

An I for an Eye: Edmund Blunden's War

Many Great War personal narratives consciously situate themselves in a generic "no man's land," falling between historical memoir and literary autobiography, allowing considerable leeway in their interpretation. And when we attend to this generic conflict, when we use genre as a heuristic tool, we begin to fully appreciate the inexorable tension between the world of the war and the narrative construction of it. More specifically, by exploring the dialectical struggle in Edmund Blunden's rendering of the war—the struggle between raw experience and formed language—we can begin to understand why he insists upon personal narrative as *the* way to tell *his* story. In fact, his insistence on personal narrative as the most appropriate mode of response to the war directs our attention to the intersection between personal and cultural modes of interpretation, exposing the power of narrative to both discover and create selves—individually, culturally, and ideologically. For we see in Blunden's attempt to fuse the partial vision of his individual perspective with the transcendent wholeness offered by narrative form an ongoing dialectical exchange between part and whole, between content and form, between individual and context, and between self-discovery and self-creation. First and last, this endlessly dynamic process is a narrative one: *the process of telling a story*.

During the war, Blunden was already painfully aware of the difficulty surrounding his ability to tell his story. In a letter he wrote home in January of 1917 he consciously reflected on the inadequacy of literary forms to capture his experience: "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." 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 experience—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," Blunden's post-war life became an extended, quiet struggle to locate an adequate mode of apprehension for his haunting ordeal. Introducing a volume called *Great Short Stories of the War* in 1930, Blunden comments that "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 was full of such questions and dilemmas; but what if, as in Blunden's case, luck holds out and you survive the war? What then?

Edmund Blunden's answer is clear: *you tell your story*. His own tale of war is a crafted and 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 caves chipped by anti-aircraft shrapnel (the guns meanwhile thundering away on the next village) (85)

Blunden immerses us in the tide of his narrative, 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 is often 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 narrate its reality. Blunden's book asks its readers, quietly and simply, to hear its story.

In a 1925 essay titled "War and Peace," Blunden reflects on the war as an event that enlarged his "mortal franchise" and opened "a new sphere of consciousness" (17). Although the shadowy complexion of Blunden's war experience remains somewhat of a mystery even to himself, immersion in "the fierce electricity of an overwhelming tempest of forces and emotions" clearly has given him a profound appreciation of the "deep-lighted detail" of ordinary life, just as it inevitably provides a horizon against which to view subsequent life (18). Like a person emerging from a coma, Blunden leaves the war disoriented yet embracing life with newfound 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.

One of Blunden's most perceptive critics, Thomas Mallon, provides such a word, when he speaks of Blunden as "almost indisputably his generation's foremost poet of war-hauntedness." We might easily extend this claim to his generation's prose works as well.¹ Some would say that Siegfried Sassoon also has a legitimate claim to this dubious honor. His twenty-year struggle to come to terms with the paradoxes and elusiveness of his wartime experience strongly 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: ghostly features dot the narrative as it attempts to map the memories of Blunden's experience.² 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 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 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*—the object "it" remaining vague and undefined throughout. In light of Blunden's 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.³ He encourages us to approach *it* cautiously, to study *it* by turns for what *it* 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 war 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.

Blunden is painfully aware that 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.⁴ In his own text, while sketching a trench 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 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.⁵

Significantly, however, even this desire is quickly checked when he is "inclined to think that [memory's] playfulness has been growing rather more trying latterly: and perhaps I am gradually becoming colder in my enthusiasm to win a few 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 [*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 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 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).⁶ 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 intentionally turns now to a dynamic form of personal narrative.

Although Blunden encourages us to hear many dialogues scarcely audible in the undertones of war, the conversation remains far from clear—even to him. Despite 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). Something in Blunden’s experience on the Western Front 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.⁷ More directly, Blunden 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 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."⁸

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." —*Undertones* (3)

Readers of Blunden's text may miss the importance of this evasive, reticent, ghostly quality of *Undertones*. They may 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." Readers may 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). Readers may 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 may 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 tempting to relate to the reality of his text exclusively through this historical lens, 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 torches 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 Blunden displays here allows us to feel the slimy mud, to smell the putrid water, to sense the exhaustion and disorientation of the infantry soldiers. Blunden, the writer, 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 consider the conventional labels critics attach to Blunden’s “rendering” of “it.” Bernard Bergonzi calls 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, 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.¹⁰ Extending distinctions made by Roy Pascal and Wayne Shumaker 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 public debts. Blunden 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 out 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)

Blunden 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 of 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.¹¹ 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 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 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 siècle*, 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—a narrative search for identity—as it does a public history of the front.

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 struggles in his narrative to locate a self he can live with.

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 nearby, 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, Blunden 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" (207-8).

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 assumes 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 the journalist 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-person,” 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 that ought to be 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 great price; he revisits the war, tramps over the ground again, because he believes this journey can encourage action in the public world, because the journey has a moral purpose. Blunden 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 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, enrolling us in the school of the Western Front. Like all autobiographers, Blunden 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. Through the challenge of and commitment to narrative dialogue, Blunden reveals his truth of war.

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. [Autobiography] 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—speak to us clearly of the tension Dawson outlines and underlines. Blunden’s 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.

But it is finally a narrative that allowed Blunden to reflect on the stark reality of the “huge dark” that haunts his memory, a narrative that enabled Blunden to tell the most important story of his life. He paid his debt; we can only pay ours by listening. □

Notes

1. Mallon’s book for the Twayne series, *Edmund Blunden* (1983), remains the fullest study of Blunden’s 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 it. For specific comments on the influence of the Great War on Blunden, see the chapter “Born for This: Blunden’s War” (52-70).

2. 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).

3. 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. 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.

4. 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 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).

5. 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.

6. 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).

7. Thomas Mallon argues, rightly, I think, that “as the years passed, his grappling with the subject of war became the 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.

8. We must be cautious here, however, not to cripple Blunden’s work by reducing it merely to a haunted text. Thomas Mallon also 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 writers who deal with this conflict; his prose directly enters the narrative discourse of mortality, enabling us to read his text as it speaks to a very real and living audience as well.

9. 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 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.

10. 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*.

11. 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.

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