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# Narrating War

Early Modern and Contemporary Perspectives

edited by

Marco Mondini / Massimo Rospocher

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### NARRATING

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# Contents

Preface, by <i>Marco Mondini</i> and <i>Massimo Rospocher</i>	p.	7
Narrated Wars. Literary and Iconographic Stereotypes in Historical Accounts of Armed Conflict, by <i>Marco Mondini</i>		11
PART I. NARRATING EARLY MODERN WAR		
Notes on War and Social History, by <i>Lauro Martines</i>		31
Narrating the Italian Wars (1494-1540). Contamination, Models, and Knowledge, by <i>Jean-Louis Fournel</i>		45
Wartime Propaganda during Charles VIII's Expedition to Italy, 1494/95, by <i>Christine Shaw</i>		63
Songs of War. Historical and Literary Narratives of the «Horrendous Italian Wars» (1494-1559), by <i>Massimo Rospocher</i>		79
In God's Fields. Military Chaplains and Soldiers in Flanders during the Eighty Years' War, by <i>Vincenzo Lavenia</i>		99
Chivalric Combat in a Modern Landscape. Depicting Battle in Venetian Prints during the War of the League of Cambrai (1509-1516), by <i>Krystina Stermole</i>		113
PART II. NARRATING MODERN WAR		
Beyond Glory? Writing War, by <i>Jay Winter</i>		133
«Small Soldiers»: When Children Kill, by <i>Carine Trevisan</i>		153
		5

Gendered Narratives of the First World War. The Example of Former Austria, by <i>Christa Hämmerle</i>	p. 161
Inter-Allied Community? Rituals and Transnational Narratives of the Great War, by <i>Victor Demiaux</i>	177
The Great War in Comics. Italy and France, 1914-2012, by <i>Roberto Bianchi</i>	193
Italian War Memorials after the Two World Wars. Notes from a Regional Research Project, by <i>Nicola Labanca</i>	213
Narrating War in Fascist Empire Cinema, by <i>Ruth Ben-Ghiat</i>	237
The Story of the War on the Eastern Front in Italy and Germany, by <i>Gustavo Corni</i>	257
Authors	277

## Preface

One of the most significant aspects of the recent historiography on war is the attention dedicated to the genesis of war's cultural image. The representation of wars in literature and the arts, in collective rituals and the media, has been at the center of much research, above all in the last twenty years, both in early modern and modern history. What seems to unite this heterogeneous collection of studies on war is the recognition that the various channels of communication through which the image of a conflict is constructed and disseminated (from painting to cinema, from novels to monuments, from political rhetoric to religious preaching, from popular poetry to historiographical accounts, from the narratives of civilians to diplomatic reports) contribute in different measures to shaping a general discourse about war. What are the motives and what is the ultimate point of fighting and (above all) dying in war? How to legitimate the sacrifice required for victory (or even for defeat)? Why, and on what terms, must the subjects, the faithful Christians, and the citizens risk their lives on the battlefield, if the pope, or the king, or the *patria* require it? These are only some of the questions to which the narration of war responds, in its various forms and with solutions that may appear extremely different, according to the period and the political and geographic contexts.

The problem of *caesurae* is fundamental for scholars who reflect on how war has been recounted—imagined, justified, legitimated or condemned—even if only in the limited field of analysis that is European history. In what way and until when can one speak, for example, of the persistence of rhetorical formulae and images of an idealized and just war? The «horrendous» Italian Wars of the 16<sup>th</sup> century seem to signal a turning point not only in the practice of battle, but also on the terrain of the pitiless conduct towards defenseless civilians, a change that should rid us of any residual illusion of an age of chivalric courtesy. And yet, in 1557, Titian imagined the Emperor Charles V triumphant at the Battle of Mühlberg, composed and imperturbable on his black stallion, invested with the traditional accouterments of the Christian knight and

armed with the lance of St. George. As Erwin Panofsky has underlined, this was a perfect symbolic synthesis of the *miles Christi*, of the wise sovereign and of the courageous gentleman, and an effective testimony to the autonomy of the cultural representation of the warrior from the social, political and diplomatic reality. Until when did this polyvalent masculine ideal—at once social, religious, and political—survive?

It is evidently difficult to respond to questions like these when one deals only with the brief periods of modern history. Even for no other reason than that, as the most recent studies on the culture of war between 1914 and 1945 have demonstrated, the narrative of conflict feeds on literary and visual archetypes with century-old roots. A German postcard of the First World War represents the brave fallen soldier, being watched over by his faithful steed, following iconographic codes not dissimilar to those in Renaissance painting; the British aviator of 1940 is the heir of a long tradition of heroic epics, which harks back directly to the stereotypes of the medieval chivalric romance. As such, the best way to find satisfactory answers seemed to us to be to enable a discussion between scholars of different disciplines (from social history to the history of art) and specializing in two crucial periods in the history of war, the 16<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The result of this interdisciplinary and diachronic perspective was the conference «Narrating War. Words and Images of War from Street Singers to the Internet» held at the Istituto storico italo-germanico in Trento on the 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> of May 2012. At this event, European and North American scholars compared views on the narration of war, giving rise to a rich discussion of which this volume aims to represent a synthesis and, hopefully, a point of departure for wider debates.

Several speakers and attendees at the conference are not represented here, but all contributed significantly to making it a valuable forum for the discussion of the themes and ideas pertinent to the essays included in this book and more general related issues. We wish particularly to thank: Alberto Banti and Piero Del Negro, discussants of two panels, Heather Jones and Joëlle Beurier, who enriched the sessions «Words and Media» and «The Visual Representation of War» with their papers. We are grateful to the director of the Institute, Paolo Pombeni, for supporting this project, and this gratitude is extended to the staff, Elisabetta Lopane and Antonella Vecchio, and to the publications of-



office of the Fondazione Bruno Kessler, in particular Friederike Oursin, for the care which they have taken in the publication of this volume.

*Marco Mondini and Massimo Rospocher*



# Narrated Wars

## Literary and Iconographic Stereotypes in Historical Accounts of Armed Conflict

by *Marco Mondini*

### 1. «Discourse of war» and «reality of war»

In a volume on iconic «scenes of war» in French history, Hervé Drevillon has addressed the narratives of battle as «aspects of an ideological system». Medieval verse chronicles celebrating feats of arms, the Napoleonic memoirs on Marengo, and the account of the battle at Solferino in Louis Noir's *Souvenirs d'un Zouave* were not primarily concerned with the disclosure of true facts as witnessed by the author: their chief aim was rearranging past events within a comprehensible and reassuring framework to transform repulsive outbreaks of brutal chaos into acceptable historical events<sup>1</sup>. In the anonymous 14<sup>th</sup> century poem *The Combat of the Thirty*, the 1351 clash of thirty Bretons and thirty Englishmen, a minor episode of the Hundred Years War, was extolled as a paragon of chivalric courtesy. On that occasion, the chaotic clash of armies had been replaced with a courtly joust in which victory must fall on the bravest and most valiant, according to the rules of the duel. It goes without saying that this revival of past models was purely delusional: from a military point of view, that episode was virtually irrelevant (among other things, the joust degenerated into a brawl). Still, the (spurious) memory of that episode was presented as proof that the warlike utopia of the elegant fight, well organized and disciplined, could indeed survive the disorderly and wicked violence of modern warfare<sup>2</sup>. Even more crucially, narration filtered out and rectified ideologically unacceptable realities. On the one hand, the in-

*Translation by Francesco Peri*

<sup>1</sup> H. DRÉVILLON, *Batailles. Scènes de guerre de la Table Ronde aux Tranchées*, Paris 2007, pp. 14-15.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

herent depravity of the fray as seen by aristocratic mounted knights, who feared and loathed the arbitrary prospect of an anonymous and inglorious death at the hands of plebeian infantrymen wielding dangerous firearms; on the other hand, the shame of the material realities of war, consisting of petty skirmishes, ambushes, sieges, pillaging and acts of violence against defenseless civilians, all of which was irreconcilable with chivalric codes and ideals<sup>3</sup>.

In the first case, we are confronted with one of the major recurrent nightmares in the history of cultural representations of war in Europe: the demise of the mounted armored knight (an aesthetically accomplished and extremely expensive professional of arms) at the hands of a mere infantryman. One such occurrence would have been much more traumatic than the massacres at Crecy or Azincourt. The 1525 debacle at Pavia, when the *gendarmerie* was decimated by the Spanish harquebusiers, lived on in infamy as an insult to the warlike mythology of dueling. The triumph of modern weaponry was an omen of social subversions to come, a threat to the existing order: soon there would be no more call for the Arthurian archetypes that had hitherto served as a model for the dominant élites, as embodied by the knight par excellence, Pierre de Bayard<sup>4</sup>. The defeat of 1525, although moderately damaging in purely strategic terms, dealt a devastating imaginary blow. The mounted knight contrived to survive the breakthrough of firearms, but only by altering his weaponry and tactics: in his later incarnations, he would continue to ride on the battlefields, and in many cases to dominate them, until the introduction of rifled barrels and breech-loading guns in the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>5</sup>. At the same time, the literary evolution of the canonical narratives of war, presenting the (mounted) knight as the true protagonist of battle, was much slower: battle, presented as a well-organized and orderly contest, continued to be perceived as a stage for valor and gallantry; the mounted chieftain was unvaryingly described in terms of a narrative canon that placed an emphasis on the attainment of superior ethical virtues, rather than military efficacy *per*

<sup>3</sup> A. SETTIA, *Rapine, assedi, battaglie. La guerra nel Medioevo*, Roma - Bari 2002.

<sup>4</sup> M. MALLETT, *Mercenaries and Their Masters*, London 1974; J. HALE, *War and Society in Renaissance Europe*, Baltimore MD 1991. On the survival of chivalric models in Italy's «horrende guerre» see M. ROSPOCHER's essay in this volume.

<sup>5</sup> F. CARDINI, *Quell'antica festa crudele. Guerra e cultura dall'età feudale alla Grande Rivoluzione*, Milano 1988<sup>2</sup>.

se. The modern age held on to these increasingly outdated tropes. The myth of war as it had been, or war as it ought to be (but ordinarily no longer was), seemed to obsess the authors of epic poems and romances and the professionals of the battlefield who have left written accounts of their experience. As Huizinga has observed, the reality of war, with its amorphous, sprawling, and utterly anti-heroic qualities, was literally unacceptable for both groups, who balanced it out by producing narratives that rearranged facts into a *joyeuse guerre* after the courtly model<sup>6</sup>. Well into the age of military revolution, when the outcome of battles was largely determined by infantry squares and cannons, the ideal model of the warrior in arms was the gallant Christian knight: a lone hero fighting for glory in a highly ritualized ethic and aesthetic framework, or alternatively a member of a selected community of sworn brothers. Even military treatises continued to perpetuate this ideological and unrealistic approach to the profession of arms<sup>7</sup>.

This glaring discrepancy was intimately connected with the ideological functions of the «discourse of war». For centuries, it had served to legitimize a dominant warrior élite (or later a caste of state-educated military professionals) whose prestige and social capital were predicated on their alleged ability to foresee, plan, manage, and of course win armed conflicts. At another level, the «discourse of war» played a crucial role in building social consensus by filtering, denying, or altering the most repugnant aspects of the «reality of war»<sup>8</sup>. The most popular example of the hegemony of traditional figures in early modern narratives of combat were the fairy-tale figments of the epic-chivalric poem in verse, which culminated between the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 16<sup>th</sup> century in such masterpieces as Boiardo's *Orlando innamorato* and Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*. Both are classic examples of the glorification of chivalric virtues as a paradigm for the good warrior. To be sure, the harsh reality of war was not entirely absent: the destruction wrought by Italian Wars and the brutalities of Charles VIII's troops were occasionally

<sup>6</sup> J. HUIZINGA, *Autunno del Medioevo*, Milano 1995 (Haarlem 1919<sup>1</sup>), p. 87.

<sup>7</sup> On the military revolution see G. PARKER, *The Military Revolution. Military Innovation and the Rise of the West*, Cambridge 1988; on the unrealistic approach of military treatises between the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries see P. DEL NEGRO, *Guerre ed eserciti da Machiavelli a Napoleone*, Roma - Bari 2001, pp. 14 and following.

<sup>8</sup> J. LYNN, *Battle. A History of Combat and Culture. From Ancient Greece to Modern America*, Boulder CO 2003, pp. XIX-XXII.

alluded to, and Ariosto famously condemned the implicit cowardice of firearms in the IX canto of his poem, in which anti-hero Cimosco shot Orlando down with a harquebus, this «abominable contraption». (The paladin would later set scores with his cowardly foe and throw the infernal device, «forged ... by the hand of Beelzebub», into the sea.) The triumph of Orlando's traditional *habitus* (the code of conduct of «the knights of old») was a sort of exorcism, an apotropaic gesture, but also an obvious anachronism: on the one hand, the only way for modern weaponry to find a place in the chivalric poems that celebrated the ideal type of the true warrior were its disparagement and destruction; on the other hand, actual warfare in Italy was increasingly reliant on those modern weapons<sup>9</sup>.

War could occasionally (or predominantly, in some cases) be narrated in a visual medium: well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, paintings, engravings, and sculptures displayed a remarkably stable array of formulas and themes, regardless of the immediate function of the image. Pictures served to celebrate the military valor of a king, or to rearrange the chaos of battle in view of a collected contemplation of war as dominated by the will and valor of the winners<sup>10</sup>. A long tradition ranging from Charles VIII to Henry IV, and culminating with François I, the «warrior king» *par excellence*, equated the ideal attributes of the prince with those of the accomplished knight and *miles Christi*. After Marignano (and in spite of the critical role of artillery in this battle) the icon of the triumphant king on horseback merged into that of the brave paladin riding against the chaotic arrays of the enemy. In Pierre Bontemps's bas-relief for the tomb of the French king (1547), François I was charging into a crowd of Swiss pikemen; one has to look hard to spot the outlines of a cannon (the «coward's weapon of choice») in the far background<sup>11</sup>. This is not to say that art never adapted to the evolving patterns of military

<sup>9</sup> L. BOLZONI, «O maledetto o abominoso ordigno»: la rappresentazione della guerra nel poema epico-cavalleresco, in W. BARBERIS (ed.), *Storia d'Italia. Annali*, vol. 18: *Guerra e pace*, Torino 2002, pp. 201-250. Now see also J.-L. FOURNEL, *Narrating the Italian Wars (1494-1540). Contamination, Models, and Knowledge*, in this volume.

<sup>10</sup> P. BURKE, *Eyewitnessing. The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*, London 2001, particularly chap. 8.

<sup>11</sup> N. GHERMANI, *Du roi en la bataille à la bataille sans héros: les représentations de la guerre dans la France du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, in P. BUTON (ed.), *La guerre imaginée*, Paris 2002, pp. 67-80.

leadership. If Louis XIV was still consistently represented as a «warrior king», his person now dominated the battlefield from above, without actually taking part in the fight, like triumphant Napoleon I contemplating victory among his generals and powerless enemies in Antoine-Jean Gros's *Battle of Eylau*<sup>12</sup>. This transition from a heroic leadership style (the commander was challenging death 'among' his men) to a non-heroic mode (the commander was maneuvering his troops from a remote vantage point) is one of the hallmarks of modern warfare. Inevitably, this shift was incorporated into the textual and visual narratives of war. This is not to say that this adjustment brought «discourse» any closer to «reality»<sup>13</sup>. As of old, narrated battles were governed by the military genius of the commanders; chaos was rationalized into an orderly and meaningful sequence of events; the fight was presented as a test of valor; death was either the utmost self-sacrifice for the Motherland or a well-deserved punishment dealt to the hero's foes. The centerpiece of these narratives, steering clear of the technicalities of combat, were the political dimension of war (including praise of the powers that had declared and possibly won it) and the emotions of the community that had taken part in the fight or re-enacted the founding myth of its collective identity by evoking a great battle of the past<sup>14</sup>.

Of course, not all authors passively adhered to this traditional canon. In the 1660s, for example, Grimmelshausen's picaresque novel *Simplizissimus* expatiated at length on the havoc wrought by the pillaging hordes that were scourging Germany, prostrated by the Thirty Years War. A century and a half later, Francisco Goya exposed the horrors of Napoleonic invasion and 'guerrilla' warfare, while in Stendhal's finely crafted parody, *La Chartreuse de Parme* (1839), young Fabrizio del Dongo, a would-be romantic hero inebriated by epic poems and martial lore, ended up losing his bearings in the middle of an incomprehensible and dismal battle at Waterloo<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> On Luigi XIV see J. CORNETTE, *Le Roi de guerre*, Paris 2000<sup>2</sup>; on the iconography of Napoleon see C. PRENDERGAST, *Napoleon and History Painting*, Oxford 1997.

<sup>13</sup> J. KEEGAN, *The Mask of Command*, London 1988.

<sup>14</sup> P. PARET, *Imagined Battles. Reflections of War in European Art*, Chapel Hill NC 1997, pp. 7-9.

<sup>15</sup> H.J. GRIMMELSHAUSEN, *Der Abenteuerliche Simplizissimus Teutsch*, München 2001. On the so-called «Stendhal paradox» see A. SCURATI, *Guerra. Narrazioni e culture nella tradizione occidentale*, Roma 2000, pp. 190 ff.

By and large, however, the heroic code of narration continued to prevail well after the crisis of 1815, ultimately feeding into the 19<sup>th</sup>-century cultural construct that George Mosse has famously termed the «myth of the war experience»: a process of distillation that reworked shared memories of the Great War into «a meaningful and even sacred event» and masked reality by presenting the ordeals of that war as the sublime adventure of a generation of youthful heroes<sup>16</sup>. The trauma of «mandatory mass conscription» during the French revolution and the Napoleonic campaigns—radically altering the patterns of mobilization of the nation in arms, particularly in Germany and Italy—had triggered a long-period «militarization of masculinity». In 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe, the task of preparing for war (verbally, if not in actual practice) was construed as a universal duty for male citizens-subjects: mandatory conscription (or private training for gentlemen) established the wielding of arms as a familiar practice; uniforms and military life became routine ingredients of daily life and standard fixtures of the urban landscape<sup>17</sup>. To be sure, national nuances need to be taken into account. The myth of the «nation in arms», instrumental to the rise of mass armies, did not produce the same outcomes everywhere (even not counting that Great Britain, for one, was always reluctant to embrace it): the French model, rooted in democratic ideals, was radically different from the royalist Prussian paradigm of the *Volk in Waffen*<sup>18</sup>. At the same time, the forms of cultural militarization were surprisingly homogeneous throughout continental Europe and beyond. Once a combination of a hermetic caste of professionals (the officer corps) and a refuge for social outcasts (the rank-and-file), the army evolved, at least in theory, into a national school of virility. The new dominant paradigm of masculinity stipulated that every gentleman (not just the aristocrats) must be ready to defend his honor (and the honor of his woman-family-motherland) in an armed duel, and every citizen in uniform

<sup>16</sup> G. MOSSE, *Fallen Soldiers. Reshaping the Memory of the World War*, Oxford 1991, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> S. DUDNIK - K. HAGEMANN - J. TOSH (eds), *Masculinities in Politics and War*, Manchester 2004. On the myth of mass conscription see D. MORAN - A. WALDRON (eds), *The People in Arms. Military Myth and National Mobilization since the French Revolution*, Cambridge 2003.

<sup>18</sup> T. HIPPLER, *Soldat et citoyen. Naissance du service militaire en France et en Prusse*, Paris 2006.



must sacrifice his life on the battlefield with courage and defiance: this was a *sine qua non* condition of social respectability<sup>19</sup>. Literary culture and artistic representations were steeped in *esprit militaire*. Romantic attitudes, and a characteristic cult of national heroes as role models, contributed to establish an equation between virility and martial valor. This general pattern admitted national variations. Ettore Fieramosca was defending the honor of an as yet unborn country; Ivanhoe was fighting to reconcile the heterogeneous ethnic components of what was to be England; Arminius was struggling to free Germany from its chains. These three characters were reflections of one and the same dominant type, whose emphatically martial connotations were inseparable from male gender<sup>20</sup>. Decades past the heyday of Romanticism, such values as pride and courage in battle were still rife in the memoirs and accounts of the survivors of the Charge of the Light Brigade at Balaclava. In the visual narrative of Alphonse de Neuville's *Les dernières cartouches*, a depiction of «heroic defeat», the good *citoyen* embraced sacrifice to become worthy of his Republic's gratitude<sup>21</sup>. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the «age of militarization» was at its ripest, such attributes as weapons, warfare, honor, and valor were no longer a privilege of the royal courts (that is, of the last surviving strands of a ruling aristocracy and the élites in uniform) but permeated the entire mental landscape of Europe<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> G. MOSSE, *The Image of Man*, Oxford 1996; U. FREVERT, *Men of Honour. A Social and Cultural History of Duel*, New York 1995; M. DOMENICHELLI, *Cavaliere e gentiluomo. Saggio sulla cultura aristocratica in Europa*, Roma 2002.

<sup>20</sup> See in particular A.M. BANTI, *L'onore della nazione. Identità sessuali e violenza nel nazionalismo europeo*, Torino 2005.

<sup>21</sup> On the memory of Balaclava see R.B. EDGERTON, *Death or Glory. The Legacy of the Crimean War*, particularly pp. 101-137; on the culture of sacrifice see Ch. BENOIT et al. (eds), *Le sacrifice du soldat. Corps martyrisé, corps mythifié*, Paris 2009.

<sup>22</sup> See J. GILLIS (ed.), *The Militarization of the Western World*, Chapel Hill NC 1989; U. FREVERT (ed.), *Militär und Gesellschaft im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Stuttgart 1996; M. MONDINI, *Militarismo e militarizzazione. Modelli nazionali nel rapporto tra armi e politica nell'Europa contemporanea*, in M. MONDINI (ed.), *Armi e politica. Esercito e società nell'Europa contemporanea*, in «Memoria e ricerca», special issue, 28, 2008, pp. 9-25.

## 2. *The weight of the past. Literary and visual stereotypes in the narratives of the two World Wars*

In more than one sense, both World Wars were the utmost expression of a century-old contradiction between «discourse» and «reality», even if an epoch-making break with the past took place during the conflict of 1914-1918.

The Great War was a colossal disillusion: on the one hand, military headquarters consistently failed to anticipate its developments; on the other hand, the glorious expectations that had been induced in various segments of the intellectual world by a widespread impatience (or desire) for war were brutally crushed. As for the first aspect, specialized literature has long since exposed the appalling incompetence of the professionals of war, unable to react to overwhelming evidence of an ongoing evolution of warfare that contradicted a decades-old tradition of military doctrine and illusions, beginning with the myth of a short war that could be won through great pitched battles<sup>23</sup>. Surprisingly, the most realistic anticipations of modern warfare at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are found in two subgenres of popular literature: pacifist treatises and science fiction novels. In the fictional scenarios that Gerd Krumeich has termed «representations of future war», pacifist writers such as Ivan Bloch (*La guerre future*, 1899) and Norman Angell (*The Great Illusion*, 1909) or mid-cult novelists such as Albert Robida (*La Guerre au vingtième siècle*, 1887), described a devastating «future war» whose outbreak would be «inevitable», proving better prophets of industrialized warfare than many so-called «military experts»<sup>24</sup>. The intellectual field at the beginning of the new century lacked this extraordinary perception and ability to predict the consequences of a mass conflict, but many shared the sensation that a *great war* would soon break out. War was perceived as either ‘inevitable’ (it was intrinsic to human nature and human societies as described by social scientists, among which Gustave Le Bon), ‘desirable’ (particularly as an invigorating antidote

<sup>23</sup> See J.-J. BECKER, *Prévisions des états-majors et effondrement des plans*, in S. AUDOIN-ROUZEAU - J.-J. BECKER (eds), *Encyclopédie de la Grande Guerre. 1914-1918*, Paris 2004, pp. 235-247; J. KEEGAN, *The First World War*, London 1998, particularly chap. 2.

<sup>24</sup> G. KRUMEICH, *Vorstellungen vom Krieg vor 1914*, in S. NEITZEL (ed.), *1900: Zukunftsvisionen der Großmächte*, Paderborn 2000, pp. 173-186; see also F. CLARKE, *The Tale of the Next Great War*, Syracuse NY 1995.

to the decadence of the race in late bourgeois societies, as assessed by certain segments of the cultural avant-garde), or *attractive* (in the eyes of those who believed that the international balance of power required some adjusting)<sup>25</sup>. War was evoked, meditated, and courted by virtually everybody. The revolutionary fury of Italian futurists (who famously celebrated war as the «one and only hygiene of the world» in their 1909 manifesto) and the generational longing for a trial by fire among French and British students were only extreme expressions of a widely shared attitude. Robert Musil, a good example of an intellectual who believed that war would cement the social cohesion of ailing societies, imagined a «beautiful and fraternal war»<sup>26</sup>. The «flowers in the gun barrels» and the popular enthusiasm for the mobilization of the armies in a cheerful atmosphere of *union sacrée* in Paris, Berlin or London were certainly a myth, but these overemphatic images were indicative of the special fascination that the adventure of war exerted on many intellectuals, and expressed their readiness to embrace a cultural mobilization that would transform them into agents of popular consensus<sup>27</sup>.

One of the most striking features of the narratives of the Great War (in literary as well as visual media) was the survival of seemingly obsolete stereotypes. British war memoirs are probably the best-known example. The use of ostensibly incongruous sources (from Greek-Roman literature to the poems of chivalry) was one of the ways in which authors and diarists attempted to reconcile the shocking experience of life in the trenches, under the fire of heavy artillery and the menace of chemical weapons, with the grandiose heroic scenarios of national history, from Blenheim to Waterloo<sup>28</sup>. The reuse of familiar imagery from the

<sup>25</sup> See D. PICK, *War Machine. The Rationalisation of Slaughter in the Modern Age*, New Haven CT - London 1993; see also W. J. MOMMSEN (ed.), *Kultur und Krieg. Die Rolle der Intellektuellen, Künstler und Schriftsteller im Ersten Weltkrieg*, Oldenburg 1996; C. PROCHASSON - A. RASMUSSEN, *Au nom de la Patrie. Les intellectuels et la Première Guerre mondiale 1910-1919*, Paris 1996; V. CALÌ - G. CORNI - G. FERRANDI (eds), *Gli intellettuali e la Grande Guerra* (Annali dell'Istituto storico italo-germanico in Trento. Quaderni, 54), Bologna 2000.

<sup>26</sup> See R. WOHL, *The Generation of 1914*, London 1980; P. PARKER, *The Old Lie. The Great War and the Public School Ethos*, London 1987. Musil is quoted from E. KOESTER, *Literatur und Weltkriegsideologie*, Kronberg 1977, p. 135.

<sup>27</sup> On the categories of «cultural mobilisation» and «consensus» see in particular S. AUDOIN-ROUZEAU - A. BECKER, 14-18, *retrouver la Guerre*, Paris 2000.

<sup>28</sup> P. FUSSEL, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Oxford 1975, particularly chap. 5.

educational canon (or pre-war best sellers, such as the ever-popular novels of chivalry, propagating the courtly atmospheres and icons of «medievalism») guaranteed the psychological survival of fighters and powerfully contributed to building and sustaining social consensus<sup>29</sup>. Recalling the horrors of life at the front at Passchendaele, the British poet Edmund Blunden gratefully quoted Edward Young's *Night-Thoughts*, in which he had found some repose from the atrocities of industrial carnage<sup>30</sup>. At the same time, translating the anonymous and random death in the trenches into a language that suggested the fundamentals of the heroic canon, the beauty of martial comradeship (reminiscent of the chivalric *comitatus*), and the carefree levity of war as a playful activity served to convey reassuring illusions to families and friends at home: the process that Mosse has called a «trivialization» of war was founded on a discursive practice that displaced the dismal realities of modern warfare and sought refuge in a world of reassuring phrases<sup>31</sup>.

The linguistic repertoires and narrative conventions of the past were just as essential to French or German «eyewitness accounts», particularly when the soldier-writer's status as an eyewitness was most ambiguous. Jean Norton Cru's monumental *Témoins*, published in 1929, has established a taxonomy of war narratives that appears to defy any attempts at criticism: the eyewitnesses who had taken up the pen to describe what they had seen, in the exact terms in which they had experienced it, were considered the only reliable sources. That approach suffered from numerous shortcomings. To begin with, the emotional content of most soldiers' letters from the front (an overwhelming documentation that can be considered one of the earliest «narratives of war» aimed at contemporary readers) was purposefully adulterated for consolatory purposes. The priority of letters home was hardly to provide first-hand accounts of horror (if that had been at all possible)<sup>32</sup>. Even the most

<sup>29</sup> On the relevance of chivalric stereotypes in the narratives of the Great War see M. GIROUARD, *The Return to Camelot*, New Haven CT 1981; S. GOEBEL, *The Great War and Medieval Memory. War Remembrance and Medievalism in Britain and Germany*, Cambridge 2007.

<sup>30</sup> E. BLUNDEN, *Undertones of War*, London 2000 (1928<sup>1</sup>).

<sup>31</sup> G. MOSSE, *Fallen Soldiers*, pp. 126-158.

<sup>32</sup> See C. PROCHASSON, *14-18. Retours d'expériences*, Paris 2008, particularly pp. 167-240.