Memory and Oblivion in European War Fiction

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

Luigi Pirandello, "Berecche and the War"

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

We can see then that writing as testimony is connected to recollection, to the memory. The subject – the writer – takes the responsibility to choose, to select, to mould the unformed mass of memories. At this point you could say that there exists an equivalence between the role of the writer, and those of the anthropologist and the historian. In 1962, Lévi-Strauss had already perceived how much of the work of the historian, which consists of choosing, eliminating, labelling, ordering and sieving, is closely aligned with the methods of the anthropologist and with those of the writer, particularly when he must deal with the memory. Indeed, Lévi-Strauss wrote:

> Each ethnographic research starts from written 'confessions' (...) as a consequence the historical fact is not a more significant datum than the others; it is the historian, or the agent of the historical process, that creates it through an abstraction, and as if acting under the threat of an endless regression (...) Even from that point of view, the historian and the historic agent choose, cancel, and underline, because a real total history would result in chaos (Lévi-Strauss, 2003: 271-279).

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

Addressing this point in her seminal work on cultural memory, Aleida Assman underlines the difference between 'memory' and 'remembrance'. The first indicates 'the mnemic fact', or you might say, the 'knowledge' of the fact, whereas the second always involves the subject, and the subjective experience. Therefore, testimonial writing, as we will see, can be closely connected not only with the autobiographical experience of the writer, but also with the complex and difficult process of remembrance, which implies an emotional participation intimately connected to the mind as well as to the body (Assman, 2002: 29).

Another aspect which renders testimonial writing highly problematic is the interlacement, the dialectic tension between the search for truth and the awareness of the difficulty in achieving it. As he/she who bears witness is implicitly or explicitly aware that the testimony is in any case always partial (Lollini, 2001).

A dialectic born of the necessity to create a distance between the subject who experiences the event and the moment of its transcription. A distance both temporal and psychological, as demonstrated by the many temporal devices used by novelists. The writing then can be seen as a kind of therapy, and, although it is an attempt to dominate something 'inexpressible', it is however, the only instrument available to the author.

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

> While confronting all this, to use the words that are available to us is now as difficult as facing our own thoughts. War has worn out words; they have worn out, weakened, deteriorated. (*apud* Sontag, 2003: 21)

Confronted with the massacre of the First World War – a war which saw millions of young lives sacrificed to militarism, as witnessed in the disfigured faces of the soldiers in the photography of Ernst Friedrich in his book *War Against War!* (1924) – words fail, or in any case, the written word is incapable of fully expressing the horror of all that occurred. This dialectic tension between the willingness to bear witness and the painful awareness that the medium is insufficient, becomes even more tragic when one remembers how many pacifist and anti-militarist writers decided to take part in the war precisely because the idea that literature could contain all of life was in crisis.

Writers like Ford Madox Ford, Henry Barbusse and Renato Serra expressed in their work this tragic conflict between art and life. The action becomes inseparable from their role as writers and witnesses. It is as if in order to write about war, one is existentially obliged to have fought. The ethical responsibility of the act of writing is connected to the fact of having participated directly in a war which they did not believe in, because it was useless and paradoxical. The act of

participating in a war, as is very clear in the novel and public declarations of Barbusse, seems to be a necessary prerequisite of writing about war: one must share in the suffering in order to bear witness, and the act of writing becomes a bitter denunciation, a battle against ideological falsehoods. Barbusse, an anti-militarist and pacifist writer, enlisted at the outbreak of the war and fought on the front line as an ordinary soldier. In his letters and in his declarations in the press, he explained the motives for taking part in a war he considered evil.

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

> far from abandoning the ideas that I have always defended, I intend to serve them by joining the army. This is a social war that will give the final push to our cause. It is the revolt against long term enemies: militarism and imperialism, the sword and the boot and, may I add, the crown. (Barbusse, 1920)

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

The extreme ferocity and vastness of the global conflict gave rise for the first time to the alarming problem of the

'theatricality of war'. Fussel remembers the First World War as so inhuman that perhaps, paradoxically, one could bear witness to it and reconstruct it only through means of fiction. The First World War was such an incommensurable event, such a liminal experience that one could only bear it by pretending that one was acting, playing a part in a drama:

> It is thus the very hazard of military situations that turns them theatrical. And it is their utter un-thinkableness: it is impossible for a participant to believe that he is taking part in such murderous proceedings in his own character. The whole thing is too grossly farcical, perverse, cruel, and absurd to be credited as a form of "real life". (Fussell, 1975: 192)

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

We were saying at the beginning that written war testimony presupposes a distance, not merely a temporal distance, but also a psychological, existential distance. In First World War narrative there is a sense of estrangement with respect to the reality of the author's surroundings: it is the traumatic experience of the veteran, which one senses above all in Remarque's novel, a sense of desolation, mistrust, separation from home, from those that have not seen No-man's Land, that terrible spectral space separating the trenches of the enemy, an area of absolute devastation where the soldiers' corpses would accumulate for days. In the work of Remarque and Ford, trench warfare is a liminal experience, with the identity of the soldier completely destabilised by the

constant presence of death and above all, of dead bodies. An experience which has a profound transforming effect.

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

> ... the war is such a tremendous landmark that locally it imposes itself on our computation of time like the birth of Christ. We say 'pre-war' and 'post-war', rather as we say 'B. C.' or 'A. D.' (Lewis, 1982: 1)

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

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

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

of waiting, of the passivity of the soldiers in the trenches is underlined – at war, one is always waiting:

> We have become waiting machines. At present, what we are waiting for is the mess. Then it will be the letters. But each thing at the right time: when the mess is over, we'll think of the letters. Then, we will prepare to await for something else. (Barbusse, 1921)

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

> Where are the trenches? You can see lakes, and between them you can see lines of milky and stagnant water. There was more water than we could imagine. It has invaded everything, it has spread around and the prophecy made by men at night has become true: there are no more trenches; these channels stand for the buried trenches. It's a Deluge. The battlefield is not sleeping: it's dead. (Barbusse, 1921: 257)

New war writing then is seen to be in tune with the experimentation of the twentieth-century European avant-garde. The Great War is the beginning of modernity and in the following passage (as Kerr so masterfully underlined in the chapter entitled 'The Cubist War') the new tactics and military strategies and the terrible new equipment of war was

fundamental, not only to the new conception of time and space, but also to the space-time experimentation of cubist paintings. In her essay on Picasso, Gertrude Stein wrote:

> to say the truth the composition of the war 1914-1918 was not the same composition of previous wars. This composition was not one where man was placed in the centre, surrounded by a mass of other men, but it was a composition with neither rhyme nor reason, a composition where an angle counted as much as any other angle: in short, it was the composition of cubism. (Stein, 1986 [1938])

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

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

> When you came in the space was desultory, rectangular, warm after the drip of the winter night, and transfused with a brown-orange dust that was light. It was shaped like the house of a child draws. Three groups of brown limbs spotted with brass took dim high-lights from shafts that came from a bucket pierced with holes, filled with incandescent coke and covered in with a sheet of iron in the shape of a funnel. Two men, as if hierarchically smaller, crouched on the floor beside the brazier; four, two at each of the hut, drooped over tables in attitudes of extreme indifference. (...) (Ford, 1988: 291)

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

Also in passages by Barbusse we can see similar references to such a disconcerted vision of the landscape after battle, where trunks of trees are mixed in with scraps of flesh:

> trees were spread on the ground, or they had disappeared, eradicated, their trunks lacerated. The border of the street are a mess and turned upside down by grenades. Along the whole line.....there are the trenches, twenty-times obstructed and dug again ... the more we advance, the more every thing looks as if it has been turned upside down, it looks terrible.
> We walk on a surface made of fragments of grenades, at each step our foot stumbles over them. We go on among them as if they were traps and we stumble on the mess of broken arms, or fragments of kitchen tools, of bottles of water, of fire buckets. (Barbusse, 1921: 386)

In comparing the testimonial writing of the two wars, I believe it is important to look again at the differences noted by Mosse. The first war was a war of 'position', a slow trench-based war, in which the exhausting experience of the single subject is central, while the second is a war of movement, which also involved the civilian population. 'The myth of the war experience' is therefore of less concern, and it seems that what prevails is a greater awareness of the reflections of personal testimony as an act of writing.

Of the two examples I have chosen in order to examine this difference, the first by Italo Calvino focuses on the Partisan War, and the other by Primo Levi, concerning the events of the Holocaust. They are two examples of eyewitness accounts which illustrate two defining moments of the Second World War, where again the act of writing and the responsibility of the writer are brought into the foreground.

In the 1964 preface to his book, *The Path to the Nest of Spiders*, written in 1946, Calvino explains to his detractors why he chose an indirect way, a 'negative way', to bear witness to the Resistance; a strategy that for Calvino was not neo-realist but **neo-expressionist**, ready to deliberately deform the faces of his fellow partisans. In doing so, Calvino is in harmony with his desire to deconstruct the myth of the Resistance, a desire which had already been in place immediately after the war. In choosing the point of view of Pin, the poor street urchin and brother of a prostitute, Calvino creates an estrangement effect, a marginal perception of the Resistance and of those people and actions which would become, in the Italian culture and popular imagination, real icons. In his preface, Calvino repeats that every time one acts as witness, as actor in a historical epoch, one feels possessed by 'a special responsibility' (Calvino, 1976).

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

As we saw earlier, in the writing of the Second World War, 'the myth of war experience' (Mosse) was less in evidence, but in Calvino, and also in Fenoglio, it seems to me that a feeling of anti-rhetoric coexists with a sense of the epic, founded on the

oral memories of the partisan stories. I realise that this is a complex area, and that even today historians are arguing as to whether the Resistance was really a 'popular' movement or not. In this sense the testimony of Calvino is very clear.

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

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

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

> memory is a frayed fibre, it's discontinuous, tore between myself now and myself in the past. Communication is broken, and as I cannot see a future myself at the other end of the thread, in the same way I cannot distinguish myself outside of the present moment where I am blocked, walled in, and no matter how much I lean back and forth, all I can see are strangers. (Calvino, 1992)

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

Calvino seeks to remember his experience as a partisan, but he realises the difficulty involved in this process, for within his memory there are sunken layers of official history which

nullify the memory. In an attempt to recreate these memories, to order and select, it becomes clear to Calvino that he no longer possesses the past in its fullness, but only small pieces. Memory is compared to sand, something formless, which only emerges gradually and in grains, and upon these grains the story is constructed.

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

> It is not true that I do not remember anything, my memories are still there, hidden in the brain ball, in the wet bed of sand that stays at the bottom of our thoughts: if it is true that each grain of this mental sand observes a life moment fixed in a way that it can never be cancelled, but buried by billions and billions of other grains. (*idem*, 50)

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

> the night of the dead in the enemy village, watched over by people alive who no longer know who is dead and who is still alive. The night of me searching the mountains looking for friends who can tell me if I won or if I lost. The distance that separates that night from this night, when I'm writing. The sense of everything which appears and disappears. (*idem*, 58)

I would like to end my paper with a reference to Levi's *If This is a Man* published in 1958 but begun as a series of notes during his stay within the concentration camp. In the chapter "The Drowned and the Saved" Levi asks himself if "it is good and worthwhile leaving some testimony of this exceptional, liminal human condition" (Levi, 2003: 93). The various writings of the survivors go on asking the same disquieting question: if such an unthinkable experience could be translated into language. Words fail to render such a trauma because words belong to everyone, thus they are not able to encompass the experience of those who were subjected to such tremendous physical pain. Nor are they able to describe this tearing wound of memory.

Here I don't have time to tackle the complex debate aroused in the last two decades about the inadequacy of language and the ethical responsibility of those who write on Shoah. However, I would like to focus on two aspects of Levi's book: the first is that his writing as a testimony does not originate from the need to find a rational explanation to an experience that for its extreme nature overcomes rationality itself. Rather, Levi is driven by an impulse, a pathological need to be listened to and understood. The second aspect is that Levi experiences the terrible existential condition of those who survive the nazi lagers. While going through the pages of his text, characterised by a concise style, the reader is struck by Levis's sense of solitude and anguish, and above all by his impelling need to justify his condition to those who have not come back form lagers.

Thus, writing becomes the need to bear witness to those who have not returned. The 'drowned' are the real and whole

witnesses of Shoa: "drowned, they crowd my memory with their faceless presence, and if only I could enclose in an image the whole evil of our time, I would choose this image, with which I am familiar: a thin man, with a leaning forehead and bent shoulders, on whose face and eyes no trace of thought can be read". Although Levi is aware of the paradoxical condition of memory and trauma, as Lyotard points out, for its resistance to any sense of signification, nonetheless he writes. Out of his testimony an undeletable memory is made, a warning against the horrors of new conflicts to come. <<

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