

# REMEMBERING THE GREAT WAR: AUTOBIOGRAPHY, FICTION, AND METAFICTION

*Tom Burns*<sup>1</sup>

## **RESUMO:**

Este trabalho estuda relatos escritos da Primeira Guerra Mundial (1914-1918) através de uma análise da classificação do gênero e as estratégias narrativas usadas por escritores clássicos e contemporâneos britânicos e canadenses. Verifica-se que as narrativas mais recentes incluem muitos temas importantes da literatura clássica bem como outros novos, de acordo com as mudanças sociais que tem ocorrido desde então. Na metodologia, os relatos contemporâneos mostram diferenças significativas da obra clássica, uma vez que aquelas tratam da questão de que como um evento que não se lembre mais possa ser recuperado ou reconstruído.

## **PALAVRAS-CHAVES:**

Literatura da Primeira Guerra Mundial; Memórias de guerra; Narrativas de guerra

The First World War of 1914-1918 proved to be a fertile ground for memoirs, autobiographies, and autobiographical fiction written by veterans. As Paul Fussell, author of the seminal work **The Great War and Modern Memory**, put it: “Everyone who remembers a war first-hand knows that its images remain in the memory with special vividness” (FUSSELL, 1975, p. 327). In an autobiography, memory is given over to “the recovery of the cognitive content of fantasy,” giving the text “a dimension that goes beyond the merely documentary or testimonial” (MIRANDA, 1992, p. 128-129, my translation). Autobiographical narrators, in other words, are self-conscious in ways that recorders of facts may not be. While the diary and on-the-spot documentary are pre-literary forms, the memoir or autobiography takes shape in retrospect. The events recorded at a present time are now seen and reflected on from the viewpoint of the past and therefore take on different, often more complex, meanings. In this formulation, memory in autobiographical narrative is given form; it is constructed or “narrativized.”

The distinction between fiction and non-fiction in narrative accounts of war would seem to be clear-cut, since there are restraints on invention about historical events, namely, the large body of documentation. The difference in method between the archival research done and interviews conducted by a biographer to illuminate his subject, however, and the kind of text produced by one who attempts to write about himself as a participant in war proves to be crucial,

---

<sup>1</sup> Professor de Estudos Literários na Faculdade de Letras da Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais.  
e-mail: thomasburns@hotmail.com

in, for example, the point-of-view. In biographies and histories, there is usually a “consistent” third-person, omniscient narrator, while memoirs and autobiographies are told from the more intimate viewpoint of the first-person narrator, but both types enjoy the hindsight of the “narrating, as opposed to the experiencing ‘I’”(KLEIN, 1984, p. 17). An attempt at representing the experiencing-I may be given in fictional and non-fictional narratives for the increased tension and psychological concentration of the combat narrative discussed in Chapter Three. On the other hand, the “I-was-there” aspect of the combat novel, what Klein calls the “from within” perspective, is shared by both types of accounts (KLEIN, 1984, p. 21).

In the literature of war, autobiographies classified as non-fiction were often written by statesmen or generals to celebrate their triumphs or to justify their strategic or tactical mistakes. In their case, of course, there were documented historical facts that could not be ignored. By contrast, the war narratives written by less exalted military personages—line officers and men of the lower ranks—did not need to be confronted by this established body of fact, since their accounts were necessarily of events at a purely local level, that which has been witnessed first-hand and does not necessarily have, or is even likely to have, official documentation. On one hand, there are the official accounts of battles that construct an overall narrative of the events, giving background and context, facts and figures, even while they also depend on the individual perceptions, observations, and memories of actual participants. A company-grade officer or enlisted man’s account of a battle, on the other hand, need only give his individual perceptions. This circumstance leaves the imagination a certain amount of free play so that events may be interpreted—or, as in fiction, invented, whether consciously or not.

The autobiographical work, therefore, just like its fictional counterpart—the “first novel” of the young writer—tends to be a personal narrative of one man’s experience of war. The autobiography is written for much the same reason and with much the same content as an autobiographical war novel. The obvious difference between the two is that, in the former, the author and the narrator make an explicit claim to be the same person, while the fictional work has a character who functions as an alter-ego for the author. There is another difference as well: in autobiography presented as non-fiction, there is an implied truth-claim, “continuous implicit attestations of veracity or appeals to documented historical fact” (FUSSELL, 1975, p. 310). The author of the autobiographical text says something like: “I was there, this is the way it was, it is not made up, and my account can be checked against the record.” Robert Graves, in what is

perhaps the most well-known autobiography of the Great War, **Goodbye to All That**, first published in 1929, is referring to this distinction between fact and fiction when he tells the reader that he “stupidly” began his account of the war as a novel and then decided to “re-translate it into history. (GRAVES, 1960, p. 79).

The distinction between autobiography and fiction, however, is particularly difficult to maintain in reference to the prose literary production of the Great War, as can be seen in both the categories and the discussions of Bernard Bergonzi’s comprehensive critical history of the literature of the Great War, **Heroes’ Twilight**, whose first edition was published in 1963. Bergonzi treats autobiographies and memoirs, as opposed to the fiction, in separate chapters (denominated “Retrospect I” and “Retrospect II”), but even in this apparently straightforward division there is considerable overlap. As he admits, the war novels of 1928-29 are “autobiographical,” and one or two of them could be put in either category (BERGONZI, 1996, p. 163). And his comments on Siegfried Sassoon’s trilogy, **The Memoirs of George Sherston** (combined edition published 1936), a supposedly fictional work, are found in Retrospect I, although the presence of the word “memoirs” in Sassoon’s title admittedly invites confusion. Fussell, for example, notes the book’s “overall ironic structure” (FUSSELL, 1975, p. 106).

Bergonzi characterizes George Winterbourne, the protagonist of Richard Aldington’s autobiographical novel, **Death of a Hero** (1929), as a “briskly manipulated puppet,” a barely disguised voice for the author’s personal tirades against the British Establishment, a critical assessment that emphasizes the autobiographical over the fictional elements of the novel, since rhetorical passages are much more acceptable to readers in autobiographies. Furthermore, an explicit formal structure is also more to be expected in a novel, while the autobiographer is expected to tell his story according to “how it happened,” but Aldington’s novel, according to Bergonzi, is “willfully formless” (BERGONZI, 1996, p.172-173). It may be said, however, that the flashbacks supplying the background to Winterbourne’s apparent suicide build a necessary context for madness, which may explain the apparent formlessness. Conversely, Bergonzi says that Herbert Read’s war memoir, **In Retreat** (1925), resembles fiction in its self-imposed restrictions: for example, the text sticks to what the author personally experienced and concentrates on only a few days in March, 1918, and that—also in a fictional mode—Read’s narrator effaces himself in the interest of a “transparent” narrative that will invoke in the reader the illusion of being present. The narrative “conveys the sense of the war as a large machine that

transcends the separate humanity of those caught up in it”—that is to say, it sounds rather like a typical postwar novel of disillusion—while at the same time the “prose provides a track of time over a short stretch of time as recorded by one individual consciousness” (BERGONZI 1996, p. 142), thus also displaying an autobiographical element.

Read’s work also shows that another possible criterion of distinction—that autobiography is more comprehensive (attempting to give a complete account) while fiction is more selective (giving a more dramatic account), holds up no better. Compared to poet and essayist Robert Graves’s autobiography **Goodbye to All That** (1929) which encompasses the author’s childhood and post-war life as well as his military experience, the poet Edmund Blunden’s autobiography **Undertones of War** (1929) confines itself only to certain selected experiences at the front, and the soldier and intellectual T.E. Lawrence’s autobiographical work, **Seven Pillars of Wisdom** (1935), confines itself to a few continuous years of a military campaign. In these three works, regarded as autobiographies, the narrative events go beyond mere recollection: they are selected, shaped, and styled like narrative fiction.

There is even a kind of official confusion between the two kinds of text. Several books on the war were catalogued as “personal narrative,” or non-fiction, by the British National Union Catalog and other bibliographical works, but were later reclassified by the New York Public Library as novels. Hager and Taylor give the example of an anonymous work titled “The Fighting Mascot, The True Story of a Boy Soldier, by the Boy Soldier Himself” (1918). The author turned out to be one Thomas Kehoe, but the anonymous status of the author-narrator and his admission that he had had professional aid in writing the book may well have contributed to its being listed as non-fictional. In any case, it should be recalled that metafictional devices designed to make a fictional text appear to be factual have been employed as long as the novel has existed. Let me illustrate varied types of narrative strategies in war memoirs with a few examples: the first is the autobiographical work of T.E. Lawrence, “Lawrence of Arabia.”

Anonymity was not in question for Lawrence, who became a legend in the British army and whose autobiographical work **Seven Pillars of Wisdom** was no doubt intended to extend his fame to the general public. The manuscript, as he tells us in the preface, was written in 1919-1920, but this first draft was lost. A second draft was privately printed in an expensive limited edition in 1926, and then, in the following year, in a much abridged edition for a larger public, under the title **Revolt in the Desert**. The full-length work came out only in 1935, with a new

edition in 1940 and reprintings nearly every year afterwards for more than a decade. As an acknowledged “autobiography,” Lawrence’s work could be checked against the historical record of other accounts. As if to further this claim, he attaches to the appendices with the names of the British members of military units and a table of positions with place-names and dates. This editorial apparatus is gratuitous, since these men do not figure by name in his account, as he admits to having changed the names of participants, but it may well be to bolster the status of the work as factual.

The contradictory aspects of unstructured memoir vs. planned narrative do not stop here, however. In a forward, the author begs the reader to take his book “as a personal narrative pieced out of memory,” since circumstances of the campaign forbade him “to make proper notes” (LAWRENCE, 1952, no page no.). Contrary to this suggestion of a book written “on the march” (LAWRENCE, 1952, p. 21), the precise details of topography and event and the balanced cadences of the prose constitute a polished work, intended, as the author himself admits, to narrating “a designed procession of Arab freedom from Mecca to Damascus” (21), or a teleologically-designed narrative. He seems to change his tack on the next page, however, with the significant admission that his history is, after all, “not of the Arab movement, but of me in it,” and then, as if this sounds too presumptuous, he claims that his own part in the movement is only “a mock primacy” (22), even though his narrative constantly shows him at the center of events and in close collaboration with his principal leaders. In any case, the text is structured like a work of fiction to show how “natural” and “inevitable” the narrated events were.

My next example is the autobiographical memoir of Vera Brittain, **Testament of Youth**, first published in 1933, which is valuable for its treatment of familiar war themes from the viewpoint of a woman who took an active part in the war nursing soldiers. The theme of pre-war innocence versus wartime experience, which she says is central to her work, is also a primary theme of the British memoirs and autobiographical novels written by men. Sassoon’s trilogy, for example, goes from the idyllic, fox-hunting youth of the protagonist George Sherston in Edwardian England to his initiation into the army and eventual service in the trenches on the western front, in which the contrast between beauty and comfort with ugliness and suffering are symbolic of pre-war and wartime England, evoking the nostalgia resulting from the realization that the former is gone forever. At the same time, although Brittain lost nearly everyone she loved—her fiancé, her brother, and their two close friends—and was emotionally devastated by

the experience, she does not submit to the typical (and, in the Twenties, even fashionable) malaise of so many young men who renounced their participation in life. In fact, her work as a nurse and her political convictions as a feminist and internationalist turn her autobiographical account in an “inspirational” direction.

The double current of the historico-cultural and the political sustaining the personal therefore form the basis for an individual who is concerned to tell her own but typical story, a narrative of suffering and loss, but with an increasingly uplifting message of hope. These aspects can be perceived, for example, in the Foreword, when Brittain says that she felt an urgent need to give “an impression of the changes” that the period brought to the middle-class society of her time: “Only, I felt, by some such attempt to write history in terms of personal life could I rescue something that might be of value, some element of truth and hope and usefulness, from the smashing up of my own youth by the War” (BRITTAIN, 1994, p. 11). She means to delineate the social context of the middle-class (“its interests, its morals, its social ideals, its politics”) within which her personal story can be best understood, but her purpose is not only personal and historical but political: “...what I have written constitutes, in effect, an indictment of a civilisation” (BRITTAIN, 1994, p. 12).

Like Graves, Brittain says she originally planned to tell her story in a novel, but gave that up as inadequately “detached” for events that were still too close to her. She seems to be referring to some kind of autobiographical “pact,” as suggested by the autobiographical theorist Philippe Lejeune, in which a truth-telling pact is made between author and reader, a truth that need not be guaranteed by a fictional narrative (NORONHA, 2002, p. 22). Brittain’s next strategy was to publish sections of her diary, with fictitious names substituting the real ones, but this too seemed to her “spurious,” and the diary, which covered only the war years, was too short for the comprehensive treatment of a whole period that she wanted to write. The only course left, she writes, was to tell her story as an autobiography, with its typical truth claims (“tell my own story as truthfully as I could against the larger background”) and its classic *apologia* of the personal as illustrative of the collective: “In no other fashion, it seemed, could I carry out my endeavor to put the life of an ordinary individual into its niche in contemporary history, and thus illustrate the influence of world-wide events and movements upon the personal destinies of men and women” (BRITTAIN, 1994, p. 12). In this autobiographical move, the account of a personal experience becomes an exemplary narrative for an entire generation.

A methodological consequence of the desire to insert the personal within the larger social context is her use of extensive quotations from her own letters and diaries (the 1913-1918 diaries were published, posthumously, in 1981). Inserting these passages in the final text gives a greater impression of candor but also goes beyond it, for, as she points out, this method conveys the fresh impressions of “contemporary opinion,” even when these may appear in retrospect as naïve or wrong. In diaries, the “moment” is valued, although it may later prove embarrassing to the writer, as anyone who has kept a diary in their extreme youth to read over later often discovers to his or her dismay. The cost of emotional excess is paid for, however, by the candid opinion or expressed emotion of the moment, compared with the atemporal wisdom of some autobiographies, which are often (as Brittain accurately puts it) “retrospective reflections heavy with knowledge,” for it is much easier, because it is less honest, to be wise after the fact. Brittain is therefore concerned, as the male narratives of the war rarely are, with recording these feelings and impressions as, or soon after, they occur, in all their naiveté.

My final examples refer to recently written works. As part of our collective memory, the First World War still inspires writers to produce works of fiction, although these tend to be unlike the novels and memoirs of the war years, since they must take into account the intervening decades of history. As a recent commentator notes: “1914-19 has always been a site of memory under construction and reconstruction” (KORTE, 2001, p. 121). After the death of the last known veteran, the war can no longer be directly remembered, only recovered, or “reconstructed,” as the critical jargon term has it, but each generation recovers it in its own way.

Korte, in discussing such “retrovisions” of the Great War written in the 1990s, finds certain recurring images and themes. Images include the Western Front as the prominent site of memory, the men going “over the top” to the sound of the CO’s whistle, shellshocked and mutilated men, especially those with facial disfigurement. Themes and motifs include martyrdom, crosses, the Apocalypse, the idyllic prewar world vs. the shattered postwar world, the comradeship of the men, their distrust of the war’s purpose, their hatred of civilians, and their inability to communicate the experience of combat (KORTE, 2001, p. 124). These, of course, are the images, themes and motifs of the classic works. As Korte acknowledges, as well as the “sedimented” images and myths of the collective memory, today’s writers and filmmakers have had to depend on the earlier literature. The differences from the classic works that are found in recent fiction reflect some of the revisions that took place in Great War novels since the Sixties—

the war experiences of the lower ranks and the working-class, of women, of pacifists and Conscientious Objectors—but the distinguishing feature of the Nineties novels “is a preoccupation with how war can be remembered at all,” with the authors fictionalizing their own difficulty in representing it (KORTE, 2001, p. 124). My last two examples are of this type and illustrate these differences in both form and content.

Pat Barker’s “Regeneration” trilogy (BARKER 1991, 1993, 1995) offer a careful social reconstruction of the period, a mixture of fictional and historical characters, and a treatment of the war experiences of women and pacifists as well as soldiers. Barker’s “retrovision” focus on gender and homoeroticism was ignored in the classic works, but she also treats the important themes of those works, like the association of courage and manhood and the conflicts of social class within the military. In this fictional trilogy, trench warfare is not described directly, as in the typical combat novel, but rather filtered through the painful and impressionistic memories of the participants. This turns out to be an effective strategy, since Barker is concerned, for one thing, with the devastating psychological effects of modern warfare on human beings. Accordingly, much of the first novel, **Regeneration**, takes place in Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh, where one of the central characters of the trilogy, the (historical) neurologist-anthropologist William Rivers, a captain in the medical corps, works as a psychiatrist, looking after a group of psychologically debilitated officers, including Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, who would become the most celebrated of the British poets of the war.

The recovery of the Great War in memory was also one of the main concerns of an earlier work by the Canadian novelist Timothy Findley, **The Wars** (1977). Findley’s strategy is to imagine a *post-mortem* reconstruction of the life of his protagonist, Second Lieutenant Robert Ross, by interspersing a straightforward narrative of the events with devices like descriptions of old photographs of him at various points of his life (“You begin at the archives with photographs”) and (fictionalized) contemporary interviews with people who had known him while he was alive, like Lady Juliet d’Orsay who was only twelve “at the time of the events she describes” although she is now in her seventies.

This pseudo-historical reconstruction serves as a commentary on the action, where a time gap is established between past events and present reflections on them, and the observations of the retrospective narrator, who is also occasionally present as an “interviewer.” The pretension of fact is often signaled by the narrator: “The dates are obscure here—but it must have been mid-



January, 1916 since Robert's tour of duty began on the 24<sup>th</sup> of that month" (FINDLAY, 1977, p. 104). And at the end, in discussing the circumstances of Ross's death: "Here is where the mythology is muddled...none of this is in the transcript of the material—but the 'witnesses' insist it was the case" (FINDLAY, 1977, p. 217). With these narrative strategies, Findley manages to innovate while following established patterns. In a number of ways, the narrative is the classic one of the young subaltern in the Great War, from prewar life on a farm to the horrors of combat overseas and conflict with the military establishment. This narrative arc repeats, in general terms, the accounts of Graves, Sassoon, Brittain and other members of the educated British upper- and middle classes.

## **Bibliography**

ALDINGTON, Richard. **Death of a Hero**. London: Chatto and Windus, 1929.

BARKER, Pat. **Regeneration**. New York: Plume, 1991.

\_\_\_\_\_. **The Eye in the Door**. New York: Plume, 1993

\_\_\_\_\_. **The Ghost Road**. New York: Plume, 1995.

BERGONZI, Bernard. **Heroes' Twilight: A Study of the Literature of the Great War**. 1965. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition: Carcanet Press, 1996.

BRITAIN, Vera. **Testament Of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the years 1900-1925**. 1933. Harmondsworth, Middlesex; Penguin, 1994.

FINDLEY, Timothy. **The Wars**. New York: Delacort Press, 1977.

FUSSELL, Paul. **The Great War and Modern Memory**. Oxford University Press, 1975.

GRAVES, Robert. **Goodbye to All That**. 1929. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1960.

KLEIN, Holger (ed.). **The Second World War in Fiction**. London: MacMillan, 1984.

KORTE, Barbara. "The Grandfather's War: Re-imagining World War I in British Novels and Films of the 1990s." In: CARTNELL, HUNTER, and WHALESAM. **Retrovisions: Reinventing the Past in Film and Fiction**. London: Pluto Press, 2001, p. 120-134.

LAWRENCE, T.E., **Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph**. London: Jonathan Cape, 1952.

MIRANDA, Wander. **Corpos escritos**. São Paulo: EDUSP/Belo Horizonte: Ed. da UFMG, 1992.

NORONHA, Jovita M. G. “Entrevista com Philippe Lejeune.” In: **Ipotesi: Revista de Estudos Literários**. Juiz de Fora, MG, Brazil,. Vol. 6, No. 2, Jul/Dec.2002.

READ, Herbert. **In Retreat**. London: Chatto and Windus, 1925.

SASSOON, Siegfried. **The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston**. London: Faber & Faber, 1937.