, v). Can Gibbs really believe faithful description is possible within these parameters? Or perhaps his location during the battle gave him too distant a view of events? He was present at the battle, wandering behind the lines throughout the night, then, as dawn approached, actually standing with "a few officers in the centre of a crescent sweeping round from Auchonvillers, Thiepval, La Boisselle, and Fricourt, to Bray, on the Somme, at the southern end of the curve" (*Dispatches*, 94). Yet as close as he is to the action, he realizes that his perspective is that of a spectator. With the minutes inching toward 7:30, "an officer near me turned away, and there was a look of sharp pain in his eyes. We were only lookers-on. The other men, our friends, the splendid Youth that we have passed on the roads of France, were about to do this job. Good luck go with them!" (100). Somehow though, even acknowledging the presence of censorship and Gibbs' physical separation from the front line seems inadequate to account for the disparity between his narrative and the others we have read.

Like diarists and letter writers, Gibbs presents his material with little time for reflection. He gives us an

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present too" (22). The grounding moral impulse in narrative construction will be a concern of ours throughout this study.

immediate reaction--one caught, in Hynes' phrase, in "the whirl and muddle of war." And he expects us to respond directly to the tale he tells, to acknowledge both the limits and authority of his position as narrator. In the journalistic contract he assumes with his readers, he promises to deliver an objective and unbiased view--from a passive and transparent perspective, like that of a camera or tape recorder--and we agree to accept his version of events as the accurate testimony of an eye-witness. Lest we forget this, Gibbs reminds us:

At the end of this day's fighting it is still too soon to give a clear narrative of the battle. Behind the veil of smoke which hides our men there were many different actions taking place, and the messages that come back at the peril of men's lives and by the great gallantry of our signallers and runners give but glimpses of the progress of our men and of their hard fighting (102).

Yet his faith in a "clear narrative" seems unwavering. Due to the "veil of smoke," his erratic glimpses must have been similar to those of generals trying to direct their forces during the battle in the absence of timely or full information. Both parties rely on the same sources--human runners, messengers--for news. Anticipating this, battle plans are designed to cover gaps in communication, to give attacking soldiers orders in the absence of updates, and to provide commanders with a pre-planned plot which enables

them to "see" the battle even in the absence of information; Gibbs, it seems, had an equally consoling narrative--one able to penetrate even the fog of war. Perhaps a lack of information led Gibbs to believe that "our bombardment had done great damage and had smashed down the enemy's wire and flattened his parapets" (102); perhaps such a view fit well with his story. Compared to Surfleet's report of Germans standing on the parapets and mowing down the British soldiers, or of Tommies butchered at the enemy's wire, Gibbs' rendition has the flavor of premeditated optimism.

Even his final assessment of the day's action carries an exuberant tone. Watching lightly wounded soldiers return to their lines, Gibbs provides the following description:

They were wonderful men. So wonderful in their gaiety and courage that one's heart melted at the sight of them. They were all grinning as though they had come from a "jolly" in which they had been bumped a little. There was a look of pride in their eyes as they came driving down like wounded knights from a tourney (106).

Of course, these were men who escaped the slaughter of battle, who cheated the god of death. Most were men with a 'blighty,' a light wound that entitled them to recovery time far from the sound of guns. But rather than emphasizing their profound sense of relief, the joy of mere survival, Gibbs interprets the scene for us in terms of their grins and laughs, their optimism and hope: a scene that to him, "seemed to rob war of some of its horror" (106). He arranges

the events of the Somme in such a way that readers view a scene similarly denuded of the brutality and horror of war. We must ask if such a scene also robs it of some of its reality, some of its truth? What price does Gibbs pay for this narrative? Gibbs' allusion to the pride of wounded knights moves us to ask what story Gibbs is really telling?

"It became customary amongst British writers," observes John Ellis, "to interview the survivors of the bigger battles to produce stirring copy for those back home. Speaking of the supposed accounts of the Somme veterans, one officer wrote: 'These preposterous storie were read and laughed at by every soldier in the line and were considered an immense joke'" (104). Gibbs obviously tried too hard to "produce stirring copy" when he yoked together the soldiers experience on the Somme and the traditions of chivalry. Moreover, his vision of German soldiers--generally portrayed as "dazed and deafened men who held their hands up and bowed their heads"--found little in common with that of the rank and file. John Masefield quotes one soldier fresh from the battle:

I tried to tell myself that I was doing it for this or that reason, to make it sound better, but I didn't believe those grand things. When you are waiting to be killed those damned newspapers seem damned thin, and so do those damned poems about the Huns. The Fritzes are a dirty lot, but they are damned brave you may say what you like. And being killed by a lot of damned Fritzes

is damned bad egg, and no amount of talk will alter it.

(quoted in Ellis, 104)

Although this soldier may lack Gibbs' smooth prose and clear narrative, although we may think of him as damned inarticulate, his story does question the well-shaped narrative Gibbs produces. Lacking the relative immunity Gibbs enjoyed, lacking the comforts of Gibbs' social status as a pseudo-officer, lacking most of all his ability to commute to and from the war, the ordinary soldier's daily confrontation with "being killed" was, no doubt, "damned bad egg."

Even though Gibbs was a professional journalist, one committed by profession to reporting the truth of war, he seems drawn inexorably toward the narrative power of this battle, he appears caught up in its story. In his retrospective book, *Realities of War* (1920), Gibbs claims that the "daily narratives" he wrote concerning events on the Western Front stand "as a truthful, accurate, and tragic record of the battles in France and Belgium during the years of war, broadly pictured as far as I could see and know" (v). Nonetheless, it was only after the war ended--and he exchanged his role of chronicler for that of commentator--that he could address the harsher "realities" of war.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Despite his affirmation that the earlier dispatches have no need of correction, Gibbs writes an 80 page revision of the "realities" of the Somme in his 1920 text. Although he still affirms the willing spirit of the troops--"a man would be a liar if he pretended that British troops went forward to the great attack with hang-dog looks, or any visible sign of fear in their souls"--he also notes that he

Adding Gibbs' records to our narrative matrix of the Somme enables us once again to examine the mediating force of narrative in the construction of truthful and tragic records, and, in so doing, to qualify the limits of what Gibbs "could see and know," to define more clearly a horizon of truth for the Somme. A horizon, we begin to see, fully evident only in the dynamics of narrative.

The extensive preparations and unprecedented bombardment on the Somme left little doubt that the first of July was to be a historic day, one decisive, perhaps, in the conduct of the war. In the days leading up to the attack, Gibbs observed the tide of men flowing "in from the ports of France--new men of new divisions. They passed to some part of the front, disappeared for a while, were met again in

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"was appalled at the task which lay before our men" (289). His later narrative is laced with phrases like "the flower of our youth was cast into that furnace month after month, recklessly, with prodigal, spendthrift, haste" and "those boys were mown down in swathes by machine-guns, blown to bits by shell-fire" (295). The adventure-romance has become a malicious tragedy. He ruefully admits that the "illusion of victory" he so willingly embraced during the opening days of the battle would soon be revealed in the fullness of a terrible nightmare. The "wounded knights" of his earlier dispatches have become "walking wounded" who hobble "slowly with their arms round each other's shoulders." The scene has changed, emphatically: "It was a wonderful picture of war, in all its filth and shambles. But was it Victory? . . . I knew then that it was only a breach in the German bastion, and that on the left, Gommecourt way, there had been black tragedy" (300). Late in the essay he summarizes the "realities" he remembers: "the stream of wounded that came back day by day, the 'Butchers' Shops' [medical treatment centers in the field], the agony in men's souls, the shell-shock cases, the welter and bewilderment of battle, the shelling of our own troops, the lack of communication between the fighting units and the Command, the filth and stench of the hideous shambles which were our battle-fields" (339).



fields and billets, looking harder, having stories to tell of trench life and raids" (*Dispatches*, 92). From the outset, then, Gibbs sees the epic potential of this event: he sees it in terms of "stories to tell," in terms of some grand narrative. Noting the "silences and thoughtfulness" of the men, Gibbs "could guess that something was to happen" (92). Earlier we observed the enthusiasm, the eagerness, of the High Command as they prepared for the "big game" on July 1st. Gibbs records a similar attitude in the men:

There was a thrill in the air, a thrill from the pulse of men who know the meaning of attack. Would it be in June or July? . . . After the misery of a wet winter, and the expectations of the spring, they were keen to get out of the trenches again. All their training led up to that. The spirit of the men was for an assault across the open, and they were confident in the new power of our guns (92-3).

Like a fighter poised for a championship match, or a soccer team or rugby club trained to perfection, the soldiers Gibbs sees are eager to fight.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps he never spoke with Private Hubbard or Archie Surfleet. If we recall the conditions Hubbard was writing in--up to his neck in filth and mud--Gibbs' view seems all the more remarkable:

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<sup>13</sup> The sports metaphors I employ here saturate the texts of the Great War. No only does Gibbs make extensive use of them, but they provide a kind of cultural currency and suggest a narrative line for many other authors as well. For a fuller discussion of this trope, see especially my chapter on Sassoon.

The fields on the edge of the battle of guns were very peaceful. A faint breeze stirred the tall wheat, above which there floated a milky light, transfusing the darkness. The poppy fields still glowed redly, and there was a glint of gold from long stretches of mustard flower. Beyond, the woods stood black against the sky above little hollows where British soldiers were encamped. There, by the light of candles, which gave a rose-colour to the painted canvas, boys were writing letters home before lying down to sleep (93).

Even if we admit that Hubbard was writing from the trenches and Gibbs from behind the lines, this picture looks more like an evening camping with the Boy Scouts than the eve of a great battle. Why did Gibbs tell such a story? How did he come to characterize "those splendid young men" who "smiled grimly" in such glowing terms?

The lively history of war journalism prior to the Great War illuminates Gibbs' dispatches and makes his story a bit more comprehensible. Although the evolving role of the war correspondent needs a far more sophisticated history than Phillip Knightley's 1975 work--*The First Casualty, from the Crimea to Vietnam: The War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist, and Myth Maker*--nevertheless Knightley does help us to see the work of Great War correspondents in a larger social and cultural context. His study of correspondents in wars leading up to the Great War--during what he calls the "golden age" of war correspondents, 1865-

1914--furnishes a fairly detailed picture of early war reporting: we sense a gradually increasing accuracy in the reports, we feel the constant pressure of timely reporting and scooping the opposition, as well as the power of journalistic money in generating vivid accounts of battle and the thirst of the public for sensational news from war (3-63). Arguing that war correspondents only provided what the public wished to read, Knightley remarks: "To readers in London or New York, distant battles in strange places must have seemed unreal, and the Golden Age style of war reporting--where guns flash, cannons thunder, the struggle rages, the general is brave, the soldiers are gallant, and their bayonets make short work of the enemy--only added to the illusion that it was all a thrilling adventure story" (62). This description seems to me to characterize much of the story Gibbs tells us of the Somme as well. He writes of an epic adventure using many elements of the style Knightley outlines here. Moreover, although he does qualify his report in important places, readers leave his account feeling they have witnessed a grand drama, believing they have glimpsed as much of the "real" battle as it is possible to communicate. Thus the narrative invoked by Gibbs' account exceeds his stylistic conventions and the specific way he configures events in his text; gradually it spills over into the narrative frames available within his readers' cultural context for refiguring the narrative--in this case, to the generic frames of war journalism.

Knightley goes on to link the rise of internal propaganda during the Boer War to the powerful influence it exerted during the Great War. Observing that correspondents covering the Boer War included such notable figures as Winston Churchill, Rudyard Kipling, Arthur Conan Doyle and Richard Harding Davis, Knightley describes the reports they rendered: "reports of the pluck, grit, and fighting qualities of the troops, of the chivalry shown on the battlefield, and above all, of the absolutely splendid way the British officers were dying" (66-67). We have little difficulty identifying Gibbs' affinities with this conservative tradition. Although he initially made near heroic efforts to stand outside such an official and propagandized view of events, nonetheless his war dispatches resound with official--"officer-class"--optimism.

Knightley dismisses the journalists of the Great War as unwitting victims of a state-orchestrated propaganda machine--and much evidence can be adduced to support such a claim. But it seems to me that the narrative status of these journalistic reports can account for some of the subtler and more complex disparities between journalistic reports and actual experience.<sup>14</sup> In other words, I suspect

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<sup>14</sup> In a more modern context, Stuart Hall reviews "The Narrative Construction of Reality" with regard to the Falklands dispute in the March 1984 issue of *Southern Review*. He observes "that journalists of very different views and dispositions can tell the same kind of story. I often say to radical friends, 'I'm not interested in what the person's politics are; what kinds of stories do they tell?' Because I know many radical journalists in the media who tell exactly the same stories: they construct events with the same kinds of language as the people who disagree

that Gibbs' reliance on the plot of an adventure-success story and his debt to stylistic conventions of war reporting, combined with generic expectations prompted by war correspondence and the economic power of "historic" headlines, accounts as much for the "distortion" of his narrative as do the more visible shaping forces of censorship and propaganda.<sup>15</sup>

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with them profoundly" (7). My point here is similar: where Knightley wants to direct attention to the political stance of war journalism, I want to explore the larger implications of narrative construction, emplotment, and reception--I want to know what kinds of stories someone like Gibbs tells. What social conventions does he draw on, what inventory of response does he activate through the dynamics of his narrative journalism? How do these change when he shifts to writing personal narratives?

<sup>15</sup> The important point here is the powerful, if indirect, link between stylistic conventions, generic expectations and the shaping forces of censorship and propaganda. The evolution of Gibbs' narratives reminds us that the experience of the Great War often exceeded a recorder's ability to comprehend it, whether he was a soldier or a journalist. Stuart Sillars' study of popular "art" and the war (*Art and Survival in First World War Britain*, 1987) comments that the "major function of art of all kinds is simply to inform and record. But as a task this is far from simple" (3). In its demonstration of the dynamic quality of war narratives, my chapter on the Somme supports his conclusion that all war writers were "limited by external constraints of some kind--the official-censor, the Press Officer, and the various bodies dealing with propaganda and the dissemination of information respectively. And even those accounts most avowedly impartial, which aim to do no more--or no less--than simply record, cannot avoid a personal, interpretative stance of some kind. The writer conceals the truth about his conditions to avoid upsetting those at home; the correspondent's desire for a 'story' leads him towards the unusual rather than the quotidian; and the photographer and artist both subconsciously use their professional skill to select a striking composition which may distort the inner reality while clarifying the external form. Underlying assumptions and attitudes of which the artist is himself unaware add another layer of interpretation, and for the beholder may reveal much about the psychological stances of both artist and intended audience" (4). As his closing sentence suggests, Sillars is

As we noted at the outset of this section, reality is often in the eye of the beholder: the reality of the Somme--victory or death--was malleable. And each way of telling a story activates reservoirs of meaning mutually indebted to what is told and how it is told. Historians, diarists, and journalists all have distinct forms to work within, unique tools available to shape their material. But all of them finally owe allegiance to a narrative dynamics that cuts across their differences. Gibbs managed to construct two very different narrative realities, to attest to two remarkably different narrative "truths." But in order to appreciate the striking differences between his narrative journalism and his later personal narrative of the "realities of war" we need some larger standard to measure them against, some more inclusive horizon by which to gauge his responses.

The horizon of truth by which we assess narratives of the Somme must therefore be open to contributions from several narrative registers: open to readings in terms of style, arrangement, and genre; open to input from historical, literary, and political situations; open to dialogue with a narrator, his text and his audience. Knightley closes off many of these options and misses much of Gibbs' narrative because the only "truth" Knightley will

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most interested in the way artistic structures reflect various strategies for personal and social survival. Nonetheless, his points about the complex intertwining of motives and constraints in the portrayal of war add further support to the claims I am making about the dynamic exchange between registers in narrative.

accept from a war correspondent is one that protests the War. Although we may be ethically sympathetic with such a position, limiting the truth of stories of conflict in such a way does foreclose any sort of genuine dialogue with many narratives of the Great War. We must carefully attend to the ideological, political or economic forces at work in the dynamic exchange between narrative phases, for these forces necessarily contribute to whatever interpretation we construct for a narrative. However, exclusive attention to what we might call, with Jameson, the ideology of form can impose an interpretive distortion of the very kind it sets out to redress. Thus we return to affirm a fully dynamic conception of narrative as the most productive means of addressing the complex interplay between the registers of personal narratives. Gibbs' narratives, for all their shortfalls, reward such a dynamic understanding; as we shall now see, so does the narrative history of Liddell Hart.

### "The Real War" Historically Speaking

Young writers who took part in the last war came back with one desire: to tell the truth about war, to expose its horrors, its inhumanity, its indignity.

Herbert Read, "The Failure of the War Books"

The historian's rightful task is to distil experience as a medicinal warning for future generations, not to distil a drug. Having fulfilled this task to the best of his ability, and honesty, he has fulfilled his purpose. He would be a rash optimist if he believed that the next generation would trouble to absorb the warning. History at least teaches the historian a lesson.

B.H. Liddell Hart, *The Real War* (1930)

As we have seen, any number of contenders might vie for the privilege of relating the "real war": Liddell Hart's 1930 history of the Great War simply claimed the honor directly in its first title.<sup>16</sup> Implicit in his claim, of course, we encounter yet another aspect of the truth of the Somme--one reaching beyond experiential or formal levels toward cultural and political registers. Our reading of Gibbs' dispatches began with formal analysis in hopes of measuring the truth of configuration invited by his narrative--what Hayden White might call "the content of his form"--a measurement enabled by the dialogue between Gibbs'

<sup>16</sup> That the issue of the title was of some importance to Liddell Hart the record leaves little doubt. Brian Bond, in his study *Liddell Hart* (1977), cites the "amusing evidence" concerning alternative titles left by Liddell Hart. Possible titles included: "'No Napoleon', 'The Conflict of Nations', 'The World Folly', 'The World in Wonderland' and 'The Headless Monster'" (53-4). The range and implications of such titles clearly reflect his disenchantment with the Army leadership and may be far more than "amusing."



two different stories, as well as by the growing conversation with other narratives of the Somme. Liddell Hart's historical narratives partially preempt such formal analysis by directly proposing scrutiny of their interpretive ethics. In one sense, they never presume to enact the experiential suffering or loss that other authors have used as a basis for authority. Rather, donning the mantle of historical authority, Liddell Hart overtly organizes and interprets the meaning of the real war for his readers. He claims distance and perspective as authority. Of course, in another sense, such distance only widens the narrative frame within which we must interpret his account and his truth claim refocuses our attention on the power of cultural rather than experiential authority.

Thus, his work raises several significant questions for us. To what extent is his truth of the Somme, finally, a product of generic or political manipulation--a matter of power in narrative interpretation? Can the regulative concept of a horizon of truth provide a method of adjudication between various manipulations of power? Finally, what debt does this method owe to a dynamic conception of narrative? Introducing Liddell Hart's narrative history into the matrix of the Somme enables us to examine the narrative features of yet another mode of response to the battle, suggests a slightly different focus for the space of experience presented, and thereby further broadens the concept of a horizon of truth.

When he expanded and republished his story of "the real war" in 1934, Liddell Hart opted for the more sedate title *A History of the World War*. Although Philip Gibbs also published his two versions four years apart, he argues that his shift in genre--rather than the distance of time--dictated the type of reality and level of truth he was responsive to. On the other hand, Liddell Hart's republication of his history uses the authority of time--of distance, separation, difference; of a culturally sanctioned authority--as support for his revisionist claims about the politics of truth and reality. Having gained a certain popular high ground, he explains the changed title in his new preface: "as a summary of the significant facts of the war it [*The Real War*, (1930)] has met no serious challenge, and even its interpretation of them has been endorsed by the innermost observers of events." Critical and professional dialogues--and lack of serious challenge--thus emerge as one standard by which his work claims truth. But although his history of the war quickly achieved canonical status, many contemporary historians--especially those working on the *Official History*--had some difficulty with his narrative interpretations. The original preface to *The Real War* indicates why:

This book may at least claim one merit, and one contrast to most war 'histories'. I have as little desire to hide its imperfections as to hide the imperfections of any who are portrayed in its pages.

Hence in writing it my pursuit of the truth has not been interrupted by recourse to the pot of hypocritical varnish that is miscalled 'good taste'. In my judgment of values it is more important to provide material for a true verdict than to gloss over disturbing facts so that individual reputations may be preserved at the price of another holocaust of lives.

Whereas Gibbs' dispatches sought to avoid making judgments, at least until after the war when "realities" could be revealed, Liddell Hart believes historical truth can only be served through such judgments, through true verdicts. Directly in the tradition of historical writing, cautiously balancing empirical data with conceptual assessment, Liddell Hart emphatically shifts the emphasis on truth to an ethical and political register--one clearly seen in the polemics of his Preface and measurable only against some larger generic and cultural horizon.<sup>17</sup> Though certainly not apolitical,

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<sup>17</sup> One of the foremost critics of modern historical method, Hayden White, argues that "the nature of 'realistic' representation . . . is the problem for modern historiography" (*Metahistory*, 3). Although my use of a horizon of truth for the narrative matrix of the *Somme* engages similar problems of the nature of realistic representation, as we noted at the outset of this study, this horizon of truth emerges from the dynamics of narrative and exceeds the formalist boundaries White proposes for his study. Paul Ricoeur's critique of White's work in *Time and Narrative* (especially Vol. 3, 151-55) exposes the limits of a purely tropological approach to narrative. Whereas White proposes to "moot the issue of which [model of conceiving history] represents the most correct approach to historical study" (4), Ricoeur works toward "the ultimate referent of history" via its narrative commitments, willingly admitting both the sameness and otherness of all historical representation as they are mediated by analogous modes of apprehension.

the horizon of truth gradually emerging from our study of the narrative matrix of the Somme--one constantly aware of its own precarious situatedness, one dependent upon a continuous exchange between individual narratives and the larger horizon they collectively constitute--should enable us to examine his claims, and the politics of historical truth, more thoroughly.

Although their historical methods and narrative presentations differ dramatically, the works of both Keegan and Liddell Hart share many features: they start with similar assumptions regarding the real war, the tone of their narrative voices intersects in many places, and their narratives build toward truths locatable in cultural and ethical registers. Both writers are intensely aware that they present a partial or exclusive reality--yet each also believes they convey the "real war" through the faces we glimpse or the scenes we view. Thus Liddell Hart explains the reality of his narrative:

Some may say that the war depicted here is not 'the real war'--that this is to be discovered in the torn bodies and minds of individuals. It is far from my purpose to ignore or deny this aspect of the truth. But for anyone who seeks, as I seek here, to view the war as an episode in human history, it is a secondary aspect. Because the war affected individual lives so greatly, because these individuals were numbered by millions, because the roots of their fate lay so deep

in the past, it is all the more necessary to see the war in perspective, and to disentangle its main threads from the accidents of human misery (Preface).

Whereas Keegan directed our attention to the individual soldier, Liddell Hart takes up mass armies and national policy. Keegan focuses on the immediate truth of individual ordeals, Liddell Hart on the distant truth of collective experience. Keegan writes a personal narrative of sorts, Liddell Hart "an episode in human history." Therefore, our study of Liddell Hart's historical narrative must explore the implications of the distance and perspective he adopts. Does his account of this episode in history divorce itself from the human story, from the individuals acting and suffering? Critics of Liddell Hart's work, such as Tim Travers and Keith Simpson, often suggest it does not.<sup>18</sup> Alternatively, if he can truly sever the "main threads from the accidents of human misery," what price must he pay? What, in short, does his narrative reveal about the nature and politics of historical reality?

Tim Travers, in his detailed study of the Great War *The Killing Ground* (1987), identifies two dominant approaches to the historical representation of the Western Front: a

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<sup>18</sup> See especially Travers, *The Killing Ground* (1987) and Keith Simpson's contribution "The British Soldier on the Western Front" in the essay collection *Home Fires and Foreign Fields: British Social and Military Experience in the First World War*, edited by Peter H Liddle (1985). Contrast these critiques with Paul Fussell's unqualified endorsement of Liddell Hart's histories in *The Great War and Modern Memory*.

"critical school of thought" that tells its story by directing responsibility for the tremendous losses on the Western Front toward internal factors such as staff incompetence or lack of leadership, and an opposing school that blames external factors "for the problems and casualties of the Western Front" (xvii-xviii).<sup>19</sup> It should come as no surprise that Travers locates many personal narratives of the war, as well as well-known literary accounts, within the "critical school." In fact, he goes so far as to suggest that early writing in response to the war had little impact "on public opinion until the onslaught of plays, memoirs and autobiographies between the years 1928 and 1930 produced a strongly negative, lasting, and rather misleading image of the Western Front" (xvii). In the next chapter, when we turn directly to the personal narrative of Edmund Blunden, we will begin to explore the nature and implications of this "misleading image" more closely. A personal narrative, after all, necessarily focuses more attention on individual actions and suffering rather than on composite abstractions of national strategy or policy.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Travers is certainly not alone in typing approaches to the history of the war. Keith Simpson speaks of the patriotic and revisionist schools of thought (*Home Fires*, 151), whereas Brian Bond contrasts Liddell Hart's "passionate reaction against the futile slaughter of the First World War" with a more "disinterested historical curiosity" (57). Each of these formulations, however, arrives at a certain categorical certainty--be it methodological or political--rather than the dialectical ambiguity I see in many of these works, especially those of Liddell Hart.

<sup>20</sup> The comments of the historian Trevor Wilson are illuminating here: "The past exists in its own right. The

At this point, however, Travers' claim that Liddell Hart's overtly public work also belongs to this critical tradition demands our attention.

Histories in the external blame tradition, those that locate responsibility for the disastrous consequences of the Western Front in external factors, often transfer blame from the "brass hats"--commanders and their staffs, the men actually planning and directing battles--toward some more remote or abstract cause. Travers identifies several of the more commonly cited external factors as the "inexperienced staff and officers [actually in the field], the appearance of new technology and resulting technical difficulties, the fighting virtues of German officers and men, and political interference" (xviii). Locating the genesis of this approach in the British official history, *History of the Great War: Military Operations, France and Belgium* (commonly known as the *Official History*, published between 1922 and

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historian's task is to know it as completely as is possible. The experiences of poison gas, and lice, and sentry-duty, and a chance encounter with a rodent, are part of the fabric of life lived by a particular body of people during the past. . . . Yet the creative writers are often partial witnesses. And it is important that this be recognized, if only because they are such compelling witnesses, difficult to approach with reserve. They tend to be partial because they are witnessing to the war so largely from the viewpoint of the serving soldier. . . . And they tend to be partial because the personal qualities that enable them to feel so deeply, and to express their feelings so tellingly, are bound to heighten their outrage at what they are experiencing" (676). Our close study of three important personal narratives in the closing chapters of this book will further address the advantages and liabilities of such a perspective. To briefly anticipate, I argue there that our method of reading such works, as well as their historical counterparts, must recognize their "wholeness" in addition to their "partiality."

1948), Travers reminds us that "the history of the British army on the Western Front is also the history of the writing of that story" (203). It might help us to pause for a moment and consider how this story was written, acknowledging the politics and ideology encompassing this official narrative. As we shall see, Travers' enlightened reading of the *Official History*, and his study of the process of its composition, clearly reveals the politics of interpretation that plagues this influential account of the war--politics perhaps inevitable in any interpretation of the war--and thus it provides a clearer cultural and political context for Liddell Hart's works.

Travers argues that "the *Official History* tended to avoid specific criticisms and tried to tell the story as a straightforward narrative. Awkward passages were either relegated to footnotes or appendices, or simply omitted altogether." Throughout our survey of the narrative matrix of the Somme we have noted the abundant problems associated with "straightforward narrative." But in this case, Brigadier General Edmonds, the general editor of the history, saw his role as to "tell the story, but not to be too critical" (203). Clearly, the *Official History* tells a story in its account of the Somme: an official story soaked in facts, one with a distant narrator who carefully explains rather than judges, one with a plodding plot that resembles a poorly told mystery story, one where any solution to the



calamity of the Somme seems beyond the grasp of both the battle commanders and the official historians.

This story, of course, carries clear political implications within its narrative, implications well beyond the way it assiduously avoids placing blame.<sup>21</sup> For example, in the *Official History* summary of the first day on the Somme, events frequently follow their own predetermined course--carefully distanced from command responsibility--as in this description of the failure of artillery to provide ground troops with the protection necessary for a successful attack: "the difficulties of rapidly changing the artillery programme and time-table, in spite of every possible means of communication having been provided, when the orderly up-to-time advance of the infantry ceased, proved almost insuperable" (490). Far more than the periodic structure of this sentence is insuperable here. Given the ramifications of rapidly developing technology during the war, control of artillery was understandably a problem for the army commanders. Nevertheless, the official historians locate responsibility for the failure of artillery to shelter advancing troops in an "insuperable" realm beyond any

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<sup>21</sup> Paul Ricoeur cautions us here, though: "Once the false claim of historians to produce history in a sort of state of sociocultural weightlessness is unmasked, the suspicion arises that all history with a scientific pretension is vitiated by a desire for mastery that sets up historians as the arbiter of meaning. This desire for mastery constitutes the implicit ideology of history" (*Time* 3, 150). Ricoeur continues to argue that while critiques of the ideology of history are useful to a certain point, as correctives, the "negative ontology of the past" they propose remains as incomplete as the concept they attacked.

commander's control--with the tragic result that "many battalions left without any artillery support, after the barrage had passed on," consigned then to make whatever heroic efforts they could while "parties, ever growing smaller, pushed on in spite of shell and bullets towards the objectives" (490). Rather than voicing the outrage we so often encounter in the poetry or personal narratives of the war, or even calling such tactics into question, these historians conclude that "it is inevitable that once a modern army is engaged in battle, either in attack or defence, the leading sooner or later should devolve on regimental officers; and neither the battalion nor the company commanders on the British side in the Somme had the experience of their adversaries" (491). Thus the 60,000 casualties of the first day of the Somme are rather nonchalantly written off to external factors such as superior German experience or failure of battlefield leadership. My point here is not that these factors did not contribute to the massive losses on the first of July--they did, of course--but rather the ease with which the official apologists assume that such appalling losses were produced by "inevitable" external factors, the ease with which their narrative deflects blame from the army commanders. Reading this narrative within the context of the narrative matrix proposed by this chapter forces us to contend with the politics of historical interpretation so prevalent in its narrative inscription.

From this vantage point, then, we can easily see why Liddell Hart was concerned to tell his version of "the real war." Whatever blend of the truth of individual experience and the truth of nations with mass armies at war we decide upon, clearly the evasive and confused narrative of the *Official History* misses the mark.<sup>22</sup> Yet although it may initially appear that the battle for the real war then must be waged primarily in political terms, our dialogue with other Somme narratives suggests a horizon against which we can distinctly see the political concerns of various interpretations. Just as Liddell Hart directly enters his record of the war in the ensuing political debate, so too every narrative we have read has an analogous dimension that can be mapped in terms of hegemonic interests or ideological implication. But because Liddell Hart forces us directly to consider this register of his work, can we ignore the other dimensions of his narrative? Put in different, and more reductive terms, does Travers provide an adequate reading of *The Real War*--or of other personal narratives--by assigning them a place within an internal blame tradition, by identifying their political dispositions and allegiances, by labeling and dismissing them?

If, as Travers suggests above, the history of the war is as much the history of writing the story as the history of the actuality of the Western Front, then a more dynamic

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<sup>22</sup> Even the conservative historian Keith Simpson speaks of the "massaged truth" of the *Official History* (*Home Fires*, 153).

or interactive approach to writing and reading the war seems to be called for. Liddell Hart's work certainly warrants a more complete reading than the one I will briefly propose here, but a few illustrative examples from his history should outline the point I am making. To borrow Travers' terms, Liddell Hart does provide a scathing internal critique, one highly critical of the inability of leadership on both sides of the front. Whereas in past conflicts a great leader--a Napoleon--could turn the tide of battle, Liddell Hart tells a story where technology out paced and befuddled leaders on all sides. His language throughout the chapter on the Somme implies an absurd drama, a charade of tragic proportions. Haig's plan wanted "elasticity," "realism was perhaps equally lacking," and yielded a gross "contrast between intention and achievement!" (230). Thus one of the villains of the story emerges. In this characterization and emplotment, aesthetic and formal concerns reassert themselves in addition to the more obvious social and political issues Liddell Hart has foregrounded. In fact, it is precisely this deep interrelation of various narrative registers that encourages a dynamic reading of his text.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Of course, as we have noted, formal issues are intricately tied to larger ideological or cultural structures. In one sense, then, these structures govern the moralizing impulse that Hayden White argues is present in any narrativization of events. But we must carefully consider the dynamic relation between event and narrative as well. The world of action both precedes the narrative and is prefigured by it--just as Scholes' physical kangaroo preceded any signifying structure--and thus the narrative process inevitably spirals between prefigurative and

Furthermore, although Liddell Hart manages to keep his cool dispassionate eye turned on the battle through most of the narrative, at times his mask of historian slips: "I can vouch for the fact that in the first months after the British had taken over this front . . ." reminds us that we not only have the distance of a professional historian in this account, but we also have the testimony of a participant. In his history, Liddell Hart gives this account of the opening moments of the battle: "July 1 dawned a day of broiling heat, and at 7 A.M. the bombardment rose to its height. Half an hour later the infantry advanced from their trenches--and thousands fell, strewing No Man's Land with their bodies, before the German front trench was even reached" (234). In his *Memoir*, Liddell Hart paints this parallel picture of action on the Somme:

Everywhere was an arid waste of tumbled earth, with here and there a limb or face protruding--of men who had been buried by our shells. . . . It was strangely different from any picture of battle sketched by war artists in the illustrated Press. Instead of the dramatic charge of cheering troops which they depicted, one saw thin chains of khaki-clad dots plodding slowly forward, and becoming thinner under a hail of fire until they looked merely a few specks on the landscape (22-23).

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configurative moments as they are mediated by ideological or cultural structures. Our reading must stay open to a genuinely dynamic exchange between these various registers.

The narrow distance between private recollection and public history demonstrated here reveals that Liddell Hart's work blends the cultural authority and distance sanctioned by historical discourse with his personal claim to the authority of experience. That appeals to individual verity manifest a political stance no less than more collective claims, I will not dispute. But our interpretation, quite simply, must acknowledge both. In so doing, we might ask if someone who has witnessed a "holocaust of lives" is entitled to any special credibility or claim to ethos? If perhaps, at some basic human level, certain perspectives can cut across ideologies in significant ways?

As an historical record culled from the transcribed events of the Somme, Liddell Hart clearly writes a politically shaped narrative, one focused on the claim that the "real war" is best understood in relation to the failure of leadership to reckon with or control an overpowering technology. That his work also opens itself to charges of narrative ideology must be obvious from the tragic plot he uses to configure the Somme and his characterization of Haig. Moreover, in spite of his attempts to sever his study from the "accidents of human misery," we see threads of personal experience intertwined with the main threads of this historical episode. Throughout his work, on every level, we feel a sense of profound mission, of a need to warn, of a need to unveil the real war and its complex truths. We witness a constant struggle for authority and

interpretive power waged between the various phases of his narrative. Therefore, alongside the otherness of the past created by historical distance and political commitments, we also recognize an authority of personal experience and the ethical imperatives fostered by it. Reading his works as dynamic narratives, as works that invite us to consider both the will to power of their narrative interpretations as well as their claims to (re)present profound human experiences, we encounter once again the fullness of narrative expression.

One final example from Liddell Hart's work reminds us of this fullness. Although the following passage from *The Real War* closes his chapter on Ypres, Liddell Hart could easily have written it for the Somme:

To throw good money after bad is foolish. But to throw away men's lives where there is no reasonable chance of advantage is criminal. In the heat of battle, mistakes in the command are inevitable and amply excusable. But the real indictment of leadership arises when attacks that are inherently vain are ordered merely because if they succeed they would be useful. For such 'manslaughter,' whether it springs from ignorance, a false conception of war, or a want of moral courage, commanders should be held accountable to the nation (185).

In this passage, readers taste an ample dose of the "medicinal warning" he sought for future generations. It is

a warning laced with political overtones and cast within the cultural politics of historical narrative; yet it is also a narrative crafted from a particular space of experience and responds to a broader horizon of truth. Interpreting it solely as one or the other robs it of its true status as narrative--and perhaps of its legitimate claims to complex truths.

#### Literary Parentheses

War is waged by men; not by beasts, or by gods. It is a peculiarly human activity. To call it a crime against mankind is to miss at least half of its significance; it is also the punishment of a crime. That raises a moral question, the kind of problem with which the present age is disinclined to deal. Perhaps some future attempt to provide a solution for it may prove to be even more astonishing than the last.

Frederic Manning, *The Middle Parts of Fortune* (1929)

We live in an age equally disinclined to take up the kind of moral questions that trouble Manning, an age whose astonishing solutions to the peculiar human activity of war no doubt exceed even his most terrible nightmares. In his neglected classic of the Great War, a novel centered on action near the Somme and Ancre rivers in 1916, Manning tries to "represent faithfully" the experience of the "anonymous ranks" who paid the price of the Battle of the Somme. Whereas Liddell Hart consciously situates his narrative as an interpretation of the particulars of battle and thereby claims historical authority, Manning reaches beyond historical fact toward more general human truths and moral issues. Glancing briefly now at narratives by Manning



and the epic poet David Jones we cross an important threshold for responses to the Somme. In short, these consciously literary works ask to be read according to different standards and criteria than do the more committedly historical works we have dealt with thus far. They ask to be gauged by their creative use of language, their formal innovation, or even their artistic genius.

The Preface to David Jones' remarkable narrative poem *In Parenthesis* (1937) opens itself to these and other artistic standards. First, he locates the poem biographically and historically, identifies it as one which "has to do with some things I saw, felt, & was part of. The period covered begins early in December 1915 and ends early in July 1916. The first date corresponds to my going to France. The latter roughly marks a change in the character of our lives in the Infantry on the West Front" (ix). But then he carefully distances it from historical constraints:

None of the characters in this writing are real persons, nor is any sequence of events historically accurate. . . . Each person and every event are free reflections of people and things remembered, or projected from intimately known possibilities. I have only tried to make a shape in words, using as data the complex of sights, sounds, fears, hopes, apprehensions, smells, things exterior and interior, the landscape and paraphernalia of that singular time and of those particular men. I have attempted to appreciate some

things, which, at the time of suffering, the flesh was too weak to appraise. (ix-x)

In Jones' terms, literary works thus convey acts of free reflection, they consciously shape words, they appraise from a distance. They propose to be read as literature, not as history. Traditionally, readers and critics have struggled with these demands--reading many works of war literature as nothing more than impure history.<sup>24</sup> In this area, Paul Ricoeur offers sound advice: he observes that we lose more than we gain when we collapse the epistemological space separating historical texts from narrative works of fiction.<sup>25</sup> For all they hold in common, each narrative mode

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<sup>24</sup> An interesting early response in this vein comes from Sophus Keith Winther in his study of *The Realistic War Novel* (1930): "the novel which grew out of the World War follows the best traditions of modern realism, and so gives a new interpretation to the oldest of all literary themes. . . . The exigencies of modern warfare were such as to force a truthful picture of experience, although the tradition of modern realism supplied the necessary background for the treatment" (8-9).

<sup>25</sup> I find Paul Ricoeur's distinctions useful: "I am giving the term 'fiction' a narrower extension than that adopted by many authors who take it to be synonymous with 'narrative configuration.' . . . I am reserving the term 'fiction' for those literary creations that do not have historical narrative's ambition to constitute a true narrative. If we take 'configuration' and 'fiction' as synonyms we no longer have a term available to account for the different relation of each of these two narrative modes to the question of truth." He extends his argument to suggest that "what opposes them to each other does not have to do with the structuring activity invested in their narrative structures as such, rather it has to do with the 'truth-claim' that defines the third mimetic relation" (3). The closing chapters of my work on personal narratives takes up a discussion of these intersecting truth-claims and the way in which readers refigure these narratives in relation to them.

still appeals to distinct generic conventions and promotes certain types of reading. But even though these works may legitimately claim distinct epistemological warrants, Ricoeur proposes that we explore the common ontological ground both types of narrative share--a ground manifested in Jones' poetry through his powerfully shaped words and implied in the "deeper complexities of sight and sound" he presents as subconscious links with the "subterranean influence" of the mythic past.

Thus although we are moving into a different mode of narrative response, Ricoeur reminds us no matter how innovative a poetic act is "the composition of the plot is grounded in a preunderstanding of the world of action, its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources, and its temporal character" (*Time* 1, 54). His basis for such a claim draws upon a conceptual network that enables all practical understanding: a network that places action in the realm of telos, goals and agents rather than in a realm of purely random movement or physical motion (55). In other words, he proposes that basic human cognition or the move to intelligibility depends upon our ability to emplot events--to give them wholeness, to see them in terms of results or ends, to organize them temporally. As we have seen throughout the narratives of the *Somme*, each author endows his narrator with certain agency and then responds to the events and horrors of modern warfare by constructing a narrative line that provides meaning for them. Of course,

because these plots select, structure, and configure events, they inevitably distort actuality in important ways. Nevertheless, we also recognized that important aspects of the practical or historical field--such as individual change over time, various causal relations, and political or ethical implications--are inevitably constituted by this narrative act. And it is this awareness that motivates the literary production of writers like Manning and Jones.

Typically, literary acts deliberately suspend criteria of truth and falsity as part of their generic contract. Obviously, an epic poem such as *In Parenthesis* makes much less of a claim to convey the reality of the Somme than a work called "the real war." Fictional stories often mute questions of the truth of their narrative, adopting a different trajectory of reference than intentionally historical works. When we pick up a novel like *Ulysses* or *Great Expectations*, we grant the author artistic license, a freedom to create the world of Leopold Bloom or Pip as he desires, as well as the autonomy necessary for characterization. Paul Ricoeur defines two different "referential modalities [historical and fictional discourse] into which narrative configurations are, on a whole, divided" in terms of their various trajectories of reference (*Time* 1, 267). Turning to Manning's novel, a work based primarily on actual experience, we see that he, like Jones, intends to cast it within a literary mode of reference: his "prefatory note" attests that "the characters are

fictitious. . . . I have drawn no portraits." He also allows the specific battles and scenes behind the lines to drift free from any commitment to actual actions. In other words, he presents a fictional world for his characters and his readers--yet a world firmly sketched against a rather complex horizon of truth.

Ricoeur devotes a good portion of the second volume of *Time and Narrative* to opening the virtual worlds of literary works to readers. Our interest in literary narratives of the *Somme* thus follows his approach. We too seek

to follow the movement of transcendence by which every work of fiction, whether verbal or plastic, narrative or lyric, projects a world outside of itself, one that can be called the 'world of the work.' In this way, epics, dramas, and novels project, in the mode of fiction, ways of inhabiting the world that lie waiting to be taken up by reading, which in turn is capable of providing a space for a confrontation between the world of the text and the world of the reader (*Time 2*, 5).

As we noted at the outset of this chapter, our general interest in *Somme* narratives revolves around the intersecting worlds of writer, text, and reader--precisely the intersection Ricoeur highlights here. What type of transcendence do literary narratives of the *Somme* claim? How do the worlds they create differ from those of the more committedly historical works we have studied thus far? How do these literary works invite us to engage stylistic,

formal, cultural or political interpretative registers? For help in addressing these questions we now turn to Manning's novel, *The Middle Parts of Fortune* (1929).

Although Manning published his work the same year a number of Great War literary classics were released--such as Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*--his work failed to gain much of their international popularity. In fact, the 1929 edition was privately released in only 520 copies, awaiting a tamer expurgated version in 1930.<sup>26</sup> The lack of popular attention might be explained in a number of ways, the most influential--to my mind--being that it was out of step with the fashions of the time, especially with the more strident critical tone of many of its contemporaries.<sup>27</sup> The basic story of the novel--a nightmare vision of a recent battle,

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<sup>26</sup> Released then as *Her Privates We*, Manning's work had to wait until 1977 to achieve publication in an unexpurgated copy. My citations come from the new edition. This note heads the 1929 edition: "This, the only edition of THE MIDDLE PARTS OF FORTUNE, is limited to five hundred and twenty numbered copies on hand-made paper, for issue to subscribers. An ordinary edition of the same work, but with certain prunings and excisions, will be published through the usual channels, under the title of HER PRIVATES WE." (from number 288, Brown University Library).

<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, Hemingway is quoted in the new edition as calling it "the finest and noblest book of men in war that I have ever read. I read it over once a year to remember how things really were." And T.E. Lawrence: "No praise could be too sheer for this book . . . It justifies every heat of praise. Its virtues will be recognized more as time goes on." Although grossly oversimplifying the issues at stake here, a focus on titles alone--Graves' *Good-bye to All That*, Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* versus Manning's *The Middle Parts of Fortune*--might begin to suggest the greater balance and restraint Manning works with compared to these more successful works.

followed by scenes of rest and support area details, culminating in a final battle and the death of the protagonist--could be that of any number of soldiers who participated in the battle of the Somme. In fact, his story follows the same basic outline as Private Surfleet's actual experience at the northern end of the Somme offensive. However, the narrator of Manning's text, Private Bourne, does stand a bit apart in a number of ways: he has more money and education than most line soldiers, more understanding and compassion for the officers and NCO's, and more balance in his critiques of events. On one hand, then, his vision--like that of his author--represents a somewhat privileged and reflective view of events. But only somewhat: Bourne does hold the rank of private, and so he is subjected to all the details, fatigues, and pointless training of any other front-line soldier. Once again, the details of his daily existence read in many ways like the entries we saw earlier in Archie Surfleet's diary:

The next day they moved back to the sordid squalor of Meaulte, where they spent two nights housed in stables, and the draft ceased to have a separate existence, being absorbed by the various companies. There was a kit inspection, at which Bourne's tin hat was condemned, the fact being entered in a notebook by Sergeant-Major Robinson; and that piece of ritual concluded the matter for the time being, the company-quartermaster-sergeant having no surplus tin hats at

his disposal. At Meaulte they were still within the battle-area, and there was nothing for them to do. Shem, Bourne, and Martlow idled about, looking at the interminable train of motor lorries, which passed through, day and night, without ceasing, and so densely packed that it was difficult to cross the narrow street between them (37).

Like Surfleet, Bourne is swept along by the mechanical tide of war, parading for inspections and idling about during spare moments. He also records the sense of being caught in the war--in this case with a mangled tin hat--and not being able to anything about it. Powerless, a pawn in an often incomprehensible game, Bourne floats amid the sordid squalor of the war.

Nonetheless, for all its documentary value, Manning's novel clearly projects a world outside itself. On one level, his work looks forward to the politically and socially oriented fiction of the thirties in his concerns with class interaction and struggles for power. Bourne's meeting with the impersonal force of Colonel Bardon during an inspection is typical of the view Manning gives us of an authoritarian upperclass:

When one is standing to attention, one is still, erect, with eyes looking straight in front of one, but as the footsteps of authority come closer and closer, one seems to apprehend something of the reality before it is visible; then into one's field of vision, at first



vague and indeterminate, then suddenly in sharp definition, comes a face, cold and unrecognizing but keen and searching in its scrutiny, and it blurs again and is gone (129).

The harsh face of authority, the respect it demands, the utter control the Colonel has over the faceless "one" of this passage (Bourne, the protagonist) all help sketch Manning's interest in the very real class distinctions in both the Army and surrounding society. Moreover, his focus throughout the novel on the interaction between authority of position and authority of character suggests as well the inescapable political dimensions of his text. Bourne's situation constantly prompts us to ask: Who should lead? By what authority? Finally, the moral overtones of his "Prefatory Note" clearly remind us that much fiction written during these years looked not only back toward the Great War but also forward toward a gathering storm on the horizon.

But on another level, the gaze of Manning's work is resolutely directed inward--toward the loneliness and isolation of his central character, toward the psychic desolation of the modern soldier. The movement of the opening lines of the text establishes a thematic current for the novel, a constant motion from many to one, from outer to inner: "The darkness was increasing rapidly, as the whole sky had clouded, and threatened thunder. There was still some desultory shelling. When the relief had taken over from them, they set off to return to their original line as

best as they could." Then we meet the protagonist: "Bourne, who was beaten to the wide, gradually dropped behind, and in trying to keep the others in sight missed his footing and fell into a shell-hole. By the time he had picked himself up again the rest of the party had vanished; and, uncertain of his direction, he stumbled on alone" (1). Stumbling on, alone throughout the novel, Bourne--an over-privileged, over-educated private--only rarely finds solace with others.

His few close friends, his chums, Shem and Martlow, carouse with him, dodge work with him, mess with him, endure nightmares with him, and finally go over the top together with him: in short, they share life's most various and even intimate moments with him. But it seems they never really know him. Bourne floats freely between them and his friends and acquaintances among the NCO's and officers--a man quite clearly without a home. One source of tension throughout the text springs from Bourne's selection by his officers to attend the officer training course following the next battle. Of course, taking a commission would place him in the position of selling out his mates, especially given the Great War situation where the rank and authority vested in officers often made them a more visible enemy than the Germans. Bourne, to say the least, is painfully aware of his contradictory position.

As readers, we must be too. Manning relentlessly points us towards the paradoxes, contradictions, dilemmas and complexities of modern war. He locates us resolutely in

"the *middle* parts of fortune." Throughout the work he invites his readers to live in a world torn between self and other, between autonomy and determinism, between internal nightmares and external chaos, between rational control and bestial savagery--in a world precariously poised between life and death. Caught in the swirling vortex of war, he forces us to see the soldiers as both victims of it and the agents by which it proceeds. One passage says it all:

the sense of being at the disposal of some inscrutable power, using them for its own ends, and utterly indifferent to them as individuals, was perhaps the most tragic element in the men's present situation. It was not much use telling them that war was only the ultimate problem of all human life stated barely, and pressing for an immediate solution. When each individual conscience cried out for its freedom, that implacable thing said: 'Peace, peace; your freedom is only in me!' Men recognized the truth intuitively, even with their reason checking at a fault. There was no man of them unaware of the mystery which encompassed him, for he was a part of it; he could neither separate himself entirely from it, nor identify himself with it completely. A man might rave against war; but war, from among its myriad faces, could always turn towards him one, which was his own (181-2).

And despite the personal, particular focus of Manning's novel, he tenaciously turns these myriad faces toward us. He

forces us to live in a world where each crime carries with it its own punishment, where the truth of experience must perforce be dialectical. Like the soldiers above, he reminds us all of our paradoxical complicity in our fate, of our inexorably dual status as both agents and victims of history. His narrative of the Somme invites us to join a world full of the seething fury of experience, to reflect on the narrative shaping we struggle to give such experience, and to ponder the moral implications of both. Moreover, as we face the ultimate problems of life--and press for solution through our own comforting narratives--he insists that we acknowledge the fundamental mystery of human experience, the aporias of human temporality.

Manning's novel deserves far more attention than we have time to give it here, and we have scarcely touched Jones' remarkable narrative poem. But we have seen enough of each to justify an interactive reading of their narratives. And through a reading fully attentive to the dynamic quality of their narratives, we gain depth and texture for the horizon of truth emerging from the larger narrative matrix of the Somme. The historian Trevor Wilson asks "what use do literary works concerning the war have for the historian?" and then answers his own question by pointing to the way they "seem to illuminate an area much wider than themselves. Creative writing is a prime source for this general-embodied-in-the-particular concerning one of the war's most intense areas of experience" (675-76).

Yet however partial their truth, however compelling their witness, they only reveal these universal areas of experience--these areas wider than themselves--when we engage their narrative dynamics, when we attend to their various registers of response.

### Images and Realities

I am particularly interested in the practical understandings, the practical frameworks which people use and which are largely unconscious. When people say to you, "Of course that's so, isn't it?" that "of course" is the most ideological moment, because that's the moment at which you're least aware that you are using a particular framework, and that if you used another framework the things that you are talking about would have a different meaning. (8)

Stuart Hall, "The Narrative Construction of Reality"

Criticism of Great War literature has wrestled with the problem of "frameworks" from the time critics first started writing about various texts. Who has the real story? Whose view should constitute the "real war"? By what standard should the "realities of war" be measured? What limits, what "parentheses" can the author or critic impose and still claim truth? In his study, *The First World War in Fiction* (1976), Holger Klein suggests an important standard for contemporary criticism of war fiction: "Fiction here had an immediate, factual correlative of which millions were intensely aware. And the overriding criterion applied to war fiction was truth" (4). He goes on to explain that, for war novels, the realistic conventions of verisimilitude were

often supplanted by an insistence on bald truth to facts. "Thus (besides the extent of personal experience) the proportionateness of selection, the justice of typification, the correctness of detail and accuracy of data were scrutinised assiduously" (4-5). Recalling J.C. Dunn's principles of selection for *The War the Infantry Knew*, or Liddell Hart's analysis of war materials, we see standards normally used to evaluate historical texts being applied to literary works.

Even our limited survey of the narrative matrix of the Somme, however, reveals numerous problems with such naive formulations of truth; it encourages us to measure war narratives against some larger horizon. Reflecting upon the horizon of truth inferred by these narratives, we see a horizon sketched in relation to the worlds presented by the texts: a horizon shaped by the actual experience recorded and the style used to convey it, one colored by the configuring force of plot and modes of narrative arrangement, one actualized by readers interacting with various horizons of expectation. In other words, the hermeneutic approach we have taken to Great War narratives thus far relies upon understanding the dynamic relationship between the reality of the Western Front, the narrative images created to (re)present it, and the audiences available to receive and interpret them. We now must study this dynamic approach to narrative more directly.

Like it or not--and many emphatically dislike it--we live in an era of theoretical criticism most commonly called *post-structuralism*, an era often unconcerned with questions of textual meaning or power. Tzvetan Todorov suggests we reconsider these claims and arbitrate between various methods by using an ethics of reading such as the one he proposes in *Literature and Its Theorists* (1987); briefly, he asks us to engage in a dialogue of critical humanism. Surveying theoretical no man's land, Todorov observes that post-structuralism--for all its variations--has developed along two major strands

which have one thing in common: they make the earlier question, "What does this text mean?", completely irrelevant. The first--and the more dogmatic and elaborate--of the two types is called "deconstruction." Oversimplifying somewhat, we might say that deconstruction renders the earlier question moot by invariably answering: "Nothing at all." The second type of post-structuralism, more cheerful but also more naive, is sometimes known by its advocates as "pragmatism." Pragmatism renders the question meaningless by replying: "Anything whatsoever." In the wake of either response, obviously, the question can hardly be raised again. (183-4)

As should be obvious by now, I hope to resurrect precisely the question of meaning in my study. Even if Todorov paints an overly reductive picture here, it is difficult to imagine

a truly post-structural approach to the literature of the Great War. As our brief journey through the narrative matrix of the Somme has shown, personal narratives and historical accounts of the war stake some claim to meaning as the first condition in their various contracts.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, to dismiss the referent of the war as irrelevant to these works, as vulgar deconstruction finally must, seems a bit preposterous.<sup>29</sup> Nor are Great War works open to the naive pragmatism of an indiscriminate pluralism: each text finds itself situated--generically, contractually, historically, culturally--within interlocking horizons of expectation: horizons and situations that must be accounted for in our reading of them. Nonetheless, as we have seen in our study of Somme narratives, post-structural theories do suggest important qualifications for naive ideas of reference and realism by problematizing notions of unmotivated or transparent constructions of the real.

These are the issues much contemporary marxist thought has been grappling with, and Scholes' critique of Jameson reminds us just how difficult life as a materialist-idealist

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<sup>28</sup> Of course, post-structuralist theory works from an alternative linguistic assumption and focuses on the semantic rather than the syntactic or discourse linguistic level--privileging the systematic difference of post-Saussurean linguistics. But as Scholes (see above, *Textual Power*), Christopher Norris, *The Contest of Faculties* (1985), and others have shown, post-Saussurean linguistics holds to a number of contradictory claims.

<sup>29</sup> And although Derridian deconstruction may be considerably more nuanced than Todorov suggests here, at least in American critical practice what we might consider reductive or vulgar deconstructive criticism seems to be the prominent form available.



can be. Todorov--not surprisingly, given his personal experience of living under a totalitarian form of Marxism--has even less patience than Scholes with a marxist answer to post-structural problematics. Hence he writes:

Marxist criticism thus recognizes the relation of literary works to the world and to values, but it rejects universality: truth and justice are grounded in history rather than reason. It is evident, then, that the Marxist opposition to post-structuralism is not as radical as it may have seemed: above and beyond their quarrels over specifics, both are fighting a common enemy called humanism--in other words, in this case, the attempt to ground science and ethics on reason and to practice them in a universal way. Now it is clear why there have been so many attempts to hybridize these two apparently opposed schools of thought. (190)

Todorov's own answer to the dilemma posed by theoretical no man's land rests in his modification of Bakhtin's dialogic criticism, a modification based upon the regulative force of the horizon of truth in dialogue, the horizon of "universality" he describes above. Although universal conceptions of truth are notoriously difficult to pin down--witness Todorov's own vague use of the term--if we think in terms of the notion of a horizon of truth I have used throughout this chapter, perhaps the concept takes on clearer meaning. In a hermeneutic-sounding moment of insight, Todorov explains: "The choice between possessing

the truth and giving up all claim upon it does not exhaust all the possibilities that lie before us. Without turning one's back definitively upon universal values, one may posit them as a possible area of agreement with the other rather than as an a priori certainty." Later, he further refines his conception of truth: "The truth may be a common horizon, a set of directions for the journey, rather than a point of departure. Instead of abandoning the idea of truth, one may change its status or function, making it into a regulatory principle behind an exchange with the other, rather than the content of the program" (160). Once again, thinking of our survey of narratives of the Somme as a journey in Todorov's sense may help to clarify this abstract image: the regulatory horizon of truth emerges through the dynamic interplay between aspects of the narratives studied--each interpretative register affirming its partiality, its otherness, while at the same time depending on interactive dialogue for true understanding.

Positing a dialogic truth as the horizon of human knowledge, Todorov joins a long line of hermeneutic philosophers running, in part, from Gadamer to Ricoeur.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> See Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, and Paul Ricoeur's philosophy in general. David Hoy's book on hermeneutic philosophy, *The Critical Circle* (1978) provides an outstanding introduction to hermeneutic questions for literature and history. Reviewing the nuances of a truth contingent upon an intersubjective consensus rather than upon a transcendental subject, Hoy proposes this summary: "the position sensibly holds that more than a mere subjective assertion of belief is needed to make an interpretation true, but then it must specify the intersubjective conditions for something to be true. Implicit in this theory of truth is the concept that any

Interestingly, his method of dialogic criticism--"which speaks not about literary works but to them, or rather with them" (161)--shares much with the hermeneutic method of reading Paul Ricoeur deploys in *Time and Narrative*; the method, of course, we have explored throughout this chapter. In fact, the basis for hermeneutic studies has long been the shared search for meaning that Todorov isolates as the benchmark of his form of dialogic criticism (163), a shared search we invited each narrative in the *Somme* matrix to contribute to. Recalling our earlier discussion of the reading subject, one now engaged in a collaborative pursuit of truth, this form of criticism requires a complex notion of the subject, one fully aware of a reader's status as a situated, historical subject, yet one also responsive to a transhistorical horizon of truth.

Todorov notes that dialogic reading has a special ability to deal with contemporary works asserting their "own heterogeneity," with "works that know themselves for what

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*rational being* would also think such and such to be true. The concept of truth thus undergoes a Kantian modification and becomes a regulative principle. Instead of being actually attained (or even attainable), truth is considered as necessarily, although only formally, implied in the act of asserting a judgment. Further, the principle takes into account the finitude of human reason and recognizes that all the conditions for making a judgment may not be specifiable or verifiable, and that some revisions may therefore turn out to be in order. The advantage of a regulative principle of truth is that it allows for the possibility both of inadequate present knowledge and of criticism" (108-9). Thus, in my study, the narrative matrix of the *Somme* outlines a range of intersubjective conditions that enable interpretation to be seen against a horizon of truth. For an opposing view, consider the objections Paul de Mann raises in his essay on Jauss in *Resistance to Theory* (1986).

they are, at once literary construction and search for truth" (168). Whereas he is thinking particularly of the works of Solzhenitsyn, Gunter Gass, and D.M. Thomas, I believe this form of reading likewise provides a productive model for the complex personal narratives of the Great War, works caught equally between literary construction and a search for truth. As we noted above, the unending search for some tellable truth in the reality of war--a truth caught within the matrix of available narrative forms and literary possibility--characterizes these works. Some of the best Great War works, like Robert Graves' *Good-bye to All That* (1929), clearly declare their generic heterogeneity, oscillating freely between personal autobiography and public memoir in their dialectic with truth. Others, such as Sassoon's fictional memoirs or Manning's autobiographical novel, find themselves torn between conventional categories, struggling to locate truth through literary construction. Each of these works demands responsible dialogue with critics, dialogues too long ignored. In the no man's land Todorov defines between dogmatism and skepticism, skirmishes with meaning, debates of value, understanding of truth awaits these works: we must consider reading the Great War through the lens of a powerful and enabling dialogic criticism; in short, we must enter no man's land.

## Ricoeuring Questions

A human being is not one thing among others; *things* determine each other, but *man* is ultimately self-determining. What he becomes--within the limits of endowment and environment--he has made out of himself. In the concentration camps, for example, in this living laboratory and on this testing ground, we watched and witnessed some of our comrades behave like swine while others behaved like saints. Man has both potentialities within himself; which one is actualized depends on decisions but not on conditions.

Viktor E. Frankl *Man's Search for Meaning*

In part, Todorov's dialogic model--a type of reading that encourages a reader to join with writer and text in genuinely open dialogue, yet a dialogue cast against horizons of truth and value--proceeds from his complex understanding of the categories of the same and the other. His past experience as an immigrant in a foreign land makes him particularly attentive to a critical dialectic between submitting to others and speaking for oneself, a dialectic of same and other. As we shall soon see, Todorov's ideas are especially revealing for a study of battle narratives because the experience of the soldier, specifically of the soldier on the Western Front, often evokes a dialectic of same and other, of soldier and civilian, of us and them.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> See Paul Fussell's chapter, "Adversary Proceedings," for a survey of the pervasiveness of a we-they mentality during the Great War. Even if we resist tracing the "gross dichotomizing" habit of modern times directly "to the actualities of the Great War," he does present a striking inventory of polarized positions and a plausible defense of "the *modern versus* habit: one thing opposed to another, not with some Hegelian hope of synthesis involving a dissolution of both extremes (that would suggest 'a negotiated peace,' which is anathema), but with a sense that one of the poles

Our very first example of a battle narrative, Private Hubbard's letter, incorporates this dialectic. So too with other war narratives: from the internal dialogue inherent in their inscription to the external dialogue supplied by critical reading, these battle narratives encourage continual dialogue between self and other.

In a chapter recording a conversation with Paul Benichou, Todorov summarizes Benichou's critical practice--a practice illuminating Todorov's own dialogic criticism--as "an attempt, first of all to bring to light, then to articulate, a certain number of antinomies: between determinism and freedom, the universal and the particular, contextual fidelity and the systematic spirit, the conscious and the unconscious, knowledge and judgment, the self and the other" (153). Although this review catalogues a number of binary oppositions (favorites of structuralism frequently dismantled by deconstruction), Todorov himself focuses on the dialectical force generated by the various axes, using the space between terms to direct attention to the oppositional power outlined by this array of antinomies. Paul Benichou's response clarifies the position:

These antinomies in fact can be reduced to the opposition between objective existence and the existence of the human subject, an opposition that

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embodies so wicked a deficiency or flaw or perversion that its total submission is called for" (79). But our reading of Manning reminds us that, for all the dichotomous formulations of the war, important positions between these binary oppositions also exist.

cannot be resolved either by the chimerical suppression of one of the two terms integrated with the nature of the other, or by the production of a third term, for which nothing at all supplies the idea. This is neither an aspect nor an episode of the life of the human mind, but its principal definition. Let us therefore welcome the contraries in our studies and attempt to accommodate them side by side in our criticism as in ourselves. (153)

I understand Benichou to be advocating a dialectical definition of the human mind, a definition delicately poised between objectivity and subjectivity, one cognizant of the aporias inevitably introduced by the collision of antinomies. In short, he proposes a mind well-prepared for hermeneutic harvest.

Fully aware of these aporias, Benichou emphatically resists any chimerical deconstruction of the basic categories of self and other, relying instead on phenomenological support for his conception of the human condition. The most profound paradox, nevertheless, still awaits Benichou--that of transcendence. He addresses the dilemma with caution:

It is human subjectivity that includes a transcendence, it seems to me, in that it takes itself invincibly to be transcendent and--in spite of all doctrinal professions to the contrary--experiences itself as such. It is a fact that everything that constitutes

and distinguishes the human subject, in particular the exercise of knowledge and the conviction of free will, and everything that links the human subject with others--culture, law, morality--transcends the factual order and can be conceived on the purely objective level only through the verbal rejection of what is self-evident. The idea of a transcendence enclosed in the intimate sense of man may seem paradoxical; it is perhaps even philosophic nonsense, but this nonsense, if that is what it is, encompasses all that we know of ourselves, without any subtractions or additions. (153-54)

The philosophic nonsense Benichou seems most indebted to is the nonsense of philosophic hermeneutics, particularly as Paul Ricoeur has developed it over the past twenty years. Ricoeur grounds his own philosophic inquiry in phenomenology, a sort of bedrock of reality that helps substantiate the "self-evident" claims Benichou makes. Although Benichou makes no claims to be a professional philosopher, responding only "to the extent that reflection about the human condition is natural in each of us" (153), his reflections gain considerable strength when positioned within the overtly philosophic meditations of Paul Ricoeur. Both Todorov and Benichou find an important philosophic touchstone in the phenomenological hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur. In this capacity, Ricoeur's work grounds my own



study; in this way too, his method poses significant recurring questions for readers of battle narratives.

In the opposition between self and other, both Todorov and Benichou encourage a double vision of literary works, a vision that enables genuine dialogue between the self of a reading subject and the other of the object read. I suspect that Paul Ricoeur would embrace this model initially, but he would then extend it by means of a triple theoretical articulation of the same, the other, and the analogous. Working from a linguistic model that assumes all linguistic expression has at least a twofold reference--an objective meaning in the context of the language system and a subjective meaning unique to the author and specific conditions (Klemm, 20-21)--Ricoeur studies the inevitable dialectic between part and whole, text and context, self and other. But his analysis of the dialectical nature of language constantly leads him towards structures that attempt to mediate this opposition--such as metaphor and narrative. Whereas his earlier work on metaphor traces the linguistic components of human experience along the axis of the same and the other to the analogous realm of metaphor, his later work positions these categories within time, working towards a hermeneutics of historical consciousness throughout *Time and Narrative*, a consciousness of structures of human temporality as they are mapped out by narrative.

Although no summary will do justice to the intricacy of Ricoeur's argument, he reviews the initial dichotomy of same

and other in terms of historical and fictional discourse. Working from otherness to sameness, he outlines a complex refiguration of time by these narrative modes.

In our opening step the emphasis was on the dichotomy between the intentions of each narrative mode, a dichotomy that is summed up in the overall opposition between the reinscription of lived time on the time of the world and the imaginative variations having to do with the way these two forms are related to each other. Our second step is indicative of a certain convergence between . . . the function of standing-for exercised by historical knowledge as regards the "real" past and, on the other hand, the function of significance that clothes fictional narrative when reading brings into relation the world of the text and the world of the reader. (*Time* 3, 142)

In other words, Ricoeur works from the difference of reference and intention, in historical and fictional discourse, toward the common features of construction and refiguration that all narratives share--from otherness or difference, toward sameness and identity. Once again, our review of narratives of the *Somme* follows a similar pattern. Of course, as we soon saw, each moment of isolation artificially freezes an intricate dynamic: self and same defined in opposition to other and different, the enigma of difference or absence unable to acknowledge continuity or presence. Ricoeur answers this dilemma by reattaching the

idea of the analogous to the complex interplay of the same and the other. Taking his specific example from historical discourse, Ricoeur explains:

In the hunt for what has been, analogy does not operate alone but in connection with identity and otherness. The past is indeed what, in the first place, has to be reenacted in the mode of identity, but it is no less true, for all that, that it is also what is absent from all our constructions. The Analogous, precisely, is what retains in itself the force of reenactment and of taking a distance, to the extent that being-as is both to be and not to be. (*Time 3*, 155)

Stylistically, narratives of the Somme established authority through the register of identity or sameness, built on the authority of personal witness. Structurally, we noted the absence of the past in the modes of emplotment characteristic of each type of narrative. Critically, generically, and culturally, the heuristic of a narrative matrix enabled us to begin to explore the complex field of analogous forces present in these same narratives. Whereas Todorov and Benichou tend to limit their dialogic criticism to categories of the same and the other, Ricoeur moves to a three dimensional critical model by meditating on the dynamics of narrative--and he emerges with categories attentive to the dialogic impulse inscribed within existing narrative forms, as well as those supplied by the critical act. In short, Ricoeur's work provides a more complete way

to engage in dialogue with Great War battle narratives because he identifies a dynamic dimension evoked through the analogous in the exchange between same and other.

Nevertheless, in a characteristic move, Ricoeur also notes the inevitable incompleteness of his approach to the past--incomplete because any abstraction of the past severs its necessary dialectic with present and future--observing the limits of his method even as he articulates a way to understand narratives of the past more fully. Faced with the fundamental aporetics of temporality, Ricoeur remains faithful to a method of hermeneutic approximation, proposing that any reading of the past be placed "successively under the leading kinds of the same, the Other, and the Analogous." Thus his readings reveal a method committed to an inevitable dialectic of explanation and understanding, a method convinced of the fundamentally mysterious quality of the human experience of time--of historical consciousness.

Ricoeur's insistence that any record of the past--personal, literary, or historical--necessarily constitutes an act of "standing-for or taking-the-place-of" reminds us again of the complex way personal narratives of the Great War (re)present experience--both exposing the past and configuring it. Never reducible to mere reference--to veracity or authenticity of the type Dunn or Gibbs advocates--or to mere artificial constructions, these battle narratives seek to represent a profound and perhaps revolutionary moment in the experience of human temporality.

These writers grapple with an incomparably unique horror, and perhaps with an unprecedented truth. Never before in human history had so many men been both agents and victims of such mechanized destruction; never before had the basic terms of the narrative of human life been altered so emphatically; never before had the human consciousness of being in time been subjected to such radical review. As Ricoeur reminds us, "we are only the agents of history inasmuch as we also suffer it. The victims of history and the innumerable masses who, still today, undergo history more than they make it are the witnesses par excellence to this major structure of our historical condition" (*Time* 3, 216). The personal narratives of the Great War testify to this historical condition through their record of a novel experience; they also attest to its unique horror.

In order to understand these narratives, indeed, to read them or to read the war in any meaningful sense, one must probe the way they "stand-for" this unprecedented moment, one must explore the "fundamentally dialectical structure of the category of standing-for." For too long, critics have taken these narratives as static texts, as simple documentary fiction or untainted history. Now we must expand our reading to see the many ways they exceed these definitions, to recover more fully what they stand for. As Ricoeur suggests, we too must engage the dynamics of "standing-for" which "means by turns the reduction to the Same, the recognition of Otherness, and the analogizing of

apprehension" (*Time* 3, 157). Using each of these categories in turn, allowing them to problematize and question the claims of the others, our reading of the personal narratives of the Great War will gradually "hunt for what has been," will dialectically search for truths presented by them.

The method of reading I propose here responds to the self-consciously dialectical nature of these narratives--to their competing claims under each of the categories of same, other and analogous. Just as Ricoeur identifies the complex interweaving of history and fiction in narrative,<sup>32</sup> so too the personal narratives of the Great War transcend traditional categories and genres, they resist one dimensional readings. In fact, the inadequacy of previous assessments of these works, even of basically sound autobiographical or cultural studies, frequently stems from privileging only one axis of this theoretical model. For instance, critics treating these works as autobiographies rely heavily on the category of the same, often conducting psychoanalytic readings limited to a search for individual identity and continuity with past selves.<sup>33</sup> The personal

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<sup>32</sup> His project throughout the three volumes of *Time and Narrative*, but especially in Chapter 8 of Volume 3, "The Interweaving of History and Fiction." No single example is more powerful than his remarks on the need to mingle horror and history in representations of the holocaust: see *Time* 3, 180-92.

<sup>33</sup> For leading examples of the autobiographical type of this criticism, see Finney--*The Inner I: British Literary Autobiography of the Twentieth Century* (1984), and Hildebidle--"Neither Worthy nor Capable: The War Memoirs of Graves, Blunden, and Sassoon," and Mallon--"The Great War and Sassoon's Memory," both in *Modernism Reconsidered* (1983). For readings that emphasize the historical value of

narratives emerge from this criticism stripped of their value as historical accounts or cultural critiques--they "stand-for" a past defined totally by personal identity. On the other hand, studies that dwell exclusively on the factual information recorded by these narratives reenact only their claim to present a public past. Alternatively, a move to criticism which privileges the otherness of these narratives--highlighting their constructed, "fictional" status or cataloguing their offenses against historical fact--might also provide a useful, but finally inadequate, view of these personal narratives;<sup>34</sup> just as a static form of cultural or tropological criticism--apprehending narratives exclusively in terms of suggestive formal, cultural or ideological analogies--might privilege the ideology of the form or the deep structures latent in the troping of events while ignoring the voices of the same and

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these texts see Bergonzi's chapter in *Heroes Twilight*, especially his reading of Blunden, and many of the early reviews and articles that responded to their original publication, works such as Sophus Keith Winther's study of *The Realistic War Novel* (1930).

34 The embarrassingly reductive reading Evelyn Cobley gives First World War novels in "Narrating the Facts of War" stresses only their--often admittedly naive--intention to transcribe the war directly, accenting narrative otherness while ignoring any personal or historical identity with the war experience. On the other hand, even the detailed survey Fussell provides in *The Great War and Modern Memory* often suffers from its limited focus on factual transgression in these works or from a one dimensional, formal analysis of them. Through an emphasis on a "negative ontology of the past," many early reactions to the works highlighted their various political commitments--either to valorize them or, alternatively, to dismiss them. We might place Knightley's more recent work on war journalists with these other reductive readings.

the other.<sup>35</sup> We must remember that the analogous dimension of a narrative does not provide a final horizon, does not enable us to locate a determinate truth through tropological analysis; rather understanding the mediating force of narrative analogy in our interpretations, and the dynamics unleashed by a narrative's claims to both be and not be the past it represents, merely enables a fuller dialogue with the text under consideration.

The limits of earlier criticism of Great War personal narratives may thus be graphically displayed in relation to the terms they privilege, to the perspective that generates their mode of reading. My method, drawing upon the complex notion of reading and writing Paul Ricoeur employs in *Time and Narrative*, spirals across heuristic categories, shifting reading perspective and redefining text and context in response to the complex forces at work in these remarkable texts.

Dialogic in its own way, my method also addresses a horizon of truth--one posited by the communicative contract implicit in any battle narrative, one bound up in the ethics of every speech initiative. As Ricoeur notes, every speech

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<sup>35</sup> Avrom Fleishman's *Figures of Autobiography: The Language of Self-Writing* (1983) studies the quest figure Sassoon's work, but his tropological analysis rarely exceeds the formal level of Sassoon's texts. Bernard Knox goes much further with Sassoon's work, noting "the narrative has both the compulsive credibility of fiction at its best and the authenticity of an eyewitness account" (*Grand Street*, 144). Fuller versions of this type of criticism would be possible by exploring the implications of Fredric Jameson's work in *The Political Unconscious* (1981) or Hayden White's recent essays, *The Content of Form* (1987).



act "makes me responsible for what is said in my saying it," and in this ethical responsibility we regain the regulative force Todorov desired in critical dialogue. Although this horizon remains as a limit condition in any dialogue, it serves as a useful tool when examining the similarities and differences, the sameness and otherness, of various narrative responses to the war.

### Chapter 3: *Undertones of War*

I wish I could weave together all the moods and manners that I see out here, and make the epic of the age. But chivalry is not the atmosphere. It is all routine, a business with plenty of paper credit.

Edmund Blunden, from a letter home in January 1917

Although Edmund Blunden never attempted to write an epic of the Great War, his complex personal narrative of the conflict, *Undertones of War* (1928), does go a long way towards exposing the often conflicting moods and manners so characteristic of military experience on the Western Front. Moreover, as this early example of sensitivity to genre and style reminds us, the issue of how to interpret his experience, of how to tell his story, concerned Blunden for many years--perhaps becoming the inescapable preoccupation of his life. Given that he never could say "good-bye to all that," his post-war life became a long, quiet struggle to locate an adequate mode of apprehension for this haunting ordeal.

Introducing a volume called *Great Short Stories of the War* in 1930, Blunden comments: "The mind of the soldier on active service was continually beginning a new short story, which had almost always to be broken off without a conclusion" (ii). Someplace in the daunting reality of war, there is a tellable truth. Somewhere in the range of forms available, in the matrix of potential war narratives, the soldier's story--however inconclusive--might be found. But the war writer faces an intimidating challenge because he

must impose narrative closure on a story that has no proper ending, because "each circumstance of the British experience that is still with me has ceased for me to be big or little," in short, because war is a confusing, chaotic, and often contradictory experience (*Undertones*, 200). Blunden outlines a few of the paradoxes a soldier confronts in war: "you are one of an army of millions--and you are alone; you are nothing, and everything; you press this piece of metal, and you may bring misery on a girl at the other end of the earth; you move an inch or two in a wrong direction, and--what then?" (*Stories*, ii). The war, to be sure, was full of these questions and dilemmas; but what if, as in Blunden's case, your luck holds out and you survive the war? The question remains: what then?

Edmund Blunden's answer is clear: you tell your story. His own tale of war is a beautifully crafted, consciously literary work in which Blunden struggles to (re)present the contradictions of his experience on the front. Despite the "peculiar difficulty" an artist encounters in selecting "the sights, words, incidents, which seem essential" to convey the war, Blunden argues that "the art is rather to collect them" (*Undertones*, 201). And so he does collect them, in all their kaleidoscopic variety and brilliance:

The last few months have been a new world, of which the succession of sensations erratically occupies my mind; the bowed heads of working parties and reliefs moving up by 'trenches' made of sacking and brushwood; the

bullets leaping angrily from old rafters shining in greenish flarelight; an old pump and a tiled floor in the moon; bedsteads and broken mattresses hanging over cracked and scarred walls; Germans seen as momentary shadows among wire hedges; tallowy, blood-dashed faces--oh, put back the blanket; a gate, opening into a battlefield; boys, treating the terror and torment with the philosophy of men; cheeky newspaper sellers passing the gunpits; stretcher bearers on the same road an hour after; the old labourer at his cottage door pointing out with awe and importance the eaves chipped by anti-aircraft shrapnel (the guns meanwhile thundering away on the next village) . . . (*Undertones*, 85).

Blunden immerses us in the tide of his narrative, he sets us adrift in a vague and shadowy world. Although his narrative follows an orderly succession of chapters, the flow determined by chronology (embarking for France in the winter of 1916, returning home with frazzled nerves late in 1918), Blunden's deeply personal account often moves randomly amidst the ebb and flow of war. Moments of great natural beauty alternate with scenes of nature ravaged by war, and Blunden often displays "the tenacity of fancy amid 'grim reality'" (*Undertones*, 33). Perhaps no scene better characterizes Blunden's story than this description of patrolling:

If one went patrolling, it was almost inevitable that one would soon creep round some hole or suspect heap,

and then, suddenly, one no longer knew which was the German line, which our own. Puzzling dazzling lights flew up, fell in the grass beside and flared like bonfires; one heard movements, saw figures, conjectured distances, and all in that state of dilemma. Willow-trees seemed moving men. Compasses responded to old iron. At last by luck or some stroke of recognition one found one's self; but there was danger of not doing so; and the battalion which relieved us sent a patrol out, only to lose it that way. The patrol came against wire, and bombed with all its skill; the men behind the wire fired their Lewis gun with no less determination; and when the killed and wounded amounted to a dozen or more it was found that the patrol and the defenders were of the same battalion (74).

Blunden finds himself in a world without direction, in a war where your worst enemy may be yourself, in an existential landscape illuminated by "puzzling dazzling lights" where his greatest hope is to find himself. *Undertones of War* seeks to interpret this world, to narrativize and "stand-for" its reality. It asks its readers, quietly and simply, to hear its story.

In a 1925 essay titled "War and Peace," Blunden looks back on the war as an event that enlarged his "mortal franchise" and opened "a new sphere of consciousness" for him (17). Although the shadowy complexion of his war

experience remains somewhat of a mystery even to him, immersion in "the fierce electricity of an overwhelming tempest of forces and emotions" clearly has given him a more profound appreciation of the "deep-lighted detail" of ordinary life, just as it inevitably provides a horizon against which to view his subsequent life (18). Like a person emerging from a coma, Blunden leaves the war slightly disoriented yet embracing life with renewed vigor. But henceforth nature and the "desperate drudgery" of war are inextricably bound together for him, their wartime fusion demanding "a more intense word than memories" to adequately convey their troubled union (15). Blunden knows well that this union can be mapped in a number of ways, each one more or less responsive to the complexly fused features of his war experience. Approaching his war narrative, then, we too need a more resonant word than "memories" to fully describe what it seeks to apprehend; we need a word more fully responsive to the equivocal dialogue of his text and to the consciousness it conveys.

One of Blunden's most perceptive critics, Thomas Mallon, provides such a word, speaking of him as "almost indisputably his generation's foremost poet of war-hauntedness," and we might easily extend this claim to his generation's prose works as well.<sup>1</sup> Siegfried Sassoon, as we

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<sup>1</sup> Mallon's book for the Twayne series, *Edmund Blunden* (1983), remains the fullest study of his work, as well as the most complete biography to date. Although Blunden may always be seen as a "minor" figure in twentieth-century literature, Mallon's careful analysis of his lifelong work provides a number of well-considered reasons for studying

shall soon see, might also have a legitimate claim to this dubious honor. His twenty-year struggle to come to terms with the paradoxes and elusiveness of his wartime experience certainly testifies to his own profound "war-hauntedness." But Blunden's custodial care of works of other war poets and the pervasive echoes of war in his poetry give us several important reasons to examine this feature of his work most closely. To be sure, Blunden's text often seems haunted by the very undertones he seeks to expose: a ghostly and ambiguous quality visible across its war-haunted narrative map.<sup>2</sup> In a way, the "Preliminary" to his text provides a small scale version of this larger narrative map, significantly forecasting the confusing epistemological ground his text will then negotiate. Blunden invites us as readers to survey the terrain he has carefully and often painfully charted, to engage a dynamic text conspicuously in dialogue with itself and with other texts: one constantly modulating its narrative voice, one freely ranging over a

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it. For specific comments on the influence of the Great War on Blunden, see the chapter "Born for This: Blunden's War" (52-70).

<sup>2</sup> Alec Hardy quotes H. M. Tomlinson's 1930 review of *Undertones*: "'Blunden's book, in fact, is by a ghost for other ghosts; some readers will not know what it is all about". Hardy then explains that the "uneasiness" we sense in *Undertones* "is more than the 'atmosphere' of the book; it is Blunden's method of disturbing his readers into understanding his undertones" (6). Paul Fussell speaks of Blunden's motif of cartography in *Undertones* as "an act of memory conceived as an act of military reconnaissance," where "the 'ground' is the past imaged as military terrain, spread out for visiting and mapping as his battalion front had been mapped by the younger Blunden only seven years earlier" (259-60).

field of generic tension, one exhibiting a subtle unease through its deceptive irony, yet one insistently attempting to remember, "to go over the ground again" (viii).

Blunden establishes an ambiguous tone from the very outset of his text, opening his "Preliminary" with an evasive rhetorical question: "Why should I not write it?" Importantly, the focus here is not on why he *should* write it, but rather on why he *should not* write it--on reasons he can use for avoiding it--the object "it" remaining vague and undefined throughout. In light of his own reluctance to define his narrative "it," we too must be wary of prematurely limiting possible antecedents for the pronoun. Terms such as memoir, autobiography, or some other "it" recording the personal experience of war might close off the careful ambiguity Blunden seeks here.<sup>3</sup> He encourages us to approach it cautiously, to study it by turns for what it

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<sup>3</sup> In 1933 Blunden turned his historical talents directly to writing "A Battalion History" for the 11th Royal Sussex Regiment. Whereas *Undertones* sets out to be a complex blend of historical, autobiographical, narrative and poetic writing, the battalion history clearly seeks to be read as a fairly direct chronicle of events. As we might expect from our readings in Chapter 2, it too displays some of the dynamic interest any narrative evokes. But the flat descriptive prose of this history clearly contrasts with the rich dialogue characteristic of *Undertones*. The variety of intentions manifested in *Undertones*, revealed especially through the "Preliminary," sets his personal narrative apart from the more limited history. Interestingly, though, Blunden also presents this history--"with apologies"--as payment of a debt, as obliging a request from old friends. "Unfortunately," he writes, "it is shorter than they expected, but the war was also shorter than they expected" (*Mind's Eye*, 58-85). In this characteristic gesture of both identity with his friends and separation from them, we glimpse another example of Blunden's sensitivity to the difficulty of reclaiming the past.



appears to be, as well as for what it seems not to be. He gradually asks us, with his studied and indirect rhetoric, to observe the quiet clash between his parade of excuses for not writing and a vague but guiding sense of responsibility.

Jousting with memory, perhaps fleeing certain ghosts, Blunden presents a litany of reasons why his account should not be written: "I know that it is very local, limited, incoherent; that it is almost useless, in the sense that no one will read it who is not already aware of all the intimations and discoveries in it" (vii). Blunden knows that many in his audience in 1928 have made the same journey he has, and he pauses to observe that readers who have not shared this ordeal will fail, no doubt, to understand his narrative: "Neither will they understand--that will not be all my fault." Once again, *what* we will fail to understand remains, as yet, undefined. With these reservations we slowly begin to sense that the truth of his war experience might elude narrative apprehension--both his and ours--in important ways.

Too often, in the years since the war, various firsthand accounts purporting to represent trench warfare have disappointed; too often, they have not conveyed the whole truth of it; too often, in turn, audiences have failed to understand.<sup>4</sup> In his own text, while sketching a trench

<sup>4</sup> In Robert Graves' review of *Undertones* (on December 15, 1928) he comments: "Blunden is about the first man I have read who has realized that the problem of writing about trench-warfare lies in the 'peculiar difficulty of selecting the sights, faces, words, incidents which characterized the times,' and that the solution is 'to collect them in their

maintenance party, Blunden points directly to one previous failure. Recalling the scene, he observes that the men "enjoyed this form of active service with pathetic delight-- and what men were they? Willing, shy, mostly rather like invalids, thinking of their families. Barbusse would have 'got them wrong,' save in this: they were all doomed" (122). Characteristically, getting it right or wrong is of the utmost importance to Blunden: he insists that war narratives must be measured against a horizon of experiential truth, one capable of conveying a diversity and complexity of war experience--even if this means including willing, complacent soldiers in the narrative picture. Yet the horizon remains fluid and a bit indistinct for Blunden; it remains capable of accommodating the diversity of truths--such as Barbusse's inescapable fate and Blunden's willing workers--that frequently intersect in war experience.

So as we see here, Blunden typically sets his narrative in dialogue with other renderings of the war, consciously weighing the adequacy of their payments, consciously enfolding their mediations within his own. Reflecting on past failures, assessing various standards of truth, Blunden also probes his own abilities through the litany of excuses in his "Preliminary": "I know that memory has her little ways, and by now she has concealed precisely that look, that word, that coincidence of nature without and nature within

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original form of incoherence,'" and notes that any two pages of Blunden's text are worth the whole of other accounts-- "they have the real stuff in them" (*Nation*, 420).

which I long to remember" (vii). The possibility exists that he too might get it wrong, that memory might fail him. His textual dialogue includes both past and present selves, and it troubles their connection in the "little ways" of memory. Furthermore, the dual allegiance of memory--to both external and internal nature, to both the natural, public world and to an inner, private human nature--also hinders the process of narrative recall through its insistence upon their uncanny coincidence. At this point, facing an almost useless and impossible task, surely Blunden has presented sufficient reasons not to write. Yet the seductive force of memory, tellingly figured as a female muse who takes "a perverse pleasure in playing with her votaries," provokes a desire that draws Blunden on.<sup>5</sup>

Significantly, however, even this desire is quickly checked when he is "inclined to think that her playfulness has been growing rather more trying latterly: and perhaps I am gradually becoming colder in my enthusiasm to win a few

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<sup>5</sup> The complex resonance of this feminine gendering might first be glossed by the biographical fact that when Blunden wrote this (1924) he was in Japan, alone, facing the imminent collapse of his first marriage to Mary Daines. Thus the seductive lure of the muse, and his cooling interest in her, both have individually explicable referents. Yet in larger social terms, the feminist criticism of Sandra M. Gilbert--especially "Soldier's Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women, and the Great War" (1983)--provides a convincing analysis of the complicated reworking of gender roles occasioned by the Great War. She argues that "as young men became increasingly alienated from their prewar selves, increasingly immured in the muck and blood of No Man's Land, women seemed to become, as if by some uncanny swing of history's pendulum, ever more powerful" (425). The control Blunden's muse exerts here then can be explained in terms of a more general economic power and social authority as well.

gazes" (vii). Finally he answers the voices that encourage him not to write with an almost mournful resignation: "If these things are so, it is now or never for the rendering, however discoloured and lacunary, which I propose" (vii). At last, Blunden identifies the "it" he must write as a fatally inadequate "rendering." As an artistic rendering, the picture may be discolored by form or style; as an historical record, it may be riddled with gaps or muddled by time; as a personal account, it may conflate past and present selves in the ways of memory; yet, as we might infer from the letter home noted above, the idea of rendering also evokes a financial sense--he must pay a debt, settle an account, render the narrative obligation that is due for his enlarged "mortal franchise." And he must pay now--or never.

In part, as Blunden recalls this experience, he realizes that he must address the routine details it evokes--the abundant details and images that literary business frequently conveys by drawing on the paper credit of realism--and thus he proposes to render his work according to conventional realistic contracts and forms. Not only will he abide by these conditions, but he genuinely wishes to convey as much of his experience as possible through them. In addition, as Paul Fussell's close reading of *Undertones* explains, traces of the English pastoral tradition linger throughout Blunden's narrative, conveying a literary culture "so ripe, so mellow and mature, that it is a surprise to recall that Blunden was only twenty-eight when

he began writing it [*Undertones*] . . . He is already practiced in the old man's sense of memory as something like a ritual obligation" (259). But the debt Blunden must pay far exceeds his obligation either to an arcadian tradition or to realistic forms of narrative. As this evasive preamble demonstrates, Blunden carefully qualifies his project with reticence, with the notion of rendering an unpayable debt, with an awareness of the profound responsibility it entails and a sense of the radical otherness of the experience he seeks to communicate. Thus at the same time he deploys conventional techniques and modes to convey the very real images of his past experience, the shadow of truth falls across his work, haunting the text and his imagination, demanding that he acknowledge the limitations of convention by attaching a release clause to his contract. *When we fail to understand--not if--the blame will not all be his. As readers, he demands we too take responsibility for this conversation. We must engage in dialogue in order to approach the reality he (re)presents.*

But the dialogue Blunden's text suggests here is far from simple and it amply rewards dialogic interpretation of the kind outlined in the last chapter. Paul Ricoeur's reminder that "our relation to the reality of the past has to pass successively through the filters of the Same, the Other, and the Analogous" gives us a valuable method by which to approach Blunden's text (*Time 3*, 154). His text begs for an exegesis that truly recognizes the maze of

undertones, the wealth of shadows, the variety of debts paid and incurred through it. It is a narrative that directly invites readers to converse with it, to hear its voices, to join its world. It is a narrative that insists upon a dynamic relation to the reality of the past it (re)presents.

In several of the poems Blunden appends to *Undertones*--especially in "Another Journey From Bethune to Cuinchy where "I see you walking/. . . But that 'you' is I"--the dialogue and a certain confusion of selves is explicit, openly generating problems of "Who's who? you or I?" (335). The prose narrative often catches the same uncertainty and invites similar participation from the reader. The world of the war becomes Blunden's world, a world he leaves only infrequently and reluctantly, thus a world he places readers resolutely within. It is a complex world filled with irony and paradox, one spinning between scenes of horror and compassion, one oscillating between moments of personal disorientation and natural stability. The dialogue Blunden proposes through his text enables us to recognize the reality of the experience he conveys--to touch its face and identify with it--and at the same time to admit the radical, haunted, evasive otherness of an ordeal that his narrative can only suggest but never capture. Alternating freely between the facts of experience and the conventions of art, between a desire to avoid writing and a need to write, between the past and the present, Blunden's narrative journey leads us through a world filled with

contradictions; it invites us to hear the undertones of conflict and through the process of narrative mediation to comprehend its haunting dialogue.

Throughout *Undertones*, this process of mediation, this narrative dialogue mandates a dynamic interpretation of the text, an ongoing interaction with it. For example, in the closing paragraphs of the "Preliminary," Blunden casually admits that "I tried once before" (viii).<sup>6</sup> Even though this reference to a past attempt remains somewhat elusive, the metaphoric resonance of his present "rendering" quietly comments on the whole range of forms, strategies, conventions and techniques that will far exceed the "depressing forced gaiety" of his earlier version. Then he "misunderstood," he pulled at "Truth's nose;" now he sees truth's face more clearly. Then he wrote imitating a cheery "beanish" style; now he approaches with solemn reserve. This textual dialogue between past and present, between traditional styles and reflective undertones, between failed attempts and outstanding debts reveals a self-reflexive narrative commitment that clearly exceeds the narrow parameters of realistic history or pastoral elegy. To project faithfully the complexity his experience demands, he

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<sup>6</sup> Before the war even ended, Blunden attempted to write a version of his experience on the Western Front titled *De Bello Germanico: A Fragment of Trench History* (1918). Blunden's brother Gilbert published it in 1930, at Hawstead. Mallon remarks that Blunden's "description of it [in *Undertones*], although overly modest, is basically correct. The prose lacks the distinctive calm of that in *Undertones of War*" (118, note 76).

intentionally turns now to a dynamic form of personal narrative.

Although in this account Blunden encourages us to hear many dialogues scarcely audible in the undertones of war, the conversation remains far from clear--even to him. Therefore in spite of his maturing vision, he fears the inadequacy of his narrative payment. In his poetry, especially those poems directly concerned with specific battles such as "Third Ypres," he has attempted another account of "the image and horror of it," yet these poems also resist firmly pinning "it" down (viii). As we observed in many narrative accounts of the Somme, something in Blunden's experience on the Western Front also seems to resolutely defy containment by conventional literary forms and language.

So despite his poetic efforts, Blunden acknowledges that "it was impossible not to look again, and to descry the ground, how thickly and innumerably yet it was strewn with the facts or notions of war experience. I must go over the ground again" (viii). And it is this dynamic process of going over the ground again, of picking up and conversing with the broken images, the facts and notions of war strewn in memory, that will constitute the most substantial "it" Blunden offers us. For *Undertones* is as much a conversation with memory and various narrative traditions as it is a record of the experience of war.<sup>7</sup> More directly, Blunden

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Mallon argues, rightly I think, that "as the years passed, his grappling with the subject of war became the



stages a conscious dialogue between the confident record of experience and the reluctant recall of memory. Early in the narrative, he admits that "whereas in my mind the order of events may be confused, no doubt a reference to the battalion records would right it; yet does it matter greatly? or are not pictures and evocations better than strict dates?" (22). He reminds us again that this is not empirical history, and that the truth manifested through his narrative requires negotiation: sometimes drawing upon the facts of war experience, sometimes catching only a reflection in "the mirror of time gone by" (23), other times admitting "It was all a ghost story" (50).

Blunden continually invites us to hear the many voices of his text, the muted undertones of war and memory: "A voice, perhaps not my own, answers within me. You will not go over the ground again, it says, until that hour when agony's clawed face softens into the smilingness of a young spring day; when you, like Hamlet, your prince of peaceful war makers, give the ghost a '*Hic et ubique?* then we'll change our ground,' and not this time in vain" (viii-ix). The ghostly voices within, the literary shadows of past warriors, the transfigured faces of war, and the actual

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subject itself, he examined war-hauntedness as much as war, and the ramifications of this inquiry were felt in his nature and philosophic poetry as well" (62). However, as I will argue here, the intersection of war-memory and war itself as subjects was already of concern to Blunden when he wrote *Undertones*. Perhaps more importantly, the evolution of concern Mallon traces here may well indicate a deeper appreciation by Blunden--and/or by his critics--of the way war-hauntedness becomes hopelessly intertwined with war reality.

ghosts of lost "companions like E.W.T., and W.J.C., and A.G.V., from whose recaptured gentleness no sign of death's astonishment or time's separation shall be imaginable" all haunt this text from its opening lines. Blunden insists on their importance; as we shall see, they make *Undertones* far more than mere "memories."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> We must be cautious here, however, not to cripple Blunden's work by reducing it to a haunted text and ignoring its very real components. Thomas Mallon comments on the ghostly quality of the book, concluding that "while its gentle qualities make the book accessible to the unscarred reader, one senses that Blunden is speaking foremost to the dead and haunted;" and later, "the reader himself sometimes wonders at the selection of detail in *Undertones*; the presence of the dead often explains things" (65). On the contrary, as I shall show, Blunden's ghostly prose engages the epistemological quandary facing all living writers who deal with this conflict; his prose directly enters the narrative discourse of mortality Brooks described above. Placing Blunden's work within the larger matrix of narratives responding to the war thus enables us to read his text as it speaks to a very real and living audience as well.

## The Narrative Eye

The Scotchman murmured to himself, "Only a boy--only a boy," and shed tears, while his mate grunted an angry sympathy. Then, "But you'll be all right, son--excuse me, won't you--you'll be all right."

Edmund Blunden, *Undertones* (3)

Often readers of Blunden's text miss the importance of this evasive, reticent, ghostly quality of *Undertones*. They miss the dialogue, the questioning, the subtle and doubting "won't you" that interrupts a seemingly straightforward statement such as "But you'll be all right, son--excuse me, won't you--you'll be all right." They fail to hear the rhetorical ring and invitation to participate in passages such as this: "for as yet, *you must know*, I was in a sense more afraid of our own guns than I was of the enemy's" (my italics, 51). They overlook the quiet dialogue he carries on between his past and present self, between his narrator and his readers, between his text and those by other war writers: they miss his wish that

I could tell you half as intricately and spiritually [as H. M. Tomlinson did in *Waiting for Daylight*] the spell which made us haunt there [a library]; the cajoling ghostliness of the many printed papers and manuscript sermons which littered the floor of the priest's house and drifted into his garden; the sunny terror which dwelt in every dust grain on the road, in every leaf on the currant bushes near that churchyard, the clatter of guns, the coexistent extraordinary

silence; the summer ripeness, the futility of it; the absence of farmyard and inn-parlour voices which yet you could hear (52-53).

We must not close off the "coexistent" and contradictory features of his text; we must neither ignore the undertones nor make his dialogue a monologue. Yet because Blunden packs his narrative with so many details and vivid images, telling a story of the education of an open and impressionable youth--a personal history that follows a direct line from his matriculation "under orders for France" to his merciful departure for home in 1918--the historical record of his text can easily be overemphasized (1). It is easy to relate to the reality of his text exclusively through the category of the Same, noting its identity with the events of the past, measuring its reenactment of the war.

Time after time, of course, Blunden does display the attentive eye of a reporter. For example, near the end of the narrative he remarks that "no stable invention of dreams could be more dizzily dreadful" than these glimpses of the forward area:

A view of Spoil Bank under these conditions is in my mind's eye--a hump of slimy soil, with low lurching frames of dugouts seen in some too gaudy glare; a swelling pool of dirty water beside it, among many pools not so big--the record shell hole; tree spikes, shells of wagons, bony spokes forking upward;

lightnings east and west of it, dingy splashes; drivers on their seats, looking straight onward; gunners with electric troches finding their way; infantry silhouettes and shadows bowed and laden, and the plank road, tilted, breached, blocked, still stretching ahead (237).

The impressive word-painting he displays here allows us to feel the slimy mud, to smell the putrid water, to sense the exhaustion and disorientation of the infantry soldiers. He places us within a chaotic and fragmented scene of war; he invites us to view events through his "mind's eye."

On one level, then, his work might well be called a memoir or reminiscence, might be seen primarily as a historical chronicle of war, might be read for its convincing reenactment of the past. The military historian Correlli Barnett values this aspect of Blunden's work:

the reminiscences and the novels--the two often come to much the same thing--tell us just [what the Western Front was like]--and do so with all the awareness, imaginative insight, and skill of writers of first-class talent. Books like Blunden's *Undertones of War*, or Williamson's *Patriot's Progress*, or Frederic Manning's *Her Privates We* enable us to see, smell, feel, and touch the reality of life and battle on the Western Front. . . . I would simply like to point out that, carefully weighed, this evidence is of the highest value to the historian (2).

The crux, however, is *how* we ought to carefully weigh this historical evidence. What standards or categories apply? How should we relate to the objective reality it conveys? Barnett initially seems comfortable with distinctions similar to those Wayne Shumaker makes between typical modes of personal writing, especially between nonsubjective forms such as memoir and reminiscence and more directly subjective forms of autobiography. For Shumaker, in a memoir or reminiscence, "so far as the focus is kept steadily on an impersonal subject, the personality of the autobiographer (if we are willing to grant him the title) relinquishes centrality to something other than itself" (51). Clearly, Barnett begins by focusing on the impersonal historical evidence in Blunden's text, carefully avoiding his status as autobiographer. In light of Blunden's own reticence about the generic status of his work, does such a reading adequately interpret *Undertones*? Should we value Blunden's work chiefly for its objective history of the war? More generally, how useful or important are such generic distinctions?

Generic categories often cause more confusion than assistance when reading a text, so we need to pause briefly and consider the conventional labels critics attach to Blunden's "rendering" of "it."<sup>9</sup> Bernard Bergonzi calls

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<sup>9</sup> I do not pretend to offer anything more here than a provocative footnote to a very complex issue. In fact, the definition of what constitutes an autobiography, and how best to understand the many forms, acts, and sub-genres that gather under the autobiographical umbrella, has been the subject of several recent studies of the genre. From Roy

Blunden a "consciously objective writer"--as opposed to a subjective author who offers his "own reflections" and shows the "war as it affected his own development"--noting that "*Undertones of War* is much less than a full autobiography: it is a severely selective account of Blunden's experiences as a very young subaltern, on the Somme and at the Third Battle of Ypres" (147-150). To be sure, Blunden does restrict the scope of his narrative; his focus never leaves the war. Yet how much does such a distinction really tell us about *Undertones*? Having disqualified Blunden's text as autobiography, Bergonzi has left himself without a convenient label for a work that he calls Blunden's "attempt to make sense out of his own experiences, to trace a pattern in the scarifying events that had impinged on his formative years" (150). More importantly, his division between objective and subjective narratives seems both inadequate and reductive in even his own reading of Blunden. Moreover,

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Pascal's early study, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (1960), including James Olney's *Metaphors of the Self* (1972) and Elizabeth Bruss' *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre* (1976), to Philippe Lejeune's essay "The Autobiographical Contract" (1982), William C. Spengemann's historical study of *The Forms of Autobiography* (1980), and Brian Finney's survey of twentieth-century British autobiography (*The Inner I*, 1985), critics of autobiography seem to agree with Bruss that "faulty or naive assumptions about the nature of a genre impair the criticism of autobiographical writing" (1). Needless to say, there is less agreement on how best to clarify these erroneous definitions. Nonetheless, as Adena Rosmarin convincingly argues in *The Power of Genre*, generic perception--particularly when genre is viewed heuristically rather than prescriptively--often can extend the boundaries of interpretation. Thus it is the limiting nature of labels such as memoir or reminiscence that I focus on here, asking for a heuristically enabling understanding of genre instead.

as we noted throughout the last chapter, any emplotting of events--any tracing of a pattern--necessarily interprets events, necessarily offers individual reflections on them, necessarily blends objective and subjective modes.

Nevertheless, as we see with Barnett's and Bergonzi's readings, some critics do seem comfortable with an objective label such as memoir for *Undertones*, even with the limitations it necessarily implies.<sup>10</sup> Extending distinctions made by Roy Pascal and Wayne Shuma' r to twentieth-century autobiography, Brian Finney suggests that both reminiscence and memoir "concentrate on the world outside the self"--on a public world often concerned with social, political and military history (150). Although such a division between public and private worlds may possibly be fair to the generals and statesmen we usually encounter through other modern "memoirs," it does seem grossly unjust to Blunden's work.

After all, he writes as an individual soldier caught in a clash of mass armies, as a private poet recording a public catastrophe, as an author seeking to pay both private and

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<sup>10</sup> Fussell adopts the term memoir for the personal narratives of the Great War, but he wants to place additional pressure on the fictive or constructed nature of these texts. Although he certainly suggests the need for greater attentiveness to the richness of these works, all too often his own analysis truncates this same richness. In some ways, the critical label we attach to Blunden's work is of far greater relevance to contemporary readers (and makers of literary canons) than it is to the genesis of the work itself. But as we have already seen from the "Preliminary," and as we shall soon see through a discussion of Edwardian autobiography, Blunden was acutely aware of the literary forms and traditions (and their grounding assumptions) available when he wrote *Undertones*.



public debts. He writes, in short, as a mediator between private and public spheres, fluctuating between a partial view of individual experience and a more collective narrative of general events in several ways. First, *Undertones* carefully blends Blunden's personal testimony with more distant third-person reflections. The quiet shift in the following passage from the general "one" to the personal "I" is typical: "One might sit, as I did, upon our parapet, and spend several minutes looking at the opposite line and the ruins and expensive cemetery of Villers Guislain, without any disaster" (270). Next, the tension of a term such as soldier-poet captures some of the duality of his work by yoking together his public commitments and private reactions. Although his wartime poetry was tame compared to that of Sassoon or Owen, Blunden's status as a poet in uniform definitely influenced his view of the front. In fact, following the publication of a book of his poems, he was transferred to battalion headquarters: the "book of verse had done its work; and the same evening I was at dinner in Harrison's presence, afraid of him and everyone else in high command, and marvelling at the fine glass which was in use there" (78). Though still a poet among soldiers, his new position placed him a distance from "worse places and cruder warfare," allowing him to play a new role as "Field Works Officer," a role that perhaps saved his life. In this position, he adds both "practical and (as the world was then constituted) some artistic touches" to the

trenches, and views the workings of the brigade staff with "amazement and consternation" (79). Finally, we have only to reflect on the even greater paradox of his status as a soldier, both agent of destruction and victim of it--or on his role as protagonist in an autobiographical text, both participant in the events and narrator of them--to begin to appreciate the complex processes of mediation at work throughout Blunden's text. His awareness of his role as arbiter of these oppositions resembles Frederic Manning's insight in *The Middle Parts of Fortune*: "There was no man of them unaware of the mystery which encompassed him, for he was part of it; he could neither separate himself entirely from it, nor identify himself with it completely" (182). Whereas Manning turns the "myriad faces" of war on us, Blunden places us in the midst of a dialogue between the voices of war--voices both public and private.

As a dynamic and personal narrative, then, *Undertones* conducts a narrative dialogue between a historical chronicle of war experience and a personal interpretation of it. Blunden indisputably provides the eye of this text, yet he is also the "I" directing it. When the memories are too intense, he redirects them, turning the public eye away with private vision. "But let us be getting our of this sector. It is too near Hulluch and the Hohenzollern. The listening posts are not anxious to go out far at night, and I am sure I agree with them; they have had too many pineapples and not enough sleep. . . . When we got away, it was a full moon,

eternal and, so it happened, but little insulted by the war's hoarse croaking" (67). Thus for all the historical force his narrative carries--as a public record of the war, as an objective account of events--its status as an artistically crafted "personal statement should remain equally significant" (Hardie, 5).

The Narrative "I"

"The mind swoons doubly burdened"

"Third Ypres" (307)

In fact, it is precisely the personal interpretation of events prompted by Blunden's narrative that most distresses conservative historians such as Barnett. Descriptions of trench life or unbiased reports of battle, Barnett cheerfully allows; antiwar sentiments or pictures of the consuming horror of the Western Front interfere, for Barnett, with the "true" narrative record. Later we will return to his indictment of the "truth"--"true so far as it went"--through which Barnett approaches the narratives of Blunden, Sassoon and Graves (7); the important point here is the way each of their narratives exceeds the conventional limitations imposed by objective terms such as memoir or reminiscence. Well beyond mere generic quibbling, a certain ethics of criticism is at stake with these labels. If a work can be labeled as a memoir, and then discredited for various factual transgressions or breaches of objectivity, it can be dismissed or ignored. Barnett deploys this strategy to contain the distortions and antiwar sentiments of these personal narratives. His truth of war is not theirs; he resists the myth of the Great War they generate and rejects the "legend of the 'Lost Generation' of brilliant young men" they promote (17).

Blunden, however, intentionally keeps a number of modes of apprehension in suspension throughout his narrative dialogue, intentionally playing the voices of history and memoir against those of various autobiographical selves. Recall Blunden's description of the front quoted above: on the first level it does appear that his narrator relinquishes claim to an autobiographical personality in favor of detailed reporting the war. Yet the dizzying, impressionistic quality of this description, with its muted lightning, surreal images, and shadowy soldiers begs for attention too. A specific point of view generates these impressions; they flow from a reticent but visible narrator. He is an educated officer, a budding poet from a middleclass background, a sensitive witness to a scene of appalling degradation. Blunden sets this scene--very specifically for his readers--in his "mind's eye," encouraging the reader's mind to swoon "doubly burdened" with the poet's. Although the descriptive richness of passages such as this one enables us to see the war through his physical eye, through the seemingly transparent narrative record he presents, a controlling and configuring "I" always lurks behind the scene.

So rather than effacing his personality as in a memoir, the issue of a "mind's eye" and the "inner I" directing it become central to Blunden's understanding of the war. In other words, *Undertones* simultaneously records historical events and interprets them within the complex dialogue of a

personal narrative. It dynamically fuses experience and the shaping forces of memory, admitting that only together can the sameness of events and the distancing otherness of art and memory begin to approximate the experience of war. Looking back, this point merely underscores the difficulty Blunden faced labeling his own work--a difficulty critics continue to labor with.<sup>11</sup> Of course it also encourages us to pursue the dynamic understanding his narrative invites, to locate his narrative within its appropriate contexts, to simultaneously read its various narrative registers.

One context almost totally overlooked for Blunden's work is the autobiographical tradition within which he writes. Frequently, critics concentrate on the sense of radical discontinuity that the war brought to participants, and on the corresponding inadequacy of available forms for literary presentation. But as we saw in the Somme narratives, every author writes within a discernible tradition--inevitably invoking cultural narratives and reshaping available paradigms. Granting the difficulty of isolating the historical traits of a genre at any given point, nevertheless some generalizations regarding the

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Fussell initially seems attentive to the strain of conventional terms, calling Blunden's work an "extended pastoral elegy in prose," and later referring to it as "whatever it is" (254-55). But following his typical method, this ambiguity is only temporary. Once Fussell decides on a label for a work--even a hybrid term like pastoral elegy--he then closes off other dimensions of the text, other registers of meaning. Thus his one-dimensional reading of Blunden provides an illuminating discussion of Blunden's debt to the pastoral tradition, and almost no awareness of the autobiographical, or even historical, aspects of his text.

Edwardian autobiographical tradition do seem particularly informative for Blunden's work.

Carl Dawson, in his study of Edwardian autobiography *Prophets of Past Time* (1988), focuses on "writers who worked in the new climate of the *fin de siecle*, who wrote with a self-consciousness that was as historical as it was personal" (xiii). As we have begun to see, this Edwardian blend of historical and personal self-consciousness clearly carries over into Blunden's postwar narrative as well. His reenactment of events remains as much a private story of coming of age--complete with rites of initiation and fearsome figures of "adult" authority, such as the intimidating General he encounters periodically--as it does a public history of the front. At one point, he records meeting his commander while on leave wearing an experimental "Warm coat, a cyclist's coat" that was only to be worn while at the front. "'Rabbit!' Harrison roared with laughter. 'That coat!' His friend smiled sympathy at me, but I was in torment, and as usual . . . I had only myself to blame" (162). Even his first visit to the front line, when he was "unused to going without sleep," prompts feelings of shame when he "was accused of sleeping ten hours" (13). Thus alongside detailed pictures of war, Blunden writes touchingly about moments of youthful embarrassment, about his desire to succeed in the various positions the Army offered him, and of his dread of failure, of not meeting the expectations of those in authority. Firmly in the tradition

of a number of prominent literary autobiographers writing around the turn of the century--Edmund Gosse, William Hale White, Ford Madox Ford, Samuel Butler, George Moore, William Butler Yeats--writers who were concerned "about the reliability of memory, the status of language, the possibility of general truth"--Blunden also reflected their commingling of genres and placed growing pressure on the intersection of memory and experience (Dawson, 24). Acknowledging this tradition casts Blunden's preoccupation with the possibility of truth, his unease about lapses in memory, and even the remarkable range of his diction--from pastoral elegance to trench slang--in the light of a tradition that offered him a way to configure, at least partially, his own personal narrative. Although many aspects of his war experience would never fit into this narrative tradition, Blunden clearly absorbed what he could from well-known Edwardian autobiographers.

In his study of early-modern autobiography, Jerome H. Buckley highlights the chameleon-like quality of Edwardian autobiographers such as Oscar Wilde or Edmund Gosse, commenting that "the author of a self-history was less confident of the truths of selfhood, and his self-preservation, or role playing, involved a different sort of self-consciousness [than his Victorian predecessors]. . . . If the self as a separate entity seemed elusive and amorphous, or if, perhaps, it did not exist at all, it must be invented, dressed up, and projected" (2). Blunden's



youthful search for identity perhaps made him more vulnerable to inventing selves than other Great War writers; in any event, his narrative continually questions his ability to measure up to the various roles in military life. Without an established civilian identity, a socially inscribed role such as Siegfried Sassoon's fox hunting persona, Blunden readily searches in his narrative for just such an "elusive and amorphous" self.

Perhaps this characteristic struggle to define a narrative self is the most important feature an understanding of Edwardian autobiography contributes to our interpretation of Blunden's work. Sharing a fundamental uncertainty with the major autobiographers of his time, Blunden offers his own particular emphasis to the tradition. Frequently wondering why "by good luck I escaped a piece of trouble" in this or that sector (81), or commenting on a "lucky jump" or a dud shell falling near by, his proximity to random death continually hampers his efforts to locate an autobiographical self of some permanence. In a war situation more chaotic and uncertain than his literary predecessors faced, Blunden endured a perpetual and numbing onslaught:

I remember that I was talking with somebody about one 'Charlie' Aston, an officer's servant, who had been running here and there to collect watches from German dead. He had just returned to his chosen shell hole, with several fine specimens, when a huge shell burst in

the very place. But not much notice was taken, or elegy uttered, for everywhere the same destruction threatened (222).

Yet, importantly, he endured. In a land full of wastage and destruction, it must have been almost impossible not to question the integrity or permanence of the self. Still Blunden's text bears out Dawson's conclusion that although the "radical exploration of self in modern autobiography" may tend to threaten individual freedom or may seem to make constructions of the self unbearably vulnerable, these "autobiographies remain human documents however slippery their medium" (207-08). In Paul Ricoeur's terms, even as these autobiographers explore the radical otherness of various self-conceptions, they dialectically affirm their human identity, allowing the complex medium of their narrative to mediate between analogous modes of apprehending the self, or, in Olney's phrase, alternative "metaphors of the self."

It is just such a dialectical insistence on the resilience of an autobiographical self--or selves--in the face of the horrific events of the Western Front, and in its prominence in the narrative account of those events, that makes Blunden's work such a powerfully human document. The "harmless young shepherd in a soldier's coat" that closes the narrative often prompts critical attention (276), but this is only one role among many that Blunden plays in the narrative. Whereas the humane shepherd tending his flock

presents one possible metaphoric self for Blunden, at the beginning of his story we hear the voice of a young, naive man "not anxious to go," one who is filled with "an uncertain but unceasing disquiet" (1). Certainly these roles overlap in their essentially naive views of life, but the untried youth grimly facing the unknown challenges of a foreboding world lacks the pastoral immunity his arcadian counterpart offers. And although the young Blunden we first meet has yet to face the horrors of war, "there was something about France in those days which seemed to me, despite all journalistic enchanters, to be dangerous" (1). We have only to recall the chivalry and romance of the dispatches Philip Gibbs sent home in order to appreciate Blunden's scorn or to share his doubts: even sheltered in England, insulated by the Channel, undertones of war have filtered in. So Blunden embarks for France already suspicious of general truths, already sensitive to the power of rhetoric and language, already blending the roles of naive youth and skeptical maturity. The legacy of Edwardian autobiography, combined with the retrospective situation he writes within, thus provides Blunden with both a mode of apprehending the unique events soon to follow as well as a way of configuring them for narrative presentation. Whether or not he did so consciously, his personal struggle to interpret his war experience clearly indicates a dialogue with this tradition.

"Daring the huge dark:" The Mind's Eye

I might have known the war by this time, but I was  
still too young to know that depth of ironic cruelty.  
*Undertones* (275)

In the next to last poem printed in *Undertones*, "Flanders Now," Blunden sketches an image of the "flower of manhood, daring the huge dark," quietly directing our attention to those who "slept, and rose, and lived and died somehow--" (340-1). These same voices, of those who lived and died somehow, converse with us throughout his prose narrative as well, murmuring among the broken images and undertones of the text. Paul Fussell claims that Blunden, even at the end of the narrative, "despite the knowledge he has attained, especially at the pillboxes . . . is still innocent" (265). I disagree. The undertones may be muffled at times, the irony may be subtle, but our dialogue with the text must admit both. Perhaps in the "harmless shepherd in a soldier's coat" that closes *Undertones*, perhaps in what Fussell calls "that objective distancing, that tender withdrawing vision of a terribly vulnerable third-personor," the pretense of innocence is maintained (267). But it is never more than a pretense. As we have seen, this is only one moment in the shifting counterpoint of this dynamic narrative. Just as Blunden can only apprehend the fullness of his war experience through an ongoing dialogue with several traditions, through a constant challenge of narrative eye by "I," so too our approach to the reality his

text communicates must pass through successive filters of historical and literary interpretation.

In a way seldom appreciated, *Undertones* also looks forward to the works of the 'thirties--especially to those associated with the "Auden Generation." Samuel Hynes describes these works as "urging a kind of writing that would be affective, immediate, and concerned with ideas, moral not aesthetic in its central intention, and organized by that intention rather than by its correspondence to the observed world" (*Auden*, 13). Although Blunden's work anticipates rather than partakes of this tradition--he is concerned both with correspondence to the observed world of the war and with the moral intention of the work--Hynes' description catches a number of important features of Blunden's narrative. The enlargement of Blunden's mortal franchise has been purchased at a great price; he revisits the war, goes over the ground again, because he believes this journey can encourage action in the public world, because the journey has a moral purpose. Many readers will fail to understand this purpose, but, as he noted in the "Preliminary," that will not be all his fault. To be sure, he artistically shapes his text and draws upon various literary traditions from pastoral to autobiography. But for Blunden, the continually shifting center of consciousness of his narrative and the variety of roles he plays searching for self identity inevitably intersect with the debt he must pay to those who know, and know fully, the ironic cruelty of

war. Haunted by "the huge dark," Blunden pays this debt; doing so, his work claims both personal and public authority through experience--not innocence.

At the beginning of the text, in his pastoral garb, Blunden shepherds a "squad of men nominally recovered from wounds" back to the war, although "they hid [from him] what daily grew plain enough--the knowledge that the war had released them but for a few minutes, that the war would reclaim them, that the war was jealous war and a long-lasting. 1914, 1915, 1916. . . ." (1-2). His premonitions notwithstanding, as the god of war drew them gradually nearer, Blunden would occasionally "ask the silly questions of nonrealization; they in their tolerance pardoned, smiled, and hinted, knowing that I was learning, and should not escape the full lesson" (2). Thus early in his text we encounter the sense that the truth of war is a lesson that can--and indeed must--be learned. Importantly, these lessons are taught without consideration of social position or educational status, and even "experience was nothing but a casual protection" (40). Here, ordinary soldiers often teach officers, and the voices of survivors--"shocked and sad"--echo quietly. Through the chapters that follow, from the early one titled "Trench Education" to the later "Coming of Age" to the penultimate "School, Not At Wittenberg" Blunden gradually completes his--and our--education.

Blunden's opening chapter sets us on a journey with him, it enrolls us in the school of the Western Front. He,

like all autobiographers, must play the dual role of student and teacher, of historical participant and transhistorical (re)presenter. His solution to this standard autobiographical dilemma is to position us in the midst of a narrative dialogue, to encourage us to recognize the complex narrative mingling of eye and I, the crossing between world and self, and the intertwining of narrative history and personal story. Within the space of a moving personal narrative, Blunden reveals his truth of war through this challenge and commitment to narrative dialogue.

Significantly, Dawson's study of the recollective process of autobiography ends demanding "a wholesale rethinking of generic boundaries," inviting us to understand autobiography as a process "which tests the self in the process of discovery. It also involves the wrestle between remembering and forgetting, that web and warp of memory which reminds its teller of paradox and mystery, of life lost and life found" (216). Blunden's own efforts to create his narrative--to define its generic range and his position as narrator within it--remind us of the tension between remembering and forgetting, of the paradox and mystery of life remembered. His constant attempt "to understand the drift of the war," to record the recurring "hints" that often culminate in suffering, to come to grips with a dawning awareness that "It's a lie; we're a lie" (38, 65), reminds us that his is indeed a narrative of self-testing. The textual dialogue between various metaphors of the self--

Blunden as pastoral innocent, as inexperienced soldier, as battalion poet, as enlightened skeptic--reveals an awareness that his narrative can only posit selfhood within a field of epistemological doubt. So it is a tentative narrative, one full of uncertainty and moments of disorientation.

When Edmund Blunden joined the 11th Royal Sussex Regiment in 1915, he left behind him a relatively privileged, stable and tranquil life. Although he was born in London in 1896, he spent his early years in a quiet village in Kent, in a rural world quite remote from metropolitan London. Both his parents were teachers, holding positions at a grammar school "in Yalding from 1900 to 1912" (Mallon, 2). But in an unpublished memoir about his father, Edmund describes Charles Blunden as "awkwardly placed between the class in the big houses and the farm labourers and small tradesmen. The division was then quite rigid" (Mallon, 3). This sensitivity to the awkward social position of his family, to a vague status in-between classes, characterizes Blunden's outlook on life in an important way. Just as later in life he felt called to mediate between the private and public experiences of war, and to write of its troubling undertones, the ambiguous social position of his early life forced a similar awareness upon him. Certainly, his upbringing was far from deprived (grammar school led to Christ's Hospital followed by a Classics scholarship to Queen's College, Oxford). Nevertheless, Blunden's knowledge of the economic



undercurrents of life seems to qualify Mallon's view of him as "on a precocious way toward becoming a prolific, skillful and largely untroubled--except in a sometimes conventionally gloomy adolescent way--poet of the countryside" (4-5). Obviously, the war matured and refined his understanding of being caught between worlds, of wandering in no man's land, of being disoriented in a frequently incomprehensible world. But Blunden's growing awareness of his role as mediator extends beyond the military education these phrases imply. In *Undertones* he shows an acute sensitivity to the daily work his men must accomplish, and he lightens their task or helps them whenever possible. Even in the trenches, however, he finds that this places him in an anomalous position: "I was suddenly pulled up by the high and dry voice of the General, who appeared to be rather more displeased by the irregularity of an officer's publicly transferring a duckboard from trench to trench than pleased by the reformation of the sap. He went off, leaving a dash of bitterness in my mild draught of content" (79-80). For all the advantages of his middleclass status, his father's debt-ridden life enables Blunden to recognize some of life's less benevolent forces--dark forces that continue to appear in his poetry throughout his adult career.

Yet why should we emphasize these hints of social or economic awareness? Corelli Barnett accuses the personal narrative writers of serving "up an untypical and unbalanced

view of the war" largely because they came from such sheltered and well-off backgrounds:

They had had an absurd upbringing at home and at their public schools which gave them no knowledge or understanding of the real world of their time, but instead a set of ludicrously romantic attitudes . . . They were in fact the repositories of the liberalism and romanticism of Victorian England. They all lived at Howard's End, having delicate emotional responses to the aesthetic stimulus of landscape, and cherishing a knightly idealism. Who would guess from Sassoon or Blunden or Graves that the landscape they loved in fact represented British agriculture in distress and decay? Who would guess from their work that Britain in 1914 was in fact an overwhelmingly urban and industrial country with profound social problems? That a third of the population lived in poverty? (7)

Barnett makes a number of important points here: in many ways, these war writers were atypical of society; they were writers and poets with a somewhat unique social and cultural background; they do often present a picture in their narratives of "idealism turning into sour disillusion" (6). But should we go as far as Barnett does to claim that "the social, aesthetic, intellectual, and moral world in which the war writers lived before the war was in fact totally unreal--as artificial as the pastoral idylls of the French court before 1789" (8)? Is it fair to these writers to

judge that "army and trench life--quite apart from the hazards and horrors of war itself--was their first introduction to the real world of struggle, discomfort, and hardship as most of mankind experienced it" (8)?

Perhaps we should begin with the more basic question of the fairness of lumping all critical or antiwar writers--for these are Barnett's targets here--together in the unreal scene of an Edwardian garden party.<sup>12</sup> As we have seen from Blunden's own background, this view requires modification. Still some of Blunden's descriptions of trench life may, as Barnett shows, bear a striking similarity to writings about slum life in London. But do parallel descriptions make worlds rife with "indescribable nocturnal smell, mortal, greenweedy, ratty" any less real (8)? Do they speak as much about the delicate sensibility of a poet at war as they do about appalling conditions found both at the front and in the slums? Can a world be erased by pointing to its textual (re)presentation? Barnett suggests that these men wrote about a context they were unsuited to apprehend; I believe, at least in Blunden's case, that he apprehended his experience in the only way possible, often painfully aware of the disparate contexts influencing his interpretation.

Barnett concludes that "a great deal of what the war writers took to be squalors and degradations peculiar to

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<sup>12</sup> As Samuel Hynes has demonstrated so thoroughly in *The Edwardian Turn of Mind* (1968), there is a convincingly unreal glow cast by many aristocratic lives during the years prior to the war. See especially his opening chapter on the "garden party."

war--and their equally upper-middle class reviewers and readers also so took--was in fact the common lot of many of their countrymen at all times." The real problem with this reading of the personal narratives then follows: "Therefore what came to be accepted as the objective truth about life in the trenches was only a highly subjective and untypical response of a sheltered minority" (10). Barnett hopes that by identifying the class bias of the personal narratives he can then dismiss them as atypical, unrepresentative--in short, as false. Our reading of Blunden's text, our attention to the dynamic nature of his narrative and our awareness of the dialogue he suggests through it demonstrates that more than this *ad hominem* attack on him is needed to discredit his work. Moreover, as we saw in our reading of the *Somme* texts, official narratives are frequently no less motivated than personal ones. Each "objective account" must then be measured against a more distant horizon of truth, must be reviewed for its identity with the past, its distance from it, and for the modes it chooses to apprehend it with. Placing Blunden's work within a larger context than Barnett allows enables us to hear Blunden's dialogue--the hear the voices he insists upon as central to understanding the truth of war.

Barnett ends his lecture accusing the war authors of "evading the really fundamental intellectual problems of the war, even when writing ten years afterwards with all the benefit of later information. . . . They are content to

express with enormous power and cumulative effect an emotional revulsion against war" (16). What is more, he places blame for England's slow response to Hitler's crushing onslaught at their feet. It seems to me that Blunden's response contains far more than emotional revulsion; in fact, reflecting on the stark reality of the "huge dark" that haunts his memory of war provoked in Blunden a sense of moral revulsion that he quietly conveyed through a dialogue with the undertones of war. He has paid his debt; we can only pay ours by listening.

#### Chapter 4: Sassoon's "Battle of Life"

One of the objects of an University career is to equip the student for the battle of life, and as you grow older you will find that people are estimated in the world by the results which they have obtained at the Varsity. It is a kind of stamp upon a man and is supposed to indicate the stuff of which he is made. (MFHM, 85)

From a letter to "George Sherston" in  
*Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (1928)

Siegfried Sassoon's efforts to understand the battle of life--as well as the more specific battles of his war experience--stretched over several decades and six volumes of autobiographical prose, ranging from the early "fictional memoirs" of George Sherston to the later "factual autobiographies" of Siegfried Sassoon.<sup>1</sup> These texts clearly meditate on the advice rendered above: contemplating what it means to grow older, probing how the world estimates the importance of a life, and exploring the diverse "stamps" experience places upon a man.<sup>2</sup> In many ways Sassoon's epic

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Mallon calls Sassoon "a memorist who twice wrote three volumes about his early years. The "fictional" memoirs, with the non-poet George Sherston as Sassoon's reductive stand-in (*Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*, 1928; *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, 1930; *Sherston's Progress*, 1936) were followed by the "real" autobiographies (*The Old Century and Seven More Years*, 1938; *The Weald of Youth*, 1942; and *Siegfried's Journey*, 1945). The Sherston books run from George's childhood until a few months before the Armistice; the autobiographies (as the "real" memoirs will be called hereafter) show Sassoon two years beyond that ("The Great War," 82). Although I will follow Sassoon's and Mallon's leads and label the last three volumes autobiography, our study of Blunden's work reminds us that such terms must be used with circumspection. As we shall see, Mallon's preference for the term "memoirist" suggests some interesting limits for both of Sassoon's efforts.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout his work, Sassoon limits his interest to an almost exclusively male world. The female characters in

struggle to tell his story, to interpret his experience, poses a debate between the alternative values used to assess such things: opposing the outdoor sporting figure of George Sherston to the reflective poetic narrator of the autobiographies, contesting the muted pastoral tones of a sheltered Edwardian past with the savage discord of the Great War, juxtaposing what Bernard Knox calls "his idyllic recreation of his fox-hunting youth and his nightmare evocation of the war" (150), alternating narrative perspectives between a naive, often thoughtless youth and a more mature, reflective writer, between a "happy warrior" and an outraged pacifist. These contrasts indicate the tension between many of the "stamps" that might be called upon to "indicate the stuff" of which Sassoon is made: the oppositions usefully define, as Paul Fussell notes, the "matrices of his memory" (92); they also reveal Sassoon's personal struggle to embrace competing modes of apprehending his war experience.

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both trilogies remain one-dimensional foils to the active life of both sportsman and poet. Whether the indulgent yet peripheral Aunt Evelyn of Sherston's life or the overly idealistic Lady Ottoiline of Sassoon's, females are carefully circumscribed from any real importance in the texts. Bernard Knox proposes one possible explanation for this emphasis (beyond the more general cultural pressures noted above in our discussion of Blunden's invocation of a female muse) observing that the most "introspective passages" of Sassoon's diaries are concerned with the "problem posed by his sexual orientation" and his tender feelings "for those of his own sex," although later in life Sassoon records "homosexuality has become a bore" (148-9). Whatever the motivation for his "generally contemptuous" references to women, in the prose works Sassoon clearly directs his focus toward understanding the experience of men.

Our first view of the protagonist of the memoirs, George Sherston, is of a "shy and solitary youth," one locked with his Aunt Evelyn in a "comfortable, old-fashioned house with its large, untidy garden" (MFHM, 1). In this enclosed world, anything outside an eight or ten mile radius was simply "beyond calling distance" and largely unworthy of attention. Moreover, George's physical separation is reinforced by his social position. "I had no friends of my own age. I was strictly forbidden to 'associate' with the village boys. And even the sons of the neighbouring farmers were considered 'unsuitable'--though I was too shy and nervous to speak to them. I do not blame my aunt for this. She was merely conforming to her social code which divided the world into people whom one could 'call on' and people who were 'socially impossible'" (3). This characteristic division of the world, geographically and socially, suggests an oppositional habit of mind, a way of defining his experience by contrast, that Sassoon draws upon throughout the narratives.

Although the world of this young fox-hunting man gradually expands under the careful tutelage of his affectionate groom, Dixon--who cheerfully takes the young Master to a number of meets held in the local area--some limits are never exceeded. "The great thing about Dixon was that he knew exactly where to draw the line. Beyond the line, I have no doubt, lay his secret longing to have an occasional day with the Dumborough Hounds on one of his



employer's horses" (9). But Dixon never crosses the line; he knows his place and invests his energy in educating young George as a fox-hunting gentleman. Servant and master will always be on opposite sides of the line; or so it seems.

Typically, this continual insistence on contrast carries over into the narrative of Sherston's education, a narrative oscillating between moments of personal embarrassment--as when he loses his first pony or falls jumping a hedge--and times of social affirmation, such as those associated with purchasing his first hunting horse or winning his first point-to-point race. True to form, when Aunt Evelyn remarks "that she felt sure Mr. Balfour would be a splendid Prime Minister," Sherston is busy "meditating about Shrewsbury's [cricket] innings. How I wished I could bat like him, if only for one day!" (*MFHM*, 59). Politics juxtaposed with cricket, concern for the future clashing with rapture for the present, a flood of minor contrasts gradually prepares the way for two major shifts later in the *Memoirs*: first when the narrative moves from the sedate Edwardian world of hunts and garden parties to the turmoil and savage destruction of the Great War, then later when Sherston's character transitions from a patriotic, "happy warrior" to a bitter pacifist.

But Sassoon makes this oppositional method doubly complex by extending these contrasts to a larger autobiographical frame. Mallon describes "Sassoon's own childhood" as one

spent amidst the considerable comforts assured by an unusual pedigree. Descended from the commercial, but exotic and remotely Oriental, Sassoons and the native Thornycrofts (who included shipbuilders and artists), Siegfried matured in a large Kentish house, was educated mostly by tutors at home, played with by older brothers, cast (once as Mustard Seed) in his mother's tableaux vivants, and exposed to such venerable villagers as Miss Horrocks, whom King George IV once kissed. An impractical boy, regarded as delicate, he was often dreamy, and quite unsingleminded about anything. ("The Great War," 83)

The important distance suggested here between Sherston and Sassoon reveals a method of simplification deployed throughout these works. Although both George and Siegfried share the comforts of an aristocratic background and a dreamy disposition, George has less contact with the "real" world--for instance, of parents and brothers--than Sassoon has in real life. Later in *Siegfried's Journey* (1945) Sassoon openly admits to constructing, in Sherston, a simplified version of his outdoor self, a version intellectually and poetically truncated, nonetheless one clearly intended to correspond with his actual experiences. Over and over, Sassoon draws our attention to the subtle and often confusing alignment of his two protagonists. In his autobiography, Sassoon excuses himself from describing a training camp because it "has already been fully described

by Sherston as 'Clitherland Camp' in the memoirs (55). And in the final volume of Sherston's memoirs, the narrator "borrows" one quarter of the text directly from Sassoon's diaries. In light of the intentional and extensive correspondence between Sherston and Sassoon, the simplifications of the memoirs pose important questions for readers. In other words, our reading of Sassoon's work must emphasize both the identity he forges with the past as well as the distance he recognizes in his narrative (re)presentations of it. Once again, we will approach his reality of the past through the narrative dialectic between constructed otherness and the sameness of identity.

In his book *The Road to Armageddon: The Martial Spirit in English Popular Literature, 1870-1914*, Cecil Eby identifies an interwoven tide of militarism and xenophobia in popular culture prior to the Great War. "For an English youth growing up in the late Victorian period," Eby claims, "infatuation with empire, with its inevitable corollaries--the vision and paraphernalia of war--was as natural as breathing" (3). The romantic illusions that poets such as Rupert Brooke, Charles Sorley or Siegfried Sassoon carried to war with them may be attributed, at least partially, to such visions. But in many ways the romantic attitudes of 1914 were as much a product of the more local Edwardian moment as of anything else: "Sunlight, summer gardens, along with lawn parties, cricket pavilions--these are the recurring patterns woven into tapestries of memory during

that summer before Europe took the plunge. Working retrospectively, the mind simplifies complex experiences too painful to contemplate as wholes" (Eby, 238). Sassoon, or at least his fictional counterpart George Sherston, certainly seems guilty of just such simplification.

Through the picture he presents of his leisurely fox-hunting life, we glimpse a world so remote that it often appears imaginary or fictional--which, of course, in a way it is. As a consciously fictional memoir, Sherston/Sassoon can and does exercise considerable liberty while constructing his narrative. In the final volume, *Sherston's Progress*, he notes "while composing these apparently interminable memoirs there have been moments when my main problem was what to select from the 'long littleness'--or large untidiness--of life" (22). As in any autobiographical writing, Sherston faces the problem of selecting and arranging his material. But in these memoirs, he greatly simplifies this problem. Rather than contemplating the complex whole of Sassoon's past and then selecting material to present, Sherston's narrative dwells solely on various sporting roles for its material. Since the measure of Sherston's existence can then be taken in terms of how well he bats at the village cricket match or how many times he rides with the hounds in a week, complex intellectual speculations rarely pose a problem.

Safe within the cricket pavilions and lawn parties of Edwardian England, painful thoughts or contradictions rarely

trouble our hero. During the all-important "Flower Show Match," Sherston experiences one typically limited moment of epiphany: "The game was now a tie. Through some obscure psychological process my whole being now became clarified. I remembered Shrewsbury's century and became bold as brass" (81). Rising to the occasion, Sherston wins the match, the entire locus of his existence projected along a cricket pitch. The major concerns of his life become how well his new hunting boots fit and the "holy" life of horse racing and fox-hunting.

Even the comments of the--presumably--more mature narrator often have an excessively naive and simplified ring to them: "As I remember and write, I grin, but not unkindly, at my distant and callow self and the absurdities which constitute his chronicle. To my mind the only thing that matters is the resolve to do something. Middle-aged retrospection may decide that it wasn't worth doing; but the perceptions of maturity are often sapless and restrictive" (199). These heavily qualified perceptions, this contrast between the acceptance of youthful absurdity and fear of restrictive maturity, invites us once again to consider the fictional dimension of retrospection, to focus on the process of narrative simplification. One further reminder that this is a constructed narrative comes from the episodic plot of the memoirs--one which moves like successive innings in a cricket match, providing routinely scheduled occasions

for George to act nobly, to engage in the type of action he valorizes above.

Sherston's background as a sportsman, his studied cultivation of a fox-hunting ethos, enables him to transition easily to the biggest game of all--to play his part in the Great War. Even in the final volume of the memoirs, when by all rights he should be reformed by his war experience, Sherston finds himself "lapsing into my rather feckless 1916 self," playing what he calls "'my natural game'" while patrolling no man's land (*SP*, 221). Eby reminds us that "'sportsman' was one of those key words like 'amateur' which loomed so large in the psyche of Englishmen of the Great War period. When kept within the bounds of lawn and field games they were innocuous enough, but when metamorphosed into the context of martial arts or racial destiny they could become lethal indeed" (248). Only dimly aware of the reality of death, a number of times during the memoirs Sherston admits that he actually desires a glorious death in war. "There could be no turning back now; one had to do as one was told. In an emotional mood I could glory in the idea of the supreme sacrifice" (*MFHM*, 342). The cultural narratives available from his sporting world support this supreme sacrifice, confirming his belief that the worth of a man should be measured by his sporting prowess, by his varsity achievements. And the entire trajectory of his life--at least of the life of the fictional Sherston--has been directed toward embodying the

values of this sporting world. Even in the Army, Sherston "always found that it was a distinct asset, when in close contact with officers of the Regular Army, to be able to converse convincingly about hunting. It gave one an almost unfair advantage in some ways" (*MFHM*, 327). Sherston's sporting past thus provides him with a passport to the world of modern war; regrettably, it also equips him with a set of traditional values grossly inappropriate to living there.

Sherston's simplified narrative character has been purchased at a price, of course, a price ever more recognizable through the tension we witness between these conflicting worlds. The sportsman's creed encourages active participation and heroic demeanor for all contests; yet in the game of war, healthy fear or intellectual reservations might well be more appropriate responses. But throughout the *Memoirs* George Sherston has been denied any intellectual pursuits and has renounced all claims to an examined life. Mired in a world of war, he desperately tries to integrate its horrific experiences with a fatally inadequate narrative line. Inevitably, then, the Sherston who confesses "I had serious aspirations to heroism in the field," must soon face the consequences of this deadly game of war: "Never before had I looked at the living world with any degree of intensity. It seemed almost as if I had been waiting for this thing to happen" (*MFHM*, 291). Thus the stage is set for a transformation in his character: living in a world charged with intensity, the narrative of Sherston's indolent

and simplified past is exchanged for a more appropriate "memoir of an infantry officer."

"Realities beyond my radius"

Looking round the room at the enlarged photographs of my hunters, I began to realize that my past was wearing a bit thin. The War seemed to have made up its mind to obliterate all those early adventures of mine. Point-to-point cups shone, but without conviction. And Dixon was dead. . . . (MFHM, 359)

The War did cross certain lines--irrevocably. It obliterated the tranquility of the past and replaced it with a chaotic and often incomprehensible present. Sherston's faithful servant, Dixon, the tutor and steward of his fox-hunting youth, wastes away of pneumonia on the Western Front. But, significantly, he dies playing the same game as his master. Certain realities previously beyond the radius of Sherston's comprehension thus gradually come into focus for him; his narrative journey to France forces him to encounter their barren and frequently brutal forms. Recalling the war, Sherston argues that "all squalid, abject, and inglorious elements in war should be remembered. The intimate mental history of any man who went to the War would make unheroic reading. I have half a mind to write my own" (MFHM, 318). Far from the carefully limited world of a fox-hunting man, the realities of the war demand a new awareness from the simple character of George Sherston.



Sharing a common lot with the "ignorant and undoubting" youths of his age--with the "bright countenance" of Dick Tiltwood and eager commitment of Stephen Colwood--Sherston "arrived at manhood in the nick of time to serve his country in what he naturally assumed to be a just and glorious war. Everyone told him so; and when he came to Clitherland Camp he was a shining epitome of his unembittered generation which gladly gave itself to the German shells and machine-guns" (MFHM, 321). Although some retrospective bitterness seeps into this passage, initially Sherston clings confidently to his ideal past, grateful "that the War hadn't killed cricket yet" (320). He is troubled occasionally by the horrors still to come, "unable to reconcile that skeleton certainty with the serenities of this winter landscape . . . But even then it wasn't easy to think of dying" (340). Caught up in the adventure of the game, in the potential glory of war, Sherston's early perceptions of war are figured in relation to the sporting narratives of his past.

During the first year of the war, George takes the young Dick Tiltwood under his wing, trying to shelter him from its reality by playfully staging an imitation hunt for him. "Thus, in those delusive surroundings, I reverted fictitiously to the jaunts and jollities of peace time, fabricating for my young friend a light-hearted fragment of the sport which he had not lived long enough to share" (340-41). But even the joyful memories of this relationship, with

its fanciful flights to a more peaceful time, are haunted by a sense that life will never be long enough; the narrator recognizes here that these scenes were fictitiously constructed, that they were consciously fabricated. As long as the narrative flows along on its imaginative power, it can momentarily hold off reality. But the fabrications of memory must finally give way to the haunting, yet human, images of actual war. "Memory eliminates the realities of bodily discomfort which made the texture of trench-life what it was. Mental activity was clogged and hindered by gross physical actualities. It was these details of discomfort which constituted the humanity of an infantryman's existence" (*MFHM*, 369). In time, Sherston is forced to contend with these gross physical actualities; in time, he must recognize the limits of every human narrative. Attenuations of memory notwithstanding, his narrative must include the cold telegram announcing Stephen Colwood's death: "Looking at Dick's blank face I became aware that he would never see Stephen now, and the meaning of the telegram became clear to me" (*MFHM*, 323). Yet Stephen's death, interestingly, lacks substantial meaning apart from the impact it has on Dick--lacks meaning apart from the new narrative invoked to contain it.

Therefore, despite the deceptive veneer of this "fictional" personal narrative, Sassoon clearly shares Blunden's need to construct a narrative form capable of comprehending "the meaning" of his very real war experience,

one able to interrogate the images and voices of the past. Sassoon endeavors to locate the meaning of Stephen's death, to find a narrative frame it will fit within; he rejects the discredited narratives of his past and places these novel experiences in the context of a new story: the tale of disillusioned youth. Much like Blunden's insistence that the truth of war can indeed be learned, Sassoon slowly teaches Sherston about this truth by exploring the various narrative frames that might be capable of interpreting his experience.

Whereas Blunden presents the undertones of conflict through a relatively quiet narrative dialogue, Sassoon directly forces his readers to confront their contradictory voices through ironic, and sometimes brutal, narrative juxtapositions. For example, Stephen Colwood's letters from the front are full of amusing references to fox-hunting and facetious remarks about the war; but the terse announcement of his death arrives in the midst of "dull perfunctory duties" and blank faces (*MFHM*, 322-23). In another instance, Dick's engaging and natural innocence gives Sherston a "sense of security, for his smooth head was no more perplexed with problems than a robin redbreast's; he wound up his watch, brushed his hair, and said his prayers morning and evening" (*MFHM*, 322); yet during the routine burial service following Dick's equally routine death, "the chaplain's words were obliterated by a prolonged burst of machine-gun fire; when he had finished, a trench-mortar

'cannister' fell a few hundred yards away, spouting the earth up with a crash. . . . A sack was lowered into a hole in the ground. The sack was Dick. I knew Death then" (MFHM, 365). The vitality and innocence of Dick is replaced by the indifference and cynicism of Death. As one friend after another dies, gradually the past of the fox-hunting man disappears, gradually his narrative is discredited. As Sherston views an arid and empty no man's land, the landscape can no longer offer comfort. Nature appears full of "leafless trees" and "dead water." Easter Sunday dawns: "sad and stricken the country emerged. I could see the ruined village below the hill and leafless trees that waited like sentries up by Contalmaison. Down in the craters the dead water took a dull gleam from the sky. I stared at the tangles of wire and the leaning posts, and there seemed no sort of comfort left in life" (MFHM, 376). And just as the sporting narratives from Sherston's past have proved inadequate to the war, so too traditional religious narratives fail him: "I could find no consolation in the thought that Christ was risen" (MFHM, 376). On this somber note, searching desperately for a way to interpret his experience, George Sherston closes the first volume of his memoirs.

The next two volumes continue this journey towards disillusionment, gradually exchanging one narrative paradigm for another. In *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, Sherston initially believes in the redemptive power of the war. It

has freed him from his indolent past, and he seems genuinely motivated to undertake a pilgrimage leading towards *Sherston's Progress*. While fighting on the front, his "attitude toward the War . . . was that I wanted to have fine feelings about it. I wanted the War to be an impressive experience--terrible, but not horrible enough to interfere with my heroic emotions" (*MIO*, 148). And Sherston (as well as Sassoon) did display heroism on the front: he was awarded the Military Cross for one particularly heroic rescue he made after a night patrol.

Tellingly, his medal provides yet another story for him to live by; it provides an expanded narrative frame for his experiences:

But we had heard of partial and complete failures in other parts of the line, and the name of Gommecourt had already reached us with ugly implications. It was obvious that some of us would soon be lacing up our boots for the last time. . . . However one felt that big things were happening, and my Military Cross was a comfort to me. It was a definite personal possession to be lived up to, I thought. (*MIO*, 77)

Although this insight is carefully qualified by "I thought," the medal still provides a definite direction for both Sherston's life and his narrative of it. The medal offers him a culturally valued mode of understanding his war experience, enabling him to temporarily defend his role of

"happy warrior" while at the front, and then to explain his actions as a retrospective narrator.

Once he has accepted this role, Sherston often has moments where he embraces the glory, excitement and adventure of war. "I felt adventurous and it seemed as if Kendle and I were having great fun together. Kendle thought so too" (*MIO*, 88). In this guise, he quite appropriately acquired the nickname of "Mad Jack." Yet the war continues to expose him to an "indeterminate tragedy which was moving, with agony on agony, toward autumn." His doubts and thoughts

were powerless against unhappiness so huge. I couldn't alter European history, or order the artillery to stop firing. I could stare at the War as I stared at the sultry sky, longing for life and freedom and vaguely altruistic about my fellow-victims. But a second-lieutenant could attempt nothing--except to satisfy his superior officers; and altogether, I concluded, Armageddon was too immense for my solitary understanding. (112)

Although he still occasionally withdraws to an imagined world of fox-hunting, more often now Sherston dodges the paradoxes of war through his anti-intellectual character of the "happy warrior." Like Tennyson's heroes, his is not to reason why--only to act, and perhaps die. Not without dilemmas of its own, this stance nevertheless provides a

position from which he can organize his evolving response to the war:

I had always found it difficult to believe that these young men had really felt happy with death staring them in the face, and I resented any sentimentalizing of infantry attacks. But here was I, working myself up into a similar mental condition, as though going over the top were a species of religious experience. Was it some suicidal self-deceiving escape from the limitless malevolence of the Front Line? . . . Well, whatever it was, it was some compensation for the loss of last year's day-dreams about England. (MIO, 195)

In short, playing the "happy warrior" provides Sherston with a compensating narrative for the one he has rejected. And even with his growing disillusionment about the war, he maintains a belief in the values of comradeship, eagerly embracing "the Battalion spirit": "My mind was in a muddle; the War was too big an event for one man to stand alone in. All I knew was that I'd lost my faith in it, and there was nothing left to believe in except 'the Battalion spirit.' The Battalion spirit meant living oneself into comfortable companionship with the officers and N.C.O.'s around one; it meant winning the respect, or even the affection, of platoon and company" (MIO, 195). Willing himself into companionship, winning the respect and affection of his men become Sherston's motivations in the war, but the

devastating impermanence of these human victims requires him to explore the "bleak truth" of war more fully.

At first, the role of "happy warrior" allows Sherston to escape the grinding reality of death and dismemberment surrounding him. But not for long. "Last summer the First Battalion had been part of my life; by the middle of September it had been almost obliterated" (196). Time after time the human agents of war are destroyed by it; time after time they force their "bleak truth" upon him: "and there was only one method of evading it; to make a little drama out of my own experience--that was the way out. I must play at being a hero in shining armor, as I'd done last year; if I didn't, I might crumple up altogether" (196). Yet as he plays this carefully cast role in his personal drama, the knowledge that it too evades truth continually gnaws at him. The simplifications of George Sherston's character loom ever larger.

Avrom Fleishman emphasizes the figure of the quest that overlays much of Sassoon's "extended autobiographical career," commenting that his appropriation of figures common to the tradition of spiritual autobiography reveals "a typological habit of mind . . . confronting the otherwise unassimiable spectacle of the Great War" (338). Certainly, Sherston's conversion from "happy warrior" to outraged pacifist, his story of martyrdom through war, can easily be identified with this tradition. Moreover, Fleishman emphasizes an important dimension of Sassoon's text here,



encouraging readers to attend to an analogous mode Sassoon calls upon to mediate between memory and experience. Yet reading these memoirs solely in terms of the trope of martyrdom relies too heavily on Sherston's tale of "progress," and undercuts Sassoon's reflective, often ironic, qualifications of Sherston's account. Put differently: Fleishman's attention to the governing tropes of Sherston's memoirs ignores the complexity of Sassoon's narrative journey.

Taking up the dynamic aspect of these autobiographical texts enables us to expose the dialectical tension between Sassoon and Sherston, a tension fully visible in the hollow narrative of the final volume of the trilogy. Having failed to achieve salvation through his role of happy warrior, Sassoon gradually embraces the alternative vision of the antiwar pacifists. His famous statement against the war replaces physical courage with moral courage, once again reading his own past as an evolution of consciousness, as a purgative journey through disillusionment to redemption. "But I felt the desire to suffer, and once again I had a glimpse of something beyond and above my present troubles-- as though I could, by cutting myself off from my previous existence, gain some new spiritual freedom and live as I had never lived before" (*MIO*, 295). But, of course, Sassoon can never awake from the nightmare of his past, and he knows only too well that his mind may grope around in a "purgatorial limbo" for the remainder of his life. Stripped

of intellectual and poetic sensibility, Sherston may "progress," he may find salvation in his final narrative role--but Sassoon has no such luxury.

"The inmost silences of the heart"

The Front Line was behind us; but it could lay its hand on our hearts, though its bludgeoning reality diminished with every mile. It was as if we were pursued by the Arras Battle which had now become a huge and horrible idea. We might be boastful or sagely reconstructive about our experience, in accordance with our different characters. But our minds were still out of breath and our inmost thoughts in disorderly retreat from bellowing darkness and men dying out in shell-holes under the desolation of returning daylight. We were the survivors; few among us would ever tell the truth to our friends and relations in England.  
(MIO, 233)

How can one ever tell the truth of such an experience? How can one ever reconcile "the curious incongruity" between a visit to the Priory--with its "wonderful old water-clock and its ideally civilized surroundings and the memory of myself crawling about in a mine-crater to bring wounded men in after a raid on the German trenches less than three months ago." Sassoon ponders this dilemma in his autobiography; he worries about "the contrast between the war the infantry knew and having tea with Mr. Horniman--could the two things be mentally digested and rationalized by a kindly pat on the back from one's elders?" (SJ, 20). Can he, in good conscience, integrate these worlds? Sassoon struggled with this question throughout his autobiographical narratives, first presenting the simplified response of the

fictional George Sherston, then going over the ground again in his own narrative journey. During the war, he "had felt that no explanation of mine could ever reach my elders-- that they weren't capable of wanting to know the truth" (SJ, 22). Closing the final volume of his work, we join Sassoon in asking how this truth ought to be interpreted.

Pursued by the huge and horrible idea of war, Sherston sifts various narrative roles that might help him to interpret his experience: first turning to the Edwardian sportsman, then to the happy warrior, finally to the enlightened pacifist. He takes us on a narrative journey with him from innocence to experience, from youthful optimism to bitter cynicism. As his early memoirs give way to *Sherston's Progress*, the quest pattern is obviously intended to yield his final redemption. But just as Sherston represents a simplified version of Sassoon's character, so too his narrative represents a limited account of the truth of war. It is too fabricated, too constructed, too consciously intent on demonstrating its progress through disillusion to redemption. Whereas Sherston mockingly describes his experience as a three act play at one point, it is Sassoon who most clearly realizes Sherston's limitations. Similar to the Regimental Histories Sherston critiques, his own memoirs "look straightforward enough in print, twelve years later; but their reality remains hidden" (MIO, 245). Sassoon wants to get closer to the reality of war, and so he directly lends Sherston his own diaries,

after excising the literary entries of course. In his autobiography, he records the following reservations about his narrative record of experience:

While reconstructing the contrasts and inconsistencies of what might conceivably be called a simpleton's progress, I am often doubtful in deciding what is significant to the story. Anxious to impose coherence on the patchy integument of chuckle-headed immaturity, one observes how the actions of undeveloped character, especially when governed by emotion, vary between reversions to juvenility and anticipations of the self-knowledge towards which one was being conducted by the educative process of making mistakes and refusing to admit it. (SJ, 188)

The autobiographical journey, especially one through the world of war, is full of uncertainty and competing versions of truth. So although the progressive disillusionment inspired by the Western Front seems to be an old story to Sherston, Sassoon enables these memoirs to capture a new and fuller understanding of its conflicting undercurrents.

Sherston wants desperately to master his war experience, "to understand--before it was too late, whether there was any meaning in this human tragedy which sprawled across France" (SP, 218). But he never can see the experience from the outside; his vision remains partial and incomplete. He writes from the perspective of a participant, caught in the muddle of war: "my mind could see

no further than the walls of that dugout with its one wobbling candle which now burnt low" (SP, 219). More and more Sherston plunges directly into the contradictions of his experience, more and more he embraces their paradoxes. Having failed in his public protest to end the war, he seeks personal redemption by returning to it. But his return is full of a self-reflexive awareness of the duality of his position. What if he should be killed when he returns? "Killed in action in order to confute the Under-Secretary for War, who had officially stated that I wasn't responsible for my actions. What a truly glorious death for a promising young Pacifist!" (SP, 43).

Sherston also becomes painfully aware of the frightening--perhaps even compromising--ambivalence of the soldier's role in war. As both agent and victim of destruction, as both perpetrator and recipient of war's devastating forces, the soldier's position includes a moral complexity that he would rather not think about. Early in the narrative he admits "I went up to the trenches with the intention of trying to kill someone. It was my idea of getting a bit of my own back. I did not say anything about it to anyone; but it was this feeling which took me out patrolling the mine-craters whenever an opportunity offered itself" (MFHM, 366). Revenge is never pretty, but Sherston explains this behavior as "no more irrational than the rest of the proceedings, I suppose" (MFHM, 366). And although he finds himself caught within an irrational world, he still

searches for rational explanations--or narratives by which to rationalize--his behavior. Later, when his friend Kendle is killed while they are "having great fun together" shooting at Germans, all Sherston's feelings "tightened and contracted to a single intention--to 'settle that sniper' on the other side of the valley" (MIO, 89). He blindly charges the enemy trench, flinging a few bombs and scattering the enemy. "Idiotically elated, I stood there with my finger in my right ear and emitted a series of 'view-holloas' (a gesture which ought to win the approval of people who still regard war as a form of outdoor sport)" (MIO, 90). Sherston undercuts the severity of his action with the dismissive irony of his description, but again he focuses our attention on the competing narratives inside his story. Later in *Sherston's Progress*, he remarks that "I am always reminding myself to be ultracareful to keep my story 'well inside the frame.' But I begin to feel as if I were inside the frame myself" (54). And this collapse of narrative frames, this intersection of perspectives, this integration of the person with his narrative, is precisely the point Sassoon has been working towards throughout his own narrative journey--throughout his own battle of life.

In an entry taken from Sassoon's actual war diaries, he describes the "funny mixture of reality and crude circumstance with inner 'flame-like' spiritual experience" that accompanies his return to fighting in February of 1918. Even though he senses "the beginning of a new adventure" and

is "already half way into my campaigning dream-life," he feels confident that this time he is finally "equipped to interpret this strangest of all my adventures--ready to create brilliant pictures of sunlight and shadow. In the 'awful brevity' of human life I seek truth" (212-13).

As he suggests here, the interpretation of the strange and awful adventure of war must include both darkness and light, both despair and hope. His battle of life has forced him to witness the death of many close friends and to participate in the dehumanizing destruction of modern war. Yet it has also allowed him to see the powerful and noble endurance of soldiers at war and to share the intimate bonds of friendship. It has torn him from the tranquil world of his past and thrown him into scenes of utter devastation, yet it has also given him a new appreciation of the glory of nature and a sense of the actual future. Thus he ends *Siegfried's Journey* "pointing out that there is an essential disparity between being alive and memorizing it long afterwards. But the recorder of his vanished self must also bear this in mind, that his passage through time was a confused experiment, and that external circumstances had yet to become static and solidly discernible" (336). Writing in 1945, no doubt the circumstances of the *second* World War in twenty years have something to do with the shape his present journey takes. Perhaps, then, he is overly dismissive of "my younger self" who "seemed to be watching a play performed in a language of which he couldn't understand more

than an occasional word. His apprehensions of the contemporary scene were blinkered, out of focus, and amorphous as the imagery of a dream" (SJ, 336). In this view, both the young Sherston and Siegfried struggled to apprehend the truth of their experiences in terms of inadequate or outmoded narratives. And their own narrative accounts of events were similarly impaired by myopic blindness.

Yet when Sassoon suggests "that somebody with more metaphysical ability than I can command should investigate this discrepancy between the art of autobiography and the rudimentariness of reality," his dynamic narrative protests. His texts clearly mediate between various narrative lines that might be pressed on the raw flux of experience, they clearly take as one of their projects just such an investigation. To be sure, the artificial resolutions and ordered understandings that these narratives "assembled through afterthought and retrospection" do conflict in important ways with the immediacy and animality of unformed existence (SJ, 337). But perhaps, in the inmost recesses of our hearts, we all recognize this as a grounding assumption for the battle of life; perhaps this is a truth we can grasp more fully only by contemplating the "awful brevity" of life and the narratives that seek to apprehend it.



It is important instead to elevate, each by means of the other, historical explanation and individuation through horror. The more we explain in historical terms, the more indignant we become; the more we are struck by the horror of events, the more we seek to understand them: . . . There are perhaps crimes that must not be forgotten, victims whose suffering cries less for vengeance than for narration.

Paul Ricoeur (*Time 3*, 188-89)

## Chapter 5: *Good-bye to All That*

That *Good-bye to All That* is selling well does not surprise me, because I have been able to put into the book all the frank answers to all the inquisitive questions that people like to ask about other people's lives. And not only that, but I have more or less deliberately mixed in all the ingredients that I know are mixed into other popular books. For instance, while I was writing, I reminded myself that people like reading about food and drink, so I searched my memory for the meals that have had significance in my life and put them down. And they like reading about murders, so I was careful not to leave out any of the six or seven that I could tell about. Ghosts, of course. There must, in every book of this sort, be at least one ghost story with a possible explanation, and one without any explanation, except that it was a ghost. I put in three or four ghosts that I remembered. . . . (4)

"Postscript to '*Good-bye to All That*'" (1930)

With this recipe for success, how could Graves possibly fail? Following a popularly determined list of ingredients, he had only to sift through the specifics of his own past, choose the choicest morsels, and calmly form them into a narrative of his early life--one covering the years from his birth in 1895 up to his self-imposed exile from England in 1929. Following this formula, his narrative cheerfully, wittily, and most often satirically constructs a "that" to bid farewell to. Graves adopts a style well-suited to the popular success he desires--and to the financial freedom such success will entail--observing that "for a book to be popular it has, I believe, to be written in a state of suppressed excitement, and preferably against time and with a shortage of money. And the sentences have to be short and the words simple. And the most painful chapters have to be the jokiest" ("PS.," 12). Of course, *Good-bye* seems to meet

these requirements, especially in its quick-paced, often journalistic-sounding style. And the enormous popular success of the book provides evidence that if indeed his overriding intention was to make money, he succeeded.<sup>1</sup> But when "the most painful chapters" become "the jokiest," what kind of "that" emerges? How useful is Graves' formula for understanding his text?<sup>2</sup> In short, how does his narrative relate to the past reality it (re)presents? Does it trouble, for example, the "discrepancy between the art of

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<sup>1</sup> In his biography of Graves, Martin Seymour-Smith describes *Good-bye's* best seller status: "When Cape saw the typescript he knew he had a winner on his hands. Its anti- (not non-) literary quality, its 'untidiness', 'intelligence' and 'originality' (the last three were characteristics given by Sassoon to Graves as David Cromlech [in Sherston's *Memoirs*]), all these impressed Cape's commercial as well as his critical sense." And after only two weeks on the market, Cape wrote to Graves "of course we cannot forecast what the sale will be but we have high hopes of selling as many as 50,000, maybe even more than that [within a month sales had reached 30,000]." Cape then discusses the sales of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, suggesting "we think *Good-bye to All That* might be as successful. . . . The note we want to strike is that we have the German War book which is a huge success, but here is THE English War book which is the best war book of all and one which every Britisher must possess" (194).

<sup>2</sup> Brian Finney studies the link between the "Postscript" and the text that Paul Fussell exploits in *The Great War and Modern Memory*. "What Fussell and others have failed to appreciate is the radical nature of the revision that Graves undertook in 1957. Graves explicitly spells out the kind of changes he made in the Prologue which he wrote for the new edition. But the extent of them is best indicated by the answer he gave to an interviewer in 1968: 'I entirely rewrote *Good-bye to All That*--every single sentence--but no one noticed . . . It's an entirely new product.' To apply the "Postscript of 1930 to the revised edition of 1957 which we all use now is anachronistic" (166). I will follow general critical practice and take my citations from the revised edition. However, I also believe that we can avoid the anachronism of Fussell's reading and still make good use of the "Postscript."

autobiography and the rudimentariness of reality" that Sassoon's narrative investigates?

Seen in broad outline, *Good-bye to All That* moves deliberately through three phases of Graves' early life: the first section relates the story of his childhood and adolescence, the next provides a lengthy portrayal of his war experience, then it closes with a final--rather short--postwar account of his marriage, demobilization and subsequent attempts to rejoin the civilian world. He seems to write, at first glance, a very conventional autobiography. At the end of the narrative, of course, in one slight paragraph, Graves skips hastily over the most recent years, jumping from his return to England in 1926--ignoring the "complicated domestic crisis" which led to the collapse of his marriage--to his parting from his wife Nancy Nicholson in 1929. But perhaps such discretion is only to be expected from someone who has recently "been grilled by the police on a suspicion of attempted murder" ("Prologue," 1957).<sup>3</sup> Whatever the justification, the story ends with the

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<sup>3</sup> In the middle of what Peter Green calls "the biggest literary scandal for years," Graves actually wrote substantial portions of *Good-bye* while visiting with Laura Riding at the hospital following her jump from a fourth-floor window in April of 1929. Riding's influence over his literary work is undeniable. Peter Green provides the following summary of this complicated interaction: "Though Riding herself now--understandably--exaggerates both the exclusiveness and the lasting effect of the influence she had over him, there can be no doubt that at the time her energy and self-confidence, his psychological need to submit himself *in toto* to a dominant female mentor ('the female mind is the judge,' Riding pronounced, 'and the male mind the subject of judgment') between them produced, at an appalling price, remarkable results" (116).

following lines: "We parted on May 6th, 1929. She, of course, insisted on keeping the children. And I went abroad, resolved never to make England my home again; which explains the 'Good-bye to All That' of this title" (343). But does this explanation really suffice? Is it any more accurate than the disclaimer in the "Postscript" above? His departure for Mallorca may explain the "good-bye" offered by his title, but it does little to increase our understanding of what--of the "that"--he really says good-bye to.

Clearly, with over half of his text focused on his war experiences, he intends to bracket these shattering events and provide his own farewell to arms. But this narrative good-bye reaches beyond the limits of his war years to include his childhood and his education at Charterhouse in "the business of being a gentleman" (11). The revised edition of *Good-bye* begins with these lines:

As proof of my readiness to accept autobiographical convention, let me at once record my two earliest memories. The first is being loyally held up at a window to watch a procession of decorated carriages and waggons for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897 (this was at Wimbledon, where I had been born on July 24th, 1895). The second is gazing upwards with a sort of despondent terror at a cupboard in the nursery, which stood accidentally open, filled to the ceiling with octavo volumes of Shakespeare. (1)

Through this tongue-in-cheek opening, Graves extends an invitation to his readers to position the forthcoming narrative within its appropriate contexts: he begins to show us how to read his text, how to attend to his pervasive and mocking irony, how to construct an appropriate "that" from it.

First of all, *Good-bye* asks to be read as a text fully aware of its textuality, as one intensely conscious of the various conventions and forms that impinge on its narrative (re)presentation and construction. Importantly, it brings an entire range of conventions under scrutiny; it casts them under a wide net of skepticism. So although these early memories do, most probably, correspond to important events in Graves' life, their importance here must be registered against a larger background. From the opening sentences of this text, then, we are in the grip of a master narrator, one who clearly intends to dispel or correct any false impressions we might have, one who uses satire liberally to scourge falsehood and ignorance. Just as the narrator presents a young Robert who had no "illusions about Algernon Charles Swinburne, who often used to stop my perambulator when he met it on Nurses' Walk," and just as he "knew all about" the members of the Shakespeare reading circle in his own way, so too he seeks to overturn his readers' skepticism through his candid and self-deprecating mode of presentation (1). First he openly admits his debt to autobiographical conventions, dutifully sketching his "earliest memories,"

and then he turns to a patently factual document--a passport--to further develop his character. "My height is given as six feet two inches, my eyes as grey, and my hair as black. To 'black' should be added 'thick and curly'. I am untruthfully described as having no special peculiarity" (3). But when he presents a bizarre list of peculiarities--including his "unsteadied" nose that "no longer serves as a vertical line of demarcation between the left and right sides of my face" and admits that "I do not carry a watch because I always magnetize the main-spring"--we quickly realize that his comic exaggeration is designed to create a character for us, to place before us a caricature of the actual Robert Graves.

Thus it is easy to see why Paul Fussell directs our attention to the "caricature scenes" that Graves presents throughout the narrative, to see the "theatrical anecdotes" that "present character types entirely externally, the way an audience would see them" (208-9). Graves does rely heavily on this farcical, theatrical method throughout the story, ironically inverting or commenting upon his experiences both in and out of war.

Yet for all the dramatic energy this method provides for Graves' work, he points to it himself as but *one* mode of ironic interpretation, as but *one* method that must be called into question--with others--through his narrative. Late in the text, after the war, Graves takes a teaching position in Egypt--one with "a very high salary, and with little work to

do" (323). Typically, his time there is filled with comical incidents, outrageous essays written by his students, and "plenty of caricature scenes to look back on" (341). At this point in the narrative of *Good-bye to All That*, we too have plenty of caricature scenes to look back on--and that is the point. This self-reflexive quip recalls his opening nod in the direction of autobiographical conventions, and it reminds us that one of Graves' central concerns throughout the text has been to examine how we interpret our lives, to probe how we understand and order its chaotic moments, to explore how we tell our stories.

Each of these dramatic and farcical scenes, then, only has meaning within the larger narrative he constructs. One "caricature scene" he remembers sharing with Siegfried Sassoon--"myself in faultless khaki with highly polished buttons and belt, revolver at hip, whistle on cord, delicate moustache on upper lip, and stern endeavour a-glint in either eye, pretending to be a Regular Army Captain; but crushed into that inky desk-bench like an overgrown school-boy"--takes on its full meaning only when we read it in its narrative context, as part of "the real story of Loos" that precedes it and as linked to Sassoon's later outburst against the war and Graves' subsequent efforts to save him from martyrdom (180). The farce in the schoolroom, the ludicrous concerns of the commander, the incongruity of the officers seen as schoolchildren, directly calls to mind the absurdity of much of the war. But these grotesque scenes



also generate power within a larger narrative structure. The condescending tone of the Battalion commander is meant to contrast sharply with the candor of Graves' subsequent lecture to the Canadians, his "telling the real story of Loos, and what a balls-up it had been" (181). The picture of soldiers being manipulated like pawns in a chess game is meant to conflict with the discussion of the intentional atrocities committed against enemy soldiers in the next chapter. In other words, this caricature scene of the schoolroom provides a narrative counterpoint to the graphically real description of battle that precedes it and to the discussion of war morality that succeeds it. Moreover, this narrative juxtaposition urges us understand the narrative truth being generated by these intersecting strands.

In like manner, the meaning of the "caricature scene" of Graves' marriage to the feminist Nancy Nicholson--"myself striding up the red carpet, wearing field-boots, spurs and sword; Nancy meeting me in a blue-check silk wedding dress, utterly furious" (272)--comes into focus gradually as the narrative takes its course: "She had her way exactly, but began to regret her marriage, as a breach of faith with herself--a concession to patriarchy. She wanted somehow to be dis-married" (296). The comic description of marriage as an isolated event contrasts with the ongoing questions--of identity, gender and power--set in motion by the event; timebound social ceremonies and conventions thus gradually

engage with the transcendent cultural and political structures that promote them. So although Graves' enemies may, as Fussell contends, always be "the same: solemnity, certainty, complacency, pomposity, cruelty," Graves himself resists the critical certainty and complacency that Fussell's limited reading implies. *Good-bye to All That* is far too complex a text to be reduced merely to clever farce.

Therefore, despite the distance Graves places between himself and these caricature scenes, despite the emphasis he directs towards the otherness of his past experience, he weaves a dynamic and deeply personal narrative. In fact, storytelling quickly emerges as one of the dominant themes in *Good-bye to All That*. In the opening chapter alone, Graves links his story to the autobiographical conventions of personal stories, to the cultural stories bound up in Queen Victoria's Jubilee, to the social and literary stories of a Shakespeare reading circle, to the historical stories of his great-uncle Leopold von Ranke, to the disquieting stories of modern technology and progress, and to the family and national stories of his German, Irish and English ancestors. His narrative, quite simply, is a story about stories.

From his earliest days, the Graves home was filled with stories, often told as moral exemplum by his mother. "My mother used to tell us stories of inventors and doctors who gave their lives to the service of humanity, and poor boys who struggled to the top of the tree, and saintly men who

made examples of themselves. Also the parable of the king who had a very beautiful garden which he threw open to the public" (30). Steeped in an environment so firmly grounded in narrative, it is no wonder his own of story life emerges fully aware of its narrative constructions. Facing the inevitable disjunction between physical experience and the communication of that experience, Graves can do no more than tell us a story.

*But It Still Goes On*

But what is meant by the truthfulness of war-books? . . . It was practically impossible (as well as forbidden) to keep a diary in any active trench-sector, or to send letters home which would be of any great post-War documentary value; and the more efficient the soldier the less time, of course, he took from his job to write about it. Great latitude should therefore be allowed to a soldier who has since got his facts or dates mixed. I would even paradoxically say that the memoirs of a man who went through some of the worst experiences of trench warfare are not truthful if they do not contain a high proportion of falsities. High-explosive barrages will make a temporary liar or visionary of anyone." (32-33)

"PS. to 'Good-bye to All That'"

In his postscript to *Good-bye to All That*, Graves identifies four different classifications for war-books, "to each of which a different test of truthfulness should be applied" (32). In a formal history, of a unit or campaign, the test of historical accuracy seems necessary and appropriate to Graves; but in "the personal memoirs of a combatant" he advocates fidelity to experiential truth, to what it was like, to how it felt to be involved in the war

as a participant. Graves' biographer Martin Seymour-Smith speaks of "two kinds of reality" that the autobiographer can seek to represent. "One is what actually happened--which belongs to the historian, who does what little he can with it; the other is what it was like, what happened to the person who was there--which belongs to the individual" (194). As we have seen from the other war narratives in this study, distinctions between individual and public reality can be quite tricky, for even the objective historian writes from a specific social, professional, and ideological context. Nevertheless, Graves clearly owes a greater allegiance to the latter truth of individual experience that he defends above. In fact, one of the things that makes *Good-bye to All That* such a powerful and dynamic text is the way Graves infuses his narrative with this personal authority.

Though often setting the scenes of his narrative a certain distance from himself, Graves certainly argues for, as Brian Finney notes, "the pre-eminence of subjective experience in any autobiography centred on the writer's experience of trench warfare between 1914 and 1918. For Graves the problem was how to tell the previously untellable, how to use conventional narrative techniques to describe the unprecedented horrors of war as he experienced it" (167). Yet perhaps even more than reworking conventional techniques, Graves explored the problem of an adequate narrative form for these same experiences. Paul

John Eakin's critical study of autobiography, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (1985), argues first that "autobiographical truth is not a fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation," and then he claims "adventurous twentieth-century autobiographers have shifted the ground of our thinking about autobiographical truth because they readily accept the proposition that fictions and the fiction-making process are a central constituent of the truth of any life as it is lived and of any art devoted to the presentation of that life" (4-5). This notion--of truth as a process of ongoing negotiation between reality and the forms used to (re)present it--recalls, of course, the complex process of hermeneutic truth that we have continuously drawn upon.

Graves' suggestion above, that any "true" account of the Western Front must contain "a high proportion of falsities," of "fictions" in Eakin's sense, certainly supports this claim. He exposes the many conventions influencing his writing process, yet still argues directly for the potential truth value of storytelling. Recognizing that autobiography cannot offer an unmediated or direct representation of the past, Graves still believes in the larger truth claims his autobiographical narrative can make. As I have argued from the outset of this study, the elusive truth of the human experience of war is bound up with the equally intricate process of "self-discovery and self-

creation" so characteristic of the autobiographical narratives that seek to represent it or "stand-for" it. We have rejected, as Eakin also does, "the apparently antithetical claims of truth and fiction that are necessarily involved in any attempt to render the materials of a life history in a narrative form" (4). With this in mind, our analysis of *Good-bye to All That* must now turn to the sense of responsibility directing his "rendering" and to the "narrative form" Graves develops to mediate these "apparently antithetical claims."

Shortly after Graves arrives at the front for the first time, he records the following scene at the end of a night watch:

Going towards Company Headquarters to wake the officers I saw a man lying on his face in a machine-gun shelter. I stopped and said: 'Stand-to, there!' I flashed my torch on him and saw that one of his feet was bare.

The machine-gunner beside him said: 'No good talking to him, Sir.'

I asked: 'What's wrong? Why has he taken his boot and sock off?

'Look for yourself, Sir!'

I shook the sleeper by the arm and noticed suddenly the hole in the back of his head. He had taken off the boot and sock to pull the trigger of his rifle with one toe; the muzzle was in his mouth. 'Why did he do it?' I asked.

'He went through the last push, Sir, and that sent him a bit queer; on top of that he got bad news from Limerick about his girl and another chap.'

He belonged to the Munsters--their machine-guns overlapped the left of our company--and his suicide had already been reported. Two Irish officers came up. 'We've had several of these lately,' one of them told me. Then he said to the other: 'While I remember, Callaghan, don't forget to write to his next-of-kin. Usual sort of letter; tell them he died a soldier's death, anything you like. I'm not going to report it as suicide.' (103)

What is the truth of a trench suicide? How should a narrative (re)present it? Is it a matter of discussion, like the discussion above between the two Munster officers? Is it the humane "truth" of lying to family and parents about the soldier's death? Is it young Graves' halting and confused recognition of the many forms death may assume at the front? Is it the narrator's awareness that modern war often makes men "a bit queer" and that the "usual sort of" narratives used to describe them will often be found wanting? Or is it the dynamic intersection of all these possibilities as they are forced upon us by the narrative form Graves constructs?

The scene above describes the first dead soldier Robert Graves witnessed at the front; later in the narrative he describes the last: "The chaplain was gabbling the burial

service over a corpse lying on the ground covered with a waterproof sheet--the miserable weather and fear of the impending attack were responsible for his death. This, as it turned out, was the last dead man I saw in France and, like the first, had shot himself" (243). A number of times during his story of the front, Graves sketches pictures of dead soldiers--both German and English. Why are the first and last deaths he selects for his narrative self-inflicted? The answer to this difficult question is bound up in the truth that Graves must try to communicate with us--a truth that remains complicated, difficult to grasp, and often absurd. On the one hand, this contradictory form of death in war mirrors some of the larger absurdity and contradiction Graves feels compelled to share. But on the other, it places him squarely within its hopeless disorder--a disorder bracketing his time at the front--and all that he can do is tell its story.

Quite often, this story focuses on death--on the way dead bodies look as they decompose, on their noxious smell, on the nightmarish poses the dead frequently assume. Sometimes, as in his description of the fighting around Loos, Graves is able to put an ironic distance between death and his men: "The acting C.S.M. said: 'It's murder, Sir.' 'Of course, it's murder, you bloody fool,' I agreed. 'And there's nothing else for it, is there?'" (162-63). But many times, death is not a joke; gallows humor fails him:



We are now in a nasty salient, a little to the south of the brickstacks, where casualties are always heavy. The Company had seventeen casualties yesterday from bombs and grenades. The front trench averages thirty yards from the Germans. Today, at one part, which is only twenty yards away from an occupied German sap, I went along whistling 'The Farmer's Boy', to keep up my spirits when suddenly I saw a group bending over a man lying at the bottom of the trench. He was making a snoring noise mixed with animal groans. At my feet lay the cap he had worn, splashed with his brains. I had never seen human brains before; I somehow regarded them as a poetical figment. One can joke with a badly-wounded man and congratulate him on being out of it. One can disregard a dead man. But even a miner can't make a joke that sounds like a joke over a man who takes three hours to die, after the top part of his head has been taken off by a bullet fired at twenty yards' range. (114)

Nor can anyone disregard a painfully graphic scene such as this one fired at close range. Contrary to his claim in the "Postscript," the most painful parts are not always the jokiest. When poetical figments splash all over you, they can no longer be ignored. They too must tell their stories.

To be sure, the stories of war are often difficult to interpret; they often find themselves mired in moral paradoxes, caught in an epistemological mud no less

threatening than the actual quagmires on the Western Front. During his time as a training instructor at the Harfleur Bull Ring, Graves heard a variety of these stories. Many, like the dubious newspaper accounts and letters from supporters of the "little mother" that he weaves into his narrative, deserve to have scorn and ridicule heaped upon them. But others have an elusive ring of truth.

One night a captain in a Line battalion of a Surrey regiment told Graves this story: "'In both the last two shows I had to shoot a man of my company to get the rest out of the trench. It was so bloody awful, I couldn't stand it. That's why I applied to be sent down here.'" Yet the escape to the training camp is only temporary, and the stories heard there continually remind us of the "bloody awful" truth of war. Graves is quite insistent on this point: "This [the Captain's story] was the truth, not the usual loose talk that one heard at the base. I felt sorrier for him than for any other man I met in France. He deserved a better regiment" (186). Once again, caught in the irreconcilable tension of this confession, the truth of war lurks.

Remarkably, though, the solution Graves proposes here is *not* a simple plea to end the war--the answer, so it seems, is to provide "better regiments." Unlike the bitter and desperate attack on the war Sassoon stages, Graves contemplates truth from the inside of war, empathizing with the unnerving despair of a comrade in arms, with a fellow

agent of destruction. Sassoon alternates between responses, seeing the war both as an officer inside it and as a pacifist outside it. Near the middle of 1917, Sassoon writes to Graves after four officers from their battalion were killed and seven wounded in a recent battle. "The Battalion advanced nearly half a mile, which, to Siegfried, seemed some consolation. Yet in the very next sentence [of his letter] he wrote how mad it made him to think of the countless good men being slaughtered that summer, and all for nothing" (256-57). Once again, Graves sympathizes with Sassoon's frustrations--"he didn't know whether he wanted to rush back and die with the First Battalion or stay in England and do what he could to prevent the War going on"--but Graves' summary of the situation is revealing: "But both courses were hopeless" (258). Furthermore, when Sassoon sent Graves a copy of the newspaper cutting of his famous protest, Graves "read the wrong side first." And not only did he read the wrong article--one titled "The C.O.'s Must Be Set Free"--he reprints its text in *Good-bye* before he presents Sassoon's statement "Finished With War" (260). Typically, Graves uses the narrative juxtaposition of these scenes to qualify Sassoon's view, firmly placing it within the context of other *civilian* responses to the war.

The next paragraph of *Good-bye* makes Graves' position clearer: "I found myself most bitter against the pacifists who had encouraged him to make this gesture. I felt that, not being soldiers, they could not understand what it cost

Siegfried emotionally" (261). Graves shares a common past with Sassoon, he identifies with the horror of the experience Sassoon cries out against, he knows its truth. But "I also realized the inadequacy of such a gesture. Nobody would follow his example, either in England or in Germany. The War would inevitably go on and on until one side or the other cracked" (261). Full of the same frustration Siegfried feels, sharing with him a revulsion of the horror of war, Graves also knows the resignation and despair of war: he has fought in the abortive battle at Loos, he has seen the suicides in the trenches, he has seen the inhuman deaths of the badly wounded, and he has heard the stories of war atrocities on both sides. He knows, first hand, the difficult questions posed by war; his narrative seeks out their elusive answers.

*Difficult Questions, Easy Answers* (1975)

The trenches made us feel larger than life: only there was death a joke, rather than a threat. (152)

"The Kaiser's War" (1973)

Although death in the trenches may have been a joke at times, frequently it was no laughing matter. To be sure, Graves' continues to present brilliant satirical snapshots throughout his text; however, by the time we reach the end, the narrative juxtaposition of these scenes has taken its toll. The bright images reveal their dark connections, and the narrative process of self- and cultural- definition

asserts its self-conscious doubleness. Through the complex dynamics of his narrative, a somber understanding of the largeness and smallness of life gradually emerges. Death may no longer be a threat, but neither is life.

Convalescing on the Isle of Wight after the inflammation of his lung wound, Graves still attempts to make jokes and play hoaxes on the civilians. But note the changed tone as he describes one: while staying at Osborne Palace, "among our laboriously nonsensical games was one of changing the labels on all the pictures in the galleries. Anything to make people laugh. But we found the going hard" (254). As the war ground on, it became harder and harder to pass it off as a joke. Even nonsensical games are now "laborious." Like the mislabelled pictures in the hall, few things are what they seem to be at first glance. Mediating in a field of individual, social, cultural and political doubt, Graves recognizes his own moments of blindness and insight. As he struggles to present his narrative interpretation of these events--to find their elusive meaning--he reminds us to be wary of any easy answers we find to the difficult questions his narrative poses.

At first glance, the narrative structure of *Good-bye* doesn't seem overly complicated. Its autobiographical dimension seems to promise a linear progression from his birth to 1929--or at least until 1926. The glimpses of life before and after the war seem designed to circumscribe the war with their "normal" events and quotidian concerns. And

the narrative farewell to outmoded conventions and constricting traditions seems carefully contained in the "that" it constructs. Even the brilliant satire of the caricature scenes can easily be dismissed as absurd farce, thus explaining the times when the narrative moves randomly or erratically.

Yet this excessive emphasis on the constructed or political otherness of Graves' text must be qualified by the intensely personal, often painful, testimony Graves renders throughout the narrative. The careful mosaic structure of the narrative, with its elaborate and important juxtapositions, clearly indicates that Graves went well beyond merely recording a chronicle of his life, and even beyond constructing an elaborate farce. In his historical account of a shattering experience, in his graphic rendering of the unique horror of the war, and in his deeply problematic response to it we continually sense dialectical tension between self-discovery and self-creation.

In the deeply troubling events of war, Graves faces many irreconcilable paradoxes. At times, he even doubts his own ability to endure. "I wondered whether I could endure to the end with faith unto salvation . . . My breaking-point was near now, unless something happened to stave it off. Not that I felt frightened. I had never yet lost my head and turned tail through fright, and knew I never would. Nor would the break-down come as insanity; I did not have it in me. It would be a general nervous collapse, with tears and

twitchings and dirtied trousers" (198). He has seen many collapse in this fashion; he has seen others drink themselves into oblivion. Yet he is also deeply suspicious of any conventional expression of faith that might help him endure or find salvation. Thus when the Armistice came, "the news sent me out walking alone on the dyke above the marshes of Rhuddlan (an ancient battlefield, the Flodden of Wales), cursing and sobbing and thinking of the dead" (278). In this direct statement of his personal response to the end of the war--a war that defies easy answers--even the completion of the narrative brings no resolution. All one can do is curse, and sob, and remember the dead. For, as the ancient battlefield reminds us, the dead shall always be with us.

In the Epilogue Graves adds to the 1957 revision of *Good-bye to All That* he is "glad to report that little of outstanding autobiographical interest has happened since [1929]" (344). Describing the events of the past forty years, he does pause, though, to comment on the various roles his children played in the Second World War: Jenny as a W.A.A.F. war correspondent, Catherine as a W.A.A.F. radio operator, and David as a soldier who went to India and Burma with the Second Battalion of the Royal Welch--the same unit, of course, that Robert Graves served with during the Great War. But David "was killed on the Arakan peninsula in March 1943, after going up with a sergeant and one man to bomb the Japanese out of three strong-points, which had held up the

Battalion's advance. They captured the first strong-point, and when his companions were wounded, David rushed the second single-handed; but was shot through the head trying to take the third" (344). This scene provides an appropriate closing to *Good-bye*, for the meaning of both Robert and David Graves' war experience flows through it. Whenever we interpret the narratives of our lives we seek ways to give them meaning, we seek for order in their incomprehensible chaos.

David died heroically, in a remote land, fighting against terrible odds specifically for his wounded companions. Using its typically absurd rationale, "the War Office turned down his recommendation for a posthumous Victoria Cross on the ground that the attack had failed" (344-5). Yet since this comes at the end of the text, we meet this stock, ironic reversal--so characteristic of Graves' narrative method--with some of his own deep ambivalence. Outrage, bitterness, and disappointment blend with pride, loss and resignation. After all, how do you tell the truth about your own son's death? What narrative can possibly contain it?

With these questions we reach our journey's end, facing the same dilemmas that set us on our way. The search for a tellable truth in the reality of war remains caught in a matrix of personal responsibility and narrative possibility.



From the start, this concept of truth has hovered over our discussion, providing a horizon against which to view the various narrative responses to the war. As Todorov suggested, it has provided a set of directions for the journey rather than a fixed and determinate end. Each of the narratives we have studied, of course, sets forth certain indisputable truths about war in its graphic record of battle and in its insistent effort to remember. But well beyond the limited view of a past reality circumscribed by the category of the same--aware only of identity with the past--and also beyond the negative ontology of the category of the other--emphasizing only narrative distortion or loss--we have continually pursued a complex and elusive narrative mediation of the past through our dialogic reading of these texts.

The dynamic form of personal narrative is the analogous form that Blunden, Sassoon, and Graves--each in his own way--used to "stand-for" the past, the form they manipulated to tell their stories. By insisting upon personal narrative as the most appropriate mode of response to the war, they all direct our attention to the intersection of personal and cultural modes of interpretation: they expose the power of narrative to both discover and create selves--individually, socially, culturally and ideologically. They fuse the partial vision of their individual perspectives with the transcendent wholeness offered by narrative form, only to discover again and again that the dialectical exchange

between part and whole, between content and form, between individual and context, and between self-discovery and self-creation constitutes an endlessly dynamic process. First and last, it is a narrative process: the process of telling a story.

And telling stories remains a peculiarly human activity--one necessarily open to the self-reflexive awareness demanded by our modern condition, a condition shaped by the legacy of the Great War--nonetheless an emphatically human and necessary activity. Paul Ricoeur reminds us of the importance of telling stories:

We tell stories because in the last analysis human lives need and merit being narrated. This remark takes on its full force when we refer to the necessity to save the history of the defeated and the lost. The whole history of suffering cries out for vengeance and calls out for narrative. (*Time 1*, 75)

The personal narratives of the Great War often reveal a history of the defeated and lost; often they reveal a story of unprecedented suffering and incomparable anguish--they reveal, in short, their own unique hell. Yet they also face inward and probe the moral paradoxes, the epistemological uncertainty, and the haunting memories their experience provokes--finding few easy answers when they admit their individual agency and complicity in events. Need we wonder why, then, in their cries of anguish and vengeance, soldiers so frequently call out to personal narrative?

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