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## Reality and Anti-Reality in WWI and WWII Memoirs

His face was flushed, and his eyes wide and brilliant with excitement. He was a different man. Something had come to him which had not yet come to us. It was the trial of battle. No one who passes through that is ever quite the same again.

—Hervey Allen, *Toward the Flame* (17)

The obstacle faced by all war memoirists lies in describing “war” to an otherwise innocent audience. Popular aspects of “war” writing include describing the fight for survival, the futile attempt of justifying or denouncing killing for one’s country, showing the ramifications of political decisions upon the common soldier, or simply reporting what happened “over there.” While encompassing all of these popular conventions, war memoirs actually attempts to describe the entirely unfamiliar, alternate-reality that exists on the battlefield. The WWI and WWII memoirs of Robert Graves, Hervey Allen, and Paul Fussell are evidence of this alternate-reality: Each author hopes to find meaning or at least consolation through constructing his tale-of-war. Despite their best efforts, the authors’ abilities to describe the all-encompassing, transformative impact of combat is limited because of the language of our peacetime-reality; our speech lacks the descriptors needed to depict such an alien environment. Luckily,

emerging research in theories of identity, trauma, and cognition offers insight into why meaning is an unattainable goal for the war memoir. These studies reveal that the identity-making processes used in human development work in reverse in war's alternate-reality: Human beings lose their essences and non-living things gain meaning in order to explain, through association, what it means to exist in a wartime-reality. In preparation for war, the development of the soldier mirrors that of a child through training. Soldier-memoirists develop even further along this line, learning to speak the language of an alternate-reality only to later struggle in relating what was learned there. The stories that war memoirists produce consistently reflect a reversal in meaning and morality on the battlefield. As a result, a definitive answer to "why we fight" will never emerge; but individual lessons in "anti-morality" come forward as smaller but substantial products worthy of attention and scholarship.

Basic training begins the transition from the peaceful-reality that we live in to the chaotic-reality that exists on the battlefield. War-memoirists often complain of training's shortcomings and of the ways in which they were not prepared for life in an alternate-reality. These shortcomings derive themselves from the fact that basic training is a construct based upon our world rather than the world that exists in war: The best speakers fail to speak the unspeakable and the best-laid training scenarios fail to capture the indescribable. Nevertheless, training occurs before and during each war. As civilians transform into soldiers, their development mirrors that of a child in striking and obvious ways: Basic training teaches the soldier how to walk (marching), how to communicate (giving and taking orders), and how to dress (uniformity). Still, by failing to hold to its promise of preventing death and suffering, training always falls short of preparing the soldier for life in an alternate-reality. Paul Fussell relates that his training was more of an "abstraction" than a practical preparation for battle:

Like so many of the "School Solutions" we were taught, the standard small-unit attack was a nice abstraction, but perhaps its function was rather to raise our morale and confidence than to work as defined. It did have the effect of persuading us that such an attack could be led successfully and that we were the people who could do it. That was good for our self-respect and our courage, and perhaps that was the point. (93)

War memoirs uniformly focus on the shortcomings inherent with training. Sometimes, as with WWI memoirist, Hervey Allen, the impracticality of training drudges up feelings of anger and resentment:

It was the grim common sense of the “doughboy” and not our obsolete and impossible tactics that won that ground. Oh! The precious time wasted in our elaborate, useless, murderous science called “musketry.” It is as much out of style as the musket from which it takes its name. Teaching it should be made a court-martial offense. It is murder in print. Battles were not fought in lines. (139)

Fussell considers training to be an “abstraction” while Allen calls it “murder in print.” In the end, both memoirists are correct: Basic training is an abstraction that leads to death. Because it falls short of providing safety and security, the meaning of training takes on contradictory connotations in a wartime reality. Training, in the context of an alternate-reality, assumes the role of a threat to survival: Every bad thing that happens—every death and accident that occurs—can be blamed on the failure of training to prepare the soldier for the unexpected. Still, training is only one example of how concepts shift their meanings in the anti-reality of war. But before delving into how meaning, in every sense of the word, reverses itself in war, it is first necessary to chart the subsequent step in development that takes place for those who provide accounts of this reversal.

Soldier-memoirists continue to transform long after their training ends. In addition to the development needed to survive battle, soldier-memoirists must develop the ability to communicate and translate the experiences of anti-reality. This extra stage in the war writer’s development also mirrors that of a child. As Paul John Eakin explains, it is a normal part of human development to create identity through the narration of life-experiences: “[W]e learn to tell stories about ourselves, and this training proves to be crucial to the success of our lives as adults, for our recognition by others as normal individuals depends on our ability to perform the work of self-narration” (152). War is anything but “normal.” Yet, soldier-memoirists consistently juxtapose what is normal in war’s anti-reality alongside what is normal in the reality of peacetime. The problem with this juxtaposition is that our lives contain meaning: We define ourselves by the pursuit of our dreams, the measure of our compassion, and our steadfastness to our beliefs. Oppositely, war presents a situation where dreams are shattered—washed away by blood and fleeting

innocence—and compassion for one's fellow man is abandoned as the soldier kills out of necessity; morality takes a back seat to the primal instincts of survival. Just as training is an abstraction, the identity created in a wartime-reality is an abstraction within the context of a peacetime-reality. The act of identity-creation that occurs in war has the opposite effect of instilling shame rather than normalcy and guilt in the place of a desire for recognition. Like the developing child, the soldier-memoirist learns to speak the language of an alternate-reality but is cursed with the inability to ever pronounce the lessons learned there.

Our peacetime-reality often tries to associate the “Horrors of War” with pain and suffering through clichés and pithy statements of fact. However, “Horrors of War” cannot cohabitate with peace; therefore, “war” cannot be taught and describing it is an unnatural act. Even the cliché “Horrors of War” is a misnomer: The phrase is a perfect example of how peacetime rhetoric falls short of describing war's alternate-reality. The word “Horror” supplants all of the good things about going into battle: Patriotism, camaraderie, maturation, and expertise are all lost in this failed attempt to summarize something so complex. At the same time, the word “Horror” oddly becomes amelioration when applied to some experiences: Dead children, executions, lost comrades, and traumatic stress warrant individual pejoratives but fall prey to the human tendency to categorize and compartmentalize experience. Eventually, the phrase “Horrors of War” fails to describe anything comprehensible in a peaceful, civilian reality. This lexical failure is representative of the war memoirist's origins: their communicative skills derive from a peaceful-reality where the inhabitants can only comprehend a language foreign to wartime. All of these things create a paradox where the soldier-memoirists cannot adequately put into words what he experienced. However, new research allows us to understand the magnitude of what the war memoirists of WWI and WWII have to say, perhaps, for the first time.

An emerging and popular trend known as “cognitive literary studies” combines elements of developmental psychology, anthropology, and evolutionary theory to explain why certain motifs consistently reemerge in fiction. Lisa Zunshine claims that the indentifying, meaning-making techniques of “essentialism” and “functionalism” lend meaning to living-beings and non-living “artifacts” (15). In her work, *Strange Concepts and the Stories They Make Possible*, Zunshine explains that “psychological essentialism...[is] a hazy belief rather than well-thought-through theory, which influences our everyday thinking primarily about natural kinds (as contrasted with artifacts) and that can be reinforced or weakened by specific contexts” (11-12). While living-things are predominantly defined by essences, or

the categorical summation of a particular group or type (i.e. tigers and bears are predators), artifacts are defined by their functions (i.e. hammers and saws are tools). War writing shows how living-things and artifacts can take on both essentialist and functionalist connotations.

Learning to essentialize and functionalize is key step in the development of the war-memoirist. WWI and WWII memoirists routinely essentialize the battlefield in their attempts to create meaning from disordered experiences. Essentialism is precisely why war memoirists avoid realist tones and attempt to describe what they see through abstraction. In *The Soldiers' Tale* Samuel Hynes explains that “personal narratives are not history and can't be; they speak each with [their] own human voice, as history does not, and they find their own shapes, which are not the shapes of history. They are neither better nor worse, neither more nor less valuable than history; they are simply different” (Hynes 16). War memoirs are not history because they are not of this world. If they were history, they would more likely resemble casualty lists, maps of troop movements, and “official reports” devoid of personal experience. Instead, war memoirs attempt to convey a different reality to an audience lacking any understanding thereof. Complementing this point, Hynes claims that war memoirists endeavor to describe something entirely unnatural, an “*anti-landscape... [or] an entirely strange terrain with nothing natural left in it*” (7). Hynes understands that war is the antithesis to normal life; it is through an understanding of essentialism and functionalism that the full scope of the author's development emerges. The war writer uses essentialism to connect the war-reality to our world, to convey a message using our imagery. Conversely, war memoirists use functionalism to show how war drains the remnants of our reality from the one experienced on the battlefield. The uses of both functionalism and essentialism in war writing are both opposite and contrary to the way that we make meaning in our reality. As a result, normal development, as shown in a child's espousing of these techniques, reverses course and the soldier-memoirist fails to fully develop the ability to communicate in a manner consistent with this world. Instead, the war memoirist speaks in terms of anti-morality and anti-meaning, creating a memoir that is, in fact, an anti-memoir.

For example, in Fussell's autobiography, *Doing Battle: The Making of a Skeptic*, references to “theaters” and “props” describe the destruction witnessed: “As I became more familiar with war up front I perceived that in addition to being a theater of terror and mortality, war is an exemplary theater of the absurd” (112). Fussell adds the living traits of terror and absurdity to the essence of what we, the inhabitants of a peaceful world, perceive as the ideal theater. Zunshine claims

that the essentializing of an artifact “lend[s] it that ineffable, invisible something that the most meticulously wrought modern copy would not possess” (16). She continues, “If you essentialize an artifact, you end up understanding something not about this artifact” (17). Truly, when one thinks of a theater, images of war do not normally come to mind. Still, Fussell’s essentialization helps us to understand something not about theaters but most certainly about “war.” By connecting the theater image of our world to the grim scenes witnessed in battle, the peacetime audience catches a glimpse of what it is like on the battlefield.

Functionalism comes into play as Fussell continues with his theater analogy: “The bodies are props on a set, and one must understand that their meaning now is that they are props, nothing more” (Fussell 122). This statement is an example of Zunshine’s functionalism, albeit in a strictly opposite sense: Functionalism refers to the conceivable acts (i.e. eating, breathing, talking, etc.) that we attribute to any living being. However, Fussell moves in the opposite direction, removing what is innately human about the deceased and reducing corpses to artifacts. Fussell’s words, in relation to functionalism, are an excellent example of how “war” exists as anti-reality. As Fussell enters into Hynes’ “anti-landscape,” meaning-making reverses its course. Just as Zunshine claims that “[the fictional motif is] a specific cultural construction parasitizing on a more general cognitive predisposition” (21) in society, Fussell’s relating of dead bodies to props on a set is an example of how recurrent themes of disassociation consistently reemerge in war memoirs. Fussell’s description removes the “thousands of little things...in the nature of human beings” (Zunshine 18) that made those corpses human in an effort to cope with the reality thrust upon him. However, rather than recognizing Fussell’s construct we see his narrative from the standpoint that it will build into something insightful, something with meaning at the end. But war memoirs do the exact opposite: they begin in a meaningful world and work backwards, propelled by destruction, death, and chaos: all of the things that take away life also take away meaning.

So, the war memoir is actually an anti-memoir where meaning drains away, leaving only the unspeakable. In addition, the war-memoirist’s development could be considered an “anti-development” as it begins with false training about war and culminates in learning to speak the language of war’s reality, only to find that this means of communication is, like the training, another false construct. Nevertheless, and as mentioned earlier, lessons on morality often come into play in the war-memoir. If “meaning” reverses its course in the war memoir, how can we exact viable lessons on the subject of morality? Moreover, what are these lessons

and where do WWI and WWII memoirists find the authority to speak on the subject of morality when the very language they use is inadequate?

The anti-memoir produces tales of anti-morality. Again, the lessons taught resemble those taught to a child, taking the form of the “Do as I say, not as I do” sort of lessons given by a parent without the ability to explain away a situation. This is a fitting analogy because war-memoirists also lack the ability to explain what happens in the alternate-reality due to lexical inadequacies. The parent cannot explain why it is dangerous to touch a hot stove because, in all of the child’s innocence, a comprehension for the pain of being burnt has yet to be learned. Similarly, the war memoirist cannot explain notions of morality to the inhabitants of a peaceful-reality because they lack a comprehension for what it means to go to war. But this is not to say that war memoirists unquestionably fail in their attempts to describe morality as it exists on the battlefield. A good example, and one worthy of inclusion within a discussion of any war debate, comes from Vietnam War memoirist, Tim O’Brien:

A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. There is no rectitude whatsoever. There is no virtue. As a first rule of thumb, therefore, you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil. (68-69)

A conclusive meaning or reason for or about “war” will never come into being through a war memoir. Instead, meaning is consistently stripped away through a reverse form of the very functionalist and essentialist tools that we use to create meaning. However, O’Brien’s claim that the “true war story” is in allegiance with “obscenity and evil” is not exactly “true.” The war story is devoid of these descriptors: obscenity and evil, as we define the traits, do not exist in the war memoir. These traits take on different meanings, different connotations, and new definitions. Readers do not understand that justification, for anything dealing with war, is unattainable. The incomprehensibility of war is precisely why we keep reading

about it, taking away individual lessons about the experience of war and the craft of telling a war story, but never a single, definitive answer to the question that haunts warriors and their audience: *Why?*

The WWI and WWII memoirs of Robert Graves, Hervey Allen, and Paul Fussell struggle to define “war” as the alternate-reality experienced in battle. They find previously-held morality non-applicable, providing instead, examples of anti-morality that perpetuate the meaning-draining processes found in the anti-memoir. Many accusations about criminal acts and betrayal are subject for discourse. Graves provides one example:

By atrocities we meant, specifically, rape, mutilations, and torture—not summary shootings of suspected spies, harbourers of spies, *francstireurs*, or disobedient local officials. If the atrocity-list had to include the accidental-on-purpose bombing or machine-gunning of civilians from the air, the Allies were now committing as many atrocities as the Germans. (183)

It should come as no surprise that Graves’s view of the war—of summary executions and the bombing of civilians—is limited in its authority because the scope of his knowledge is limited. Hynes asserts, “One must conclude that wars are fought, and remembered, by men who are unaware of events and meanings beyond their own vision, because their attention is on other, closer, mortal things” (Hynes 14). Hynes’s assertion shows how the authority of a war memoirist deconstructs itself because of the very fight for survival which defines war literature.

Not surprisingly, war memoirs particularly struggle with the issue of authority. Thomas Couser claims that autobiographers are “culture bound, confine[d] in time and space—itself limited in authority” (247). Both Couser and Hynes agree that authority in a war memoir is limited by the perspective of the author. However, both steadfastly refuse to call the words contained in a war memoir anything other than the “truth.” Truth in memoirs and anti-memoirs alike concerns itself with the authority of the author, the ability to perceive, and more importantly, the ability to grasp a given experience for the purpose of putting it on paper.

Couser grapples with limited perspectives and the trouble inherent with cross-cultural presentations of the self. He explains that “the troubling nature of bicultural collaborative production, particularly when the parties to collaboration understand authorship in fundamentally different ways” is apparent (247). War memoirs are very much the products of bicultural collaboration because the

authors come from one reality, experience and acclimate to another, and then try to explain this totally foreign experience to the audience they were removed from. Couser is astute to point out that the parties of bicultural collaboration understand authorship in fundamentally different ways. This understanding (or the lack thereof) is why readers look for lessons on morality in a war memoir and why soldier-memoirists provide lessons on anti-morality instead.

Anti-morality is best explained, oddly enough, through wartime humor. Hynes gives the example of a “middle-aged shoemaker” who joked about a dead French soldier: “How could he have laughed at the poor dead Frenchman?” (11). Hynes’s lesson on anti-morality begins with the confession of desecrating a corpse. But the importance of this fact lies in the authority of a confessor who happens to be an ordinary, everyday shoemaker. He could be anyone and that is precisely the point of the story. After proving that an unspeakable crime could very well have been committed by the reader, Hynes concludes the lesson: “Where was his human compassion...in war, even humor is different, because it is full of death; and the man who laughed was different too, in a life that was discontinuous from that of the shoemaker who remembered” (11). The anti-moral of the story is, simply put, that war strips away the normalcy of even the most ordinary shoemaker and in that anyone can fall prey to a theft of morality. Hynes’s story also opens up understanding of Robert Graves’s famous memoir of WWI, *Goodbye to All That*.

In another lesson in anti-morality, Graves begins with a story similar to Hynes’s and ends with an anti-lesson about camaraderie in the trenches of WWI:

A corpse is lying on the fire-step waiting to be taken down to the cemetery tonight...His comrades joke as they push it out of the way to get by. ‘Out of the light, you old bastard! Do you own this bloody trench?’ Or else they shake hands with him familiarly. ‘Put it there, Billy Boy.’ Of course, they’re miners, and accustomed to death. They have a very limited morality, but they keep to it. It’s moral, for instance, to rob anyone of anything, except a man in their own platoon. They treat every stranger as an enemy until he proves himself their friend, and then there’s nothing they won’t do for him. (113)

Rather than focusing on the condescension towards miners in the passage, note the everyman quality of the tale. The method of relating a horrible event to the common person emerges as anti-morality’s method of conveyance. Graves does not begin with a confession; however, it is not hard to imagine him taking part in the

act of desecrating the corpse. At the very least, as an officer, he permitted the act to continue. More importantly, however, is that even with implications of guilt Graves chose to relay this story in his memoir. His credibility as a member of our reality seems less important than getting across his lesson: The same miner that is capable of insulting the dead and robbing a fellow soldier is capable of unwavering friendship and loyalty. By juxtaposing “obscenity and evil” alongside praise for a criminal, Graves proves to be, as O’Brien would put it, “in allegiance” with the former for the sake of the latter. At the same time, we see Graves in a different light: He is a young man trying to cope with the most difficult of situations. Indeed, obscenity and evil do not mean the same things in our reality as they do in the anti-reality of Graves or Hynes’s shoemaker. In the end, the anti-morals of Graves and the shoemaker emerge as pleas for forgiveness of the crime of guilt-by-association.

In addition to pleas for forgiveness, the conveyance of anti-morals can also contain a futile attempt to make sense of the wartime situation. As a literary scholar, Paul Fussell learned this fact by the time he composed his own memoir. Again with the same theme of dead bodies Fussell writes:

Had I hallucinated the whole thing? Or was it some kind of show put on for my benefit? Was I intended somehow to interpret it as an image of the whole war and its meaning, less a struggle between good and evil than a worldwide disaster implicating everyone alike, scarcely distinguishing its victims in the general shambles and ruin? Whatever it meant, this experience remained with me as a prime illustration of modernism, not that it occurred but that it seemed so normal, and that no one seemed to care. (134-35)

Fussell continues to compare the scenes witnessed in war to a theater by calling it a “show put on” for his benefit. His words reflect that the events occurred in reality but that he is now confused at how morality slipped away without anyone noticing. So, Fussell’s theater analogy falls short, proving that even one of the most celebrated war scholars of the twentieth century is unable to make what is “normal” in anti-reality “normal” in our peacetime reality.

Hynes, Graves, and Fussell provide examples of how morality slips away in the anti-reality of combat. But Hervey Allen takes it a step further, explaining why it is so easy for the soldier to forgo peacetime morality:

There is no man who is so totally absorbed by the present as the soldier. It claims all his attention and he lives from moment to moment in times of danger with an animal keenness that absorbs him utterly... To the soldier, *now* is everything. It is in the piping times of peace and leisure that man has had the time to afford himself the luxury of an immortal soul. (121)

Allen points to the same kind of proximity relationship to the war that Hynes cited as an impediment to verifiability and authority. However, there is no question about the truth of Allen's statement. Every account of war dwells upon how "the moment" is vital to survival in combat. The moment dictates who lives and who dies; it determines those who are decorated for valor; it provides the types of life-altering scenes of death given by Fussell and Graves; and it is the point in time where the war memoirist-turned-confessor justifies a tale of anti-morality. All of this begs the question, "Does authority really matter when it comes to a war memoir?"

Many scholars believe that truth in the memoir is a subject of serious concern; this belief is often backed by textual evidence. Graves admits early in his autobiography that he suffers from "sudden and most disconcerting spells of complete amnesia" (10). Soldiers like Graves, who were near or wounded by concussion blasts, can experience traumatic brain injury that erases memory and difficulty recalling events. Therefore, memory becomes suspect and the most obvious gap in the conveyer of wartime reality's credibility. Hynes believes that "memory is the muse and source of memoirs, it is untrustworthy, not only as a source of history but as a story of a self. It selects and colors the shapes and feelings of the past that it offers us, and so may become, it seems, an obstacle to truth" (23). However, the issues of truth and authority in the war memoir are ultimately non-issues. As Hynes later points out, memoirs are "the closest we will get to the reality of what men did, and what was done to them, in this war or that one" (25). The author's limited view of the war, discrepancies with the facts, and their credibility in the face of guilt-by-association are all constructs of this reality. Because of the very nature of wartime experience our vernacular creates limited abilities to perceive. In the end, soldier-memoirists will never fully articulate "war" using the language "over here" and we will never fully comprehend what they experienced "over there."

War memoirs do not exist. Instead, we have a concept for war that is really an abstraction. An attempt to describe this abstraction reverses the course of narration. Chiefly, this is because the abstraction that we call the war memoir is, in reality, an anti-memoir that begins with meaning and ends with something unspeakable. Meaning fails to emerge in the war memoir because the authors of war memoirs

necessarily develop in ways contrary to our reality: They begin as civilians in a world with meaning; their training is a failed, abstractive attempt to prepare them for another world; and by the time they learn to understand and speak the language of anti-reality, they realize that this language is incomprehensible in the world they return to. In the end, rather than producing “reason” and “meaning” out of their experience, they are only able to produce lessons in the form of anti-morality. Anti-morality illustrates a loss of innocence in our world while showing the necessity of disassociation on the battlefield. The lessons learned from anti-morality emerge as confessions, pleas for forgiveness, and a consistent but true warning: So long as there is war, every man and woman is capable of committing unspeakable acts.

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